

The Ones You Don't Bring Home



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Generation Why?

Nancy Kilpatrick

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Generation Why?

Nancy Kilpatrick

"I'm not 'menacing'!"

"Rand, I'm sure he didn't mean to upset you. I think he was just saying that, well, under the circumstances..." the Psychiatrist waves her hands gently and scans the concrete prison's interview room, "your statement about being a sensitive male is odd." The Psychiatrist crosses her short legs and leans forward, resting both forearms on her thigh, clasping her hands together as if she is pleading, or praying. No table between them is necessary; The Prisoner is in chains.

Rand likes the shape of her thigh, the way the pastel silk skirt clings to the taut skin and just lies there, passive, resting, waiting for fingers to reach out and separate fabric from flesh.

"Would you elaborate." The Psychiatrist asks. "How do you see yourself as a sensitive young man?"

"There's lots of guys like me. Regular guys. Sensitive. Decent," Rand says.

"Yeah. A regular, sensitive, decent serial killer!" The Reporter's remarks are aggressive. Hostile. Violent.

Rand focuses on The Reporter. "A lot of guys are serial killers. More and more every day. You see it on TV. In the news. Guys like you write about guys like me. Guys trying to help."

"Help? Right!" The Reporter stabs symbols into his notebook, barely glancing down. The carved lines of his face deepen under the glare of brilliant camera lights.

"You created me."

The Reporter looks disgusted. His skin is tight, but with no appealing insulation beneath his cheeks. Just bone, nothing but bone. Hard, not subtle. Holding up a face with limited flexibility. He starts to say, "Look, you little sh—"

"Rand, I think what you're trying to get at," The Psychiatrist interrupts, "is that the media portrays violence and that in turn encourages violence in young people like yourself, with a predisposition."

"Fuck!" The Reporter mutters under his breath, low enough that the microphone will not pick it up. Rand watches him glance at The Guard by the door, whose eyes are non-committal, but whose mouth—the one that spits saliva when he talks, that opens and closes like the jaws of a vice, that utters sound bytes that Rand breaks into chunks and swallows whole—whose mouth twitches at the left corner. Nice touch, Rand thinks. But too far in the background to be effective.

"Rand?" The Psychiatrist says. "Do you see yourself as a victim of media violence?"

"Oh, come on!" The Reporter says. "Tell us why you mutilated all those—"

"Let him answer the question," The Psychiatrist interrupts again.

The Reporter crashes back against the chair. Rand knows The Reporter would love to jump to his feet and punch The Prisoner in the face. The Reporter is violent by nature, that's clear. His turn to ask the questions is coming. They are supposed to take turns. Politely. That's the way it's supposed to go.

"I love television," Rand says. His voice is not as sincere as he wants it to sound, so he concentrates on lowering his eyes, dropping his head down a fraction. He looks up through his long lashes at The Psychiatrist. The dark eyelid hairs cut her body into strips. "And newspapers. It's important to know what's going on in the world around you."

Her face softens. She reminds him of The Teacher, and The Minister's Wife. The Others in the room wouldn't notice that her face has changed, but Rand does. She understands. "Tell us about your childhood," The Psychiatrist says gently.

This script is familiar. He has repeated these lines many times and knows them by heart. He wants to sigh, but that would not be the right thing to do. In a moment of inspiration, he tilts his head and looks away. If only his hands were free, but the chain keeps them six inches apart, which means he cannot rely on his hands to speak for him, and they speak eloquently.

"I had a very normal life," he says matter-of-factly, repeating by rote what he has said so often. Why won't they believe him? "My parents were divorced, but that wasn't a problem. Mom was great. She took real good care of me."

"How so?" asks The Psychiatrist.

"From when I was a baby. She had a monitor in the nursery and everything. So nothing bad would happen."

He remembers the monitor, even when he got old enough to go to school. His mother hovered just in the next room, always listening, waiting, as if for a sign.

"And there were home videos," he adds. Many. Endless tapes. She recorded them from before he could walk: Rand strapped into his cradle, the television set on—he still remembers his favorite show, the cartoon with the blood-red lion that chomped off the heads of its enemies; moving images of Rand eating meatloaf with his hands in front of the TV in a highchair; wandering the mall in his toddler harness, so he wouldn't get lost, or be stolen or be violated by some sick man. "She liked to shoot me. She said I was a natural on tape."

The Psychiatrist smiles.

The Reporter scribbles more notes.

The Guard shifts his weight to his other leg.

This room is small, like the set at a television station Rand visited once on a school tour. They had been broadcasting the news. The set, the size of a bathroom, consisted mainly of a plywood desk, the front veneered so it looked like real wood on tape. Two cameras. A control room with a bank of monitors before The Reporters. The Class visited the control room. The Technicians sat at the panels of switches and buttons and levers, wearing headsets, sending and receiving instructions as directed, zeroing in on The Female Reporter, then The Male Reporter. Back and forth, back and forth. Then The Weatherperson. The Technical Director controlled how everyone looked, what they said and how they said it. It was just like a movie.

"I'm sorry," he says when he realizes The Psychiatrist has asked a question.

"I asked if you would try to explain your motivation. Why you did what you did, to all those people... You must have felt very angry—"

"I never feel angry."

The Reporter leans forward.

The Psychiatrist sits back.

"Who's the first person you killed?" The Reporter demands.

"I never killed a person."

"Your DNA matches the DNA found at the scene of six murders. Six mutilations. And the jury found you guilty of—"

"They were wrong. I'm innocent. DNA can be wrong, you know. I saw a show on 60 Minutes—"

"Yeah, kid, I know the stats. If you're not an identical twin, it's one in a million—"

"Two million. One in two million, depending on the tests used. But two million and one could be a—"

"How did it feel to just tear off—"

"Please!" The Psychiatrist grips The Reporter's arm, tempering him. Reluctantly, he moves back in his chair. His face tightens. The Psychiatrist moves forward. This is her territory.

"Rand, I read the reports and evaluations. What you told the court. What you told the other psychiatrists. You said you never felt the slightest bit of anger toward anyone."

"That's right," Rand agrees. "I don't believe in getting angry. That's how Mom raised me."

"But you must have been angry at your mother now and again. And your father—"

"Nope." He knows he's answered too quickly. It sounds like he is trying to hide something, but he isn't. Not at all. There's nothing to hide.

"My father wasn't around, so why would I get angry at him?"

"He was around until you were ten."

"I didn't notice. He was always at work."

"Rand, there's a history of domestic violence, your father assaulting your mother, and—"

"Yeah, well, she divorced him. Besides, she protected me. I didn't know about it until later. I was busy."

"You played a lot of video games," The Reporter says, struggling to get with the program at last.

"Sure. Doom, Path of Exile, Dark Souls, games like that. Doesn't everybody?"

"Yeah, but everybody doesn't—"

"I mean, doesn't everybody like games? All the kids at my school did."

"Rand..." The Psychiatrist searches for another avenue, as though if she keeps probing he'll split apart, spill what's inside him. Bleed for the camera. But there is nothing to say that he hasn't said before. "Some of those games get pretty violent, don't they?"

"I guess."

"After you played them, you went out and played them in real life, didn't you?" The Reporter interjects, blurring the picture again.

"No."

"Sure you did!"

"Why should I? I had the games."

"And the urges—"

"Nope."

Rand looks up, presenting the face of The Innocent to The Videographer, a slim-bodied young woman with the head of a camera. How many hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of people will watch this drama unfold? he wonders. Most, he is certain, will understand. Most are against violence.

The Lawyer sits beside him, prepared to nip any compromising questions or answers in the bud. So far she has said nothing. Now she does.

"My client's answers to these questions are a matter of record. It's all in the trial transcripts."

"What's the basis of your final appeal?" The Reporter asks.

The Videographer shifts the camera to the left, to capture The Reporter's profile.

"Evidence that should never have been admissible," The Lawyer says.

"The video tapes?"

"Yes, the tapes."

A flash-fire races through Rand—The Reporter isn't supposed to steal the limelight! Rand is The Prisoner. The-Juvenile-In-An-Adult-Prison-Sentenced-To-Death. The one who has agreed to this 3-way exclusive. The only one the camera should be focused on!

Rand knows he should say nothing but he needs to regain control.

"The only urges I have are to get rid of The Evil."

The Lawyer jumps in. "Don't say another word—"

"What is The Evil?" the Psychiatrist asks, leaning far forward, until Rand can smell her perfume.

"You mean evil, like you?" The Reporter says sharply.

The Videographer turns the lens back to stare at Rand. Rand smiles slightly and gazes seductively into the impassive camera eye. For effect, he fingers the white ribbon he always wears on his prison shirt, below his name. "I just mean, the world is full of violence. I wish it wasn't, but it is."

"That's enough, Rand! My client is—"

"Men are the violent ones. Everybody says so. The TV, the newspapers, Facebook and Twitter. So men have got to stop the violence. 'A man's gotta do what a man's got to do.' John Wayne said that, you know. My mother used to quote him."

"Rand, have you heard of the psychiatric term 'projection'? It's—"

"If men don't do it, who will? The good guys have to stop the bad guys, or there's gonna be violence."

"Listen, kid, I've been a reporter for twenty years, and I know BS when I smell it—"

"My mother didn't raise me to be violent. She didn't want me to be like my father."

"As your counsel, Rand, I must advise you—"

"Most men are violent, don't you think so doctor? You're a woman."

"Rand, people can project feelings they have onto someone else—the way a camera projects an image. Angry feelings, or feelings of wanting to harm someone we fear will harm us—"

But Rand tunes her out. He directs his remarks exclusively toward The Videographer, to her cold, precise eye, studying him, controlling him, never letting him slide out of her objective sight.

"If there were no men in the world, there wouldn't be any violence. Isn't that right?"

Silence cuts the air for barely a second.

"I'm sorry, people, but as Rand's attorney, I must protect my client's interests. This interview is—"

"Deny it! Go ahead and deny it!" Rand shouts at the retreating camera, using emotional charge to lure it back. "You say it all the time, all of you.

How can you say something different now? You're phonies!"

"Rand, do you feel attacked? No one here is attacking you—"

"All of you! You want all males dead!"

"Turn off the camera, or I'll file a civil action—"

"So do I! Then there won't be any more violence."

"Listen, you little shithead, you're the violent male!"

Rand lunges. He is aware of the camera zooming in on his hands. The chain from the wrist cuffs is hooked to a waist chain and his reach stops inches from his grasp.

Silence clutches the air. The Videographer has captured all. The shocked looks. The gasp from The Lawyer. The cry of "No!" from The Psychiatrist. The Guard drawing his gun. The Reporter, struggling to protect his genitals, what would have been seconds too late, but for The Prisoner's restraints.

Rand stares down at his hands. They are bony and thin, 'sensitive', his mother always said. The fingers stretch like talons, ready to claw The Evil from its roots. Ready to deposit it into his hungry mouth, where powerful jaws can pulverize and razor teeth rend. Where what should not exist, by being devoured, can be eliminated forever.

That would have made a great shot. His mom would have loved it.

Rand sits back and winks at The Camera Eye. He just hopes that The Videographer had the lens in sharp focus when she captured him.

Fly Trap

Jeani Rector

While most people go to Disneyland while in Southern California, Jeani Rector went to the Fangoria Weekend of Horror there instead. She grew up watching the Bob Wilkins Creature Feature on television and lived in a house that had the walls covered with framed Universal Monsters posters. It is all in good fun and actually, most people who know Jeani personally are of the opinion that she is a very normal person. She just writes abnormal stories. Doesn't everybody?

Jeani Rector is the founder and editor of The Horror Zine and has had her stories featured in magazines such as Aphelion, Midnight Street, Strange Weird and Wonderful, Dark River Press, Macabre Cadaver, Blood Moon Rising, Hellfire Crossroads, Ax Wound, Horrormasters, Morbid Outlook, Horror in Words, Black Petals, 63Channels, Death Head Grin, Hackwriters, Bewildering Stories, Ultraverse, and others.

Enjoy Jeani's story: Fly Trap

FLYTRAP

Jeani Rector

Aaron saw it, and asked the storekeeper, "What's a plant doing in a pet shop?"

The storekeeper looked like someone from a past century, with a handlebar moustache and a stained apron. "That's a Venus flytrap. Technically a plant, but it sure seems like an animal to me."

Aaron peered at the plant closely. It was in a small, red clay pot and had a rosette of five leaves that arose from a bulb-like stem. The leaves were green, and looked like they had small claws with red interiors on their tips.

The storekeeper spoke again. “Fascinating little thing, isn’t it? Did you know that the trapping mechanism is so specialized that it can distinguish between living prey and raindrops? It won’t close its claws on raindrops. But an insect...well now...”

Aaron interrupted. “How much?”

The storekeeper smiled. “Last one left. You can have this baby for only twelve ninety-five.”

“I’ll take it.”

<< — >>

He brought the plant home and placed it on the mantle in the living room. Then he realized he forgot to ask the storekeeper about how to take care of it. Did it need sunlight like other plants? Was he supposed to catch flies for it, and if so, would it eat dead flies or be so picky that it only wanted those insects when alive?

He stood beside the fireplace, staring at the plant. Impulsively he stuck his finger into one of the red claws. It immediately closed, but the plant’s grip was too slight to matter. He removed his finger and figured that flies weren’t as strong as he was and therefore couldn’t escape so easily.

He decided to find out more about the Venus flytrap from the internet. He sat at his computer and googled it.

He read:

The Venus flytrap is found in nitrogen- and phosphorus-poor environments, such as bogs and wet savannahs. It survives in wet sandy and peaty soils. Venus flytraps are popular as cultivated plants, but have a reputation for being difficult to grow. Place your plant in a sunny window that faces south. As long as the Venus flytrap receives four or more hours of direct sunlight in the window, it should do well.

So obviously the dark fireplace mantle was an inappropriate spot. Aaron picked up the little plant and moved it to a windowsill. He felt the dirt inside the red clay pot with his finger and decided it needed water.

Next he went to his back porch where he had a flypaper strip hanging from the awning. He felt revulsion at the sight of so many dead insects, but decided that he was now responsible for the plant, so he reached for the sticky yellow strip and plucked a dead fly from it.

Holding the dead insect by its wings, Aaron thought, How disgusting.

He entered his house once again and went to the window. With the fly held delicately by his fingertips, he wondered how to serve it to the plant.

He left the dead fly on the windowsill and went to retrieve a toothpick. Impaling the dead insect upon the tip, he nervously aimed it into one of the claws. He was relieved when the claw clamped shut.

Over time, touching flies no longer disgusted him. As the weeks went by, the Venus flytrap seemed to be happily growing. So much for the internet's claim that they are difficult plants, he thought.

Then came the day when Aaron went to his porch and saw that there were no flies left on the dangling, sticky yellow strip. He felt panicked. How would he feed his plant? By now it had become a pet to him.

What would draw flies? The answer came to him: Animal waste, particularly that of dogs. But he couldn't go to his neighbor's yard with a shovel. Instead, he took a plastic baggie to the park down the street and was rewarded in his quest there.

He placed a paper towel on his back porch and dumped some dog feces upon it. The smell was overpowering. The sunlight glistened on the mess, and Aaron imagined he could see it steam with the heat.

He watched it for a few minutes, trying to breathe through his mouth, then realized that the flies would alight on the dog shit all right, but how would he actually catch them in mid-flight? Unlike a sticky flypaper strip, here the flies could come and go as they pleased.

He went to the store and bought a butterfly net. Bringing it home, he went back to the porch and was surprised to see what looked like dozens of flies buzzing on and off the dog shit. It was a home run! He swung the net around like a crazy person, and felt jubilant that he captured so many flies with his swings.

He brought his prizes inside, and impaled one of the flies with a toothpick. Fascinated by its struggles, Aaron decided that the fly did not have enough intelligence to realize its situation. It floundered and didn't seem to realize that it was now unable to fly.

He found himself staring at the fly, alive and squirming on his toothpick. It must be nutritious for his plant to be growing so well. He watched it move. He wondered if his Venus flytrap could taste its food. What would a fly taste like?

Although he lived alone in his small house, Aaron glanced furtively over his shoulder. He was possessed with a compulsion so strong that it was impossible to resist.

Slowly he brought the toothpick to his mouth, and stuck out his tongue to taste the fly.

He was startled at the fly's movement; he had never put his tongue on anything in motion before. It was an interesting sensation; it seemed to awaken some primal instinct within himself. The fly tasted metallic, but overall, it was not revolting.

Suddenly ashamed at his own weird behavior, he quickly removed the fly from his tongue and took it to his flytrap plant. He felt happy that the plant accepted the fly. Aaron imagined that the Venus flytrap was grateful to him for the treat of a living insect.

<< — >>

Aaron was unable to go to work. He couldn't motivate himself to leave the house. He was not surprised when his boss left a voicemail stating he was fired.

By now he was used to the stench. It started when he left the back door to the porch open. The warm summer breeze wafted the smell from the dog feces inside. Eventually Aaron realized that flies also liked garbage, so he got into the habit of never emptying the trash can in the kitchen. It was beginning to overflow, the garbage spilling onto the floor.

And now in the kitchen, he swooped upon his prey with the net. He saw with satisfaction that he had captured probably twenty flies. He held the end of the mesh with his hand, blocking any escape.

He loved the green ones. Not only were they beautiful to look at in all their iridescence, but he savored the buzzing activity they created inside his mouth. He liked to allow them to crawl inside his mouth; the sensation was stimulating. And when he bit into them, they had a slight crunch on the outside and were wet on the inside, so he always ate the green ones first.

Fog Over Mons

E.A. Black

E. A Black had enjoyed telling scary stories to a captive audience since she was a child. She grew up in Baltimore, the home of Edgar Allan Poe who has inspired her to write. Due to her love for horror and dark fiction she joined Broad Universe, a networking group for women who write speculative fiction. Her short stories have appeared in Zippered Flesh 2, Zippered Flesh 3, Teeming Terrors, Midnight Movie Creature Feature 2, The Journal of the New England Horror Writers, Heart of Farkness, and more. She won a Best Short Story mention on The Solstice List@ 2017: The Best Of Horror for Invisible, which appears in Zippered Flesh 3. In addition to horror, she writes erotica and romance as Elizabeth Black. Friend her on Facebook and follow her on Twitter, where she posts as Elizabeth Black. Check out her web site at eablack-writer.blogspot.com. She lives on the Massachusetts coast in Lovecraft country. The beaches often call to her, but she has yet to run into Cthulhu.

Enjoy her story: Fog Over Mons

Fog Over Mons

E. A. Black

We were five days into the battle at Mons. The Germans had forced the French to retreat, and I feared we'd go down soon. I am bereft of hope, having seen sights that once seen left the mind shredded and torn more than any shell could. Twenty men dug our trench in double time, and it would provide adequate cover from the Germans, but I didn't know how much longer we could last. We were all that was left of one-hundred and fifty soldiers. The Germans had pressed

forward for days, overpowering us. Given another day or two, they might just go right past what's left of us as if we weren't even here. They say we are going to make our last stand at the Marne and we need to buy the Frenchies time. Buying time with blood, that's the glorious infantry.

My name is Doug Simsbury, and I'm 18 years old. Next to me sat my best mate, Matt Robbins. I, like Robbins, had arrived five days prior with our friends and schoolmates after having been urged on by our minister; all of us eager to win the war for the Crown. We were fresh, green, full of piss and vinegar. Our enthusiasm soon tempered. We were no longer youth. There we were, fresh out of school and eager to live our lives, shooting the world to pieces.

The smell of cordite and corpses rotting in the stifling August heat filled the air. I had completely lost my appetite, but our platoon commander had forced all of us to eat tinned stew and stale black bread. He said we must keep our strength up, we said it was so we could be a tasty meal for the maggots. Dawn approached, meaning we would storm over the trench in yet another rearguard action and do our best to slow the German's advance. It was a futile effort, and I felt little hope we'd survive.

The battlefield was quiet; strangely peaceful. I had awakened moments earlier, terrorized again by fitful dreams of amorphous creatures stalking the heavens hell bent on destroying humanity. I attributed the dreams to that wretched potted stew. The war was bad enough, but it was harder to take when you hallucinated from lack of sleep. I, like most of the men, crawled with lice. The itching drove me mad! I scratched until my skin bled. Rain then made the wounds sting.

Mist floated about me, matting my hair to my face and blocking any view of the rising sun. The mist refracted maroon light, casting about a haze that made all of us look as if we were bathed in blood, which couldn't have been very far from the truth.

Amid the stench of battle was another smell, a deeper note I could not place. I curled my nose against its unpleasant odor, which stank like a kettle full of mutton that had been left out in the sun to rot. It came from the sky and fell around me like a moldy blanket. The oily smell clung to my skin and uniform. I desperately wanted a shower just to wash off the noxious sheen. I had hoped with sunrise, light would reveal the source of the disquiet but that was not to be.

"Where did this fog come from?" Robbins asked. We whispered, giving each other comfort in this time of brutality. "I've never seen anything like it before. It muffles sound. I can't hear much movement outside."

"I don't know what it is but it's well past dawn and it's still dark out." A glance at my watch revealed the time to be at least a half hour past when the sun should have risen enough in the sky for us to see outside the trench. "Fitzsimmons would know. Hey, Fitz! What are --" I stopped in mid-sentence. Last night we lost Fitzsimmons, one of my closest mates. His legs had been blown off as he lay on the barbed wire, allowing the rest of us to pass over him as we counterattacked the advancing Germans. He lay there, nothing left of his legs but bloody stumps, screaming for us to help him.

I shot him in the head.

He didn't stop screaming so I shot him again.

Only a month earlier I had taken his sister to a dance. If I ever returned home I would get to tell her I killed her brother. His death seemed unreal since we had talked about drinking in our favorite pub an hour earlier. Sitting in the trench I heard an echo of his voice in the air blaming

me for his fate. I smelled his tobacco, taunting me. Why did he die? It should have been me since Fitz pushed me aside to lay down on the barbed wire when I hesitated. My tremendous guilt over his death made me go numb inside and out. Not feeling was the only way I could cope.

Rather than cut through the gloom the sun rose like a bloody blister in the sky, barely visible through the haze. "I don't like this," I said, worrying one of the brass buttons on my uniform. I scratched my neck and scalp raw since the lice gave me a godawful itch. "What kind of sky is that? And why is it so quiet? I have a bad feeling about this. Something is seriously wrong."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Robbins said as he arched his back in a futile attempt to get comfortable. "But now that you mention it, I thought I was imagining that sky, but are you really all that surprised. There is no God here."

I no longer believed in God. What kind of God sent his finest creation out into a war zone only to be ripped to shreds by machine guns and torn apart by shells? I used to pray. My God was a stern but loving God who would watch over me while I was on the front line. Surrounded by overflowing latrines and the stink of shit and death, I wondered where God had gone. Why did he ignore us? I raged at the invisible man in the sky, anger displacing numbness and my intense fear. My mates and family told me I'd be home by Christmas, in time to share some nog with my loved ones. Now, trapped in a trench in the pouring rain on a hot August morning, I wondered if I would ever see them or home again.

Robbins shifted in the mud, stretching out his legs to rid himself of yet another cramp. "Relax. There's nothing we can do but wait it out and follow orders. I have a bit of chocolate my wife sent me. Want some?" Chocolate was a luxury we didn't often see on the front lines. Grateful for the treat, I took the small block of sweet from Robbins and popped it in my mouth.

The smooth, creamy taste exploded on my tongue. I closed my eyes and focused on this one bit of bliss amid the chaos.

"My girl is good to me. Here, take some of it for yourself. You need it more than I do."

He broke his chocolate bar and gave me half. I patted him on the shoulder, grateful for what little we were able to share. Although my outlook was bleak I yearned for the familiar, a comfort here and there to get me through the horrifying days and nights.

"She sent me my favorite tobacco too, even though it's so expensive we really can't afford it," I opened my eyes to see Robbins pulling a pack of fags from his pocket. Coffin nails. He slid one out, and placed it between his lips. Before I could stop him, he lit a match. I cried out in warning, but it was too late. The red flame glowed like a beacon in the pseudo-darkness.

I smacked the match from his fingers. "No! Put that out! The Germans will see the light -"

The bullet tore through Robbins's cheek, shattering his teeth and sending blood and brain all over my face. Some of it went into my mouth and I gagged as I swallowed it. Somehow the cigarette was still dangling from his torn lips, his face nothing more than a slab of chopped meat, he stared at me with his remaining eye, gurgling blood as a second bullet ripped through his neck. I stumbled backwards, anything to get away as gunfire exploded around me. I crouched into a ball, cowering like the coward I was. I looked up long enough to see flashes of light as machine guns bursts illuminated the fog and smoke like some kind of portal to hell.

A shell burst a few yards away, blinding me with its flash of white hot light. Loud humming assaulted my ears, which felt as if they had been stuffed with cotton. Blind and deaf, I begged the heavens for mercy. I want to go home! Please, please, let me out of here alive and in one piece. I curled against the wall, arms cramping and knuckles whitened from holding my rifle

so tightly. I aimed the gun outward, grateful for the added distance created by the bayonet, but my hands shook so badly I couldn't hold it steadily.

On the verge of collapse, I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe if I couldn't see the Germans, they couldn't see me. Tears pushed past my eyelids and streamed down my cheeks. Is this how I'm going to die? Trapped in the mud in a trench in a country I didn't care one whit about before this blasted war? Before experiencing actual battle I had been too proud. The British would be victorious and I'd be home in time to trim the Christmas tree. That's not what happened. Instead of being home with my mum, dad, and best girl, I was trapped in this bloody wet trench soaked to the bone, covered in my best mate's gore, fearing a shell would land on my head any second and turn me to minced meat pie.

I reached for my girl Violet's photo in my breast pocket and held it inches in front of my face. I focused on her loveliness, burning her image into my brain so it would be the last thing I'd see. She was my safe haven in this storm of bullets and mortars. The last thing I'd remember. Such sweetness and joy I'd never feel again. I knew I was going to die in this trench, gored by shrapnel with my guts strewn about me like tinsel.

Despite my lack of faith, I prayed. I begged and pleaded with Saint Maurice, the patron saint of infantry: "Please, Saint Maurice, by whose Grace Thy servants are enabled to fight the good fight of faith and ever prove victorious, protect us from evil - "

The smack on my shoulder startled me so much I pitched forward in the mud. I would have skewered whoever it was with my bayonet were it not for the hand that gripped the gun.

"Simsbury! Get your yellow arse moving!"

I recognized my commanding officer, Second Lieutenant Bran Ayelotte, by the silhouette of his uniform and the disgust in his voice. I barely focused on his face. Every gunfire and shell

exploding made me jump. I couldn't stop shaking! Coward that I was, I tried to hide, simply wishing for the pain and terror to stop.

He shouted a few more words I could not hear. He shook me, but I held fast, frozen to the spot in sheer terror as my bladder threatened to empty all over my trousers.

Lt. Ayelotte gripped me by my sleeve and dragged me down the trench. In the fog and haze from shellfire and rifle blasts, stars burst before my eyes, blinding me as I stumbled and slipped in the mud behind him. My free hand followed along the wet walls, attempting to maintain balance but failing. The rifle in my other hand seemed a useless appendage.

By the time he released my sleeve, he had dumped me in front of the remaining men. We were to rush out of the trench and in a last ditch effort mow down any German we saw. Time with blood. I gripped my rifle so hard my knuckles cramped and turned white again.

I looked skyward. The same sickly maroon permeated the mist. The sun hung inflamed in the sky; the moon hid behind blood red cloud curtains. Warm rain fell, smearing grease and oil on my skin, and soaking my uniform through until it felt as if it weighed twenty pounds. Each movement became more difficult than the last. The noxious feter that overpowered the stink of cordite, shit, and corpses littering our position smelled much worse by now. Hair on the back of my neck stood on end.

We lined up, guns at the ready, prepared to rush over the trench. Most of the men muttered under their breath. Their voices raised in prayer, some in song. All in unison, their voices carried to the heavens.

"Harow! Harow! Monseigneur St. Maurice, succour us."

"Heaven's Knight, aid us!"

"St. Maurice for Merry England!"

A deafening howl filled the air around us as if a host of monstrous beasts had been disturbed from their slumber and shrieked in outrage. The sound of drums beat from far above. Strains of a blasphemous flute sung from angry clouds. I looked over the top of the trench. Lights unlike anything I had ever seen before flashed in the sky. They weren't flashes caused by flares, gunfire, or shells. They seemed to come from the heavens.

The sounds of war were replaced by the guttural screams of German soldiers appearing as a phantasm out of the mist, right in front of our trench. Grotesque shapes appeared further inside the mist amid the lights; dark grey wings beating against the misted sky.

Before I had time to react, they poured into the trench. A dozen men acting as one. I recognized the uniforms. Backpacks. Grey jackets. Pickelhaube helmets.

Germans.

Had the Germans decided to attack us as we were about to attack them? No, they looked disheveled, unprepared; one man still had shaving soap on his face. Had Saint Maurice delivered us from evil after all?

Without thinking twice, I lifted my rifle, bayonet aimed and ready to stab any Alleyman who came too close to me. All the men in the company lifted rifles and pistols, prepared for the inevitable attack.

The Germans waved their arms about them, shouting words I could not understand except for an endless chorus of "bitte"s and "hilfe"s. I cornered one against the dripping wall, my bayonet aimed at his throat. He only stared at me, mad and wild-eyed, begging me in foreign words I understood perfectly well to not kill him. He couldn't have been more than 14. How the hell did he end up all the way out here? Didn't anyone notice how young he was?

"Stand down! All of you!" Lt. Ayelotte yelled. "Rigsby, you understand what these Huns are saying?"

"A bit, sir." Rigsby searched the frightened faces until he found their leader. He and the German conversed in staccato tones, and then he turned to the rest of us.

"Sir, they aren't here to attack us. They're fleeing the battlefield. Something about shining lights and something in the fog."

We looked at each other, having seen the same thing, wondering what Saint Maurice had unleashed upon us.

"Deserters?" Lt. Ayelotte asked.

Rigsby shook his head. "I don't think so."

The German in charge spoke again, his voice shrill with terror. He repeatedly looked over his shoulder, beyond the trench, into the heavens. He pointed overhead. Amid his shrieking I heard the word "engel".

Angel.

Were there angels over Mons?

A crash resounded over the battlefield. At first, I thought it cannon fire, but it was far too loud and too high overhead. I looked skyward and saw more lights shining through the fog.

"What in Heaven's name is that?" I asked the young soldier at the end of my bayonet. He only shook his head, not understanding what I said. I nodded towards the sky and he repeated what his leader had said.

"We... we are not here to harm you." The German leader's English could have used some improvement, but his message was clear. "We hide. Run." He pointed towards the mist. "Out there. Bad. No go back."

Another crash, louder than the last. Howls of outrage from the heavens. Gunfire ceased immediately. A few shells exploded but all was silent in moments. Even the injured ceased crying out in pain. The battlefield went more silent than the tomb it already was.

Through the fog I saw tentacles far overhead. I squinted my eyes tightly shut and opened them again to make sure I wasn't seeing things in the mist. My sanity strained as my eyes tried to decipher what stalked in front of me. A glimpse of large, luminous bodies broke my mind. Gigantic reptilian wings flapped so hard I felt the air whip against my face. These were unlike any angels I had ever heard of. They flew in the maroon mist, driving back Germans and English alike. Startled, I lowered my bayonet. The German boy in front of me did not run. He sank to the ground and curled into a ball, unwilling to glimpse the evil that filled the heavens.

It was then I understood what the German leader had actually been saying. It was not "engel". It was "Engel des Todes".

Angel of Death.

"We hide." The German leader repeated. "Please."

I turned towards the young soldier who cowered at my feet, much the way I had cowered not long ago in front of the mangled Robbins. I knelt onto one knee and spoke to him in a gentle voice.

"What's your name?"

He shook his head.

I patted myself on the chest. "Simsbury. Doug Simsbury."

"Heinrich Vogel."

A cry came from the heavens and Vogel jumped. I grabbed my rifle without even thinking twice about it, but as I watched the horror that fell to the ground I knew my weapon

was useless. Vogel was whimpering next to me so I placed a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to calm him, to no avail. This boy could have been me.

My bladder betrayed me at the sight of eldritch abominations coming from the heavens. They could not be angels. Vile appendages slithered from the heavens to smash Huns running within meters of the trench. Bones snapped like kindling with each swipe. Tentacles crawled along the edge of the trench so close to me I saw their leathery skin covered with reeking ooze. One snaked so close to Vogel I grabbed him by the sleeve and yanked him closer to me. I wasn't sure why but I felt overly protective of the youth, probably because I had failed Fitz so miserably the day before and Robbins moments earlier. Could I make up for my cowardice by keeping Vogel as safe from harm as I could muster? Two tentacles reached in the trench blindly seeking traction, grabbed one of my mates, and ripped him in two. I screamed, terror overpowering me. What the hell was happening? Would I ever leave this trench alive? The abomination tossed the soldier aside like a child's china doll, blood gushing into the mud in fractal curls.

I fled in the opposite direction pushing Vogel in front of me away from the horrors, with my platoon and the Germans following close behind. Amid the chaos we were no longer enemies but terrified men seeking shelter from the abhorrent. Overhead great wings beat in the mist, blocking the blood red sun that hung in a wounded sky. Flute music accompanied screams from the torn and dying. Ahead of me more tentacles snaked into the trench only to find nothing and crawl onto the battlefield, where they coiled around men trapped on barbed wire, tearing them to bits. The anguished cries of the damned gave way to blood-filled gurgles, and then went silent.

I crawled behind Robbins's body, cowering in the mud. Could these beings smell me? I stank of fear, sweat and piss, so I covered myself with as much mud as I could muster; anything to blend into the walls and mask my stench. I hid behind Robbins, quaking in a fear I had never

known before. What were these beings and why did they destroy all in their wake? What was to become of Mons? These were no angels, at least not any kind I had ever before seen. These were creatures from my nightmares.

Vogel whimpered in front of me, making so much noise I feared he'd draw more attention to us, so I grabbed him by his collar and pulled him towards the wall. As I smeared mud on his uniform, a booklet fell out of his jacket. I picked it up, and opened it to where a tattered satin ribbon held a page. Vile drawings and lettering in what looked like an ancient language filled the thick pages. I spied names and text beneath the drawings.

Abaddon

Herensugue

Mastema

Samael

Semiazas

Per fare una malia...

"What is this?" He grew so pale I thought he'd faint. I shook the book in front of his face.

"What is this? Was ist das?"

"Book."

"I see it's a book. What kind of book?"

He shook his head. I shook the book inches from his face, spitting on him as I yelled.

"Gott in Himmel, was ist das?" I saw what looked like an incantation, and without thinking I read it aloud. "Di quello che non possa più vivere, E non possa. più stare--"

Vogel wailed and slapped my face. I stopped speaking and glared at him, ready to beat him within an inch of his life. As if releasing a deluge, German flowed from his lips like rancid

water from a rusty tap. I caught a few words - abomination, chaos, forgive me - but he spoke so quickly his words ran into each other and I could not understand him.

Rigsby marched towards me, and snatched the book out of my hand. He waved it in front of Vogel's face. Shouting in German, he grabbed Vogel by one arm, his face twisted in rage and terror. He barked at Vogel, shaking the boy so hard his head snapped back and forth.

After a brief interrogation, he released Vogel with a shove, causing the youth to slip in the mud and fall to the ground. Rigsby pulled out his pistol, cocked off the safety, and aimed it at Vogel's head.

"No, no!" I yelled. "Don't! What did he say?"

"Oh, I have no intention of shooting him. I want to send him back out there into the Hell he and the rest of these Huns have unleashed upon us."

"What do you mean?" Lt. Ayelotte asked.

"I know this book. I thought it was only legend, but here it is in the flesh. Real flesh. Human flesh. I dare not speak the names of the entities but they dwell in chaos. These Huns called them forth. All of them. This German company and most of the others too. The orders came from the German High Command. How could you be so stupid?" He placed the tip of his pistol against Vogel's forehead as the youth squeezed his eyes shut in fright. Rigsby shouted in German with so much venom his spittle splashed on Vogel's face. When he finally spoke in English, his words made my blood run cold.

"I say we send them back out and let them face what they resurrected. Maybe if we sacrifice them to these angels of death, since they called upon them in the first place, the demons will go away." He said.

Our entire platoon aimed their guns at the Germans, who stood before us shocked and guilty for what they had done. Rigsby pointed his gun towards the German lines, his meaning clear. Vogel shook his head with terror, rooting himself to his spot and refusing to move. Rigsby smashed the butt of his gun against Vogel's head and once again aimed outside the trench. Others in my company lifted their guns, forcing the Germans back to deal directly with the evil they had summoned.

"Did you think you could control them?" Lt. Ayelotte yelled. "Take a good look at what you've called forth. Out. All of you." He and the rest of my mates, my platoon, pointed their guns at the Germans and watched as they slowly crawled out of the trench, hope drained from their faces. They knew they could not undo the horror they had released from the mindless chaos.

Vogel remained rooted to his spot, staring at me. Pleading with me to help him.

"Hilf mir..." He muttered, terror marring his young face.

I gritted my jaw, glanced into those wild eyes, and then stared at my feet. Vogel followed the rest of his company over the trench. I lifted my head long enough to see him stumbling back, turning towards me like Lot's wife wishing he could return to the false security of my trench. His gaze locked upon mine, eyes devoid of hope, bald terror upon his pale face, only to be replaced by resignation, as he stepped on a land mine. I jumped at the sound of the explosion.

The sound of anguished human wails and the rending of flesh and breaking of bone riveted me to my spot. The monstrous beings did not leave, despite our offering. I could only watch as hell spilled from the heavens, destroying German and English alike. As a thick tentacle snaked towards me, I closed my eyes and thought of my dearest Violet, her lovely face appearing in my mind's eye, praying to her after-image in terror and despair.

For there was no hope left for humanity.

####

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Who Are the Hackers?

Jessica McHugh

Jessica McHugh is a novelist and internationally produced playwright running amok in the fields of horror, sci-fi, young adult, and wherever else her peculiar mind leads. She's had twenty-three books published in ten years, including her bizarro romp, "The Green Kangaroos," her Post Mortem Press bestseller, "Rabbits in the Garden," and her YA series, "The Darla Decker Diaries." More information on her published and forthcoming fiction can be found at <https://www.jessicamchughbooks.com/>

Enjoy her story, Who Are The Hackers?

Who Are the_Hackers?

Jessica McHugh

###

Finksburg, Maryland

March 10, 2018

Red liquid drips down the flagpole, and the kids lower their hands from their hearts. The flag bulges in the wind, but its flapping is restrained, cloth and rope knotted around the brass finial.

Hailey Miller pouts. "I was supposed to raise the flag this morning, Mrs. Mull. It's not fair. It's my day."

"Relax, Hailey. I'm sure it's just a mistake."

She stomps her foot. “But I told my mom to watch. She’s probably watching right now.” She whines and stares at the buzzing webcam affixed to the school awning. “All the other schools are watching, too.”

Mrs. Mull pats her shoulder. “We’ll pull it down, okay? You’ll still have your day in the project. Just hold tight, everyone.”

The fifth grade class of Sandymount Elementary hums with impatient speculation as Mrs. Mull tugs on the halyard. The flag judders, and a corner tears free. She tugs again, and the flag unfurls, revealing its contents and spattering the onlookers with crimson droplets. The lump of meat is poorly secured to the flag with a hot pink diaper pin. Teachers cover their students’ eyes, but there aren’t enough hands. The kids scream as the fatty tissue succumbs to gravity, stretches on the pin, then tears free. The webcam whirs, and the slab of meat and muscle slaps against the concrete, jiggling as only a severed breast can.

Mrs. Mull vomits, and Hailey waves at the camera.

###

San Antonio, Texas

March 10, 2018

“Four dozen schools in and around Maryland participating in the 24/7 Patriot Program were victimized this morning around 8am. In an effort to promote patriotism among young people, the schools have been broadcasting their morning flag raisings for the entire year on their websites, as well as www.PatriotProgram.com, which receives over one thousand hits a day. Though, now, that number has risen dramatically.”

Chief Barron takes a sip of water and blots his forehead with a napkin.

A reporter in a blue blazer lifts her stylus. “For those of us who don’t troll flagpole feeds, could you explain the contents of these videos?”

The police chief nods, but his voice wavers when he says, “Of course. The videos reveal the children’s exposure to the objects contained within the flag. The objects being...” He gulps water this time, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows, and clears his throat. “Severed body parts. Genitals and breasts.”

Gasps travel through the crowd of reporters. They jot down the information, nodding, murmuring to themselves. Barron hushes them.

“The live feeds were stopped as soon as possible,” he says. “But the videos were either downloaded, or the originals posted on YouTube within an hour of airing. One such video was uploaded from right here within our city limits, under the account name ‘the_Hackers.’ There’s no profile information, and we’re not certain if this handle is a reference to computer hacking or—“ He lowers his eyes to the podium and taps his paperwork. “A more literal description of their proclivities.”

A balding correspondent from FOX News jiggles his jowls when he barks. “Do you believe this is a terrorist organization?”

“At this time, no. We tracked the IP address of the YouTube account to a house on Escalon Avenue, but it was empty, no computers, no Wi-Fi, nothing.”

“So these terrorists are local?”

“We have no reason to believe they’re terrorists.”

“Of course they’re not local,” the FOX correspondent says. “But at least they didn’t crash-land this time.”

The crowd roars in conflict, and Chief Barron shouts into the microphone.

“Calm down, everyone. We’re still investigating these so-called “Hackers,” and I assure you we’ll call another press conference as soon as we uncover more details.”

The journalists exhale their frustration, turn back to their notepads and tablets, and disperse as they filter out.

Chief Barron’s face creases in puzzlement. “Doesn’t anyone want to know about the victims?”

The room is silent, empty.

###

Bronx, New York

March 11, 2018

“It true they drugged the vics with some kind of roofie shit?”

“Tox is still out, but for the sake of generalization, yeah, it’s some kind of roofie shit.”

Detective Fritchie takes a bite of his tuna sandwich. “I can’t imagine. You go out, grab a drink, maybe dance with a few strangers, and the next thing you know you wake up with no titties. Bad night for those bitches.”

Martin flicks Fritchie’s barrel chest. “Might be a good night for you. You could stand to lose a couple bra sizes.”

Deputies Pepper and Lowe remove their hats as they approach. Glancing from side to side, they sit at the lunch table with the detectives.

“Hey, Martin, we hear you’ve got the Hacker case. Two vics in the city, huh?”

He wipes mayonnaise from his lips. “I don’t know what you're talking about.”

Trevor elbows Detective Martin and wheezes a laugh. “He was just tellin’ me about it. No greater crime than a tittyleless woman, am I right?”

“Weren’t just women. Fourteen cocks and twelve and a half sacks, too.”

The men cringe and cup their crotches. Despite the mind-numbing hours Martin has spent poring over the case file, he joins them in shuddering disgust.

Pepper inches across the table, his voice lowered. “Come on, Martin, give up the good stuff. Are the rumors true or not?”

“Yeah, who’s the hoity-toity Jane Doe from the West Village?” Trevor asks.

Martin’s jaw drops, but he doesn’t answer. He stuffs the last of his sandwich in his mouth and shrugs.

They bombard him with begging. They promise to share sensitive information on their future cases. When that doesn’t work, they berate him for being “too pussy for this kind of case.”

He waves for them to stop. The men clamp their mouths closed and smile as Detective Martin grudgingly lifts a manila folder from his briefcase.

“This stays between us, okay? Not like last time.”

Lowe nods. Pepper crosses his heart. Trevor lifts one eyebrow and chirps, “Well?”

He rolls his eyes. “Two of the victims are from the city, but only one of ‘em has woken up so far.”

“The chick,” Lowe says.

“Yes, the chick. And yes, she lives in the West Village.”

Trevor rubs his hands together. “She’s somebody, ain’t she? Not your standard Gossip Girl trim.”

Detective Martin flicks the corner of the folder. “The victim is Lucy Light.”

Trevor’s eyes widen. “The Lucy Light?”

Lowe asks, “The actress?” while Pepper says, “The pop star?”

Martin shushes them. “Yes, yes, and yes. The_Hackers mutilated America’s Sweetheart. Considering she’s the only one to wake up yet, she might’ve been the first.”

The men deflate in shock, shaking their heads and whispering, “Poor girl.”

Trevor is the first to lift his head again. He bounces his eyebrows at Martin, and a smirk travels up his cheek.

“So, which one was hers?” he says.

“Sorry?”

“We’ve seen the pictures. All the pieces—big titties, little titties, that one with the mole as big as a nipple. So which one was Lucy Light’s?”

Lowe’s lips become an “O” as he blinks wildly. “Ooh, yeah, which one? She’s so careful about that stuff in her movies—just thongs and sideboob—and I’ve always wondered what they looked like.”

“You want a postmortem on her left breast?”

Pepper stabs the air with his finger. “At least we know it’s a lefty!”

“You don’t have to describe it, Marty. Just...” He gestures to the folder. “Let us see the pictures.”

“Really? They’re pretty graphic.”

“We saw the flags they broadcasted. How bad could the pics be?” Lowe asked.

Martin’s hair flaps when he exhales at the ceiling. “You won’t tell anyone I showed you, right?”

They shake their heads in unison, and Martin pushes the folder to the middle of the table. Trevor throws open the file and wipes the drool from his lips as he leans over the picture of Lucy Light’s severed breast.

“It’s nice,” he says. “Real shame.”

He mutes his phone, pretends to get a text, and snaps a shot. One quick call to TMZ, and he’ll finally be able to afford a new UHD TV with a curved panoramic screen.

###

Channel 4, WGN Huntsville, Alabama

March 12, 2018

“Who ‘Hacked’ America’s Sweetheart?” The anchorman tosses his dreamy blond hair and glints a bleached incisor at the camera. “That’s the question on everyone’s lips tonight.”

“And on everyone’s Twitter, Dan.” His buxom co-anchor flops her head to the side and giggles.

“That’s right, Jane. Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and all the rest are exploding with speculations about which slice of life the _Hackers took from actress and pop princess, Lucy Light. And you lucky viewers are getting an exclusive scoop tonight.”

Jane claps. “A scoop is coming tonight, just for our viewers!”

“Pretty much exactly what I said, Jane.” His face tightens with an expanding smile. “While no one has been able to identify the _Hackers yet, we are finally able to confirm that Lucy Light was, indeed, a victim of this alleged terrorist group.”

“This should come as a big shock to Miss Light’s publicists and lawyers,” Jane says. “They’ve been denying she was a victim of the _Hackers since the cellphone picture of her severed left breast was posted to the social networking site Reddit.com yesterday.” She flaps her lips with a laugh. “Boy, are their faces going to be red.”

“It’s not looking good, that’s for sure. Especially after viewing the video we received this morning,” Dan replies.

Jane clutches her hands together and bounces them on the news desk. “Oooh, this is so exciting!”

“It certainly is, Jane. We have received exclusive surveillance video from Lucy Light’s second home in Palo Alto, California,” he says. “But we must warn our viewers that the following footage does contain sensitive material.”

“It’s not from the scene of the crime, is it, Dan?”

“Good gracious, no.” He tents his fingers and gazes into the camera sympathetically. “We at WGN would never dream of exposing our viewers to actual scenes of violence, especially to those with young ones at home. The following footage of Lucy Light dancing nude for an unknown individual in her Palo Alto home was taken by an anonymous paparazzo who supplied it as a source of comparison. The video has been zoomed in, enlarged, sharpened, and pasted beside an image of the left breast severed by the _Hackers, alleged to once belong to Miss Light.”

“She was dancing nude for someone?” Jane asks, her hand pressed to her lips. “No wonder she was targeted. Flaunting herself like that.”

“I don’t think anyone’s arguing that,” he replies. “But we still suggest sending the younger viewers out of the room for the duration of this next segment.”

“Or catch it online at WGN4u.com one hour after showtime,” Jane adds.

“Right. And don’t forget to like, share, and tweet our links using the hashtag on your screen, #LooseyLight. Again, that’s #L-O-O-S-E-Y-L-I-G-H-T.”

Jane sniggers. “Loosey. So clever, Bill. Did you come up with that?”

“I figured it was appropriate, considering the nudie dance.”

“Oh, completely! As my mother always used to say, if you don’t want people to see your bosoms, you probably shouldn’t have bosoms.”

“A wise woman,” Dan says with a nod. “But I guess Lucy Light doesn’t have to worry about that any more.”

“Well, half of her doesn’t,” Jane replies. She winks at Dan, and they share a hearty laugh.

A PA slides a piece of paper across the news desk, and Dan snatches it up.

“Folks, this just in—a message from Lucy Light’s publicist confirming she was, in fact, a victim of the Hackers. Miss Light and her family ask everyone to respect their privacy during this difficult time.”

Jane drums the desk with her pink acrylics. “I suppose there’s no reason to show the footage now.”

“But we’re going to do it anyway...right after the break!” He points at the camera and jiggles his yellow coif. “Tune in after these commercials for the video America’s Sweetheart doesn’t want you to see.”

“Plus, how does Lucy Light’s former cleavage stack up against fellow victim and human rights attorney, Gina St. George? We’ll compare the now flat-chested cuties to the Kardashians and see who comes out—“

“On top?” Dan squeezes Jane’s breast and makes a honking sound.

She giggles and smacks his hand. “Oh, you...”

A jazzy musical interlude plays, and the news anchors smile for the camera.

“I’m Dan Hinkles, here with Jan Gerber—please join us after these commercials on WGN Huntsville.”

“Jane Gerber.”

“Whatever.”

###

HackerFapper.com

YOLOxXxTHUGLIFE (Mar 13 2018) ewwwwww lucy that fat slut shouldn't of ever denied it I bet she put the pics out ther herself. Or she's just a tease

LadeeKiller (Mar 13 2018) Sum dude I know fucked her in highschool she wuz a BIIIIIIIG slut than he said and gave bad hed.

FollowMEBack4Famous (Mar 13 2018) I have the REAL!!!!!! PICTURES!! Send txt REALPICTURES to #800855

MoeTheLester (Mar 13 2018) Which ones?

FollowMEBack4Famous (Mar 13 2018) FOLLOW ME BACK. LUCY LIHGT, GINA STGEORGE, REAL NUDES.

MoeTheLester (Mar 13 2018) Followed! Why's it asking for my creditcard number?

FollowMEBack4Famous (Mar 13 2018) PRECAUTIONS.

PinkyPie111592 (Mar 14 2018) Aw that poor girl. I really liked Lucy Light in "I Think I Kinda Like You." She was so pretty. I think she looked better in "Story Fairy" more. What a great actress she was in that. You guys r mean.

SWAG_696969 (Mar 14 2018) No way, your crazy, she is crappy.

NoThangButtaGStrang01 (Mar 15 2018) She was pretty good in that stripper video.

Anon_and_Gone (Mar 15 2018) Not as good as Gina St. Goerge. She's way hotter.

SWAG_696969 (Mar 16 2018) Shes a feminazi tho. Way more bitchy.

YOLOxXxTHUGLIFE (Mar 16 2018) There all bitchy.

ThisAnnieGotHerGun (Mar 17 2018) You realize the _Hackers cut off penises too, right?
This is a crime against both genders, and you're sexualizing these poor people. What about the male victims?

YOLOxXxTHUGLIFE (Mar 17 2018) OMG were not fagets!

ThisAnnieGotHerGun (Mar 17 2018) Don't you care about the male victims? It could've been any one of you.

Lookatmelookatme (Mar 17 2018) They havent said any men's names. Might not be any.

LadeeKiller (Mar 17 2018) I heard the _Hackeres didn't actually hurt any men and they jus said that to make it look like the sluts weren't as slutty but its they're fault for sowing off.

SWAG_696969 (Mar 17 2018) Who else thinks ThisAnnieGotHerFun is Gina St George in diskise?

ThisAnnieGotHerGun (Mar 18 2018) You guys are pathetic.

YOLOxXxTHUGLIFE (Mar 17 2018) #YesAllBitches

ProfessorEverything (Mar 18 2018) I don't want to live on this planet anymore.

###

Franklin, Wisconsin

March 18, 2018

The bartender flips through the television stations, pausing only a second between each.
A scrolling red banner across the bottom of one channel flashes "Breaking News," and he stops.

Ernie waves his hand. "Turn that up, will you?"

The bartender cranks the volume and leans on the bar as a hurried newswoman pops in an earpiece and glances at the camera.

“Good evening, everyone, Maria Quantrell here with an emergency bulletin. This is probably no surprise to anyone who’s been online in the past hour, but...”

Several bar patrons immediately whip out their cellphones. Their faces glow blue with Facebook apps.

Maria tucks her hair behind her ears and exhales shakily. “At 3pm today, human rights attorney, crusader for feminism, and recent victim of the _Hackers, who remain at large, has uploaded a video of her apparent suicide.”

A lanky woman at the bar clamps her hands to her face. “Oh my God...”

“You knew her?” Ernie asks.

“No, but...getting mutilated like that, getting harassed the way she did, and all those photoshopped pictures, it’s just too sad.”

A note appeared at the beginning of the video, which I will now read,” Maria says. She exhales again, and speaks.

“You want me, here I am. A woman, a sexual object, a freak. But losing both of my breasts didn’t make me a freak. You did this to me. This is your fault.”

Ernie snaps his fingers. “Oh, that’s the chick who had both removed! Now I know her!”

Maria Quantrell lowers her gaze to her hands. She fidgets with a piece of paper. “Miss St. George’s written note ends there, but it continues with the video. I must warn our viewers they may find the next few minutes very disturbing.”

She nods off camera, and a dim movie consumes the screen.

Gina St. George stands naked before her webcam, her vagina and amputated breasts censored by dehumanizing smudges. A chair waits behind her with a rope hanging overhead, its

noose swaying slightly. Her stance widens, and the light from the kitchen behind her accentuates every curve and intimate crevice.

“Here I am,” she says. “Just another girl for you to eye-fBLEEPck into death. Monsters took my tits, but you...” She points at the camera. “....you still found a way to screw them, to make my scars into cBLEEPts. You threatened to rape me, kill me, said you’d pray for me and my family to die slow of AIDS so your kind could have the run of this disgusting world. Well, you can have it. I have no more use for you people, though I am 100% positive you will find a use for me when I am gone. You will keep fBLEEPcking my corpse with Photoshop, you will keep disrespecting the people I love, the people I’ve fought for, keep shaming and blaming everyone but the monsters behind this horrific crime. Some of you even support them. You’re not even trying to find them.”

She lowers her head then, touches her chest, and her hand disappears into the blur. She cries as she walks backward and climbs up onto the chair. Her knees shake as she stands erect and stares through the noose like it’s a window to a new world.

She smiles. Maybe she sees a better world there.

“This isn’t over,” Gina says to the noose. “Not even my part in it. But I’m passing that responsibility to those with the values and integrity I’ve spent my life fighting for. Make sure this video is seen. Share and discuss it. Even if you disagree, even if you call me a coward, do not stop the conversation. Once I’m hanging, please help me continue to stand for something.”

Gina St. George pushes her head through the noose and looks to the camera. Her eyes sparkle with tears, but she’s still smiling when the video cuts to black.

Maria Quantrell nods to her viewers. “The rest of the footage is too graphic for us to show, but I implore everyone watching to do as Miss St. George asked. Do not let her disappear

into obscurity. Do not sit back and allow people like the _Hackers to mutilate polite society. Do not—“

Ernie waves to the bartender. “Isn’t the game on?”

He nods and switches the channel. The lanky woman grumbles, but Ernie buys her a drink. All is forgiven.

###

Knoxville, Tennessee

March 19, 2018

“Just leave us alone!”

Mrs. Fleming shakes an empty wine bottle at the paparazzi. The flashing cameras highlight the tracks of tears staining her face, a new river every few snaps.

“Jenny, don’t, you’re making it worse.” Pastor Richard Fleming grasps his wife by the arm, takes the bottle, and escorts her into the house. He turns his back on the horde in his front yard, which increases their cacophonous pleas.

“Just one picture, Pastor!”

“What does your congregation think of you coming forward?”

“Will you get restoration surgery?”

“How’s your sex life now?”

Richard Fleming spins on his heel and holds up his hand to silence the crowd. “I’m only going to say this once, so listen up.”

He sets the bottle aside, clears his throat, and the paparazzi fall silent.

“What happened to me,” he begins. “What these ‘hackers’ did, is an abomination, and something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life. I’ve spent a good deal of my days so far

judging people—pro-choicers, homosexuals, people who can't help being different—but I can't do it anymore.”

He sighs, and his head droops. “I was wrong, and I'm ashamed of it. I can't say I deserve losing—no—having a piece of me stolen, put on display like it was, but I have to acknowledge my sins. I have given God good reason to lament my existence, but that stops today.”

He lifts his eyes to scan the crowd. “I am Pastor Richard Fleming, and I am a victim of the_Hackers. They drugged me, kept me in a coma as they cut off my penis and shipped it three states away. They pinned it to an American flag. They broadcast it for the whole world to see. I only hope my admission will give the other male victims in this brutal crime the courage to come forward. Despite this injustice, I hope this incident has some positive effect on their lives. And I hope they make the same declaration to do no harm, and instead celebrate each and every member of the human race.”

A paparazzo raises her hand, and the pastor nods to her.

“I think it's admirable to admit everything you did,” she says, “but there's one more thing we still need to know.”

“And that is?”

She gestures to her fellow mosquitos. “We've all seen the pictures—on the flag, off the flag, the memes, the drawings—“

Pastor Fleming grunts. “What's the question?”

“Before the incident with the_Hackers,” she starts, her pen primed on her notepad. “Was your penis really that small? Or were you a grower?”

He sighs and picks up the wine bottle. There's still a half-inch of chardonnay in the bottom.

###

Twitter.com

March 19, 2018

Westboro Baptist @WBCSaysRepent •22h

@StGina You're no saint! Picketing St. Michaels Cem Franklin 8am 3/23 #GodsWill #RT

#GodHatesCowards

Westboro Baptist @WBCSaysRepent •13h

God protects the worthy! He will show us the real LIGHT!!! #Humility #LooseyLight
#GodsWill #RT

Westboro Baptist retweeted

Lauren Paller @GodHATESyou_LOVESme •3h

@WBCSaysRepent @PastorRichard HA! Dick lost his DICK! #ThankGodForEverything

Westboro Baptist retweeted

TheReal Chase @PimpJuice_765 •2h

@GodHATESyou_LOVESme He wuz a fag, wasting his dick anyway!!!!!!

#HackerHeaven

Brian Harvey @ThisIsYourBrian_onHugs •2h

@WBCSaysRepent You people disgust me, & you don't deserve to call yourselves
followers of the Lord. The true Lord LOVES everyone (p. 1)

Brian Harvey @ThisIsYourBrian_onHugs •2h

@WBCSaysRepent (p. 2) & your hate will keep you out of Heaven. Pastor Richard
helped me through my addiction & saved my life. #GodLovesUsAll

Westboro Baptist retweeted

TheReal Chase @PimpJuice_765 • 2h

Wuz it you're addiction to cocks, @ThisIsYourBrian_onHugs? Cuz I bet you're still addicted to that!!! LOLOLOLOLOLOLOLOL #GodHatesYouAllFags

Westboro Baptist @WBCSaysRepent • 1h

@ThisIsYourBrian_onHugs #GodsWill #HeavenNotHugs WE WILL PRAY FOR YOU.

###

Google.com

March 20, 2018

Who are the h...

Who are the _hackers

Who are the houthi rebels

Who are the holy innocents

###

Google.com

March 23, 2018

Who are the h...

Who are the hells angels

Who are the hershey bears playing tonight

Who are the hosts of the view

Who are the _hackers

###

Google.com

March 25, 2018

Who are the highest paid athletes

Who are the hollywood hillbillies

Who are the hebrews

Who are the huns

Who are the harlem globetrotters

Who are the house cast

Who are the _hackers?

###

Google.com

March 30, 2018

No results found for “Who are the _Hackers?”

Did you mean: “Torture Porn”

Snake Eyes

Jo-Anne Russell

Jo-Anne Russell is a horror writer and the publisher at Dead Light Publishing, living in Alberta, Canada. She is legally blind, the mother of eight, and enjoys all forms of creative expression. Find her on Facebook, Twitter, or here: <http://www.jo-anne-russell.com/>

DLP's first anthology release, Not Just A Pretty Face, Women in Horror Volume 1 will be available this February.

Snake Eyes

Jo-Anne Russell

Snake Eyes sat across from his newest victim. She sat tied tightly to one of the two old kitchen chairs that he kept down in the basement, and was just coming to. This player was different. She was harder to knock out with the ether and was waking up much faster than any of the others.

Lightning flashed outside the tiny window sending the flies in his direction. He swiped at them as he rolled the five black dice in his hand, and glanced at the direction they had come from. The corpse pile in the corner was going to topple over soon if he didn't do something with them. He didn't need them anymore – after all, he had his trophies. He looked around the room and admired them. The walls stood lined with canning shelves, full of large pickling-jars. His prizes floated freely in their encasements of formaldehyde. The player sputtered and coughed as she started to panic.

“Where am I? What the hell is going on?” She struggled in her seat.

“Don’t bother,” Snake Eyes said as he passed a die between his fingers. “I made sure those ropes are secure. You might as well calm down so you don’t forget the rules when I tell’em to you.”

“Let me go! You’re making a huge mistake.”

“Oh no, I’m not. The dice don’t lie. They picked you, just like they picked all the others.” He pointed to the pile.

She gasped, screams erupted from her dry lips, but the booming thunder disguised them from the outside world. “Let me out!”

“Maybe, but you have to play the game. The dice will decide if you go free, or if parts of you stay right here forever.” His smile revealed yellow, broken teeth that looked too big. Deep creases spread across the leathery skin of his face. He basked in her fear as the look in her eyes gave way to the terror she was trying to control.

“Please don’t make me do this, just let me go. I’ll forget this ever happened – I’ll forget what you look like.”

“No, you won’t. I won’t let that happen. You’ll play just like they did. You’ll follow the rules and play until the game is over.”

“If I do, will you let me go?”

“If that’s what the dice want, then yes.”

“How do I know you won’t just kill me whether I play or not?”

Snake Eyes stood, staring at her for a moment. “You see these?” He showed her the five worn dice in his hand. “These have guided my fate for my entire life ever since I was eight years-old. My Father raised me when my Mother fucked-off, leaving us with nothing but debt and no-place to live. He used these to put food on the table, pay for rooms, even to decide what city we

would go to next. These five dice have kept me alive, and made every decision in my life. These dice decided my Father had to give me up to a player when I was eight. They decided how he would treat me, torture me, and guide me into my destiny. They are the only thing I believe in or trust, so you have no worries – unless the dice decide different.”

“What destiny; to kidnap and dismember people? What’s wrong with you!”

“Let’s talk about the rules,” he said, taking his seat.

“I don’t want to talk about rules,” she screamed, “I want out! Let me go! Help!”

The storm raged outside shaking the window inside its pane. More flies buzzed around them, bouncing off her face while she screamed.

Snake Eyes laughed. “Don’t you hear the storm? No-one can hear you. No-one knows where you are, and if you don’t stop wasting my time I might just have to keep you here longer until you’re ready to listen.” Impatient, he struck out hitting her in mid-throat, cutting her scream into a choke.

She sputtered, tears spilling down her cheeks as she gasped for breath.

“That’s better. Now, tell me your name.”

Her swollen eyes darted from side to side, but there was no escape.

“Com’on now, don’t be shy. Give me your name!”

“Sam.”

“Ahhh, Sam. Samantha I presume? Okay, well Sam, Samantha is a bit long for the player tags I have so we will leave it at Sam; now was that so hard?”

The tears kept streaming from her eyes as she shook her head no.

He grabbed a small paper off the table and scribbled her name on it. “Here you go,” he said as he peeled the wax-paper backing off, and pressed the sticky side to her chest. “And now

for the rules. They are quite simple, really. Each turn consists of one roll. You roll the five dice all at once. If you get three sixes, I let you go, but if you roll two ones - that's snake eyes, just like me - you stay here with me forever."

"W-what if I roll something else, then what?"

His smile broadened. "Then I get a prize," he motioned to the shelves.

Her eyes widened, and she squirmed in a final attempt to get free.

He ignored her futile effort, and rolled the dice in his hands again, waiting for her to finish. When she stopped, her voice had regained a sense of composure, and the tears stopped. She swallowed before speaking.

"How many chances do I get?"

"Well that depends. If you roll three sixes, I'll untie you and let you go. If not, we cauterize the limb and play again tomorrow. We'll keep playing until one of us win, or your body gives out. It all depends on what the dice want for you, just like them." He motioned to the corpse pile behind him.

Rotting eyes stared blankly in her direction. She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat.

"Ready? Game time!" He put the dice on the table and walked to the back of her chair. He retrieved a knife from his pocket and held it to her throat.

She winced, and sucked in a quick breath.

Snake Eyes leaned down and tucked a loose lock of her brown hair behind her ear and spoke. "I almost forgot something important. I'll be right back." He disappeared up the stairs for several minutes before returning with an old electric iron.

"W-what's that for?" Her voice betrayed her brave face.

He plugged the iron into the orange extension cord that snaked across the floor. Setting it on its flat end, he returned to his position behind her. With a swift jerk of the blade, he cut a single rope free from her right arm.

“That, dear Sam is to keep you from bleeding out while we play our game.” He returned the knife to his pocket, scooped up the dice and sat back down. “Just so it’s fair, the dice decide what I get as a prize; the higher the roll, the bigger the limb.” He smiled with sparkling eyes like a child at Christmas, and put the dice in her hand.

“Ready? And take your roll.”

Her hand shook involuntarily as she felt the warm plastic cubes of her fate. She looked at her captor’s eyes as they twitched in anticipation of her turn. Sweat formed on her brow and trickled down her skin. A booming crash paired with a sheet of blue and white filled the room as the lights went out.

“No, not right fucking now!” Snake Eyes scrambled from his seat and flicked the switches on the breaker panel back and forth in a fit of rage. He streamed out a string of curse words, finally grabbing the iron and throwing it at the nearest shelf. Three large pickle jars exploded just as the next wave of thunder and lightning clashed outside. The contents of the jars spilled off the shelf and slid beside her chair.

She screamed.

“Shut the fuck up you stupid Bitch! I already told you, no-one can hear you.”

Her scream turned into uncontrollable sobbing. “Maybe the dice...want you...to let me...go.”

He turned to her, giving up on the panel. His grinning face blinked in and out of view with each flash of light. He walked to her and grabbed the two ends of the cut rope. “We’ll see,” he said, as he re-tied her wrist. “You just sit tight, and we’ll get the game started in no time.”

“Nooo! Let me go!” She thrust herself against her restraints like someone having a violent seizure.

“Suit yourself, but you’re just going to get hurt, hahaha.”

She struggled as he walked up the stairs and slammed the door shut. He was right, the ropes burned into her flesh with each attempt. She was not going to get away; she was going to die down there just like the others.

Fresh tears spilled over her cheeks. She would never see her family again. They would probably never recover her remains, have a funeral, or closure. She’d never taste cherry-swirl ice cream on a hot summer day. Never see her beloved Yorkie, Margot, with her little pink bow; always so excited to see her when she got home from work. No, she would die a single twenty-two-year-old, and no-one would ever know what happened. Maybe if Snake Eyes was caught- then they might be able to identify her among the rest of the bodies, but not before he snuffed out her life.

“What did I do to deserve this?” But deep down, she knew.

They were seventeen, celebrating Sam’s birthday down by the lake. Jordan brought the 40 of Jack Daniels and the plastic cups, and she brought the soda. They were having a good time and for a moment she thought they might even have a future together. Sam let him take her that night right by the water. He was sweet and gentle; taking the time she needed despite the intoxication. Afterward, they went for a swim. Neither of them realized the storm rolled in, nor the severity of the damage it would cause.

Dark clouds smothered the moonlight above. They had swum out much further than intended, splashing each other and racing toward the floating dock. The six-by-nine feet wood platform disappeared in the darkness; swallowed by swelling waves.

Sam started vomiting, choking and sputtering on the intake of water, gasping for every breath. She felt Jordan's hands thrusting her upward, trying to keep her face out of the waves. She was panicking, flailing her arms in a feeble attempt to get back to land.

His arm reached around her chest and under her arm. In seconds she was on her back, the rain pouring down found its way into her throat and nostrils. She knew he was trying to save her but her instincts clouded her judgement. She twisted and thrashed to get free, hitting her elbow off something hard. Lightning flashed and lit up the shoreline. She was close.

Sam kicked with all of her might, pulling the cold water beneath her shaking body with her arms, and headed for shore. The rest was a blur as she fell in and out of consciousness. Fragments of memories flashed; the wet sand beneath her trembling body, crackling snaps and lights coming from above, exposing the moon in tiny pieces, and reaching out for Jordan – but not finding him. Later the police would tell her it was a tragic accident, but she knew that somehow she was responsible for Jordan's death.

Sam bounced in her seat. The wood chair slid fairly easy with each bounce. If she was going to die, she was at least going to get one last look at the outside world. Inch-by-inch she moved the chair across the room to the window. She struggled with getting it to go in the direction she wanted, slipping through the mess of body parts and formaldehyde, tangling the extension cord around the legs as she went. Her bare feet crunched down on broken shards of glass from the jars, but she pushed on.

The chair came to a halt just a few feet shy of the window. She bounced harder, determination coursing through her mind, as she struggled with whatever the thing was that was stopping her. She shifted direction and tried again. This time she moved forward, as the iron jerked off the table and hit the cement floor with a hard clang. The momentum of release sent her forward. Her restrained hands and feet proved useless as her face slammed the floor.

Light reflected in the pooling blood of her head injury. On the un-even surface it followed a crack in the cement downward toward the wall. The next clap of thunder and the sound of the shattering window above swallowed the ringing in her ears. None of that affected her though, as a searing pain ripped through her spine and into her brain.

The pain! The beautiful pain spread through her, like the colors that appeared all around her. Some of them she had never seen, nor imagined. A euphoric orgasm of the mind intertwined with her soul. "Was she floating? Yes, floating like she was on her back in a lake with-" Images flashed in speeds beyond her previous comprehension. Memories of everything she had ever experienced and even forgotten rushed to the forefront of her expanding mind. "Do you like games?" The stranger in the park asked her as he covered her mouth with a damp rag. Her screams muffled, she fought him, but he was stronger. The pain and the memory passed and in its place left a mental strength and knowledge beyond human understanding. Her emotions cleansed of all previous conceptions, and as she accepted her new reality everything went black.

"Wake up!"

His voice entered her ears with a snap as the cold water drenched her.

"It's time to play. Wake up!"

Sam opened her eyes and allowed them a moment to adjust before speaking. She watched Snake Eyes take his seat across from her on the other side of the table. His face shined, glazed in sweat. The front and armpits of his gray tee-shirt donned darker gray ovals of his stinking fluids.

“I thought you might be dead when I found you, most people don’t survive a lightning strike.”

“Lightning?” She tipped her head a little to the right, and glanced at the broken window.

“Hahaha, yep. You were just lying there in your own fool blood pool. That flasher came straight through my window and hit you between the back-bars of the chair. Damndest thing I ever saw; took me an hour to bring you around.”

“I thought...I was dead.”

“Oh no worries there, the dice will still have their say. Can you wiggle your fingers?”

She moved them just enough to feel she still had a grip on the dice he had handed her earlier. “Earlier, hadn’t the room been darker, and stripped of the brilliant hue it now held?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good. And do you still have the dice? I couldn’t find them on the floor, and your fist was clenched so tight I couldn’t pry it apart.”

They felt different now as she squeezed them in her hand. No longer just warm plastic cubes, they felt hot to the touch, yet so light almost not there at all. She nodded at him.

He jumped up and hurried behind her, slashing through the same rope as before. He returned to his seat with eager eyes staring at her.

“Well, go on; show me!”

Something had changed. She felt no more fear of this so-called man, no upset, not even a twinge of anxiety. Her nerves were steady, and her mind empowered with what was to come.

“Here they are,” she raised her hand and opened it one finger at a time.

She pulled them back as he reached for them.

“What are you doing? Give them to me!”

“Nuh, uh, uh. Aren’t we going to play a game? It’s my turn, right?” She smiled as he re-adjusted himself in his chair.

“Oh, okay. Roll then.”

“I’ve got a better idea, a new twist, if you will. I think you’re going to like what I have to show you.”

Sam held her hand out and released her fingers one-by-one. The euphoric sensation coursed through her. Every synaptic nerve, every vein, even the tiny hairs on her body not visible to the average eye filled with her new-found power. The dice rose from her hand as she released the final finger, and hovered about six inches above her palm.

“H-how did you do that?” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, mouth agape.

“Oh, but there is more. Just watch.”

Sam moved the dice in rolling patterns, changing directions and speed as Snake Eyes watched, consumed in amazement. The dice reflected in his eyes, while hers began to glow-exaggerating their already green tone. He didn’t notice, nor the wind whipping harder through the broken window, or the loose papers scuffling around on the floor. He was mesmerized beyond recognizing the changing colors of the lightning, or the flashing of the bare light bulb hanging overhead.

She changed her focus while still engaging the dice. A hand stretched from the corpse pile behind him, moving away the other parts that were near. In seconds the un-dead torso attached to it pulled free, blinking at her over crinkled eyes of faded blue.

Round and around the dice danced in the air.

The torso dragged itself across the floor leaving a trail of black fluid.

“Keep watching,” Sam cooed to him, “the best part is about to happen.” A wide smile spread across her face as the torso closed the gap between them.

Snake Eyes didn’t as much as twitch when the torso pulled the knife from his back pocket.

“Ready?”

He gave a slight nod, and watched the dice drop to the table.

Three sixes and two ones.

She smiled at him again, “Snake Eyes,” she whispered, but her lips remained still in a smile.

“Nooo!” He screamed but confusion flooded his mind as the torso drove the blade deep into his spine, ripping down his back with inhuman force. Her glowing eyes caught his attention as his body slunk from the chair.

Sam released herself, and squatted beside him. “I’m sure our friend here has some unfinished business with you, but don’t worry, I’ll take good care of these. She opened her hand and revealed the five black dice.

Snake Eyes watched as she stood. Her laughter carried on long after she ascended the stairs, and shut the door.

In a blur the torso was upon him, screeching.

“Game over!”

The Cowboy Cabin

Julia Benally

Julia Benally was born to the Bear Clan of the White Mountain Apache Tribe. She absolutely loves to dance, sing, and do cross-stitch. She once had a fish, but it has since committed suicide in its fish tank. She also likes to scare herself by looking for creepy things, and writes horror strictly at high noon. You can follow her on twitter at @SparrowCove, subscribe to her blog at <http://sparrowincarnate.blogspot.com/>, and like her page on facebook at www.facebook.com/SparrowCove.

The Cowboy Cabin

Julia Benally

The cacophony of blasting guns and bellowing soldiers screamed above booming Heavy Metal. The soldier James played was about to die. As the character dropped dead, James shrieked for the end of the impossible level had been in sight. His shocking obscenities reached the preschool down the street. One would think he had lost his leg. His neighbors would have said his head, but they could still hear him.

“Cheeseburger,” Rita shouted over the din, “Grandpa says someone’s stealing from the cornfield again. Can you go over there and help him out?”

James grimaced, he hated his nickname. “No.” The cornfield was in the middle of the woods, his cousin Tobias saw Bigfoot over there not six months ago and Elroy from across town was found hanging a scant hundred feet away in a big tree. The place was cursed.

That was of no consequence to Rita for she didn’t have to go over there. Lips pinching into a thin scarlet line, she snapped off the consol.

“Hey!” James tossed the controller. “What was that for?”

“I swear I’ll ax this stupid box if you don’t help your grandpa. He’s an old man.” And with that, she marched to the shed for the ax.

James jumped to his socked feet and pulled on his clonking shoes. He had learned the hard way not to brush off his mom’s threats. The remains of his last system still lay in the corner of the yard. Slipping his phone into his big pocket, he walked into the messy living room as his mom entered with the ax.

“I’m ready!” James stomped to the door. “You psycho, axes are for wood.”

“Exactly,” Rita said. “Not for laying around, doing nothing and moping about a whore who doesn’t want you. Use it for wood and I won’t use it for your retarded games.”

James punched the wall at the mention of Cory. “I’m supposed to chop wood and help grandpa at the same time?” He shook his greasy head and marched out the door. Glancing at the empty drive, his jaw tightened; his stupid brother had the car again. That meant he would have to pass by Tobias’s house. Steeling himself, he started walking.

It didn’t matter the time, Tobias would be home, waiting like a wolf spider for his victim. He had no other prey but James. As the government dwelling with its treeless front yard loomed, he scanned the place for signs of Tobias. Was the wretch gone today?

As he hurried past the ominous abode, stumbling on his too long jeans, his cousin's dreaded voice hollered, "Hey, Cheeseburger! Taking a walk?" A large boy in baggy blue jeans and a black t-shirt appeared over the ridge of the rooftop. His lips pulled back over yellow teeth and he sat down. "When's the last time you saw daylight? Where's Cory?" He guffawed. "I told her how many games you bought after she left you. And how you gained thirty pounds. She started laughing!"

A hot dart of fury burned James' breast. "Shut up!"

"Weren't you supposed to be in Varsity this year?" Tobias cackled. Reaching behind him, he produced a BB Gun and aimed at James' butt. "Time for cardio, Cheeseburger!"

"HEY!" James clamped his hands over his unkempt black hair and fled as Tobias pulled the trigger. A BB ricocheted next to his foot and then what felt like a hot needle jammed into James' left butt cheek. He screamed. Tobias's triumphant laughter reverberated through the air. The reprehensible sniper took aim once more, but his galloping victim rounded the corner. James may have gained thirty pounds, but his quarterback speed hadn't left him yet.

"I'll get you in the balls when you come back, Cheeseburger," Tobias bellowed.

James struggled not to cry as he hissed vile curses under his breath. Despite how he hated Tobias, he could not confront him. Tobias had a mean punch. These days, James had no backbone to end the constant torture. Rubbing his hindquarters, the heavy teen reached his grandpa's house on the other side of town. It was one of those old houses built of wood during the sawmill days when this sleepy reservation community was a booming cultural hub, and not just for the Fort Apache Reservation, but for all the White Mountains.

The old man lounged on an abandoned classroom chair as if it were comfortable. The sun beat against his wrinkled brown face though he wore a baseball cap to shade his squinting black eyes. None of this mattered. The sun could burn its hottest, Old Jerry wasn't going to budge.

He waved a stringy arm. "Cheeseburger."

"My name's James," the boy mumbled.

"What?" The crone guffawed. "James is a man's name!" He leaned forward. "Finally took a walk?" He cackled. "Cory with your brother now?"

James showed his teeth like a snarling lion as tears threatened to further his humiliation.

"Not good enough in bed?"

"I never slept with her," James bit out.

"That's why you lost her. She wanted your brain hanging out of your pants, but you're zipped up. That's good. Too many Apache boys catching STD's from her. You don't need to be next."

James drew himself up to his tallest. "Cory's a virgin." He didn't know why he was defending her. She was as reprehensible as the rest of them. Maybe it was because his grandpa was right, and he hated when his grandpa was right. The old man loved rubbing it in.

"Cory likes groups. This time next year Jason's gonna be burnin' warts off his weenie." The crone chortled.

James shifted his feet. He always felt like an idiot when his grandpa talked to him. He never had witty comebacks either. It was like his brain had shut down. After Cory had left him, he had thought the games would keep his mind off of her. But they had wiped his mind of everything but Cory.

“Hey, tall for nothing, get in here and take out my trash. I can’t do nothing with my bad back.” The bow-legged crone hobbled into the house.

James frowned at his chuckling back and followed, feeling like a slave. His eyes roved the house and yard for his grandpa’s devil hound. Sometimes the old man just laughed if his mutt attacked someone, and it was usually James.

For living alone, Old Jerry had a truckload of trash. The man loved his Sprite. Two liters cluttered the kitchen, windowsills and the dinner tray by the television set. The only thing lickably clean was the trashcan.

“I thought I was supposed to do something about the cornfield,” grouched James as he scoured Old Jerry’s filthy abode.

The old man plopped into an old chair made of orange tweed and swigged a Sprite.
“Yeah, I left my razor over there.”

“Mom said—what you bring your razor for?”

“To cut corn, stupid.” He let out a humungous burp; ancient air from musty lungs.
“Somebody’s been stealing it, so I been cutting it.” James wrinkled his nose as the rancid stench floated across the room to him. “Get over there and guard it.”

“Until when?”

“Morning, and don’t forget my razor.”

“I needa eat first.”

Old Jerry blasted gas from both ends. “Eat your gut.”

“Ugh, come on, Grampa.” James covered his nose.

“What are you complaining for? When’s the last time you washed your butt? Help out an old man, boy! You better run over there. Mr. Big, get over here.” A little rat Chihuahua scrambled from the hallway to its master’s bony knee. “Chase diabetes here to the cornfield.”

The satanic mutt darted at James, head down. Every fantasy that James had ever conjured of kicking it in the face flew out the window. Turning tail, he fled, yelling vile curses. Old Jerry chortled in contempt and went looking for another Sprite.

#

Sweat stinging his eyes, lungs broken for all the air they sucked in, James stumbled into the cornfield’s vicinity. It was out in the middle of nowhere, like Old Jerry’s mind. Tall pine trees surrounded the area as far as the eye could see, as if civilization didn’t exist a few miles away. Not even the sound of the highway reached this secluded spot.

A grimacing scarecrow with stitched mouth stood guard in the middle of the field with a host of crows roosting on its thin arms. A cowboy cabin languished in the shade of a gnarled Ponderosa. Its small window faced the field. Beside the cabin, plastic covered a pile of wood.

Staggering onto the gray porch, James sat down, ready to give himself up for dead. To his surprise, the miniscule fiend had vanished. As the sky merged into orange and yellow, the last rays of light touched the dirt road. What time had it been when he had left the house that the sun was setting? He hadn’t witnessed such a sunset in eons, but he didn’t care. His fingers itched for a grimy controller and the blue rays of a video game.

Twilight fell, chilling his skin, though he wore a thick black sweater. Going inside, he looked around for a thermostat. The cowboy cabin had all the amenities one needed: a hard bed, fireplace, one candle, a rusty stove, buggy blankets, a rickety chair and a keg of gasoline because the crazy old man used it as a fire-starter. Not a single zap of electricity had ever graced that

cabin. James would have to make his own fire if he wanted to be warm. What a travesty to chop one's own wood! For one thing, James was afraid of axes. They clove toes AND video games. Plus, he couldn't make a fire.

Cursing like a madman, he sat on the hard bed and stared into space. What was he supposed to do now? To bring a book was out of the question for he despised reading. Why hadn't he brought his 3DS? He rolled his eyes and flung himself back on the bed in annoyance. KLOCK! His stink head smacked the hard wall instead of the mattress.

"ARGH!" He sat up and punched the wall as if it had done it on purpose. He just hurt himself and he kicked it instead. He paced like a lunatic around the room, bored out of his mind. "What am I supposed to do?" Nothing bothered to answer him.

As the evening grew colder he realized that he had better learn to make a fire or they'd surely find his reeking butt frozen in the morning. It wasn't like he cared how anyone would feel about losing him, if they cared at all. Some weirdo doctor might do an autopsy. That meant he'd be laying butt naked on an operating table. He wasn't sexy enough for that. What would they say at his funeral? His horrid grandpa's woody voice croaked in his head: "I knew diabetes in that BIG coffin. He was tall for nothing!"

Tobias's voice chimed in, "Dr. Man, did you see where I shot him in the butt?"

"Cheap old man," James snarled. "Eff Tobias!" Picking up the ax, he marched to the logs piled against the side of the cabin. Glancing in trepidation at this place where Bigfoot hung out, he placed a log on the dusty ground and swung. CRACK! The log was the only one with a knot in it. James threw back his head and howled in frustration. He glanced around as if all the forest laughed at him. Cutting wood was an overrated experience. So what if his grandpa had started

chopping wood at three and hiking the mountains alone at eight with his own gun? Did he kill a wolf with his teeth too? He'd probably claim it if he could think of it.

James set up another log, determined to prove to the forest creatures why man was superior. He swung. The handle bounced off the wood, flew out of his hand, and landed in the shadows behind the cabin. Laughter sounded from the trees, the mice, the squirrels, birds and even the stupid worms.

"AAGH!" He stomped inside, pulled up the chair and glared out the glassless window. It was lighter out there than within. He'd be able to see the thief without being seen, or the Bigfoot. Ugh, he wouldn't be here if it weren't for that Chihuahua. Next time he saw it, he would kick it right in its ugly mug. Why was he afraid of it anyway?

As he plotted revenge, an owl hooted; its great shadow glided over the cornfield. Apache ghost stories about owls flitted through his mind and James shivered. Owls meant someone was going to die. Cold wind whistled through the tall cornstalks, rocking the scarecrow until it fell over with a crash. James rolled his eyes. He wasn't going to fix it. Maybe his grandpa would break his back when he showed up to do it? James grinned.

Leaning his chin on his arms, he drifted into a light doze. It grew colder; chills prickled his skin, aggravating the sting of the BB beneath his reeking pants. His sleepy mind whispered: There will probably be a giant bruise there. The autopsy doctor will see it. You better get the ax and make a fire, even if you have to toss the log in whole.

"Yeah," he mumbled, head rolling to the side. As the moon climbed through the trees, ghostly light gleamed like lace on the forest floor. Before James knew it, he toppled off the chair; it clattered across the wooden floor, making the forest cringe for interrupting its stillness.

“Aie-yah!” James scrambled to his feet. He rubbed his grubby bottom, jerking his hand from the BB’s striking point. This place was stupid! With vile mumbles he kicked the chair into the fireplace. “Where’s that crap ax?”

As he headed for the door, a shadow scurried past the window. James started, it was the intruder! He’d show that idiot to steal corn from his grandpa. It wasn’t that he cared about the crone; it was the intruder’s fault that he was stuck out here. Besides, at this point, he just wanted to pound something. Scurrying to the porch, he barked, “HEY!”

The shadow seemed extremely thin, hunched over at the wall of corn like some feral child.

“You get over here,” James bellowed, advancing with all the threat he could muster.

Glancing at him, the shadow scrambled back to the forest, sometimes using its too-long arms to help it. James gulped in consternation. What was that? He wasn’t about to investigate an unknown spook. He hurried back to the cabin and shut the door, shoving the stubborn lock into place. It squeaked with wood on wood, worse than nails on a chalkboard.

“Screw this,” he murmured and slipped his phone from his pocket. He dialed up his mom, but she wouldn’t answer. He called again, nothing. The woman hadn’t set up her voicemail either. “What’s wrong with her?” He prepared to text her although she never answered those. She looked, laughed, and promptly forgot. She just joyed in receiving messages.

KNOCK-KNOCK!

The sound echoed through his brain. Whatever was outside must have heard the lock squeak into place. Shoving the phone in his pocket to blot out the light, he pressed against the door and glanced at the window. It shone like a navy blue square in the dark. Why couldn’t it have had glass in it? If only he had the ax!

A high whining voice began singing outside the cabin door. It circled the small building, scraping what sounded like a nail across the weathered wood. James clutched at the hood strings against his chest, heart thumping against his fingers. His wide eyes followed the awful sound, and then silence fell. Had it gone away? But then the shadow appeared at the window. James pressed his stiffened frame against the wall. The thing crawled in head first; its spidery arms reached the floor before half its body had come through. Pulling its legs in, it straightened up until its head touched the ceiling; it had to stoop.

Walking to the empty fireplace as delicately as an arachnid on a web, the creature sat cross-legged before it. James' breath strained from his throat. His fingers crawled to the lock. He tugged, but it remained fast. He closed his other hand on the bolt, pulled, nothing. Frightened sweat beaded his forehead. If he forced it like he did before, the lock would squeak, and he couldn't afford to make a sound.

The fates were cruel this night. Heavy Metal music screamed from his pocket. James fumbled to shut it up. The shadow's head spun around, but the body remained immobile. Two glimmering eyes flashed; they rose to the ceiling as the body swiveled to face him.

Screaming, James ripped the lock off the door, slicing his fingers, but he couldn't feel it. Shouldering through the exit, he stumbled outside and sprinted into the shadows behind the cabin—the last place he had seen the ax.

He glanced back for the shadow, but didn't see it. Looking at the roof, his heart skipped a beat and he darted behind a tree. The shadow perched on the ridge like a spindly gargoyle, its orbs gleaming like two red stars. From that nightmarish sight, James' eyes roved to the patch of black where he was sure the ax lay. Silver glimmered just outside the swatch of gloom.

James swallowed. Somehow, he had to get that ax! A plan formed in his mind, but could he pull it off? There was no time to work out the details. Squaring his shoulders, he dashed for his salvation. The shadow espied the movement and sprang towards his running form, limbs stretched out as if it would wrap around him like mummy bandages.

With an alarmed gasp, James stumbled out of its way and lunged for the ax. His shoulder knocked what felt like a small aspen tree. Pain rippled through him, but he paid no heed. His hand closed on the handle near the head. Sinewy arms circled round his shoulders. A bony hand clamped on his wrist. With a strangled scream, James swung the weapon behind him. CRUNCH!

The emaciated hand slipped from his wrist, and the form tried to flee. If it escaped now, it would be just as bad as losing sight of a monster spider in the house. Seizing its raggedy shirt, he let loose a flurry of powerful strikes. Every muscle that had lain dormant in his video game room animated. The creature's screeching wails sent chills skittering down James' spine, but he refused to back down. Flinging the shadow into a patch of moonlight, he moved to continue his attack, but froze with ax raised to swing; his eyes widened in horror.

It was his grandpa's scarecrow. A stitched mouth grimaced from ear to ear beneath eyes as round as jetty bulbs. Strange reflections glowed in the depths as if therein lay the flames of hell. Blood stained the deathly pallor of its skin, soaked its shredded clothes. Though hacked to ribbons, the creature could still move. It crawled towards James, snarling and whining in despairing tones.

Its eyes reminded him of a flaming match. He would burn this monstrosity up even if he had to use the cabin as fuel. He raced inside. The creature clawed after him at frightening speed. It slid in through the window before James could reach the mantle where the matches lay and pounced.

James cried out in pain as he hit the stone fireplace, the ax beneath him. The creature's fingers dug into his flesh, ripping through the sweater and tearing at his hair. They rolled across the hard floor. James managed to fling it from him. Its form clattered against he didn't know what. In the pitch blackness, his hand groped for anything and landed on a wooden something. All he could see were the flaming eyes as they darted at him. Swinging his new weapon at his assailant, the momentum jarred to a halt as it met the body. The eyes momentarily vanished.

Not knowing how the blow had affected it, James scrambled for the black hole that was the fireplace and felt around for the ax. Its sharp cold edge pressed against his flesh. Desperate fingers skittered over the hard head and closed on the wooden handle. A chill rose on his back, as if the cabin had fallen away from him. With a startled gasp, he arced the weapon behind him. An awful wail pierced the air and the thing tumbled to the hard wood. Its glowing eyes slithered in circles on the floor while a pounding noise sounded in a different part of the cabin.

"What's it doing, what's it doing," James squeaked. Somehow he remembered his phone. Turning it on, he opened the flashlight app and shined it on the monstrosity. He had cloven the scarecrow in two; its upper body scurried over the floor. The legs kicked and twitched beside the broken chair that he had fallen off of earlier. James' body seemed to move on its own as he seized both pieces and thrust them into the fireplace.

Snatching up the matches, he lit one and threw it onto the flammable body, but the fire didn't catch like in the movies. James' heart thumped in panic. What was he supposed to do? Eyes darting from one corner to another, he hunted for...a vague image of the gasoline keg rose to mind. The scarecrow struggled to escape the fireplace with a dull thump-thump-thump. James' feet pattered across the floor with its rhythm.

"Where is it?" he shouted.

His light darted over the keg and he almost missed it. Hauling it up, he ripped off the cap and dumped it at the scarecrow. The bulk of the contents splashed across the floor. Without thinking of what that might do, the panicked boy lit a match and threw it.

The flames leaped with startling power. They swallowed the writhing scarecrow and rushed for James. With an alarmed cry, he sped out the door, leaving the keg in the middle of the room. He lunged for the trees, the flames swept inside the container and BOOM!! The cabin blasted apart. Bits of wood, nails and roof showered like shrapnel. James rolled behind a tree, ears ringing, head throbbing. His very bones seemed to have come loose.

He lay behind the tree for he didn't know how long, but when he raised his head, gray morning light filtered through the smoky remains. The cornfield had been riddled with debris, all but destroyed. As he stood to survey the damage, a startled deer darted from the cornfield and loped into the forest now singing with merry birds. James cried out in terror and stumbled against the tree. Heavy Metal screamed from his pocket and he almost jumped out of his pants.

"Crap!" He shoved his shaking hand into his pocket and pulled out the phone. He would have to change that shrieking mess as soon as possible. It wasn't good for his shredded nerves. R-I-T-A scrolling across the screen did nothing to calm him either.

"Hello?"

"What do you want?" Rita said as if he had been intruding. "You need a ride home, Cheeseburger? You stop by your—"

"I don't need anything," James cut her off and hung up. He didn't need her nagging, and he surely wasn't going to listen to it just to get a ride. As he headed back to town on foot, his eyes so long closed in the darkness of his gaming room opened, his ears cringing with VR battles

took in the soft roar of the trees. Lights and shadows rippled on crunchy pine needles as a squirrel scurried across the road.

James halted and breathed in the mountain air. It filled him with a life that he hadn't felt in so long. A memory that he belonged here dispelled the itch in his fingers for a controller that had ruled him as much as it had the characters on the screen. Glancing at his torn sweater, he pushed the long bangs from his face. These belonged in the graveyard of the gaming room. With one last glance at the road, he tramped into the trees.

Babies

Christine Lajewski

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher, and a teacher/naturalist at MA Audubon. She also volunteers at Mystic Aquarium. She is a haunt actor during the Halloween season. Her first novel, JHATOR, explores death and grief as a shamanic journey and was published in 2014. A collection of horror shorts, Erring on the Side of Calamity, was published in the summer of 2018. Her first horror novel, Bonebelly, was published in October, 2018. She has had short stories published in Dark Tales, Sanitarium, The Flash Fiction Press, Shadow Over Deathlehem. and The Misbehaving Dead anthology. Enjoy her story, Babies.

Babies

Christine Lajewski

I am looking out the window of a tenement apartment wondering where the hell I left my car—my beautiful car, my Mercedes, the one I have no intention of paying for.

I need that car. I have cash in that car. Guns, too, and passports and credit cards with IDs to match, including one with the name my wife took when she married me.

I'm not sure how I got here or how many hours have passed since I arrived. Hard to tell with that dirty yellow sky, a smoggy twilight that obscures the skyline. Twenty-four hours is my best guess because my Rolex and my phone are missing, too. Except for the clothes I'm wearing, all my things are gone.

I don't recognize this street. It's a long gray canyon of gutted tenements, empty warehouses and boarded-up storefronts. It feels like I've stood at this cracked double window for hours, running a steady narration in my head, as if there is someone else in the room who can hear it. Not a soul has appeared in that time, not on the street, not in the alleys nor behind the broken windows across from me. I'm afraid to go out there. I don't know why. But I have to find my car. I have to get out of here. I have to get out of the country.

I go to the entrance. My hand shakes as it closes over the doorknob, but I turn it and find myself in a long hall of gray floorboards and flaked, moldy horse hair plaster. There is a vile smell of dead rats and urine. I move as quickly as I can down the stairs, mindful of the rotting treads.

The street is deserted and silent. I turn left for no particular reason and begin scanning my surroundings for my car. A breeze ruffles my hair. Then, without warning, a dry gale blasts my face. In seconds, the wind gathers strength, funneling through the concrete canyon. It's sucking up trash and surging down the street like a garbage tsunami. It towers above the tenements, a wave of tattered shopping bags in hues of beige, pink and dirty white. It transforms into a whirling vortex of sand and plastic as it approaches my tenement and I fall back into the safety of the entrance.

The door rattles as the dust devil bucks and pivots outside. I can hear the snap and pop of thin supermarket plastic. Bags are plastered against the door, then peeled off again. Shadowy heads, nearly faceless, appear at the wind-scarred window and whirl away.

I retreat up the stairs and fall backwards through the door of my tenement flat.

It's not my tenement flat, not really. I have a handsome apartment in a highly

desirable section of the city. I share it with my wife and two-year-old son. How does that song go? “This is not my beautiful house.” But I am relieved to be back in this wreck.

I turn around to find three women seated on the derelict couch that is holding up a wall in the living room. No, not women. They are life-sized origami figures made from plastic bags, folded and dimpled and puffed out with air to resemble women. The braided plastic holding up their balloon heads crackles as they turn their blank faces to me. Empty, shadowy sockets connect with my eyes and sock puppet mouths form open-mouthed smiles. I am so afraid I think I might actually shit myself.

And then the mewling starts. It bears a passing resemblance to kittens blended with the croaking squawk of bitter crows. It grows louder and closer, a scratchy, angry squall that rises and falls like sirens.

It’s a pack of corpse babies, bloated with gray, peeling flesh, making that god-awful noise. Somehow, I know they are ravenous. I know their famine enrages them. There’s five of them--three crawling, two toddling on fat, rubbery legs—and they are making their way to me.

“None of these are mine,” I say to the bag women. They each bring their inflated latex glove hands to their air-filled breasts. The fingers squeeze; the breasts sigh with whispery rustling, indicating they are empty and unable to provide.

“Oh, fuck me,” I say, because I know exactly what they are asking of me.

The babies are at my legs now, raising their mottled green-gray faces to me, their open mouths shrieking and squalling, their yellow eyes fierce with want. Their little nails dig into my legs and they climbed up my pants like cats. I lift one foot to kick them away. Immediately, the bag women surround me, pushing against my body with surprising force. One of them thrusts her face right into mine—a female facade veiled in translucent plastic, beige with

the faded logo of a supermarket chain across it. A torn flap flutters with a moist and pestilential breath. And the babies keep climbing.

One of them fastens its dead rosebud mouth on my belly and begins to suckle right through my shirt. The others each take a finger into their mouths. I cannot believe the pain, like something is reaching inside and trying to turn me inside out. The more I scream, the harder they suck. But this is not what scares me the most. It's the thing crouching in the corner that I can just see out of the corner of my eye that really terrifies me. My knees won't hold me anymore. I crumple to the floor.

There is a blank in the narrative running through my head. Perhaps I passed out. When it starts up again, I find myself seated on the floor, leaning against the wall, my cheek resting on the sill of the cracked double window. I am alone in the room. I struggle to my feet and inspect the damage the babies have inflicted on me.

There is a hollow in my abdomen just above my navel., as if I were trying to pull in my gut. The index and ring fingers on each hand still hurt. I've never in my life seen anything so white. Much of the skin and muscle has melted away like peppermint sticks sucked down to sharp, colorless points. There are no actual wounds. I don't know what those demon brats took out of me, but it wasn't blood.

Outside the tenement, the wind is kicking up again. Trash spirals through the concrete canyon, slowly at first, then picking up speed. The sky turns dusky yellow and green. As the filth swirls outside the window, plastic bags, ragged shirts, socks that presumably left their mates in dryers throughout the living world come together to form shapes. They look like men leaning hard into the wind, striving to bear the unbearable. Then the wind screams—or maybe the men do—and the shapes are torn to pieces.

The dirty cyclone blasts along the sidewalk and I can see across the street again. A shredded piece of vinyl sheeting flaps in the window directly across from me. It takes form, as if someone is waving a dirty white arm at me. Then a face resolves and I see my wife, Celia, trying to get my attention. I realize I must be telling my story as it happens for her benefit. It is of vital importance that I make her understand how much I have been suffering.

But she speaks to me in that complaining scold I have come to hate. “Whatever you’re going through, you’ve earned,” says Celia. She is easily several hundred feet away but sounds like she is in this very room with me. “Remember that little discussion we were having before you left? About the women? About the children? Remember what you did?”

I tell her I don’t remember, although that isn’t entirely true. I kind of don’t remember because I am very good at rearranging my memories to suit my needs.

Of course, Celia is happy to remind me. “My dad found out a few things. He hired a detective. We found three different women you left destitute. Two of them had children. You cleaned out their accounts, ran up debts in their names, changed yours and ran off. One of your abandoned families is in a homeless shelter. Just who are you, anyway? Do you even remember your real name? Do you know how many other children you might have fathered and abandoned?”

I am thinking there are five, including our two-year-old but I don’t know for sure. There could be more. The one Celia does not know about was part of a story that made the news about twelve years ago. A young couple, soon to marry, mysteriously disappeared from their beautiful home in California. Weeks after they vanished, their investment accounts were hacked into. Stocks were liquidated, cash was deposited and then the accounts were siphoned dry. Troubling debts and frauds were uncovered during the investigation. To date, no one has

determined if a crooked financial advisor killed the couple before he cleaned them out and abandoned his own family or if he was murdered before he could talk. Did the couple meet a dreadful end or did they simply take off for South America under new identities?

Over the years, I've been told I bear a passing resemblance to the missing young man. Celia's dad made that joke more than once, before he started checking me out. What no one knows is the young woman was three months pregnant when I buried her under the pit excavated for her neighbors' new in-ground pool. Mother and child now lie secreted under sea green fiberglass and 10 feet of water.

"Sociopath." said Celia, clearly aghast by the story I have just revealed in my head. "That's what you are—a sociopath. Completely amoral. No conscience."

She has called me this name before. It was one part of the argument I do remember clearly. And I remember how enraged I was, that she had seen through my lies, and how, as her voice grew increasingly shrill, our little boy began to cry, first reaching for her, then for me. I needed to go and every time I turned around, the boy was in front of me. "Damn it, Celia, get this kid away from me before I knock him into next week," I shouted.

And that is what I did. I pushed the kid into the wall. I didn't intend to hit him that hard, but I guess that no longer matters. Now Celia stands in a window across this deserted street, shaking her head and weeping. I have to go over there and fix things in any way—and I mean any way--I can. I am in a world of shit if I don't. But she is fading. The hands she brings up to her face turn back into shreds of dirty plastic flapping in an empty window. I'm panicking now, and I run out the door, down the stairs and into the empty street without worrying what else might happen to me.

The wind starts to cry the moment my feet touch the broken, littered pavement. I push through it and make it to the blasted tenement across the street before the cyclone can pick me up

and whirl me away. I pound up the stairs to the apartment and throw open the door.

It's empty.

Now I'm both panicked and angry. I was counting on making Celia understand. I realize now that, although I am ready to do anything to protect myself, what I really want is for her to show me how to get out of this horrible place. I need her to do that loving woman thing that makes everything better. But she's not here. Perhaps she never was. So who am I telling this story in my head? I think I keep running this narration in the hope that someone—angel, demon, anyone—will hear it and get me out of here.

Get me out of here.

Get me the hell out of here.

I am repeating this mantra when I again hear the dreadful sound of rustling, flapping plastic behind me. The bag women are floating through the door. There are five of them this time, one for each life I used up and threw away.

They arrange themselves on the dilapidated furniture scattered across the scarred floor. They are dressed in trashy finery: chains of aluminum pull tabs and rusty nails, fringed shawls of tattered blue tarps, hats of burlap, yellow cabbage leaves and hypodermic needles. They gaze at me expectantly with their empty eye sockets. They are dressed for a feast. I gag in anticipation. The babies will be coming for me again.

But first I get to meet the shadowy thing in the corner that frightened me so. It struggles to push itself up to its full 33 inches. It must lean against the wall because its neck can't

hold the weight of its skull. The little head flops forward to its chest and it uses its pudgy little hands to push it upright. It falls to the right but the wall keeps it from collapsing on its shoulder. It slides a sidelong glance at me and I am looking into my son's eyes. "Knock him into next week," he says in that adorable toddler lisp. Then he pushes himself along the wall so he can travel the length of the room.

He wants to get close to me.

Now he is standing directly across from me. He tries to push off from the wall but his head flops forward on its broken neck again, forcing him to stumble to his knees. I want no part of him. I take a long step back but one of the bag ladies glides forward to help the boy to his feet. Her air-puffed, plastic hands gently hold his head in place as my boy toddles forward, holding out his hands to grasp my pant leg.

The shrieking of starving infants starts up behind me. A voice—my own, I think—is howling a protest, trying to scare off the inevitable. The toddler blocks my way to the door but I charge past him anyway, leaving him on the floor, tangled up in multi-colored, crackling layers of plastic.

"Knock him into next week," he says as I bolt down the stairs.

I head for the basement, thinking there might be a doorway to a network of back alleys I can navigate to elude the trash tornado. But before I can get even a glimpse of the layout, I see they are all waiting for me: the bag ladies, the babies and Little Rubberneck. The babies are amazingly fast and agile. They are squawking and clawing their way up my legs. I fall over, screaming and trying to kick them loose but they dig their nails into my thighs and stomach and latch onto my fingers.

My son's cheek lies against the floor and he is crawling towards me. He pushes his head forward with his legs until he reaches my breast. He sinks his baby teeth into my chest and proceeds to drain away everything that is me, everything of myself I denied him because, truth be told, I was simply incapable of giving it.

Blank white in my head for a while but I am fully aware of the pain. My eyes focus on my surroundings again. I am still in the basement, but I am alone. It is very dark in here. I stagger to my feet and find a single bare light bulb that throws a feeble circle of dirty yellow light. The windows are painted black and they reflect my image back to me.

The babies have wreaked terrible damage. All ten fingers have been sucked down to brittle bone from the tips to the middle knuckle. They vibrate with burning pain. My face has deep hollows in my cheeks and under my eyes. I lift my torn shirt. My core muscles are shrunken and shriveled. Every one of my ribs stands out. I am a walking plea for famine relief.

I am sticking to my plan. I will sneak through dark alleys until I can find my car and get the hell out of here. I find a rear door and step into the shadows. I creep between broken buildings until I come to the next street and wonder of wonders, there it is. There's my Mercedes.

But it's not a Mercedes, not anymore. It's a metal ruin wrapped around a telephone pole. If that is my car, then I think I was the one who got knocked into next week. To be accurate, I was knocked into some infernal hereafter.

The trunk is open. Cash and personal papers are skittering down the windy street. I remember how badly I need those things and I begin to chase after them. But as soon as my feet touch the street, the filthy twister rounds a street corner and heads right for me. I race for the wreck and wedge myself between the distorted metal and the curb. The wind picks the car up and

I must hug the pole with my withered muscles to save myself. Faceless men reform from the flying debris. A collective “Ahhhhhhh!” sounds and rises alongside the screaming wind as the men grope for \$100 bills with their shadowy hands. Despite my pain and my terrible predicament, I feel a spike of rage. They have no right to my money! What would these garbage wraiths do with it anyway?

Just as my strength is about to fail, the tornado moves on. I crawl for the cover of the closest alley.

I hear that rustling sound again. This time it’s coming from the alley across the street. The five bag ladies spill out onto the sidewalk, each cradling a gray-green baby in their air-pillowed arms. One of them has placed a hand on my toddler’s shoulder, supporting his floppy head as he clings to her pharmacy chain skirt. The women all turn their sightless eyes to me, which prompts the infants to start yowling again.

“Is it feeding time already?” I say and I laugh. I can’t stop laughing, even as I turn down the dim alleys in a futile attempt to elude them. When I reach the next street, I finally understand how doomed I am. I stand on the crest of a hill, from which I can see block after deserted block of ruined tenements and abandoned businesses stretching endlessly in all directions. My laughter becomes hysterical wailing. The snap and flutter of weathered plastic sounds behind me, ever and forever on my heels.

I now know I have been running this inner narrative as an appeal to anyone who might take pity on me and remove me from this hellish neighborhood of thrown-away women and children. I know the right thing to do is to grieve for something more than the loss of my luxury car and some cash. I must demonstrate remorse for all the lives I have destroyed. I am supposed to beg for forgiveness, discover a long-lost faith and ask for a chance to make

reparations. But, after a life of deception, I can finally be honest and admit that I could mouth all the right words and never follow through on any amends. I just don't care enough. I just want out of this pain.

That does not mean I am without choices. I get how this place works. I can wait around for the babies to suck me dry, although I have so many layers of lies, impersonations and counterfeits I'm sure they'd be at it for a very long time.

I could, instead, take what's left of my soul, let the cyclone claim me and shred me to tatters, like the other trashed men. We will each of us watch for any fleeting chance to reform ourselves from bits and pieces of discarded goods. Then we will strain against the furious wind, laboring to escape before our own rage tears us apart again.

This time, when the trash tornado rounds the corner, I make my choice. I work my legs into a gallop and launch myself into the midst of the vortex.

Boundaries

Rebecca Rowland

Rebecca Rowland is a sarcasm-soaked author and librarian originally from Western Massachusetts. Her genre of focus is psychological horror, having applied it in her former profession as a high school English teacher. Her collection of short fiction, *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight*, was published in 2018 by Dark Ink, as was the Halloween-themed anthology she edited, *Ghosts, Goblins, Murder, and Madness*. Despite her unwavering distaste for cold temperatures, she currently lives with her family in an often icy corner of New England.

Boundaries

Rebecca Rowland

Broadway actors were shrinking. Lin-Manuel Miranda was 5' 9". Before him, the big name was Neil Patrick Harris. He was 6" even. And before that? Hugh Jackman at 6' 3". Richard Felling worked as an actor for twenty years. At 6' 2", he sometimes towered over his female partners, and because of his height, was at times banished to the back of the chorus line. Occasionally, his scene partners were forced to wear higher heels to balance him, which of course made them cranky and in turn, made the entire run a pain in the ass, especially when they went on tour.

He didn't go on tour anymore.

He had been married for more than eighteen years: a child's lifespan. When he met Jacquelynn, he hadn't even been old enough to drink, let alone make rational, lifelong decisions,

but at twenty, he asked her to marry him. He spent the next two decades auditioning for shows, sleeping in buses, drinking in applause like water, and fucking waitresses and co-stars. Finally, Lynn—Lynn, not Jackie: Jackie was a white trash nickname, he told her—rounded thirty and began prodding him for a family, which meant stability: a perfect little house with a tidy picket fence and a round little Corgi for whom he was perpetually picking up poop each time he returned home on break. His children began to walk and talk, and suddenly, no longer was he phoning home from cheap motels halfway across the country, some fan's mouth suction-cupped tightly around his cock as he wished his wife goodnight, the phone receiver pressed tightly to his face so no background noise petered in. No, at the ominous age of forty, he had a real job, a secure job, a job that kept him home 365 days a year.

He was a middle school drama teacher.

It was in Richard's second year of teaching that he started to notice the grey along his temples. One night, while he was flossing his teeth, he saw the crow's feet crinkle beneath his green eyes. He had barely dipped a toe into middle age: he shouldn't look like a grandfather. It was as if when he stopped chasing his dreams, the world caught up with him, tapped him on the shoulder, and yelled "You're It," leaving him to hold a leaky bag of hourglass sand.

At ten o'clock at night, he sat in bed, thumbing his phone surreptitiously around porn sites while his wife snored loudly beside him. He turned from his screen to look at her in the television's glow. She had never been a slight woman, and although she had a decidedly pretty face that lacked the garishness of makeup or the ostentatiousness of expensive creams, she had always been what people described as Rubenesque (on a good day, voluptuous), and carrying two children hadn't done her body any favors. Moreover, since he had left the road, she had really let herself go. She rarely if ever shaved her legs anymore, never mind any other feminine

parts, and with the additional weight had come the unpleasant side effect of monstrous snoring, the kind that woke him from a deep sleep each night.

Lynn's primary care physician had sent her to an overnight sleep study. Richard used the opportunity to sneak one of his local girlfriends into their marital bed, and the next morning, as he was stripping the sheets and poking around the trash to make certain the condom wrappers were sufficiently hidden, she returned with her diagnosis: sleep apnea. She could wear a CPAP machine or she could lose weight. Her high blood pressure and use of birth control pills already made her a walking stroke candidate; the apnea was just icing on the risk factor cake. She had promised to lose weight, to get healthy, if only for the children's sake, but six months had passed, and the nocturnal cacophony had only worsened.

Richard opened up his Facebook app. Although he had abandoned the stage, he kept in contact with some of his regular "roadies," as he liked to call them, through innocuous social media sites. They sent him covert emails and private messages every now and again, then justified their online friendship by attaching enthusiastic Love! emojis to his family photos and compilation videos. There was a message from Marielle, the plain-looking but petite brunette he'd met in Chicago a few years back. Each time a tour brought him to the Windy City, Richard would drop Marielle a note, and within an hour's time, she'd be straddling him on her basement office desk chair, covering his mouth as he came so that her husband, sound asleep in the bedroom two floors up, wouldn't hear them. Marielle had two children under the age of six but she managed to keep her figure in check for him. The tiny green dot next to her name indicated she was online.

Hey, sexy, the screen read.

Richard shifted his weight so that he could finger the screen with one hand. Hey there yourself, he wrote back.

Three grey dots danced to indicate she was typing. What are you up to this evening? she asked.

Richard glanced at his wife's noisily heaving body. Just listening to my wife shake the house with her snoring, he wrote. It would be so easy, he thought, to simply roll Lynn onto her stomach and press her face into the pillow until she suffocated. The doctors would rule it an accident, considering the havoc she had been wreaking on her circulatory system. He didn't understand why she took the birth control pills in the first place. She was thirty-eight. Their last child had been born three years ago, and he could count on one hand the number of times they'd had sex since then. He could count on his closed fist how many of those times she'd been on top, his favorite position.

I bet I could make it shake, too, Marielle's reply read.

Richard clicked off the television with the remote and turned slightly onto his side, his left leg bent to tent the sheet and blanket. Send me a pic to help me imagine, he wrote back. He muted the sound on his phone and watched the screen swell into a darkly lit live stream of Marielle, lying on her back in her underwear, Lynn's snores humming a raucous soundtrack in the background.

The next morning at work, Richard received an email from the school's Guidance office. One of the students in his class, Susan Davis, had submitted a note from her mother to the school. She has an eating disorder, the email explained, and as part of her treatment, she should be allowed to eat food anytime, anywhere. Richard snorted. Another helicopter parent coming in

for a landing, he thought. He didn't know when mothers and fathers had lost their balls, but his generation had definitely been castrated. Kids demanded instant gratification these days, and their parents were too lazy to say no.

Susan, or Suzy, as her friends called her, was a bossy eighth grader with long, greasy hair and a perpetual look of indignation on her face: she always seemed to be smelling someone else's crop-dusted fart. Last week, he had caught her eating a bag of Fritos. Richard's number one rule was no food or drink on the stage—not only was it unhygienic, but unintentional spills or crumbs could cause a fall. He had assigned Suzy detention and she had refused to attend, making a grand show of her public pronouncement. Now she was shoving his nose in it: she could violate his authority with impunity.

That afternoon, Suzy's class filed into the auditorium for class, and he instructed the students to line up on stage and face the long mirror he had pushed to the back wall. "Are we going to dance?" asked one of the children.

"No, no," explained Richard. "We are going to do some work on our postures. Now stand an arm's length away from the person next to you so that you have some movement space." He paused and watched the line wiggle and expand. "Okay, now deep breaths."

Richard walked slowly behind each of the students, watching their inhales and exhales in the mirror. When he got to Suzy, he stood immediately behind her. He amused himself by watching his body disappear behind her broad hips and meaty thighs. She was barely five feet tall and thirteen; he was a grown man of two hundred and sixty pounds, and yet, she exceeded him in width. Fat Suzy, that's your name from now on, he thought to himself, if only in my head. Fat Suzy sneered at her teacher in the mirror and Richard smiled prettily back. "Good work, Ms. Davis. Keep it up," he said cheerfully.

“Excuse me, Mr. Felling?” a voice called from the theater door. It was the front office secretary, someone whose name he had never bothered to learn. “You have a new student.”

Alongside the anonymous office worker appeared a tall girl with straight brown hair. She walked carefully down the aisle to the stairway and onto the stage and handed Richard her schedule card. The secretary disappeared without a word.

Richard skimmed the card. “Edith?” he said tentatively. He could barely read without his cheaters anymore. The letters were fuzzy and melted together. “Is that right? The lighting is terrible in here.”

“Yes, that’s right. Edie, please,” a small but husky voice said. Richard took a long look at the girl. She wore a plain burgundy dress and a long-sleeved cardigan sweater, and her face was plastered with so much makeup, Richard had the urge to scrape it with a putty knife.

“Edie, like Édie Piaf, the famous French chanteuse and international film star,” Richard said, smiling. “Or is it more like Edie Sedgwick, the avant-garde muse to Andy Warhol?” Richard was always doing that, making references to things and people he knew his students were too young to recognize. It made him feel important and knowledgeable, even though he knew he’d probably come off as a pompous narcissist to any adult who overheard him.

To his surprise, Edie replied softly and evenly, “I’d say the latter, but I’d like to live past twenty-eight.” She took the schedule card back from Richard, shoved it in her purse, and walked to the end of the line and faced the mirror. For the remainder of the class, Richard said nothing to Edie directly, but he watched her with great interest. There was something about this young girl that drew his attention. It wasn’t sexual; it was something else. He found himself thinking about her for the rest of the afternoon.

There was another email from the Guidance office in his inbox the next morning.

Dear teachers-

This is an email to let you know some information on your new student, Edith Wells. Please be aware that Edith is transitioning and should be allowed to use the bathroom in the nurse's office should she wish. Also, should any paperwork with Edith's birth name, Elliott, be forwarded to you, we wanted you to understand that it would be referring to Edith. Edith's parents are very supportive of her journey and we encourage you to contact them should any problems, academic or otherwise, develop.

Richard leaned back in his chair. Edith had been born a boy? He could hardly believe it. Usually, he could sniff out the gays and trans from a mile away; he worked in the theater for half of his life, for Christ's sake, and he'd had his share of one-night stands with men and even a couple with women who turned out to be biologically male. An orgasm was an orgasm, as far as he was concerned. But Edie... she looked more like a full-fledged girl than Fat Suzy did.

That afternoon, Edie lingered after the dismissal bell. Gathering her books and jacket, she seemed to be waiting for Richard to notice her. When he looked up from his plan book, she was staring at him. "Have a good evening," he said dismissively. He didn't like having to stay after school if he didn't have a preplanned commitment. That was one thing that teaching had over acting: the show was over early enough in the day that he could still do something productive.

"You were on Broadway, right?" asked Edie. "I mean, I heard some of the kids talking about it."

Richard smiled. He loved telling the students stories of his stage adventures: the PG-rated ones, that is. He could afford to stick around for a few minutes. "That is true, young lady. I

was a stage actor once.” He turned to walk toward his office beside the emergency exit off stage right.

Edie took this as an invitation to follow. “Anything Tony-winning?” she asked, walking briskly behind him.

Richard pushed the heavy velvet curtain aside and held it so that Edie could walk past. He motioned forward, toward backstage. The area was only dimly lit, and he walked carefully over a few cables and around a casually strewn folding chair. “Sure. I was in quite a few of the touring companies. Most of the actors weren’t from the original production, but the show was the same. You should have seen some of the intricate costuming.” He didn’t know why he had added that last part: maybe he figured a girl would be more interested in the clothing than in the performance itself. Maybe he was nervous, but why? He was talking to a child. He talked to more than one hundred children every day. He opened the door to his office, switched on the desk lamp, and sat down heavily in his rolling chair.

Edie stood in the doorway and shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t know much about fashion or costumes. To be honest, I don’t know much about plays or musicals in general. I’ve never acted before. I just saw your class on the list of electives and decided to try it out.”

“Well, that’s okay,” said Richard. “There’s a first time for everything, right?” The two were silent for a moment. Edie was making Richard a little uncomfortable, hovering in the doorway like she was. He was about to make up an excuse to leave for the afternoon when she suddenly spoke.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” she asked, pointing to the one other chair in the room, a vinyl-covered vintage knockoff. Richard had brought it from home because he liked looking at its color, a seventies-funk burnt orange.

“Oh, sure, of course not,” stammered Richard, embarrassed that he hadn’t offered her a seat earlier.

Edie sat down delicately and crossed her ankles. She was wearing a blood red dress with black tights and shoes. “She folded one arm beneath her chest and rested the elbow of the other awkwardly on her forearm, then propped her chin with her fist. “So, Mr. Felling,” she began. “Tell me about your strangest experiences as an actor on Broadway. I want to hear everything.”

Richard felt his face blush, the first time he’d reddened from embarrassment in recent memory. “Edie, that’s a tall order. We could be here for days.”

She laughed and rearranged her arms so that she could entwine her fingers while resting her hands in her lap. “My ride doesn’t come until four.”

By the time Richard got home, his children were getting restless and the babysitter, annoyed. She expected to leave by three-thirty each weekday, about a half hour after his oldest son disembarked the yellow bus from school. Richard gave her an additional twenty dollars and opened the refrigerator door to assess the possibilities for dinner. “What do you think, guys? Taco salad?” he said, more to the air than anyone in particular. He pulled out a package of hamburger, a head of lettuce, and a bag of shredded cheddar. He began dicing the ripe tomato that had been sitting on the windowsill.

Lynn didn’t cook. If he didn’t plan out the meals and make an effort, they would be ordering take-out every night. He wondered if the children had developed mild cases of scurvy while he was on the road; they did seem to lose their baby teeth much earlier than he thought children should. A year ago, he decided to stop planning and making dinner as an experiment; he wanted to know what his wife would do. Sure enough, she pulled out a pile of menus and the

family ate nothing but submarine sandwiches, pizza, and Chinese food for a week. When he stepped on the scale and discovered he'd gained five pounds after only seven days of his strike, Richard drove to the grocery store and resumed his daily dinner preparation.

He rinsed the knife in the sink and glanced out the window. Along the back edge of his property was a moderately tall wood fence. He had installed it a month after they bought the house, even though the neighbor's property had a chain-link fence surrounding it. He left a five-inch gap between the neighbor's fence and his, and over the years, from the dead space an army of weeds had banded together and woven opaque nets of vines that peeked over the tops of his fence posts and lolled in the breeze. He refused to trim them: after all, he couldn't see them unless they drooped onto his side of the barricade, and quite frankly, the rogue vegetation was probably growing from his neighbor's property anyhow—why should he be responsible?

Suddenly, from over the top of the fence poked the blades of an electric hedge trimmer. He watched the instrument zip and shear the top six inches of weeds along the perimeter of the fence, the clippings falling carelessly onto his lawn. "What the fuck?!" Richard yelled and ran outside into the backyard. "Hey!" he yelled over the fence. "Hey! You're leaving weed clippings all over my grass!"

The lopper continued to whirl and chop without commentary. When it had finished trimming all of the weeds, Richard bent down and scooped as much of the debris as he could carry, then lobbed the pile back over the fence. "Here!" he called snidely. "You dropped something!" He brushed his hands on his khakis and stomped back inside, muttering to himself. He hated passive-aggressive people.

The next morning, as he stirred sugar-free creamer into his coffee, he saw it.

A pile of weed clippings was stacked neatly on his chaise lounge in the middle of his backyard.

For the next month, Edie came to visit Richard every day after school. They never referred to her visits during class time, and occasionally, Richard would fool himself into thinking there were two Edies, one who was his student and one who was his captive audience of one. After a few weeks of her stopping in after the last bell, Richard began to expect her; he even started stocking cans of diet soda in his mini-fridge in case she was thirsty.

They didn't have conversations; rather, Richard talked and Edie listened. They were a therapy patient and physician, a one-man show and the sole ticket holder. At first, Richard censored his stories; he provided a public television version of the truth. However, after a few weeks, Richard spoke as if thirteen-year-old Edie were a colleague, an equal.

The release he received from unburdening his memories onto her became addictive; when the weekend arrived, he found himself restless, unable to concentrate. He wondered what Edie was doing. Did her family plan day trips to the movies? Museum walks? Picnics in the park? Had she made friends? Did she have a boyfriend? He had never asked her about her life or even how she was adjusting to a new school. He'd make a mental note to inquire first thing when she showed up on Monday afternoon, but then he'd forget and as soon as she arrived, his own life spilled from his mouth uncontrollably like a dam had broken. Soon, he was telling her about his wife, his children, his family. He was complaining about the neighbor who had taunted him with the weed trimmings. He was reminiscing about his love affairs on the road. He admitted to her that he wished he had never gotten married so young. Perhaps, if he had remained single, he'd be a great actor today. A star.

All the while, Edie would smile at him, a broad, gentle smile framed by pouty, burgundy-painted lips and accented by a spontaneous giggle now and again. She reassured him that he was a good father, a devoted husband, and a dedicated teacher. She pushed him to investigate the local community theaters, to get up on stage again.

She absolved him.

And then, one Monday afternoon, she stopped coming.

Richard told himself something must have come up: a family emergency, an adolescent hormonal crisis, an alien abduction. Certainly, she would have told him if she had known she could not visit. The next day in class, as the students were practicing their monologues in preparation for their graded performances later that week, he stealthily bent down and whispered into her ear. “What happened to you yesterday?”

She visibly shrank from his presence and did not turn her head to meet his eyes. “I joined the volleyball team. I have practice now every day after school,” she said quietly, matter-of-factly.

She joined the volleyball team? Richard didn’t know Edie had an athletic bone in her body. He’d never seen her wear anything but dresses and delicate, feminine shoes: not the clothing a jock would wear. “Oh,” he replied. “I didn’t realize. Well, good luck with that,” he stammered. He walked swiftly to the next student and pretended he was checking in with every child’s progress, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched Edie. She was lost in concentration in her pantomime, gesturing broadly with her arms as she recited her soliloquy. She seemed unfazed by the abrupt cessation in their daily meetings.

Her abandonment meant Richard would be alone with his thoughts once again. On the bright side, he could head home right after the last bell again. He’d have some coveted alone

time if he arrived before the sitter appeared. It was a positive readjustment, he told himself. And yet, that evening, as he lay in bed, attempting to block out Lynn's snorting and squealing as it grew progressively more obnoxious, he typed every variation of Edie's name into Facebook's search bar to try and locate her page. She was nowhere to be found. He tried Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter. Nothing. He put his phone down onto the bed and sighed. Realizing how naked he felt without it in his hand, though, he picked it back up and returned to Facebook.

To distract himself, he waded through his newsfeed. He could see by his friends list that Marielle was signed on; he wondered what she was doing. A couple he and Lynn saw socially every once in a while announced that their five-year-old was graduating from preschool in May; they were having a barbecue to celebrate and wanted all of their Facebook friends to attend. Really? thought Richard. A daycare graduation? How the hell could a kid fail out of daycare? Eat too many crayons and projectile puke on the reading circle carpet? Jesus, some parents were idiots. Richard clicked "maybe" on the response.

He closed the app and surfed through his standby porn site but found nothing that struck his interest. Irritated, he turned onto his side and fluffed his pillows violently, not caring if he woke Lynn. She continued to snore uninterrupted and he rested his ear on the pillow and watched her face for a moment. This was it. This was what he had signed on for when he slipped the ring onto her finger so many years ago. There was no undoing it now. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Wednesday afternoon, Richard walked across campus to the gymnasium entrance. The co-ed volleyball team was playing in its first game of the season, and faculty and staff had been encouraged to attend, so the bleachers were already packed with spectators by the time he

arrived. He climbed the stairs until he found a small opening on the fifth level and shimmied over to the vacant spot. The man next to him, a squat, balding man in his thirties, sat with his legs spread wide like a predatory animal staking his claim on the hunting ground. Richard shifted his weight away from him to keep the man's knees from bumping his, but with his every movement away, the man encroached even further into Richard's space. Finally, Richard opened his legs and bumped the man's leg with some force, and his neighbor, after shooting him a look of annoyance, slid away from Richard a few inches.

A whistle blew on the court. Richard searched the players' faces for Edie's familiar countenance but did not see her. The teams batted the ball back and forth over the net. Richard did not know the formal rules of volleyball, but he managed to surmise the basics as the game progressed. Finally, the visiting team served and the ball sailed over the net and to the back of the home team's court. It hit the boundary line and bounced away. Richard didn't understand the referee's ruling, but neither team seemed happy, and soon both coaches were on the court, yelling and gesturing loudly, while the children fidgeted and looked uncomfortable in their polyester uniforms.

Richard figured this was his opportunity to escape the game and go home. He wiggled past the people sitting to the left of him and hobbled carefully down the wide stairs, taking extra care not to trip and fall: there was nothing worse than looking stupid in front of middle school students. Their mouths were loud, their memories were long, and their empathy levels were on par with burgeoning serial killers. Should he fall, he would have to hear about his accident for weeks to come. Luckily, he made it to the bottom unscathed, and he could finally look up and in front of him, just in time to run straight into Edie.

He pushed into her and immediately began to apologize before he realized who she was. “I... oh, Edie. Edie, I’m so sorry: I didn’t see you,” he said, both surprised and embarrassed. Then he recognized that she was dressed in her everyday school clothes, not in a team uniform. “I... what are you doing here? Why aren’t you playing?” he asked.

She stared at him, unashamed at being caught in her lie. “Oh, I decided not to play volleyball after all,” she said. “See you tomorrow, Mr. F,” she added dismissively, then stepped to the side and began to walk around him without waiting for his response.

Seeing her brought a wave of relief he hadn’t felt since she had last sat in his office and listened to him talk. When she began to leave, he felt that relief fall to the pit of his stomach. Without thinking, he grabbed her by the shoulders to keep her from leaving. “Wait, where are you going?” he asked loudly. He tightened his grip and shook her slightly to punctuate his desperate longing. He needed her to come back.

Her face changed. Her ambivalence transformed into incredulity. “What are you doing?!” she screamed at him suddenly. “Don’t touch me!” She pushed his chest with both of her hands, his firm stance sending her reeling backward slightly. The gym fell silent. The coaches stopped arguing and waving their arms. The players topped teetering. The crowd stopped chatting amongst themselves. “Stay the fuck away from me!” Edie yelled. “You’re old enough to be my dad! Why don’t you get friends your own age?!”

Richard froze in place. He felt a deluge of shame wash over him as every adult stared at him ferociously, their glares piercing and stinging his flesh. Edie walked quickly and determinedly to the gymnasium door, her kitten heels clicking like a metronome. Richard turned and skulked to other door on the other wall of the gym. He kept his head pointed down as he

concentrated on placing his feet firmly on the floor with every step. He did not look up again until he had reached his car and climbed inside.

When he arrived home, the house was quiet. His wife should have come home from work by now, or the kids and the babysitter should have been running around the backyard or shooting hoops through the basket in the driveway. Instead, he found Lynn's handwritten note taped to the refrigerator. Kids were starving. Couldn't wait any longer. Went to Chuck E. Cheese. It was just as well; he wasn't very hungry anyway.

He glanced out of the big window over the sink. With the prodigious amount of rain that had fallen in the past weeks, the weeds behind the fence had accelerated their growth and once again lolled over the top of his posts. He needed something to distract his mind, so he wandered outside and into the garage and grabbed his manual hedge trimmers. This garden tool always made Richard a little uneasy, as it reminded Richard of a scene in the movie *The Exorcist III*. In it, a nurse quietly goes about her rounds on a hospital ward until suddenly, without warning, a figure in a white nun's uniform appears behind her, holding an enormous pair of shears even with the nurse's neck. Richard thought of the scene again as he held the tool and walked toward the fence. It played on a loop in his mind as he held the trimmers high in the air and he opened and shut the hinge over and over on the vines. He could see the nurse's red cardigan sweater, her white nurse hat, her white nurse shoes. He snapped the shears open and shut, open and shut, faster and faster, and watched the green heads and necks fall helplessly in front of him and behind the barrier.

Snip snip snip

He thought of Edie's smile as it had appeared as she sat, listening intently, on the burnt orange chair in his office.

Snip Snip Snip

He thought of her angry sneer as she berated him in the gymnasium.

SNip SNip SNip

He thought of Marielle's smile as she faced him on her basement's desk chair, her head tilted backwards and her bare breasts bouncing softly up and down as she rode him.

SNIP SNIP SNIP

He thought of Lynn's face as she lay dead asleep, her mouth slightly ajar, her lip quivering with each snort and grunt.

SNIP SNI—

“Richard, we br—”

He felt a hand grip his shoulder, and startled, he spun, reeling the sharp blades around to confront the person behind him. It wasn't until he saw the look of surprise and horror that he realized what he had done. Lynn's mouth formed a deflated oval, and her eyes widened; saliva dripped from her lips, and she spasmed a cough, spraying a fine mist of bright red blood over his shirt.

As she collapsed, Richard let go of the tool's handle and watched it sail backwards with her, the better part of the blade still planted firmly in her neck like a garden stake in fresh earth. She lay on the ground, groaning and writhing in agony.

Richard looked at her for a long minute. Then he leaned over, pulled the trimmer from her flesh, and stabbed it over and over into her chest until there was nothing left of her breasts and neck but a sticky mound of bloody pulp and bone.

Richard had crossed the boundary.

He wasn't coming back.

Bleedthrough

Scarlett Algee

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by CultureCult Magazine, Thrice Fiction, Pen of the Damned, and The Wicked Library, among other places. Her short story "Dark Music" was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and she was contributing editor of the podcast-based anthology *The Lift: Nine Stories of Transformation*. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle, skulks on Twitter at @scarlettralgee, and blogs occasionally at <https://scarlettralgee.com/>

BleedThrough

Scarlett R. Algee

one

It's raining. Lately it's always raining. You hunch into your tattered coat and pull the collar up; you're in a hurry.

"Curiosity." The psychiatrist is a cyborg, Shelley is almost sure of it: she can't put her finger on exactly what gives her the certainty, but it's there. Maybe it's the way he talks, the words coming out in a drawl that's probably meant to be reassuring but that instead gives the impression his speech is stoppered in his throat. He blinks too slowly, smiles too stiffly. Like now, when he's saying, "Well. That's one I haven't heard for this simulation package before. Of course, I suppose it comes down to curiosity in any case, but most people aren't so forthright about it."

“It’s true. But I was the girl who liked books instead of boys. My grandmother gave me Grimm’s Fairy Tales when I was three and I got hooked on horror stories.” Shelley eyes him: white-haired, pink-cheeked, eyeglasses with silver rims, dimples placed appropriately. It’s the face, she decides; he may have all sorts of biomechanics under that suit and lab coat, but it’s his face that tells her he’s not just meat anymore, the way his affable expression doesn’t change with his inflections. He’s altogether the picture of the friendly American country doctor from a century ago, if his smile were more relaxed and genuine. She lies back on the reclining seat that will be her space for the sessions, and immediately pushes forward to sit on the edge again. Just as well that VR suits are padded, when this thing is all cold metal and plastic and stiff angles, bits of it poking in uncomfortable places. “Look, I’ve done six prior Futurepast simulations, Dr. Bowman, and I’ve never needed a psych consult before. Don’t tell me that’s simply because of my ‘curiosity’.”

Bowman laughs and shakes his head, still a too-slow movement, leaning back in his chair. He tugs at those glasses with a plump hand. “No. No, please, don’t be offended. It’s standard for this simulation package; prior experience has taught us it’s a good idea. People are usually a little disturbed afterwards. They want to talk.” He swipes through a few screens on the tablet balanced on his knee: her Futurepast profile. “You tried the Narnia package last year and reported satisfaction with it.”

Shelley looks away from his face, if only to keep him from seeing her roll her eyes. “It was pretty,” she says grudgingly, gaze flicking from floor to ceiling of this cubicle and back again. Institutional grey, livened by a stripe of grass green halfway up and the Futurepast Technologies logo stenciled on the wall in darker malachite. No one comes to these sessions for the aesthetics of the building. “The animals were cute. Aslan was wonderful, very convincing. I

mean, once was enough, it's a little too sweet after a while. But I'd heard of the stories and it was nice. And on sale."

"Yes, I have a note here that you've tried several promotional packages. Narnia. The Mars colony. Genghis Khan's Mongolia," Bowman answers blandly. He's watching the tablet screen, not her. "But you paid full price for this one."

"It was the only way to get in. That, and agree to the supervision." Shelley pulls her knees up as much as she can without leaning back. "Is there going to be a problem?"

Bowman lets out a slow breath. "It's just a little unusual, in my experience. Most of the people who've bought the Ripper simulation package have been historians, at least amateur ones, trying to puzzle out the killer. Sometimes law enforcement officials who want to try their hand at nineteenth-century detective work. Not--" He stops, and she can practically hear circuits straining as he ponders his approach. "I'm just a little concerned that you seem to be interested solely in the entertainment value." He makes eye contact with her for a second and looks back at the tablet. "You work for Arlington and Bond."

Shelley grimaces. Work, of course it's about work, she's dissatisfied with work and that's a motivator. "I'm in accounting. Telecommuting, the department got physically downsized last month." She still remembers the weight of the stapler she'd just picked up when Brian, her boss, had walked in with a hangdog apologetic look and told her that her physical presence onsite was no longer necessary. "It's been, well, it's been a change. I'm not stupid, I can balance the books in my pajamas while I'm eating Cheerios at the kitchen table. But it's not the same, especially with the twenty percent pay cut." She huffs. "All right, fine. Maybe I'm just a little frustrated and resentful. Maybe this is stress relief or therapy or something. Look, if this is going to be a problem I can just go back down to the front office and get a refund--"

“It’s not a problem. It’s not a problem.” Bowman’s voice has gone smooth and conciliatory and for a moment Shelley fears it’s going to get stuck in that loop. “I just want you to be aware that this program does carry a degree of psychological risk, and--” He stops abruptly again, studying the tablet. “Here are your release forms, and your receipt. So apparently you do understand.” The psychiatrist sounds almost disappointed. “And it looks like your measurements are already on file and your suit’s ready. When do you want to begin?”

“Now.” Shelley slides off the edge of the chair. “It’s the end of August. I’d like to start now.”

It starts like always: the sudden fogging of your vision, deep grey shot through with green, the sickly color of a tornadic sky. Then a sudden sinking feeling and the clearing of your vision and you’re there.

It’s two in the morning.

Here in London you can always tell the unfortunates simply by their presence: no self-respecting woman of any means would be out on these streets at this hour. Tonight it seems every public house has at least two standing in the street outside, wearing probably everything they own but trying to give an air of shabby gentility to it: a lace shawl here, a fresh posy pinned there, skirts drawn just so, catcalling every man they see. It’s enough to make you jittery with possibility, but you focus on the presence and weight of the knife sheathed in your left boot and walk on: you have to choose carefully.

In Osborn Street you spot a young one, and sidle onto the Whitechapel Road corner to watch her. Pretty enough from a distance, in a pale sprigged dress that’s been cunningly vented

in the skirts to show a darker material underneath, a crocheted shawl hanging low on her shoulders; she has to be freezing at this hour of the morning, because the stammer in her voice when she beckons to passersby is part hesitancy and part pure shivering.

She looks round and catches sight of you. You watch her mouth work as she takes a half-step toward you and oh, she's so obviously new at this. You wonder how old she is--she doesn't look sixteen--and you touch the brim of your hat to her and smile, but shake your head. She's too much of an angel still: she's not at all what you want.

She might be missed. You can't have that. Not yet.

"Lookin' for someone, sir? Someone to keep you company a bit?"

You turn around. The woman who spoke is smiling at you, hands held boldly out; she's dark and petite, the top of her head perhaps just reaching your chin. The bonnet she's wearing is obviously new, just as the rest of her clothes are obviously not. You see a ragged hem, a patched sleeve. She's forty if she's a day and she exhales gin: she even sways a little where she stands.

She's perfect.

"Yes," you say. "Yes, I'd like that."

The fee she names is ridiculously small, the price of a night's lodging in Thrawl Street or any other hole. She calls herself Polly; it could be a hundred other things. You try to lead her, guide her to an appropriately dark place, but she's desperate enough for that small bit of coin that she drags you instead, stumbling twice in her drunken show of eagerness. By the time she's got you in a blind alley you've managed to work the knife out of your boot and into your hand, hilt up your sleeve, tip curled in your palm. It's uncomfortable, blade pressed into your forearm, but it won't be there long.

You keep your hands back and she doesn't see it; she's too busy working her fingers under your belt anyway. "Bit shy, eh?" She chuckles. "See that a lot. Well, don't you worry, lad, Polly will take care o' that."

Now. Now. You grab her shoulder, haul her around, tug her back against you and yank off her bonnet. A fist in her hair to get her throat back and you cut deep, as deep as you can, fast, one side and then the other. The scream she might have made comes out her sliced throat as a whistling bubbling spray of blood.

You drop the knife. Another hand to twist in the layers of fabric at her neck, to hold her up while she bleeds out. The spurts become oozes slipping down her neck into her clothes, rolling back toward her hair. When you let her go she hits the ground like a stone, and makes no sound.

She's face down. You find the knife and take it up and turn her over. You lift her skirts. Four layers. Three pairs of stockings. You were right. She's wearing everything she owned.

You draw her clothes up higher. Her belly is white and sunken, and the sight of her flesh does nothing to stir you. Still, it feels good to sink the knife beneath her navel, to pull and pull against the resistant flesh, to hear it part in a jagged line with the wet noise of a tearing bedsheet.

You leave her body in Buck's Row, with her skirts thrown up.

An attendant helps Shelley out of the VR suit, sprays her naked body with rose-scented disinfectant and warm water, then towels her down briskly and gives her a papery grey bodysuit to pull on; her street clothes are in a locker in the changing station at the end of the hall. By the time Bowman comes into the cubicle, Shelley is perched on the edge of the seat, drinking water from a rice-paper cup. He leans in the doorway. "Hi. Feeling okay?"

“Fine. Fine.” Shelley drains the cup and crumples it, twisting it in her hands, feeling it tear. Like Polly. “Jittery, maybe.” She’d forgotten that from her last sessions. The adrenaline rush, the comedown, the sense of snapping back into the real world and finding it somehow less than the one she’d left. “But it’ll be okay in a few minutes.” For a split second, everything’s garish, even the grey cubicle walls, too bright and too loud; then her senses recover and it’s all plain again. She tosses the remnants of the cup at the wastebasket and misses, but the attendant is there for the rebound. “It was...easier than I expected. Fast.”

Bowman watches her. “The experience?”

“The murder. He--I--it was just so quick. Like I’d planned it, and I don’t even know where the knife came from.” Another effect of VR: no prior ‘memories’, just dropping you into the world with what you need like a videogame. Shelley shrugs it off; she doesn’t want a lot of prying questions about her feelings right now, even if it disappoints him. “We’ll talk about it next time. Right now I just want to go home and shower.”

Shelley picks up her clothes at the changing station and trudges to the elevator, feeling grungy and exhausted and elated all at once, the neurochemical backlash of the VR experience setting in. Fortunately the only other person in the elevator is a young blond man who looks like he might be twenty. He’s a newbie: he’s got that wide-eyed uncertain look, and a nametag stuck to his Springsteen T-shirt that says ‘Erik’. His jeans are ripped at the knees to show red paisley cotton underneath, and bright pink earbuds trail to the candy-green iPod in his hand. When she steps into the elevator, his gaze shifts from the device to her. “Um. Hi.”

It's said with a nervous tongue-lash of his lips. Shelley groans inwardly; she just wants to go home and clean up and balance a few accounts for work, not make small talk with this kid.

“Hi. You’re new at this, right?”

Erik blushes almost as pink as his earbuds. “Does it show that much? My brother talked me into this, he got a huge deal on the ‘Twentieth Century Horror Authors’ package. Says it’s a real wild thing.”

Shelley shakes her head; she’s never even seen that in the catalogue. No wonder it’s apparently cheap. “Talentless hacks who all died too young?”

Erik stutters a laugh. “Yeah. I guess. He says I should start with Lovecraft, says the dream sequences are awesome.”

Dream sequences? For a moment Shelley wonders what she’d dream about in the simulation, if she stayed under long enough. “Sounds fun.”

“I hope.” He fidgets. “So. You doing a package too?”

She nods. “My seventh. Jack the Ripper.”

“Oh. Cool.” Erik shrinks into the corner just a little. “Um. Trying to find out who he was, or--?”

“Right now I don’t give a damn who the killer was. I just wanted to try the murders.” The elevator stops and Shelley hoists her bag. “I’m thinking of it as my vacation.”

Polly.

Shelley thinks of her in the shower, washing off the last of the VR suit’s tacky adhesive; and at her desk with a talk show droning in the back of the living room, plush smoky carpet

under her bare feet as she digs her toes into the fibers and prods the Mancini account into correctness on her tablet.

The woman hadn't screamed; she hadn't had time. Her potential cries for help had come out as short-lived bursts of blood-laced air through the gaps in her throat, and yet the curiosity Shelley feels is muted, clinical and distant, as though she's watching a moth struggle as it's spitted on a pin.

A body spitted on a knife.

Later, in the kitchen, she oils her hands and makes meatballs from pankò and ground turkey, dropping them one by one into a pot of simmering vegetable-laden sauce. Outside her front door she can hear clawing, whining, loud meows: her neighbor Elsa Dannoy has left her cat out again. Bruno, Shelley thinks, or something like that, a skinny orange thing that roams the complex because his owner isn't home enough to remember to keep him inside. Elsa has children in three adjacent states and she makes the rounds every week to each one of them.

She has the last meatball in her hand. The cat meows again and for a moment Shelley seriously thinks of throwing the meatball out to the animal, if only to shut him up. But she restrains herself: anything you feed becomes something that stays. Everyone knows that. She'll have to complain to the super again.

Someone to keep you company a bit?

Shelley thinks of Polly, of the quick sweet bite of the knife and the thick stickiness of blood not her own, and eats the meatball raw.

Shelley doesn't bother with a shower this morning: there's no point when she'll need one after her session anyway. It's a morning appointment today, so she just pulls on her old comfortable purple sweats and ties her hair back into a ponytail. She's just got her shoes on and grabbed a peach from the kitchen--scouting out the window reveals no sign of Mrs. Dannoy's cat, so she must be home for once--when her phone vibrates in her pocket.

She pulls it out and grimaces at the screen. Work. It's always work. "Hey there."

"Shelley? Brian." Not just anyone, of course, oh no, it's got to be the boss-man himself. "You busy?"

She gets her keys and jacket. "On my way out the door. Those Futurepast sessions I told you about? All week?"

Shelley says it with a hopeful please-leave-me-alone note in her voice, but Brian just answers, "Yeah. You mentioned that. I don't think it's smart, cramming a month's worth into a week like this, but it's your dollar."

All six thousand of them, Shelley thinks with a grimace. "Was the Mancini work all right?"

"It was great. Um." Brian suddenly sounds like Erik from last night. "I've got two more accounts that need to be done by tomorrow morning, I'm putting the email together now, and then. Um. That's going to be it for a while."

That's what? Shelley almost drops the phone. "That's going to be it? Brian, what the hell does that mean, are you running out of work for me or something? Cutting me loose?"

"...Yes." God, she can picture the way he ducks his head, that stupid apologetic look she'd seen before, like he's kicked someone's puppy. "I'm sorry, Shell, but you know the

cutbacks come from higher up. Look, don't worry, your record's stupendous, I'm sure things will pick up soon."

"Brian. Stop. Just...stop." Shelley realizes she's gritting her teeth and forces herself to relax; her jaw aches. Fuck. "Look. I've got to go or I'll be late. I'll talk to you when I get the accounts sorted out, I don't have time to kill."

Time. No. You have other things to kill, perhaps, but not time. It's almost daylight.

The woman approaches you on Hanbury Street, just past number twenty-nine. She's a little taller than the last one, and not so overdressed: a little heavier, maybe, or at least stouter in the face, but the luster of her wavy dark hair in the beginning light of morning isn't without its charm, and she shows fine bright teeth when she smiles.

She smiles a lot and, well now, you're just the sort of gentleman she's looking for, aren't you, the sort who's surely got a few minutes for a good time with Annie if he don't mind spending just a bit of coin?

You don't mind, and say so. There's enough light now you can see her eyes are blue. She reaches up and catches you about the neck, as if she's about to kiss you. Instead she just tugs you down a bit to laugh in your ear and nudge you toward a nearby yard. "Right here. Inside the fence. Sixteen people in that house and they wouldn't know if you pulled it down round 'em. Be a dear and lift the gate for us."

Such a bold thing, and so very foolish. You reach down, but what you grab is the kerchief around her neck, slipping your hand under it. Twisting, twisting as she pulls at you, flails, a ring slipping off her finger. But she can't break your grip, especially not when you jam your free hand in under her chin and squeeze.

Twist. Squeeze. Her hand drops away from yours. Her face mottles. You let go, for a moment, reaching for your knife, and she falls back against the fence.

She's too far gone to strain for air, is poor Annie. You pull her head back where she's fallen and cut deep into her throat. Blood oozes: it doesn't pulse, just seeps out along the blade. The cartilage of her larynx crunches as it parts.

You lay her down. Past saving now, poor Annie, quite past saving. Now the deep work: pry the blade out of her throat, wipe it on the grass, shove it into her abdomen low and to the hilt. Quick drag, rent-cloth sound of flesh tearing, lower noises, liquid. Parting the wound shows viscera; you shove your hands in and draw it out in loops, pulled up over her shoulders. In the cool air she steams, a sparrow folded in the wings of her own flesh.

The sunlight is brightening and you're panting. You pull your knife free, wipe it clean on her skirt, turn her face to one side and stroke the wave of her hair.

There's a butcher shop, an honest-to-God butcher shop, on the route between Futurepast and Shelley's apartment. She hasn't stopped here in months, but she'd come out of her post-session shower thinking of her grandmother's chicken-liver ravioli.

It had seemed appropriate.

The fellow behind the counter at the butcher shop is an android, an old model, his face sculpted in synthetic flesh that's fixed in a mask of grim determination, his movements stiff and almost comical. He doesn't speak; Shelley keys in her order at the counter and waits, and in just a few minutes she's on her way home with a pound of fresh chicken livers in a plastic container, blood pooled in the bottom.

A chicken liver isn't exactly of the same order of palatability as a meatball, but in the kitchen, listening to Mrs. Dannoy's cat whine, she eats one anyway, wiping blood from her chin with a paper towel, studying the grainy toughness of the organ, the bitter iron taste like a handful of nails in the back of her mouth.

Hadn't the Ripper eaten parts of some of his victims? Bowman would know, but she's not going to ask him. She'd blown off the after-session talk because she hadn't felt like discussing Brian and having her motivations for these sessions brought up again.

It's a little morbid fun. That's all. Just a good time.

Brian calls again while the ravioli is cooking, while Shelley's tapping at her tablet to resort spreadsheet columns. Parnett is the name on this account: her next to last piece of work for God knows how long. "Shelley? Look--"

"Brian, if you want this shit by in the morning, I'm busy." Tap. Tap.

"Look, don't be mad at me, I'm talking to management," he insists. "They'll--"

"Work something out?" Shelley rolls her eyes even though he can't see it. "Yeah. Sure. You look. Don't worry. I'll land on my feet."

At just that moment Mrs. Dannoy's cat lets out an enormous moaning meow. Shelley curses and nearly drops her tablet. "Jesus Christ," Brian says, "what was that?"

"Neighbor's cat," Shelley sighs. "She leaves home and leaves it outside. We've all complained and the landlord won't do anything."

Another wail. Brian winces. "Shouldn't you do something?"

"Yes. Check my ravioli." Shelley gets up. "It's against my better judgment, but maybe I'll feed it."

three

Oh, you've got yourself a posh one here. All genteel-like. Took your arm and walked you along while you talked the business. He didn't argue the price, even told you how smart you look--and of course you do, all this black, very sleek. He'd even given you the posy on your jacket, red rose and maidenhair fern.

He hasn't commented on your Swedish accent once. You're always a little wary of the men, that's just good sense, but this one almost makes you feel safe.

You don't mind when he pulls you into Dutfield's Yard. The Workers' Club is meeting across the street, even though it's after midnight, and you can hear them singing. People will probably come out to listen; it's lovely singing.

"On your knees." He says it gently.

Oh. So that's what he wants. Well, that never takes long and in this black outfit it's not as if anyone will see you--

Then he grabs your hair, and something's in your throat before you can scream.

"What the fuck!" Shelley's half out of the VR suit, pulling at the taped-on leads inside while the attendant tries to cover her with a towel. "Bowman, what the fucking fuck--"

"Shelley." Even his voice makes her want to punch him. "Shelley. Calm down. The program ran the wrong segment, that's all."

He makes it sound like it's her fault. She glowers and grabs at the towel. "Look." Brian's word--fucking Brian--but she forces evenness into her voice. "Look. Dr. Bowman. I've had enough lately. First I get downsized to telecommuting, then I have to deal with a goddamn pet-

abandoning neighbor my landlord doesn't care about, and now I'm about to lose the job I have because there's not enough work for me." She looks him in the eye. "Don't spoil it, okay? Give me my damn catharsis."

"Fine." Bowman holds up his hands: ineffective, pathetic. "I'm sorry. I apologize unreservedly. Do you want to run the segment again?"

"No." Shelley lies back so the attendant can work her back into the suit. "No. Sorry, it's ruined. Go on to the next one."

You take the first woman you find in Mitre Square. By God, you were interrupted once; it's not going to happen again.

She's drunk like Polly had been, drunk enough to go along with you, and you can tell she's not a prostitute all the time--she's got a thimble on one finger and a needle in her collar. Probably her man's turned her out; the most you can get from her slurred rambling is that her name is Kate.

The southwest corner of the square is far enough. You've had practice: you seize her neckerchief and cut her throat, side to side, slicing her right ear as reflex makes her try to pull away. You drop her and she falls on her back. Her bonnet has slid backward. The thimble clinks on the stones and rolls away.

Her mouth is open. Half smiling. You cut it deeper. Throw her skirts up and her legs apart. Kneel. Remember the other one: blade in belly fat, sink it deep, drag across. Cut through the intestine: pull it out, cast it aside. Reach back to her left kidney, veiled in its caul of fat. Slice it out: a keepsake, an ornament. Perfect the work.

Your hands are shaking. She's still warm.

The cat wails.

Shelley had finished the last of her work with a bottle of red wine and the last of the ravioli. She's not talking to Brian, not now. Not anymore.

Another pitiful noise from outside, and she groans. Brian telling her she's out of work, Bowman fucking up her session, and above all this damned cat...

There's a f of ravioli left. Shelley dumps it onto a saucer and opens her door. "Bruno?"

Bruno is receptive to the ravioli, and receptive to petting. He doesn't even object when she scoops him up in her arms.

The recyclers in each apartment are alternatives to standard garbage disposals, turning food scraps into fertilizer for the complex's gardens. Right now Shelley's is straining under a load of fur and skin and small bones.

The amount of usable meat on such a thin cat is negligible and gamy. Shelley chews and winces. Mrs. Dannoy really should have fed Bruno better, or at least more often.

But he makes for a passing sandwich.

four

This one will take time. You don't care. This one is your masterpiece.

She reminds you of the girl you'd seen the first night: not quite such a child, but younger than the others and fair, with that same half-innocent look. Her name is--was?--Mary Jane Kelly. Or Marie Jeannette. She told you both.

Not that it matters now.

Her lodging at Miller's Court is a single room, lit with a single candle. No time to waste in preliminaries: you'd paid her fee, thrown her across the narrow bed and sliced her throat back to her spine. It's easy now, after all your practice. Force her head aside. Bare her throat. Cut deep, deeper, watch the blood pulse out against the wallpaper.

Hold her down until it stops. Bathe your hands in her spray. Lick it clean.

You need more light, so you cut her dress off methodically, wad the scraps into the fireplace, set them alight.

And you peel her.

Eyebrows. Ears. Roll her neat breasts in your hands and cut them away. Filet her: work the skin from her arms in strips, from her thighs in flaps, detach red muscle, dig down to white bone. Slice her cheekbones flat, scratch lines into her lips and let them drain.

Put your mouth to the gape of her throat and drink. To the bared fibers of her pectorals, and chew.

Empty her. Up and down, side to side. Lungs. Liver. Kidneys. Lift. Pull. Draw the knife. Pillow her head on her discarded flesh. Take the meat in butcher's cuts from between her ribs.

Cut again. Gash her nose, her feet, her fingers. Always cut. Slip your blade into tenderest skin and lift her eyelids away.

This is not murder, not anymore. Not when you are gloriously fed and yet more gloriously bloodied, and she is cooling, slippery, marvelous and inviting in her emptiness.

You've made a set of them, haven't you, from Polly to Mary Jane, these soiled doves cleansed by the kiss of your knife. Each one more complex, more pure, and this one is the zenith, the last work and the greatest.

No, this is not murder. This is art.

The only consequence to the cat's disappearance had been Mrs. Dannoy posting HAVE YOU SEEN THIS PET notices on every free surface and the landlord posting warnings about too much animal protein in the recyclers. Shelley can't think of it without giggling.

She dresses slowly once she's out of the VR suit: slowly, because she's still tacky with adhesive from the various leads in places only a good hot shower will reach, and stretching the skin there is uncomfortable, more so when the fabric of her thin black sweater and jeans both immediately stick into place. Slowly because she's dry-mouthed even after three bottles of water, because she'll start shaking uncontrollably if she doesn't try to keep her adrenaline load at bay, slowly so she won't dislodge the razor blade she'd tacked into the wrist of one sleeve.

She breathes deeply.

In the examination cubicle--still grey, still sterile, but with a tiny window and a better seat--she wipes her face and hands with a damp towelette and manages, for Bowman, a reasonably sincere smile. She stands; the psychiatrist settles onto his wheeled stool with a squeak of springs. "Well, that's that. How are you feeling?"

"Tired," Shelley admits, if it's possible to be tired while she's thrumming with sick anticipation, and adds to herself and a little disappointed it's over, but I guess I can dream. "It's been"--fun, so gloriously bloodily fun--"cathartic, I think. Sort of cleansing. I've definitely got a new perspective." She stretches, long and exaggerated, working the blade into her palm. The faint prick of it in the soft skin between her fingers is wonderfully familiar. "But right now I think I want to go home and enjoy my catharsis with a talk show and some cookies." She smiles. "I may even get my official resignation in on time."

“You certainly don’t seem to be suffering any ill effects.” Bowman blinks that annoying low-shutter-speed blink again. He’s making notes into her file on his tablet. “For which I really do have to congratulate you. That’s--”

“Unusual for this package,” Shelley finishes, getting to her feet and making a show of stretching again. “I know. Like I said. Cathartic.” She waits till his attention is back on the tablet, and steps in much closer, hands on her hips. “I’ll admit, I’ve always wondered who decorated this place.”

“What?” Bowman glances up, eyelids lifting from mid-blink into an approximation of mild annoyance. “Oh. Yes, it’s...let’s say, unfortunately plain. The Futurepast staff had the building painted before anything was ever moved in. You’re far from the first person to notice, but they have a suggestion kiosk downstairs.”

“I’ll drop something in.” She has to make him turn his head. For a moment Shelley thinks of Annie, just seized and whipped around, but she settles for hanging over his shoulder a bit and pointing at the blank wall behind him. “I mean, look at this wall. Nothing. Not even a stripe or a logo.” She can feel his displeasure as he shifts, but he finally turns to look. “Now work with me a second. Just imagine...”

Shelley grabs his shirt collar and twists hard.

“...something red.”

Bowman doesn’t taste like Mary Kelly had.

He'd been a cyborg after all: she'd found a respiration controller behind his thyroid, its titanium-coated carbon fibers winding up toward his brain in silvery threads under the muscles of his neck. Unlike his flesh, they refuse the edge of her blade.

His meat is slick and oily, sweet with a chemical tang, lacking even the faint gaminess of Elsa Dannoy's tough, stringy cat. By the time Shelley gets to the elevator she's faintly queasy, but that's just the adrenaline talking.

There will be consequences, of course. She quickens her pace to match her pulse. No getting around that. There are always consequences, even if there have always been killers who've managed to fall through the cracks.

The only person in the elevator is the blond boy she'd met on the first day. Erik: factory-ripped jeans and a black T-shirt, but he's still got his iPod and newbie nametag. He gives her an uncertain, watery smile. "Hey, you're the Ripper lady."

"Yeah. I never introduced myself, did I? I'm Shelley." He's twitchy. Shelley glances down: anything? Anything to give her away? Blood under her fingernails, piece of Bowman between her teeth? She doesn't see anything out of the ordinary, not in these black clothes, so she gives him the brightest smile she can muster with her heart trying to hammer its way out of her chest. "Just finished up, and let me tell you I'm pretty beat. How about you and the horror-writer program, have you summoned Cthulhu yet?"

She says it teasingly, but Erik jerks and shudders. "Twice. Sorry, it--sometimes it gets to you a little, doesn't it? Like it's too real, too fast. I keep dreaming." He pulls his earbuds out and drapes the cord around his neck, fidgety, grimacing. "So. Um. You ever find out who your killer really was?"

Somewhere above, an alarm is sounding. Shelley leans against the wall of the elevator and closes her eyes.

--Here in London you can always tell the unfortunates simply by their presence: no self-respecting woman of any means would be out on these streets at this hour. Tonight it seems

every public house has at least two standing in the street outside, wearing probably everything they own but trying to give an air of shabby gentility to it: a lace shawl here, a fresh posy pinned there, skirts drawn just so, catcalling every man they see. It's enough to make you jittery with possibility, but you focus on the presence and weight of the knife sheathed in your left boot and walk on: you have to choose carefully.

You're on Osborn Street again, and again the tow-headed girl catches your eye, but this time you get a good look. Pale blonde, willowy, and she's changed her dress, blue calico skirt arranged just so, velveteen neckerchief tied around her throat. Beneath the carefully arranged fringe of her hair she looks up at you, eyes wide and blue, the set of her painted mouth uncommonly bold. She makes an offer without saying a word.

Not so much the angel, now.

Something's changed.

She's ready.

You smile, and bow, and hold out your hand--

"It was me," Shelley says with finality. "All along. Just me."

Predators

Valerie Williams

Valerie B. Williams is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and of the Virginia Writers Club (VWC). She worked with Stoker Award-winning author Tim Waggoner in the 2017 HWA Mentorship program. She survived the 2018 Borderlands Press Writers Boot Camp and participated in the 2018 HWA online writing group, Fright Club.

Valerie has had three short stories accepted for publication. “The Succession” appeared in Skyline 2018, the annual anthology of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the VWC. “Pickled Pig” will appear in the anthology Not Just A Pretty Face in February 2019. “Amazing Patsy” will appear in the American Gothic anthology (Flame Tree Publishing) in May 2019.

Valerie is a “military brat,” who grew up in many locations in the U.S. and Europe. Her love of writing (and of horror in particular) comes from her English mother. She lives near Charlottesville, Virginia, with her very patient husband and two equally patient Golden Retrievers.

Predators

Valerie B. Williams

The dream has become more vivid. This morning I woke on the edge of a climax. An exotic, luxurious taste lingered. It’s tempting to call in sick and go back to sleep, but dreams don’t work that way. The memory fades in the heat of the shower, and by the time I’m dressed, my focus is on work. I do love my job.

Checking on the Lilliputian inhabitants of a row of small glass enclosures consumes my morning. The sole entomologist in the lab, I am responsible for the care and feeding of a variety of insects. My favorites are the Tiger Beetle, assassin bug, dragonfly, and praying mantis—predators all.

The assassin bug disguises itself with dirt, waits for an unsuspecting ant to trundle by, spears it with needle-like mouth parts, and sucks the innards until there is nothing left but the chitinous exoskeleton. Magnificent! The leaf cutter ant munching on its salad faces no such challenges. It's like comparing a wolf to a cow.

Following an afternoon of writing reports, I return home and don a dowdy, ill-fitting blouse, baggy jeans, and old sneakers. In the twilight, I leave the apartment building hunched over, eyes downcast, arms hugging my body. My nondescript appearance belies my anticipation.

I catch a bus across town, walk the dock area to a smoky bar, and shuffle in. A bored waitress approaches the ratty blue vinyl booth and takes my order. Beer foam clings to the empty glass before a tall, baby-faced guy in a flannel shirt with the sleeves torn off slides into the other side of the booth.

“Hey darlin’,” he says. He carries a fresh beer in each hand. His tongue slides around his full, red, almost womanish lips.

I drop my eyes and stare at the table.

“Shy, huh? You shouldn’t be shy, pretty thing like you.”

He works construction. I laugh at his corny jokes and he continues to drink, two beers to my one. After his fourth beer he pops the question.

“Wanna go to my place?”

My feigned reluctance excites him. He loops my arm through his as we stroll the nighttime streets. Salty air fills my lungs and clears my head. I glance at him and hesitate.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

Is ‘babe’ the default name for all his conquests? Has he forgotten my name already?

“Nothing.” I smile.

We climb to his fourth-floor walk-up and he leads me to the bedroom. His cock presses against me as we fall onto the bed. We shed our clothes. He tells me over and over how he’s going to fuck me good.

I climb on top of him while sliding cold metal out of the pocket of my discarded jeans. His eyes are squeezed closed as he grunts with each thrust. My knife slices his throat to the spine, releasing a jet of hot, coppery blood. His eyes fly open and he gurgles, but his greedy body doesn’t realize it’s as good as dead and keeps pumping. I feel nothing.

He’s still twitching as I lean over to lick the blood off his face, then hesitate for just a second, drawing out the moment. The anticipation is too much and I succumb, suck his full red lips into my mouth and bite down hard, jerking my head to the right and tearing the skin. Luscious gobbets of warm flesh fill my mouth and I chew slowly. My climax shakes the bed.

Reality is so much better than a dream.

All the Extras

Chris Rodriguez

Chris Rodriguez has retired from the horrors of conventional life. She now lives on the brink of inspiration in a 100-year-old cottage in Pocatello, Idaho. Her works have appeared in various themed anthologies including Rhetoric Askew, Kelly Jacobson's, The Way to My Heart: An Anthology of Food-Related Romance, Anchala Press's Flash Fiction for Flash Memories and several by Horrified Press/Thirteen O'Clock, a Blunder Woman Productions in, Wrong Turn and Left Hand Publisher's, Mindscapes Unimagined. You can find her latest at <https://chrisrodriguez-onthebrink.com/> or <https://www.amazon.com/author/chrisrodriguez-onthebrink>. "All the Extras," has been accepted for publication in Horrified Press/Thirteen O'clock Press' Bought and Sold Anthology. Check them out at <https://www.facebook.com/HorrifiedThirteen/>

All the Extras

Chris Rodriguez

Thank God it's Friday! Harley Black incanted as he picked up his cell and speed dialed The Asiento, the only pizza place in this god-forsaken county. Run by a Dominican family, it worked only because of the exotic spices they added.

"Yeah," he said the girl finally answered, "This is Harley. Let me get an extra large tonight and don't forget the extra cheese and extra toppings!" These idiots couldn't take an order if it was drilled into their foreheads and fracked directly into their brains.

Harley knew it would take time since he was five miles out at the Holmstead Farm where he ran a drilling operation. The kid with the sponge curls took forever delivering on his

Mickey Mouse scooter. A shower was in order even though he wasn't going to town with the crew. Fortunately, he had a 6-pack stashed for the deliciously slow evening ahead.

Just as he was unwinding, getting into a better mood, his wife called. "I'm sending as much as I can, Kailynn! I can't work 24/7 and I'm putting in as much overtime as they allow me. See if your mom will loan you the money for Sammy's soccer fees and I'll send extra in the next check." This job was running over contract and Harley was two weeks away from losing his bonus.

He chunked the phone back in the cradle, huffing air through his gritted teeth. He ran a calloused hand through his still wet hair, grabbed a brew cracking it open with a quick twist. The cold, amber liquid went down like silk soothing his frazzled nerves.

I'm starving. When is the pizza going to get here?

An hour later, the scooter buzzed up the muddy road. Harley opened the trailer door before the kid even got to the steps. "You took your sweet time." He twisted his lips in disgust, grabbed the box and opened it. Still hot from the mini-heater on the back of the machine, Harley burned his forefinger dipping it into a slice. "Dammit! Thought I told you all the extras. Hardly anything covering this pie. Can't you people take an order?"

Matias stood quietly as always waiting with hooded eyes for the payment. It pissed Harley off even more when he got no reaction or apology. "Here." He threw the money at the kid who bent to pick it up from the ground.

“I will tell my grandmother about your complaint. I will tell her to be sure to put on the extras next time,” Matias stated without looking at Harley. He put the bills including a ten-cent tip in the pocket of his baggy shorts and turned to leave.

Harley watched him ride off before he tossed the box onto the coffee table, found a decent movie on the limited channels available out here in Armpit, USA and shoved half a slice into his mouth before kicking back to relax. About the time he was finishing his third piece, washing it down with a second beer, he felt much better.

Maybe I’m hypoglycemic or something. I shouldn’t have yelled at the kid. It’s not his fault everything is going wrong for me right now.

He was suddenly ashamed of his actions and decided to call The Asiento to apologize. No answer. A glance at the clock showed it was well after midnight.

Where did the time go?

Harley yawned. He wasn’t due on shift until afternoon, but since diddly-squat was on the tube, he decided to hit the hay to get a little extra shut-eye. Wouldn’t hurt. He made a mental note to call the kid tomorrow and headed for bed.

Harley set an alarm even though he was pretty sure he’d be up and at ‘em long before his shift. He needed to go to town to wash some greasy coveralls at the one laundromat where the machines were designated for the roughnecks. He would grab a few things while the grubbies were processing so his Sunday could be spent relaxing. However, the alarm sounded on deaf ears. Harley slept right up to the start of his shift only awaking when Junior Simpson, his rig operator, shook him roughly.

“You coming to work today, Boss?” We’re headed over to the rig if you want a ride.”

Red eyes cracked open taking in Junior’s worried look. “What the hell time is it?”

“Quarter to.”

“Speak up fer chrissake. Can hardly hear ya.”

“Quarter to, Boss,” the crewman said loudly as he leaned in closer to Harley.

Confusion swept through Harley’s foggy brain. Did I drink that much? “You better head on over to relieve the day shift. I’ll walk down as soon as I dress.”

“Sure thing, Boss. You okay? You look like death warmed over, no offense.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just gotta shake the cobwebs outta my brain. No worries.”

Junior slammed the door on his way out causing Harley to wince. He threw off the sheet and staggered to the bathroom to relieve his bladder of the beer from the night before. He normally loosed a hearty stream, but this morning his urine, tinged a pinkish color, trickled out like thin strings. He swayed, staring into the toilet bowl trying to think of a reason for the anomaly.

Time to lay off the bottle for a bit. Your kidneys are taking a beating.

His balance was off. The room spun in a dizzying kaleidoscope of mirror-walls-door-toilet. He steadied himself against the sink. The muffled sound of the crew transports heading out made him wonder if the vertigo wasn’t due to clogged ears. He did miss the alarm this morning.

Harley grabbed some Q-tips from the jar on the shelf and stuck one in his ear. He twisted a bit to either side, then pulled the swab from his ear. Some wax build-up was expected but he was alarmed when a long string of orange goo stretched from his ear to the cotton tip. Wax build-up was the understatement of the year. The swab was literally dripping with the orange stuff and as he turned his head to look at his ear, he could see more goo oozing freely from the

opening. A quick check on the other side proved both ears were leaking something thick and disturbing.

No wonder I can't hear anything. Time to make a doctor appointment to get these babies deep cleaned.

A quick wash-up in the shower refreshed Harley so he dressed and rushed to the drilling site. He was still feeling a bit green around the edges.

"Heads up! Boss is here," Junior shouted. "Better start looking like you're earning your keep!"

Harley grinned waving at the men as the inevitable clipboard was shoved unceremoniously toward him. Since his hands were shaking uncontrollably, he tossed the clipboard back to Junior. Junior's brow wrinkled. "You okay, Boss? Still got the hangdog?"

"Sure, sure, Junior. You're doing a great job. If you want a promotion, you better stop putting on the lock whenever opportunity knocks on your door." He clapped his assistant on the shoulder. "I'm going to just sit around and do what bosses do best. Nothing." He grinned again, but on uttering the last word, a hard, phlegmy cough escaped his lips. A few chunks of quarter-sized brown matter landed in his hands.

Junior had turned back to supervise the crew so didn't catch that last bit. Harley grabbed the bandanna stashed in his hip pocket and wiped the mess into the middle. He climbed into a transport. Curious, he unfolded the fabric to see what the hell he had hacked up. He was more than surprised at seeing some pepperoni rounds sitting in a pool of mucus. "What the...?" Harley stared hard for a moment then quickly wrapped them back up before shoving the whole thing into his pocket.

After sitting in the warm cab for 20 minutes or so, his discomfort caught up to him. He fell asleep, head lolling on the window and dreamed:

An old woman swayed and chanted, lighting candles in a small, dark room. “Ni con Dios ni con el Diablo” she intoned as she held a black rooster upside down near an altar. He couldn’t see who the woman was, but he felt he knew her somehow. She lit some herbs and waved smoke around the room, threw a handful of small bones onto a table covered in colorful tiles. A \$20 bill was produced from her apron pocket and placed in a metal plate filled with ashes. Then she cut the rooster’s throat letting the blood drip into the plate. She whispered in an unfamiliar language mixed with Spanish then lit the money on fire. The bill exploded into smoke and sparks until she damped the whole mess with a clear bowl of food – mushrooms, olives, pieces of green peppers, onions, pepperoni, little balls of sausage, shredded cheeses and much more. A tiny doll wearing coveralls was dipped head first into the bowl and stirred around using the doll as a paddle. The old woman chanted more unrecognizable words and then said clearly in English, “Give all the extras to Harley Black!”

He jerked awake at a tap on the window. Harley struggled to open his eyes. They were glued shut. Junior opened the cab door carefully placing his grimy paw on Harley’s shoulder. “We’re breaking for dinner, Boss. You slept all afternoon. It’ll be dark soon. Want to ride back with us?”

Harley shook his head slowly. “Give me a minute. Can’t get my dad-blasted eyes open.” He rubbed at them careful not to press hard since they felt so odd, like they were full of rocks and sticks. “See if anyone has some water, will you?”

Junior ran off and returned with a water bottle. Harley swigged thirstily before reaching for his bandanna. He remembered the mess in it and grabbed a partially used napkin from the truck seat instead. The dampened paper helped to wipe some of the debris from his eyes.

Junior barked, “What the hell is that? You got a cold, Boss?”

Harley pulled the napkin down staring at himself in the rearview mirror. His vision blurry, he made out a few hard, crusty granules stuck in the corners of his bloodshot eyes. When he pinched the stuff between his fingers it smelled like cheesy pizza crust. Matter like green peppers and mushrooms poured from his nose in a river of chunky snot.

“I don’t know – I,” Harley was stunned. He thought back to the morning of events. The goo oozing from his ears, then coughing up the pepperoni. Now this. Impossible! It was all pieces and parts from a pizza. The dream rushed to the forefront of his memory. Realization hit him at the same time as the utter horror. That old Dominican witch had done something to him. She had cursed him in some way.

“Get me to a doctor, Junior. I need help – now!”

“It’s Saturday night, Boss, the clinic is closed. Doc Morgan is gone until Monday.” He helped Harley climb out of the truck and walked him around to the other side. “Let’s get you home for now. I’ll go to town to see if someone else can help.”

Harley nodded weakly, shock and horror making him feel numb. Numb would have been fine because soon he was doubled over in pain. His stomach bloated to twice its normal size looking as if it might explode like an overfilled balloon. As soon as they arrived at Harley’s trailer, Junior helped him undo the straps on the constricting coveralls. The side buttons had already popped off. Harley staggered like a drunk into the bathroom barely making it before his guts exploded into huge piles filling the bowl with the stink of digested pizza. Harley gagged at

the smell and pulled the waste basket over to relieve the upper half of his tortured stomach. More pizza, not quite liquified. He had never in his life been so sick, not even when he got botulism as a kid from eating green beans from an old bottle in the cellar.

Junior was pacing nervously in the cluttered front room and jumped when Harley hollered at him. “Call The Asiento. Tell the delivery kid to come out here, now.

Junior complied, but had a hard time explaining the situation to the girl on the phone. Harley didn’t want a pizza, just the kid to come by himself. He was relieved when Matias finally came to the phone. “No hay problema. I will come in one hour.”

Harley, doubled over, hobbled from the bathroom to collapse on the couch just as the scooter came up the road. “Let him in Junior then you can leave. I’ll be fine now.”

“Sure, Boss.” Junior opened the door to let the boy in and himself out. “Hope you feel better soon,” he threw back over his shoulder.

Harley waved cracking open his bloodshot eyes, still half glued shut with the crusty matter. Matias stood over him, waiting. He said nothing.

When Harley felt he could speak without letting loose more of whatever he was drowning in, he said, “I wanted to apologize for treating you badly last time you were here. I was... Well, no excuse, I was just plain rude and I have a feeling it wasn’t the first time. I hope you will accept my sincere apology.”

Matias shuffled his feet before replying, “Yes, Mr. Black. Of course I will accept your apology.”

“Matias?” Harley started, then choked momentarily on some pepperoni bits threatening to rise up in his throat. He cleared it into some tissue, then, “Matias, tell your grandmother thank

you for all the extras. I know I don't deserve this special treatment. I appreciate all you and your family have done for me and the other crew members."

Again, Matias nodded. "I understand Mr. Black. I will tell her."

Harley felt at peace as the scooter buzzed back toward town. He fell into a deep sleep waking refreshed the next morning. Sunday. It was good to have a day off. The sun was shining, a ball game was on the tube and Harley knew everything was going to be better.

"Thank God it's Friday!" Harley said as he handed Matias the money for the large pizza with all the extras. He also handed the kid an extra \$20. Matias grinned and hopped on the scooter with a wave. Harley took a deep breath, tossed the pizza into the garbage bin and headed over to see if Junior and the boys wanted to go to town for Chinese.

She Who Breaks the Cycle

Pat Flewwelling

Pat Flewwelling writes dark fiction of all kinds, from short stories like “The Great Inevitable” in *Expiration Date* (Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Publishing, ed. Nancy Kilpatrick) and “Cyphoid Mary” in *Alice Unbound* (Exile Editions, ed. Coleen Anderson), to full-length novels like *Blight of Exiles*, *Plague of Ghouls*, and *Scourge of Bones* (Tyche Books, 2015, 2016, 2017 respectively). Forthcoming works include “Nowhere Time” in *Canadian Dreadful* (Dark Dragon Press, ed. David Tocher), and the fourth novel in her *Helix* series: “Sedition” (Tyche Books, 2019). On the side, she also runs a travelling bookstore, is a co-editor at ID Press, and works full-time as a senior business analyst.

She who Breaks the Cycle

Pat Flewwelling

1970

Olivia stood ankle-deep in cold, used diapers. She’d tipped over the heavy pail when reaching for a fresh wipe off the lower counter. Now she just stood there, staring at it, the funk of aged piss boiling up around her. She straightened and stared at her hands, as if seeing them for the first time. Outside, the world went on, bright and cold. To her left, her husband sat white-eyed in his comfort chair, with a tube of yellow-brown beer throbbing in his mouth and down his throat into his bloated stomach, while a smaller tube, filled with foamy, yellow-white urine came out from his pant leg and connected to a neighbouring vat beside the keg. At his feet sat three of their five children, lounging before the static-filled television set, their shirts stiff with dried food

and vomit. In the hall, her eldest daughter Delly, eleven, was on the phone, as she had been for the last forty minutes. On the table, her youngest son grunted and squeezed out an arm-length turd onto the change table and over the back of her hand.

“This is it, isn’t it?” she asked herself. “It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

Olivia set down the wipe and went first to the bathroom sink, where she idly scrubbed her hands, and then washed her face, scouring her eyes of that day’s tears. The faucet shrieked when she turned it off, and the pipes rattled. Her husband made some noise of discontent, but with his throat clogged, he was unintelligible; soon his chair began to vibrate, lulling him back into his state of blissful semi-sleep. Olivia dried her hands and face on a threadbare tea towel and glanced out the tiny bathroom window at the huge world beyond. There were colours outside. Sunlight reflected off the top of a passing coupe, and she could hear music issuing from its speakers. She had a guitar once.

She unhooked the latch and opened the bathroom door, seeing three crusty children staring blandly up at her, whining about hunger and boredom. Delly was still on the phone, now complaining about the stink of unattended baby shit and about the utter negligence of her own incompetent mother. Olivia went further down the hall, reached the broom, and used the handle to pop open the trap door into the attic. The ladder she angled up through the frame, and climbed.

Boxes, lamps, and an old rocking horse dominated the dusty attic, though the unshaded window bestowed slants of dotty sunlight and added cheer to the dead possessions. One ray of light fell on a simple hope chest. She opened its cedar lid, and within, on top of generations of embroidered linen, was ancient photo album. She took it out and let it fall open where it pleased.

The album opened to a spread with a handwritten marriage license and a black and white wedding photo on the left. The license was dated 1861, as was the wedding photo. Neither husband nor wife smiled, because that wasn't the thing to do in the mid-19th century; and yet, they seemed both surprised, alert, and ready for whatever joy or hardship life could throw at them. The photo on the right was cast in sepia. It was the bride, Olivia's great-great-great-grandmother Anne, the first matriarch to live in that very same, very small, one-storey house. That grand but simple dame was standing in front of a narrow changing table, wearing a long black dress with her sleeves rolled up. She was staring out the window through bleak, diaphanous curtains and a bright world beyond. Whether the child she was cleaning had shat on her hand or not, Olivia couldn't tell. Captured in that same photo, off to her left, was Anne's beloved husband, obscured by the wings of a high-backed chair; in the picture, he was little more than a bent arm and an upraised clay jug. The photo was dated January 12th, 1870; below it was a death certificate dated March 5th, 1870.

Olivia turned the left-handed page to the right, moving forward through time toward the front cover of the album. This was a spread devoted to the grand matriarch's oldest daughter, Mary, Olivia's great-great-grandmother. On the left was her marriage certificate and wedding photo, dated 1879; on the right was a faded, moldy sepia photograph of the same woman eleven years later, standing at a change table, staring out the same window with the same curtains, with her beloved husband drinking out of a large brown bottle. Mary's eyes were huge and white, as if she'd seen some hideous monster lurking on the lawn. The photo was dated May 1890; her death register was dated two months later.

Another page closer to the beginning of the album and there was Gertie, married in 1899, changing diapers in June 1910, dead by September 1910. Rebecca and Judy came next

in the album. Olivia stopped on Judy's page, running her fingers over the image of her mother's terrified face as she stood at the changing table, staring out through the living room window. There were new curtains and a house next door, but nothing else had changed. And there was the elbow of her father, dead to the world in the booze-chair Olivia's own husband had inherited.

A week ago, this was the first page in the album. The trip backward through repeated history had started with this picture of her mother.

Now there was a new front page.

She hadn't heard the click of a shutter, but she could feel the edge of a new photo. She wondered if it would be colorized or black and white. Up to now, the cursed photos had seemed to keep up with the technology of the time.

But instead of looking, Olivia closed the album, saying, "No. I break the cycle." She replaced the album in the cedar chest and closed the lid. She went down the ladder, set it against the wall, used the broom to lever the trap back into its accustomed place, stepped over three whining children to the front hall, took up her purse, and walked out the door. Delly ran after her, shouting, "What are you doing? Um, did you forget your own son on the changing table? Mom!" Olivia walked down the crooked path to the sidewalk, down to the corner, turned toward downtown, and kept walking. All the while, her eldest daughter cried out after her, swearing at her, pleading with her. But Delly stayed on the porch without following, and Olivia was sad, because though she'd removed a link, the chain was still strong.

1990

Delly stood at the change table, wrestling with her son to get his diaper taped. He'd been screaming his head off for forty-five minutes solid. She knew this for a fact, because her eldest daughter Lucy had been in the hall since the phone rang at 4:15, waking her son from his nap,

and he'd been crying ever since. It was 5:00 p.m. In the corner of her living room, her two brothers and two sisters were sitting at the card table, drooling over a 100-piece jigsaw puzzle. Her father was in his booze-chair – or rather, ooze-chair – and had been since October of 1987, after he had his accident at work. Delly's husband Bob had promised to take another crack at fixing it once he came home. It had been leaking all day, and something was really starting to smell.

The front door opened, and Bob came in. Lucy yelled, "Dad's home!" and dove right back into her over-the-phone rant about the godawfulness of having to live in this hovel with her grandfather, two aunts, two uncles, three siblings, and the parents who just didn't get it, and who just didn't care how much everyone was suffering under the endless, grueling poverty. The two middle children came out from some dark corner, whining about money and toys and boredom, and Bob laughed them off, gave them a new tabletop game, and away they ran. Bob came into the living room where Delly was changing the youngest one's diaper, and kissed her on the neck. "Hey Babe, what's new?"

"I just realized," Delly answered, "that I've been changing diapers for more than half my life." She'd started with her youngest sibling in 1970, who'd been left wallowing in his shit on the changing table, that damned, ugly day when her mother ran off and left everyone behind. She'd been eleven years old, and with her father spending every resting hour in that godforsaken chair, she'd become the head of the household before she'd finished Grade Seven. As her siblings grew in size, their competence shrunk, and Delly had started changing adult diapers. Ten years later, she was married and carrying her first of four children, each of them shitting and pissing into diapers. If she wasn't chained to the sink feeding and washing up for a family of eleven – four siblings, four children, one husband, one father, and occasionally herself

– then she was chained to the changing table, as her mother had been, as her grandmother had been, as all her forebears had been.

“Practice makes perfect, sweetie,” Bob said as he went into the living room to check on his father-in-law.

This tiny, dilapidated house had passed through seven generations following the maternal line. Their last names changed as new men were added and died off, but nothing else seemed to change. Every twenty years, a new matriarch stood at that antique changing table, going through the same motions, looking out that same window – thank God Delly’d changed the curtains – while the man of the house sat in his booze-chair, spending every free hour in that reverse-dialysis machine, white-eyed and stupefied.

“Delly?” Bob called from the living room. “Oh God...”

“What’s wrong?” she asked. She snapped up her son’s onesie and set him on the floor beside the heavy pail that still hadn’t been taken to the curb.

“I don’t think the chair’s broken.”

“But there’s beer and piss all over the floor,” she said.

“Feedback,” Bob said. “Beer’s not going into his stomach anymore, and it’s not coming out of his bladder.” He stood up with his hands on his hips and released a weary sigh. He looked unsurprised. “He’s been dead for a while.”

“Oh,” Delly said. She stood beside her husband, staring down at the liver-spotted, white-eyed, stinking husk of a man in a sunken chair. Bob had the good sense to turn off the machine and stem the flow. “I guess that’s that then.”

“Guess so,” Bob said. He went into the hall, coaxed his daughter off the phone – then bribed – then yelled – then disconnected the phone at the jack, whereupon she screamed at

him, ran out onto the porch, and slammed the door. He reconnected the phone and called the funeral home.

At the burial, a strange thing happened. Delly happened to look up at a familiar sounding cough, just as a woman in a black trench coat gathered her chest-high children to her and led them away. Delly stepped away from the solemn gathering to chase after her, convinced now that she recognized the face behind the veil. She tapped the woman on the shoulder, and the woman shrugged her off. Delly took the woman by the arm, forcing her to turn around. The youngest of the girls turned and grabbed Delly's hand, shouting, "You leave my mom alone!"

She was the splitting image of Delly, when she was that age.

The older woman finally turned to her, saying, "I just wanted to say my goodbyes. Please, just let us go."

"Mom?" Delly asked. It couldn't be her; this was a well-dressed woman with manicured hands, clean children, a long black Mercedes and a driver waiting for her. "Wha...where have you been all this time?" she asked, when she meant to ask, "Why didn't you take me with you?" Then outrage welled up. "You left us!" She pointed at the stubborn girl and the clean-faced boy. "For them? To have them with someone else?"

"I had to break the cycle," the woman said. "It had to end with me."

"Wha...what cycle?"

"Don't you see? Look at the husband you've managed to find. That was because of my sacrifice. Look at your children! Those are the children you've raised because of what I did for you."

“You left me in charge of the house at eleven years old, mother,” Delly shouted.

“Sacrifice? What kind of bullshit – ”

Olivia clapped her hand to her son’s ear and drew her favoured daughter in close.

“At least I gave you the house, didn’t I?”

But before Delly could reply, Bob ran up to them, aghast and amazed. “Delly! You never told me you knew Livy Angel!”

“Who?”

“Who?!” Bob blurted. “Only the most famous country-western singer to come out of this shithole of a town? Married to the heir of the Falston fortune? You never told me you knew her!”

Delly scowled and said, “Apparently I never did.” She spat on Olivia’s patent leather shoe. This time it was Olivia’s strong hand around Delly’s arm, crushing the muscles and bruising the bone. Mother and daughter glared at each other with quivering eyes and matching, pursed lips.

“I did what I had to do,” Olivia said. “To save my own life, and to make a better one for you.”

“Bitch,” Delly said. “You abandoned your own children so you could go off and do your own thing. You abandoned your whole family for...for what? Money? Fame? Sex?”

“All of the above,” Olivia shot back. “And not one goddamned regret. And if you had any sense in your head, if you gave a shit about your own little daughter, then you’d get your head out of your ass before you start the cycle all over again.”

“What cycle?”

Olivia lifted her chin and nose. “Go see it for yourself. It’s in the attic. You’ll see. You’ll understand for yourself. Go on. And say goodbye to your father for me, since clearly I’m not wanted around here.” And with that, Livy Angel put her children in her chauffeured car and never saw her eldest daughter again in this life.

When the whole miserable gang returned home, Lucy went straight to the hall phone, Delly’s siblings went to their card table, the middle children went to their room to play with their games, and the youngest son went right back onto the changing table, three hours too late. The house seemed so much quieter with the booze chair shut off. An hour later, Bob had taken the fatal chair outside and hacked it apart with an axe. Sweaty, he came back in and offered the axe to Delly, so she could have a few whacks at it, too. She declined. She had a family of ten to feed, and two more adult diapers to change.

While the soup was set to boil, Delly took the advice of her estranged mother and went up into the attic. There, an old cedar hope chest seemed to glow under the touch of a single, dusty beam of sunlight.

The shriek was so loud and so haunting that Lucy’s friend heard it on the other end of the line and said she was calling the cops. Lucy said she was being stupid, because her mother was just creeped out by the funeral – Granddad had been dead for almost two days before anyone noticed, after all.

Her mother dropped out of the ceiling from the attic trap door looking like a woman possessed. She went out the front door, wrestled on the lawn with her husband for the axe, and returned inside. Seconds later, two children, four adults, one pre-teen, and a husband were trying to restrain Delly from chopping up more than the changing table. Everyone was

screaming, especially the baby. Lucy grabbed her mother by the waist, crushing her tear-streaked face against her mother's sweating back, while Bob tried and tried again to catch the axe by the haft. When the axe head lodged in Bob's shoulder, it stuck. He roared in pain, recoiling, and the blood made the handle slick enough to slip from Olivia's shaking hands. Lucy tripped her mother and pinned her to the ground, but a twelve-year-old is no match for a distraught woman who had been changing diapers for twenty years – twenty years, and for what?

“I am she who will break the cycle!” Delly shrieked over and over into the floor. “I am she who will break the curse!” She smacked Lucy away and, tearing out her own hair, laughing, frothing at the mouth, Delly flung herself out the door, across the porch, down the path, to the sidewalk, and ran around the corner and out of sight.

Lucy ran after Delly past house after house, calling her mother's name, begging for her to come home, begging any of the neighbours to call the police or the ambulance, or anything. Finally, a kindly old man rushed down his driveway and caught Delly by the shoulders, cooing soft words, holding her steady. Delly was too out of breath – too out of her mind – to fight any more. Lucy stayed with her mother until the ambulance arrived; the paramedics told her to go find her father and tell him which hospital they were taking her to. Lucy ran all the way home and explained to her father all that had happened. He was bleeding profusely. Bob thanked Lucy, handed her his youngest son, grabbed his keys, and jumped into the car to go redeem his wife.

Lucy's brother had shit his brand new diaper, and the soup had boiled over. At twelve years old, she was the most competent member of the family left in that house. What else could she do, but take up where her mother had left off, at least until they gave her some good drugs and sent her home again.

Her father didn't come home again until late the following morning, well after Lucy had bathed, dressed, and fed her siblings, aunts, and uncles, and sent them off to their respective days. He came home with his arm in a sling. With him were two strapping young men carrying a huge box between them. They set it on a dark patch on the hardwood floor, where someone had always been sitting, blocking out the sun, for the last hundred and thirty years. They cut away the cardboard box and the plastic straps. It was a brand new, state of the art, fully reclining chair, to replace the one Lucy's grandfather had slept in. Bob seemed grateful and relieved, and sent the delivery guys away with a generous tip. He luxuriated in the smell of the new leather, and fondled the shining, clean tubes and dials and displays. He grabbed the remote control off the TV stand, sat, and let the technology sustain him, body and mind.

"Dad," Lucy asked, "is Mom okay?"

Bob didn't answer. He was too busy leading a wide-mouthed tube over his belt and down his pants. Unlike Granddad's chair, this one didn't pipe away piss. And Bob really, really liked his new chair. By the sounds of the arrhythmic vibration and the mechanical gasps of suction, it was clear that the chair also really, really liked Bob.

Lucy went to the hall phone and called the operator. She was twelve, but she was clever; and while it took a little effort and guile, she found the personal home number for Livy Angel. Sick to her stomach with anxiety, Lucy introduced herself briefly and told her grandmother what had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

"Yes, your mother came here," Olivia said with a sniff. "And I turned her away. If she was truly my daughter, she would have the strength to get herself the hell out of that situation, under her own power. If she's not big enough to do that on her own, then she's no daughter of mine." And Olivia slammed the phone in her granddaughter's ear.

Lucy gently returned the earpiece to the receiver and listened to the sounds of the house. Bob was in his chair making guttural noises. Her aunts and uncles were slurring and belching and whining in their corner with the card table. Her oldest siblings were in their room, shouting over rules and board pieces. And her youngest sibling was crawling after her, latching onto her pant legs. The only person who really needed Lucy was Delly, wherever she was. She got back on the phone and called the hospital.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but we don’t have a patient here by that name,” the head nurse said. “She checked herself out this morning.”

Lucy stood in the hall, trying to make sense of how her life had become so upended.

Something had driven her mother mad, and it wasn’t just the funeral. She looked up. Something in the attic had scared the wits out of her mother. Delly hadn’t closed up the attic; Lucy picked up the ladder and set it inside the trapdoor frame, because Olivia’s lack of fear had skipped a generation. It didn’t take Lucy long to find the album.

It didn’t take her long to make up her mind, either.

Where her grandmother and mother had failed, Lucy would succeed. She would be the one who broke the cycle.

For the next three school days, Lucy patrolled the city looking in every corner for her mother. The thought never even occurred to her that Delly might return home. It wasn’t even a remote possibility; Lucy knew she’d never go back there.

After that weekend, Lucy began to fall into a routine of getting everyone else ready for school and the day ahead, and then, after school, collecting her youngest brother from daycare, getting dinner started, and changing as many diapers as her raw hands could handle.

Bob only disconnected himself from his sex-chair in time to get to work, and once home, he refused to leave it even to feed himself. She assumed he ate and pissed and shat at work, because he wouldn't even get out of that chair overnight. She didn't particularly care; it was one less person to feed or bathe.

And in the evenings and on the weekends, she'd leave them all to their own devices and go back into town, looking for her mother.

Then, almost exactly two months after Granddad's funeral, Lucy found her mother. Delly was lying in an alley, hair tousled, eyes open, needle in the crook of her elbow, her mouth full of flies. When the police and paramedics arrived, they confirmed her mother had been dead for at least six hours. Lucy was too late.

Lucy didn't mind so much. It was the sign she needed. She sensed her mother's benevolent spirit hovering behind her, apologizing for her own weakness and short-sightedness, assuring her that Lucy's decision was the right one. Delly's spirit followed her daughter all the way back through town, along the sidewalk, around the corner, up the street, along the path to the porch, and inside. The house was humming, belching, farting, shitting, rotting, creaking, and vibrating, as it had for nearly a century and a half. And its time was over.

Lucy filled a pot with oil and turned the element on. She opened the gas in the oven. She returned to the attic, ignoring her clinging siblings and aunts and uncles, and retrieved the album from its hope chest. She tore out the very first page without looking it; it felt blank and unadorned, but she refused to look it. Instead, Lucy opened the album to the very back page, where the first matriarch stood behind the changing table, staring out at the world beyond. The photo was dated 1870, as was the first death certificate. Anne had died when Mary was only nine years old. Mary had died when Gertie was eleven. Gertie had died when Rebecca was ten. And

so on, and so on, and so on, to Lucy, who was twelve and very courageous, who would be the one to finally break the cycle. She pinned the album open with a dirty diaper and went outside with her father's keys. She pushed in the car lighter until it popped back out, its spiral glowing red, and set her torn-out album page and set the corner against the lighter, letting it smoke and catch fire. Once it was well aflame, she went back to the tiny kitchen window, propped it open from the outside, and tossed the paper onto the pot of boiling oil.

2010

Lucy kissed her husband's lips as he bent over her. They shared a sad smile. He looked so hopeful as he caressed his new daughter's powder-soft cheek. "Don't stay up too late," he told her. "And don't forget, if she wakes up, it's my turn tonight, okay?" He kissed her on the top of her head.

"Thanks babe. Love you."

"Love you," her husband said. He went into the condo's main bedroom and left the door open. A few moments later, he took off his glasses, set them on the nightstand, and turned off his lamp.

Lucy hummed as she rocked. Her daughter was fast asleep, perfect lips moving as sucked a dream-teat in her sleep. She'd been pregnant four times, but this was the first child she'd carried to term. She was supposed to be a boy; that's what the tests said. She wasn't supposed to come out as a girl. Lucy's smile hardened and her voice shook, but she had to keep the lullaby going. It wasn't just for the sake of her daughter; she needed to ensure her husband was well asleep, too.

All the scans showed she was supposed to be a boy – that's why she took a chance on this little one. But she was so beautiful, too, wasn't she? So perfect, with her tiny toes,

and her wrinkle-free fingers. Such an easy baby. Hardly any crying at all, and her voice softer than a kitten's mewl.

She'd named the girl Olivia, in honour of the baby's illustrious great-grandmother. That same name was hand-painted in rainbow-colours behind the head of her crib, and when Lucy laid the child down, the baby fussed and stretched and wriggled for only a moment before relaxing into an idyllic rest.

Lucy had made a committed promise to fulfill the wish of her forbears.

"I am she," Lucy whispered as she picked up the pillow, "who breaks the cycle." She gave the baby one last kiss on the cool forehead, smelling that new-baby scent.

If Olivia cried, it was too muffled to be heard by the snoring man in the room next door.

Private Beach

Stacey Longo

Stacey Longo is the author of *My Sister the Zombie*, *Ordinary Boy*, *Secret Things: Twelve Tales to Terrify*, and five other books that have nothing to do with horror. Her short story "Of Giraffes and Men," featured in *Carnival of Fear*, garnered this pearl of a review: "This is one of the sickest, creepiest and gag-worthy stories I've read in a while. While reading it I was engrossed and almost got up to barf." You, too, can barf at her books by visiting her page on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/s?k=stacey+longo>, or at staceylongo.com

Private Beach

Stacey Longo

Tom and Sandra walked right past the No Trespassing sign without giving it a second glance. She was carrying the blanket; he had a bag of fried chicken from a fast food joint, and a bottle of champagne in one fist. Tom reached out with his other hand and grabbed Sandra's as they walked, feeling thoughtful and grown-up and purposeful: he was going to tell Sandra tonight how he felt—that while he wasn't ready to marry her yet, he certainly felt that he would marry her someday, and he had a tiny ring with sapphire chips in the band to prove the seriousness of his intent. He was the one that had suggested an evening picnic by the ocean, and Sandra had loved the idea of a romantic date.

He was also hoping for a blow job on the beach. Sandra could be a bit of a prude when it came to sex outdoors, but there wasn't a soul in sight—his Jeep was the only car in the lot right now. Surely she'd put out once she saw the promise ring.

Tom and Sandra had been a couple since his senior year of college, when they'd met in biology class and found themselves lab partners. She had sleek black hair, olive skin, and plump red lips that pulled back easily in a wide smile. He'd been embarrassed to admit that he'd been struggling to pass the course. Sandra, two years younger, picked up quickly on the fact that he couldn't finish a lab report, and had tutored him through the class. They'd been partners ever since, and over the past eighteen months, he'd only cheated on her once: something she'd never found out about, and he'd never shared, but he was proud of himself just the same. Only cheating on a girlfriend once was a personal best for him, and was all the proof he needed that Sandra was the woman he was meant to marry.

Someday.

They had about an hour of daylight left before the sun set over the water, and he intended to make the most of the romantic setting. They trudged over the dune, passing the sparse tufts of razor-like grass, agreeing without speaking to head toward a flattened semicircle of sand next to a large, blackened log of driftwood. The wind tugged at the blanket as Sandra tried to smooth it down; Tom found four rocks, blasted to smoothness by the ocean wind and sand, to secure the corners down.

"Take a walk?" Sandra asked, smiling at Tom with her verdant eyes, and he felt his jeans pull uncomfortably. She might be a bit of a prude, but just a glance or a hint of a smile from the girl could get him hard in an instant. He turned away from her, reached down the front of his pants to adjust himself, then looked back at her and nodded. They latched hands, strolling down the beach.

It was low tide; there was a line of seaweed and debris that the ocean had rejected tracing a path down the sand. The wind was biting, agitating the sand—Tom had to blink repeatedly to

keep grains out of his eyes. “Watch your step,” Sandra said, sidestepping an opaque glob with tendrils on the beach. “Here’s another one!” She moved in closer to Tom, as if she needed him to protect her from the dead jellyfish strewn along the beach. Limp bodies dotted the sand every few steps, making it difficult to walk a straight path. They meandered on. Sandra stopped to pluck a stick out from the tangle of seaweed and broken shells at the tide line, and used it to occasionally flip jellies aside to uncover and examine a tiny conch or pretty stone.

“Not very romantic with all the dead jellyfish,” Tom complained, stepping squarely on a gelatinous mass. He was grateful to be wearing his sneakers. He was pretty sure that jellyfish could still sting even when dead, and he didn’t want to experience that ever again. He’d been stung by what his mother had said was a jelly, but what he suspected was a man o’ war, when he was fourteen, vacationing in Pensacola with his folks. Although ten years had passed, the agonizing, burning pain was still easy to recall to this very day. He’d wound up in the hospital, feverish and struggling to breathe, and although the doctors had told him there was a chance he’d grow out of his allergy to sea jelly venom, he’d never tested that theory. His chest tightened at the sight of the lifeless orbs that littered the beach like raindrops. “Maybe we should head back to the blanket,” he said with a nervous laugh.

Sandra bobbed her dark head in agreement, and they turned around.

“Maybe it’s mating season or something,” Tom commented, and Sandra shrugged.

“Could be. Or it’s a lemming-like, mass jelly suicide,” she offered, weaving her way around the jellyfish bodies. “Although it doesn’t seem as bad back this way.”

This was true. Fewer of the umbrella-like blobs dotted the sand back toward the section of beach where they’d tacked down their blanket. Had it been this way when they’d started their walk? Tom wasn’t sure, but he was glad. The jellyfish bodies were starting to make him lose his

appetite, and he didn't want an air of squeamishness to affect his heartfelt vow of affection that he had planned later. Plus, from the way Sandra was gazing at him with heavy-lidded eyes, he was now pretty sure once he gave her the ring, he was absolutely getting beach sex. Score! Sand in some uncomfortable places, maybe some flea bites on the ass, sure—but still worth it.

Tom and Sandra made it back to their picnic spot quickly. Their dinner and champagne still sat on the blue-checkered cotton blanket, waiting for their return. “Look at the sand! It looks like a zen garden,” Sandra said, pointing, and she was right. The sand was rippled like circles on a pond; Tom hadn't noticed it when they'd first spread out the blanket, though admittedly he'd been admiring the way Sandra's black jeans hugged her ass cheeks.

“Yeah, neat.” he grunted, sitting down and opening up the bag of chicken. “I'm starving—let's eat.” Because I've got something for you to gobble on later, he thought, then quickly faked a cough before she could see his smirk.

Sandra swatted at his arm. “You don't appreciate the beauty in anything,” she said with a grumble, settling in next to him.

“Not fair. 'Preciate you,” he said, doling out drumsticks. They ate quietly, hungrily; Tom occasionally paused to offer a smile at his girl. She was beautiful, even when confronted with the messy task of eating chicken on the beach. She dabbed at her mouth with a napkin delicately between bites, which made Tom's heart skip a beat. If it weren't for his college loans, and his new job, and the upcoming real estate license exam that he had to study for, he'd marry her right now. But Sandra still had a semester left of college, and had no idea what she wanted to do for a career; best to wait until they were both more settled and secure.

Sandra stopped for a moment, looking at him curiously. “You sure are deep in thought. What’s on your mind?” Tom winked at her, wiping his hands on his jeans. Now was as good a time as any to bring out the ring and make his promise to her.

“Sandra, I . . .” he stumbled over the words. He took a long breath and tried again. “I wanted to talk to you tonight. I wanted to tell you that—uh, that—listen, maybe you should ditch the chicken bones.” Sandra was watching him with wide eyes, awkwardly cradling the bones from her dinner in a napkin in her hands.

“I didn’t want to litter. I don’t know if the seagulls would choke on the bones,” she said. Though now that she mentioned it, Tom hadn’t seen a seagull since they’d gotten there. Miracle of miracles. At least we don’t have to worry about birds shitting on us while we’re fucking.

“Toss them over at the dune like I did,” he said with a shrug, but she shook her head.

“I can’t throw that far; you know that.” She looked around, as if searching for a garbage can.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Just bury them in the sand. I’m trying to do something important here.” Tom cringed when he saw a hopeful smile spread across Sandra’s face. Shit. Terrible choice of words! Now she’s expecting a proposal. Shit-shit-shit!

Still grinning widely, Sandra shifted on to her knees and laid her napkin down atop the sand. She started digging a hole off the side of the blanket, giggling like a teenager as she scooped. Take your time, nitwit, Tom thought. She was definitely expecting him to pop the question now. He needed a minute to figure out how to get away with not proposing, but still get laid. She’d know as soon as she saw the ring, right? It wasn’t a diamond or anything. But she also knew he was broke. She might think it was a placeholder until he could get a real ring. Fuck. Why hadn’t he gotten her a promise bracelet?

“Oh!” Sandra gasped. Tom looked up. Sandra had one hand deep in her chicken-bone hole, the other reaching toward him, grabbing at air. “Tom, help! Something’s in here—I can’t get my hand out!”

Tom leaned forward, squinting. Dusk was just starting to fall, but he could see that her left arm was buried in the beach up to her elbow. “Are you trying to be cute or something?” He was unsure of what kind of game she was playing. Was this some stupid thing where she expected him to pop her arm out of the hole and put the ring on her finger? “Damn it, woman, stop trying to force my hand,” he snapped. There was no way he’d ever propose to her now. She’d gone and ruined the moment with her pushiness, her expectations of matrimony. Hell, she’d be lucky if he even bothered with the beach sex at this point, much less whip out the promis—

“Tom!” Sandra screamed, and her whole body lurched forward into the sand.

His mouth dropped open, and he scrambled to get up and help her, but it was too late: he watched, horrified, as her head, then her torso, and then quickly her legs disappeared under the beach one fell swoop. The sand shifted, resettling; the meditative ripples reappeared on the surface.

“What the—Sandra?” Tom’s mind was racing. His girlfriend had just nosedived under the sand, and not so much as a handprint remained. Quicksand? He’d never heard of quicksand yanking someone in and smoothing itself out like he’d just witnessed.

There has to be something under the sand. Some sort of—worm, or giant vole, maybe—had just sucked his girlfriend down into its lair.

Tom dropped to his knees next to the spot where Sandra had disappeared and started gouging furiously at the sand, feeling for any sign of her—a shoe, her leg, some sort of proof that

she'd really just been there. His breathing sounded high-pitched and manic in his ears, and not like him at all. He pawed frantically, and then he felt it.

A tug.

It wasn't a nip from a sand-tunneling vole or giant worm: it was the sand itself, sliding around his wrist, pulling gently at first, then more firmly, urgently. Tom ripped his hand away quickly, and not without a little force. The beach leveled out at once, settling back in zen-like circles.

Tom rocked backward, sitting down hard on the blanket. What the fuck? He could taste salt in the air as the wind picked up, blowing harder, but the ripples didn't change. The beach—the beach ate Sandra! Then, more importantly: it wants to eat me!

He knew what he'd just seen, what he'd felt—but there was still a rational part of his brain that told him it was impossible. Beaches didn't eat people.

The distant caw of a high-flying tern caught his attention. He looked up, barely making out the shadow of a sea bird overhead. If it was quicksand, then it just had to be that one spot next to the blanket, right? He scrabbled through the bag that had held their dinner. He fished out a cold biscuit. Perfect.

“Here, birdie-birdie-birdie,” he said, ripping off small chunks of the bread and tossing them high in the air to try and attract the tern's attention. “Dinner time, fella. Come and get it!”

The bird continued to circle above Tom's head. “For fuck's sake, you goddamn dumpster duck. Now you're gonna get fussy?” Those are seagulls, not terns, at the dump, Sandra's voice corrected in his head. “Shut up, you condescending bitch. A sea bird is a sea bird—they're all fucking scavengers. This is your fault,” he added, his voice rising to a sob. But it wasn't her fault. He didn't mean it. He loved her. And now she was gone! He was going to promise to—

“This is no time to lose it,” he said, shaking his head to clear out the voices. “Keep it together, man.” He tossed another hunk of biscuit, aiming it in a steep arc.

The bird swooped down with a sharp cry, landing next to the doughy ball in a flutter of feathers. “Hey, there, little guy,” Tom whispered. “Hungry?” The tern fumbled at the biscuit with his beak, then managed to flick it up and get it down with an ungraceful swallow. “More?” Tom gently tossed another piece, as gently as possible, to the right of the bird. A little farther away. If the sand was safe over there . . .

The bird let out an alarmed squawk as its twig-like feet sank into the beach. Its wings spread out, thrashing, as if to hold it above the surface. It tried to flap, screeching a horrific caw as it writhed. The cry was cut off as the bird was sucked down beneath the sand.

“I’ll be goddamned,” Tom muttered. He closed his eyes to try and erase what he had just seen, but behind his lids, he replayed the image of the tern breaking feather and bone as it struggled to escape. I killed that bird. And if I step off this blanket, that’ll be me.

The whole beach, he had to consider, could be like this. He scanned his surroundings. The path through the dunes back to the car was about a yard away. His heart sank as he remembered that the parking lot where his Jeep now sat was nothing more than packed sand; he wouldn’t be any safer in his SUV than he was on this thin blanket. Which isn’t really safe at all, is it, Tommy boy? he thought, a stab of fear shooting through his chest.

Did the blanket just shift under him? There—under his left ass cheek? He pushed himself upright, standing on his tiptoes. He needed to make a move, fast.

He looked down the beach. In the fading sunlight, he looked for the jellyfish carcasses that had mottled their path when he and Sandra had strolled down the shore. He couldn’t see any

now. Were they gone? Had the beach eaten them, too? Wait—weren't there fewer down this way earlier?

A hot tear escaped the corner of Tom's eye. He was going to die here, suffocated by the sand; he was sure of it. If he even made it to the Jeep without being pulled into the beach, he would have to act pretty quickly to drive out of the lot before the whole vehicle was swallowed into the earth. His car was known to be temperamental on the best of days; one false start and he and the Jeep would be history. He'd be a missing persons case, his mysterious disappearance being speculated about by the likes of John Walsh or whoever the fuck was hosting those true crime specials these days. Can't pin this one on a serial killer, Mr. Walsh. Maybe the Sandman. You'll be flipping through the comics one day, and have a breakthrough. Bust the Sinister Six. Case solved!

He stared at the waves that rolled in from the ocean, lapping closer now as the tide came in. His romantic night—had he really thought he was going to get laid? It felt like a million years ago that he'd been daydreaming of blow jobs. I should've proposed. Why had he thought they should wait? Life was short. He should've grabbed the chance to marry Sandra while he could, instead of his convoluted plan to "promise" her to marry her "someday"—Christ, it sounded so lame to him now. He scowled, watching the seaweed floating on the waves, winking in and out of sight, mocking him. He was an idiot. And now Sandra was gone, before he could even tell her how stupid he was, how much he loved her . . .

Something about the seaweed distracted Tom from his self-flagellation. He watched as it lethargically floated in toward him, then pulled away with the tide again.

It floated.

Just like Tom would, if he could make it to the water.

He could make a dive for the ocean, and pull his feet up off of the sand, and float to freedom. He'd seen breakwater rocks a little way down, and even now, lights were starting to turn on in the windows of the seaside mansions that sat back from the beach. If he could make it to the sea, and swim to the rocks, he could walk his way to safety without stepping once on the dunes that waited to consume him.

Tom breathed deeply, trying to steady his nerves. It was just a short sprint to the ocean. He thought he could make it. Had to believe there was a chance. He pulled off his sneakers, held them for a moment over the side of the blanket, then let them drop on the beach. He counted: one . . . two . . . three—his sneakers were sucked down into the sand with a quick slurp, leaving not so much as an aglet behind in their wake.

Three full seconds. Tom was pretty sure he could make it to the sea in three seconds.

Maybe four.

He couldn't stay on the blanket for one more moment, he realized, breaking into a sweat despite the biting, salty wind. There was nothing to stop the beach from pulling him down where he stood. As if in response to his train of thought, he felt the ground shift beneath him again.

He had to move. Now.

Here goes nothing. He gulped, and tore away from the blanket, lunging toward the darkening ocean. He felt the sand tug at his feet as he ran, and pulled his knees up in a short, fast gait, lungs burning. His steps became more difficult as he got closer. The sand was dragging at him harder now, making it feel as if Tom were running through mud. He yanked his feet free in one last adrenaline-fueled burst, diving headfirst into the waves.

The water was cool, but not unpleasant; his body warmed quickly as he splashed out past where the waves swelled and crashed at the breakline. He needed to increase the depth between

himself and the seabed below. Once he was safely past the breakers, he allowed himself to cry in earnest, this time with relief. He had beaten the beach: the crazy, carnivorous stretch of sand that he thought he could hear roaring even now in frustration over his escape.

He looked around as he tread water, and spotted the black silhouette of the breakwater rocks to his right. His arms were hot with the fire of a thousand suns, but he pushed the pain out of his mind and pulled himself forward, cutting through the water choppily, stopping every few feet. He felt like there wasn't enough air in the world to fill his racking lungs.

The full moon finally broke through a swath of clouds, casting its light across the water. The sea reflected back the shimmer in phosphorescent blue.

Tom drew up, treading again. He could feel the light kiss of seaweed tendrils against his calves, his torso, his feet: a word that almost made sense to him (mermaid?) flashed through his mind as his brain scrambled to make sense of what his eyes were seeing.

The moon lit up orb after orb of drifting jellyfish; tiny shamrocks of blue brainstems surrounded by pulpy gel, bobbing lazily in the water. Bloom after bloom of luminescence winked in the moonlight, surrounding him. The ocean practically pulsed with gelatinous umbrellas and their softly trailing tendrils. There was nowhere to swim without knocking into them.

So beautiful, he thought, even as his heart started to seize.

Ice Chips

Nina D'Arcangela

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair and dread. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old graveyards. Nina runs a monthly picture-prompt blog series featuring twenty to thirty women who write for The Ladies of Horror on Spreading the Writer's Word she is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications and Phrenic Press, a co-founder of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

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Ice Chips

Nina D'Arcangela

“Pete, you always were an asshole, man!” We all started laughing. “The only reason they put you in green was because they were out of shit-stain brown.” Brunt of the joke or not, Pete pretended to fuck his M-16 and laughed harder than the rest of us.

The canteen made another round; it didn't quench my thirst, but it sure as shit eased my mind. This fucking place was a hell hole dug straight out of the devil's ass itself. Me, Pete, the whole squad – we were tight. We'd hit the bush together and somehow managed to survive the last seven months. It pissed off some of the other guys but screw them, let them find someone else to cover their backs. We didn't need some FNG making expectants out of us – fuck that.

It'd been days since we'd done anything but hang around our LZ and shoot the shit, but sand bags and make-shift bunkers weren't the worst things out here; any grunt would testify to that.

We were making so much noise, we'd drawn the Sarge's attention; I could see him making his way over. "So fellas, you having a good time?" The cheshire grin on his face was enough to tell us the shit was about to fly, and it was coming our way, but we were so piss-ass drunk no one gave a crap.

"Any of you jerk-offs wanna tell me why Pete here, who is supposed to be on the greenline, is laying on the ground humping his gun like his wife just traded up for a new and improved cooch?"

I swear Pete must'a pissed himself he was cracking-up so hard. He snatched the canteen from Rog and held it up to the Sarge, barely able to get his words out. "Here, this'll tell ya. Come on, Sarge, have a nip. Besides, it's been quiet for days. O'Boyle's got it. The little bastard has this sixth sense or something. He can fucking smell Charlie coming." We all started laughing again, a little more reserved this time.

The Sarge stared down at Pete for a moment, then his eyes flicked to me like it was my job to keep him in line. I was still snickering, but doing my best to hide it. The Sarge, he was one of us; I could see he was making up his mind between what he should do and what he wanted to

do. Taking a long drag on my smoke, I decided to back Pete up. “Go on, Sarge, have a sip. Ain’t crap been happening around here since forever. No harm in Pete having a little break.” Squinting up at him, I blew out a stream of smoke and waited while he stared back.

Reaching out, he snatched the canteen Pete was barely holding steady and crouched down to join us. After a long hard pull, and sucking in serious air to cool his lungs, he shoved the canteen back into Pete’s hands. “Good thing I didn’t see you assholes fucking around. Especially this one who’s supposed to be...”

“Incoming!” Someone screamed.

The first sound I heard was the whup-whup of its wings; I could feel the pressure of the air pressing down upon me as the beast beat a steady rhythm above. I was being dragged toward it, dragged through a field of claws that scraped at my skin, tore at my clothes, ripped apart my mind. Whatever was dragging me had a tight hold on my pack and was grunting while it ran in a lumbering lurch. Fleshed in red, with pieces of luminous crystal protruding from its bark-like skin, something about it seemed familiar, but I couldn’t remember why.

“Pete! Pete, where the fuck are you?” I screamed. It hissed in a language I didn’t understand, waved its free arm while shaking its head. I shrieked for Pete again, but the whup-whup of thrashed air was my only answer.

As we drew closer, other creatures rushed from the dragon’s gaping maw, they hefted its green tongue, carried it aloft.

The thing dragging me halted. The others tried to grab me with their talons, lift me onto the dragon’s tongue. In my mind, I struggled, the entire time the wash blinded me with coarse pellets carried on its breath. I was in the midst of an inferno. As I looked around, I saw flames

licking the edges of this new hell. The dragon fought its foe with mighty plumes of spray. The others rolled my limp form onto its side. The familiar one spoke, a glistening madness seethed in its eyes as I was rolled backward and landed on the wyvern's tongue that had slithered beneath me.

Its rasping texture stung my flesh as it tasted my blood, molded to my form, began drawing me toward its mouth. The beast's minions trotted alongside, assisting the tongue as it serpentine'd its way back to its host. The closer we drew, the fouler the dragon's breath became, until finally I was consumed through the yawning rift.

The beast took to the air. I could feel the rock and sway from within the cavern of its gullet. More creatures waited there; they began to pull me apart. They delved with their translucent hands into my gut, only to emerge covered in blood. I fought them with what will I had, but it was futile – one of their young smothered my face, pulsing noxious fumes into my lungs. When eventually they finished, all but one sat in stony silence. The attending creature looked down at me and spoke through some odd contraption it wore on its glistening face. It grasped my hand, spoke with a force I couldn't deny, but force or not, I didn't understand its words. My head lulled to the side drawn by the ever present whup-whup of the air as the wings continued to beat. As I began to lose consciousness, I saw a slit in the scales; an opening. With all that was left in me, I flung myself toward the fissure. The creature lost its grip upon my hand.

As darkness stole over me, my final sensation was one of falling.

I woke splayed awkwardly on a thin membrane that stretched as far as my eye could see. Disoriented at first, I realized there was no sound in this new place. I screamed out; nothing echoed back to me, nothing but the sound within my own head. I stood and realized I was

tethered to something, but I couldn't see what. A rope protruded from my midsection. When I grasped it, I felt an overwhelming pain; it was slick and streaked my hand with filth. Quickly, I released it.

I began to walk on unsteady legs; the tether seemed endless and I walked for hours. The membrane beneath my naked feet bounced in concert with each step I took. There was a strange tangerine light here, one that shone brighter on the horizon. I traveled toward it, but it seemed the further I walked, the further away it continually became. My foot hooked on something and I stumbled. Looking down, I saw an arm. Startled, I fell backwards and landed with a soft pwoof on the surface – the first sound I'd heard since I'd arrived here. Looking around me, I could see the membrane was littered with debris, most of it human offal and limbs. How did I not see any of this before? How had I wandered unhindered for so long?

I kneeled, wobbling as I did so, on the taut surface. I inspected the arm that had initially tripped me. Reaching out, I grasped it. There was a Celtic wedding ring on its third finger; it was clad in blood drenched fatigues. I ripped at the fabric like a madman until I finally uncovered the forearm. And there, where I had seen it so many times before, was the name of Pete's son tattooed on the baby rattle he'd had inked on him the day his wife had given birth to their first and only child back in the real world. I began searching through the remainder of the wreckage. Bits and pieces identifiable; a magazine, shell casing, glasses, boots – photographs. More things than I cared to recognize. Still holding Pete's arm, I crouched forward and wailed in despair and rage. This time the sound split the air as it slammed its way through this otherness, shattering the silence.

I reached down with my free hand and yanked on my tether – no, not my tether, my umbilical, and pulled as hard as I could.

A harsh bright light blinded me as my hearing rushed back in a nauseating wave. I found myself in a field tent on an operating table.

“What the fuck?” I barely managed.

“Stay calm, you’re gonna be okay,” I began to fight. “No! Just try to stay calm. Goddamn it, don’t struggle. Where’s the fucking dope guy! Get him under, get him under now – we’re gonna fucking lose this one!”

Blackness again gave way to the tangerine glow. Cradling Pete’s arm in my own, I sat, I cried. I screamed my rage. I tried to rip the umbilical from my gut. Finally, I lay down and gave up.

I didn’t want to wake up; I wanted to sleep – like Pete. Sleep and never wake again. Opening my eyes, I lifted my head to look around. I wasn’t on the OR table this time, I was in a quiet, sedate ICU ward. Most of the other soldiers were either sleeping or staring blankly off into space. I tried to call for help – a doctor, nurse, anybody, but barely made a sound. What little strength I had ebbed away and my head fell back to the pillow. An orderly walking by noticed the movement.

He smiled and came around the side of the bed to lean on the rail. “Hey man, good to see you up! You was out for a long time, wasn’t sure you was gonna wake – no matter what the doc said. Here, lemme get you some ice...”

“Wait,” I managed to rasp as my hand flopped like a fish in an attempt to grab him. He looked down at it, then back to my face.

“Nah, man – don’t try to talk or move,” he said as he gave my forearm a pat.

After returning with a cup of ice chips, he pulled up a chair and sat down next to me. My eyes never left him.

“You been out for what seems like forever, man. They did a shit load of surgery putting your insides back together, both in the field and here. It was touch and go for a while. You know where you at? Shit, you at Ben Hoa Airbase, man.” He slid the first ice chip into my mouth.

“My insides?” I croaked hoarsely.

“Yeah, man. You big talk ‘round here. They didn’t think you was gonna make it. You was ripped up so bad, but here you are; breathin, talkin, eatin ice. Goddamn if modern medicine ain’t something else, you know what I’m sayin.” Another sliver of ice slipped between my lips.

“What about Pete?” I forced myself to ask.

“Pete? I don’t know nothin ‘bout Pete. Was he in your squad? If he was, he didn’t make it – sorry man. You the only one that came out of that mess alive. They say some Sergeant died haulin you to that Huey. There’s somethin I don’t get, why’d you guys abandon the line knowing your LZ was hot?” Another sliver of ice.

“What do you mean hot?” I choked on spittle. When the racking cough stopped and I could breath past the pain, I pressed, “What do you mean hot? Our LZ was dead quiet, nothing for days in the boonies around us.”

More fucking ice. If I could have moved, I would have ripped his throat out.

“Look man, I got no idea what you guys was told. The official word is there was some major crap goin down ’round you,” he inched closer. “But look, I’m gonna tell you somethin you not supposed to know. And maybe I’m not supposed to know it neither, but ’round here, ya hear things. Maybe it’ll help you come to terms with all this shit, maybe not, what the fuck do I know, right?” He cupped his free hand around my ear and whispered, then pulled back flicking what I thought was a green tongue across his lips before smiling again. As my eyes shot back to his, I could swear I saw a flicker of flame reflected in them.

“Rumors, man. I hear rumors. But listen, I’ll come back later; check on you. You hang in there, a’right. I’m countin on you.” And with that he stood, tightened the leather strap around my wrist and walked away whistling softly to himself.

It took a moment for what he’d said to sink in, and when it did, I began to thrash against the restraints. I stared wide eyed and half crazed with the knowledge he’d given me. I kicked the phantom legs I could still feel, but were no longer there. My mind tried to escape to the silence of the realm I’d just left, but his words pinned me down as effectively as the straps across my torso.

My screams echoed through the ward.

Seven Things a Girl Needs to Survive in the Woods

Jessica Shannon

Jessica Shannon is currently working on her debut novel that takes place in a dead mall. Her work has appeared in *Black Candies: The Eighties* and *Trembling with Fear*. You can find her on Twitter @JShannonwriter and at her website www.jessicashannon.com

Seven Things a Girl Needs to Survive in the Woods

Jessica Shannon

“Are you going into the woods again?” Daddy scowls as he hands me a piece of paper, still warm from our printer in the den. I am at the age where we don’t talk anymore. Instead, Daddy prints things out for me to read. I shrug and shove the paper into the pocket of my skirt.

Daddy's eyes are heavy. He wants to go with me, but he can't.

The backdoor slams behind me as the cool air kisses my face. Leaves and mud squish under my feet. Humidity seeps inside my nostrils. My house disappears and the trees envelope me. I take the paper out of my pocket.

Six Things a Girl needs to Survive in the Woods

Shelter

My treehouse is a one room shack wrapped around an oak tree. Daddy built it for me when I was eleven. It was the last time I saw him smile. There's beaded curtains on a single window and a lumpy mattress on the floor. I made him put a lock on the door. He didn’t want to, but he knew I needed privacy. I'm the only one who has a key. I wear it around my neck on a tiny silver chain. A friend waits for me inside. He doesn't have a name yet.

Food

Faded boxes of cereal are all that's left on the shelf next to the window. Marshmallow clouds and rainbows sprinkled with mouse poop. A dead spider sits next to my friend's black work boot. Half of the spider's head is missing.

Water

I offer my friend some of the rain I've collected from the pink plastic teacups outside of my treehouse. He drinks the liquid too fast and begins to wretch. I forgot to tell him what was in the teacups before it rained.

Knife

The metal blade is buried deep in my friend's calf. I can't remember how many days it's been there, but the pool of blood is black and it looks like chocolate syrup. It doesn't smell like chocolate though. It smells like copper pennies.

Rope

My friend thought it was funny that I used a beaded curtain to tie him up. He doesn't laugh anymore though. He's tied so tight that parts of him have begun to turn purple. My favorite color.

Fire

I light matches to watch them burn against my friend's pale skin. If I squint, they look like fireflies and they make me feel eleven again. My friend doesn't scream as much as he used to. He's beginning to bore me. They always end up boring me.

I return home when the sky bleaches from black to grey. Rain patters on my head. A light is on in the kitchen. My father is waiting at the table with another piece of paper. He grips his coffee with so much force that his fingers become translucent.

“The woods are a terrible place for a girl to be alone,” he grunts as he pushes the paper across the table.

He’s added a seventh entry to the list.

A Friend

I smile and look into his eyes. “I’m not alone, Daddy. I have a friend.”

His eyes soften and he smiles like he did when I was eleven.

The Red Harvest

Amanda McHugh

Amanda McHugh is a writer and former English teacher from upstate NY. She received her MA in English from the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY and her BA in English Education from Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY.

From a young age, Amanda found inspiration from the horror genre, and her works frequently explore the unknown, psychological, and the unexplained. Her work has appeared in Zimbell House Publishing and The Mark Literary Review.

Her debut novel *Like Monsters of the Deep* is forthcoming from Magnolia Press in 2019.

When she's not writing, Amanda can be found with several iced coffees planning adventures with her family.

The Red Harvest

Amanda McHugh

One of the first things I was taught in my college education classes was to never correct papers in red pens; they cause anxiety and feelings of personal inadequacy in students. Pearls of wisdom from my Edu 101 professor. Listening to one of his lectures was enough to tell me that he thought the red pen as evil, and those who used it were evil by default. Apparently it's much less disheartening to see your mistakes highlighted in blue or black, or at least my students tell me this is true. Paper bruises heal faster than paper cuts, after all.

But still I wonder.

How could a color have that much control over a person? I know there are studies and data to back up these claims, but I've never been one to rely on numbers fabricated by research groups funded by some fancy corporation looking to capitalize on the weakness of buffoons. No, I rely on the Red. The prickly certainty when I just know something. It starts as a tickle in the bottom of my stomach, the mixed tug of excitement and dread you might experience as a roller coaster reaches the top of that first arch right before you are dropped into oblivion. That split second you're convinced that death is imminent. That's as close as I can come to describing it. Most of the time, the Red can't be ignored. It hits violently, a roiling demon that sweeps over my body, planting the crimson urge of hunger.

All the statistical research in the world can't overcome the pull this color has on me. When the surge hits, I am at its mercy. It's as much a part of me as my own tongue.

I was seven when I named it. Mother had decided to paint my bedroom. It was supposed to be a special treat, an early birthday present for her growing boy, she said. We didn't have much money, lived paycheck to paycheck, as they say now. An entire can of paint devoted to me was a big deal. My father, if you could call him that, worked as a cashier for one of the oldest gas stations on Hoosick Street by day; at night, he was the favorite bartender of many a patron at the Old Irish Pub. Neighbors called him a nice man, the kind of man who'd volunteer to help you move on a rainy Sunday. But in terms of intelligence, he was rather dull, and that combination won't get you far, especially when you're from a small town.

Mother stayed home to "harvest her talent" as a painter. An artist is what she called herself, but very rarely did she do anything worthy of merit. Shoddy landscapes and random sketches of shapes reflecting her "abstract, tortured soul" were plastered to the fridge. There was never any room for papers I brought home from school.

“Why would I waste my valuable space honoring the A you received on a trivial spelling test?” She asked me. To her, I was merely demonstrating how well I could copy what someone else told me was right.

“You’re not embracing your spirit,” she would say, “and that’s not worthy of praise.”

Then came the birthday announcement. “Tell me, boy. What color do you envision for your walls?” She never used my name.

I hesitated. I knew it was a mistake. Hesitation implied uncertainty, and with her, art was always certain.

“A person either trusts his muse and follows his inner rhythm or he waits to reproduce someone else’s ideas.”

I stuttered, staring up into her face with my fists clenching into my stomach. “Blue,” I said. “I’d like blue walls.”

She said nothing, just stared at me with her head tilted, like she was trying to figure out what kind of animal I was. I kneaded my fingers harder.

That demon was emerging for the first time.

“Blue,” she spat. “Blue? How utterly original. Not cerulean or periwinkle or azure. Blue. Tell me, boy, why blue?”

Had I said blue? I couldn’t remember saying anything at all. My mind was red—a blank space of swirling scarlet shadows.

She took a step closer and asked again. “Why blue?”

“Blue is for boys,” I muttered.

Mother exhaled in my face. The smell of mint and stale cigarettes darkened the red clouds forming in my mind.

“Stick out your tongue,” she said.

I did nothing.

“Stick out your tongue, boy,” she repeated, “and do not make me tell you again.”

Nausea enveloped my body. My breathing became short and heavy. I stuck out my tongue, following her words and trying to find a focal point, anything to help fight The Red.

I wasn’t afraid, you see. I was hungry.

Mother grabbed my tongue between her forefinger and thumb. Dug her nails into the tip. Her other hand wrapped around my neck. She drew my face close to hers. The stench was overwhelming. I saw my reflection in the curve of her glasses, a boy with the devil in his eyes, and felt disgusted.

Behind the fragile barrier, however, I saw joy in her eyes and knew the demon dwelled in her, too.

She squeezed my tongue harder, gritting her teeth. An outsider looking in would’ve thought she was grimacing, but I knew better. She was smiling. “You’re not my child,” she growled. Drool leaked from her mouth. Her neck twisted to the side with a sickening crack.

“My child would never choose blue because blue is for boys.” Mother’s voice taunted, mocking me. Her head lolled in time with the words. “I should rip this filthy tongue right out of your head, do you understand?” She sank her nails in deeper.

The Red inside me flared, then, whispering its introduction. I didn’t cower or beg for her to stop.

I winked.

She released her grip and unkinked her neck with another blunt crack, shoving me backwards into the wall. Two tiny crescent moons bled into my mouth, slick on my teeth. I spat on the floor. Twice.

Mother crouched and stared at the burgeoning pool. I thought she'd grab me again, but instead, she stuck her palm in the viscous puddle, smearing it like jelly. Clapping her hands together until pinkish fluid spattered. Cackling. "No. No. Your room won't be blue."

Simple. Calm, matter of fact, like she was reciting a list of items she'd need at the market.

Mother left me there, muttering to herself as she skipped down the hall.

My room never did get painted, but the trail of my blood she traced along the walls was still there a few years later when she mysteriously vanished.

I heard the shuffle of her dingy maroon slippers dragging back and forth—same as my own slippers now shuffle through my apartment as I read the words written on the paper in my hand.

Remembering this now, the Red is trying to burrow out of my stomach. Ready to be reborn. The ink has bled through the paper, a macabre mirror of my message:

The Harvest Begins.

I sigh, put the paper in my pocket, and stare at the jars on my shelf. Except for the one on the end—that one's been complete since the Red took Mother—they are small and shiny. Desperate to be filled.

"She won't be able to call me a thing now," I say to them. "Not after tonight."

I watch the woman in her window. Our buildings parallel to a spectacular view. I find it astounding that in 2019 people choose not to use curtains. I don't own a TV, not when everything's so easy to stream, but the glare from hers flickers on the window any time the camera shifts perspective.

She's beautiful in her plainness. Tall, but not slim. Long hair that's neither brown nor blonde, a mousy color somewhere in between. There's nothing remarkable about her except for her eyes. She doesn't wear glasses. Unprotected and vulnerable. They remind me of the Atlantic, a blue-grey crested by mounds of frothy white foam speeding towards the rocky shore. They're exquisite.

I must have them.

I wonder if they make her vain. Give her confidence over her otherwise ordinary countenance. Identity's a tricky thing. Society's been trying to solve the "problem" of identity since the concept of society was established. There's a strong, even primitive, need to be able to label everything and everyone. In grammar school, we call it cliques. Children evaluate their self-worth by ranking their placement on the proverbial social ladder. Jocks, preps, goths, nerds—this archaic system teaches people to judge based on what they see—that their identities depend on how others perceive them. They tell themselves that they'll outgrow this, that they turn into "better people" capable of seeing beyond initial appearances, but this is a lie.

They can't even tell themselves the truth. How could they expect others to understand their identities when so few people know who they are underneath their own pretenses?

Mother, for example, was a very skilled liar. Every morning she'd smile and wave to our neighbor, Mrs. Mansfield, an elderly woman with three filthy cats and no decorum. She lived alone and was determined to know everything about the people in her community, lest they

decide to steal one of her preciouses (a nickname, I'm sure, she unwittingly stole from Lord of the Rings). Eccentric, yes, but even in her old age, she, too, fostered the need-to-know mentality: Who are you? What can I call you? What makes you tick?

Mother's smile irked me the most. That plastered-on, shit-eating powdered face she saved for such occasions. Teeth sparkling and bright brown eyes. Like she had, for once, successfully completed a portrait of the person she claimed to be. It was almost cartoonish.

Mrs. Mansfield never saw it. She adored Mother. Always offered pleasantries and compliments before skulking her yellowed, sagging skin inside to feed the cats.

I saw the truth, though. I had something more concrete than the daily falsities with which she masked herself. I saw the creature living inside her. I tasted the truth; and the truth tasted like salty fingers and acrylic paint.

The girl chuckles at something on the screen and the Red stirs.

A side effect of identity was assigning blame. She made me this way, or he made me do it.

It's not my fault I am this way.

Deviating from the expectations of society, you'll surely cast blame somewhere. Labeling creates the norm, but it also feeds the outcast. The Red.

I'm not Norman Bates. I don't blame Mother for the things I've done—the things I have yet to do. Should I say we? The demon taking shape and my own desire for the hunger? Or are we inexplicably united? I'm not sure I know.

The paint-color incident helped me to name the thing that was already living inside of him. I had to name it before I could embrace it. It would have been easy to blame her—she had her own demon, maybe it was contagious—but choosing a name implied ownership.

Ask any of my students reading *The Crucible*, a name is everything; it is reputation, perception, and truth. A name is power. I named my demon the Red, and therefore I own responsibility for its actions.

I was nine when it happened.

Until then, our individual demons remained relatively dormant, clashing every so often in implosive violence.

It started as an itching behind my eyes. No matter how hard I scratched or rubbed or washed, I couldn't stop the insane tingling. Mother saw this ailment as an opportunity. A teachable moment, as they say today.

She walked into the bathroom as I was, unsuccessfully, trying to get the bottle of eye drops to cooperate.

"Your eyes are red," Mother said, pointing a finger at my reflection.

I didn't reply, just squeezed the bottle harder, sending a stream of salty liquid running down my cheeks. Fake tears.

"It's a sign, you know," she said, leaning against the door frame. Again, with her matter-of-fact tone. The Church of Motherly Knowledge was in full service, and she was ready to deliver her sermon.

"A sign?" I asked.

“Of your lies,” was her reply. “Your own body is rebelling against your sheepish ways. It knows that you’re a liar. A lying thing incapable of originality.”

I put the bottle on the edge of the sink and turned around. “I’m lying?”

She ignored me. Her hand reached out and stroked my hair.

Then came the smile. The real smile that Mrs. Mansfield never saw. “The only way to cure yourself is to admit it. You’re a lying sheep, and you will never harvest your talent.”

Inside my stomach, the Red swelled. Stronger now. A swarm of wasps stinging my insides, fighting to get back to their hive. I almost didn’t speak, convinced they’d escape. If I opened my mouth, I knew the wasps would attack.

“Nothing to say? Something got your tongue?” She sneered. “You want to see true harvested talent?” Her red demon twinkled with glee.

Mother’s fingers entangled in my hair, pulling me hard behind her. I didn’t cry, the remnants of the fake drops was enough embarrassment. I pictured myself drowning. Swallowed by huge crimson wave. The seething water overwhelmed me. I sank into the dark abyss.

We stopped in front of my room. “This is the truth,” Mother hissed. She opened the door as if she were cutting the ribbon at a gallery auction. I looked left to right slowly taking in the scene. Every inch was covered in her newest project. Hundreds of faces bored holes into me. They were distorted and mangled, scribbled over and slashed, and each one was glued to a drawing of a red sheep.

“I knew you wouldn’t mind if I used your school pictures,” she said. “I think I really captured your essence.”

I gazed at the me-sheep and absorbed the Red. Let it fill my pores and crevices. When I spoke, the sound that leapt from my throat was not my own. Gravely and deep. Pierced by shards of glass.

I'm not sure when it happened. How I broke the bathroom mirror. How I plunged a jagged edge into her chest, the glass ripping up tissues and tendons in a hand that once belonged to me. And when I stood over her twitching body, preparing to take my socket trophies, two laughs pushed forward and filled the room.

The woman stretches, unaware of my gaze. I take the picture from my wallet and lay it beside me. It's creased over the years, but the red outline is still prominent, the sole me-sheep I saved in the jar with Mother's eyes.

I've squandered too much time tonight. The Red's demanding to be set free again, its stinging insistence burns in starvation.

Tonight I will nourish it.

Tonight I will harvest.

I'll start with her eyes.

Road Kill

Monica J. O'Rourke

Monica J. O'Rourke has published more than a hundred short stories in magazines and anthologies, such as *Clickers Forever: A Tribute to J. F. Gonzalez*, *Postscripts*, *Nasty Piece of Work*, *Fangoria*, and *The Mammoth Book of the Kama Sutra*. She is the author of *Poisoning Eros*, written with Wrath James White, *Suffer the Flesh*, *What Happens in the Darkness*, and the collection *In the End, Only Darkness*. Her books and stories have been published in Germany, Greece, Poland, and Russia. She is a freelance editor and book coach. Find her on www.facebook.com/MonicaJORourke.

Road Kill

Monica J. O'Rourke

Bubba Junior Junior stuck a long grimy finger deep into his nose and started digging like he was trawling for worms. He speared a large juicy booger, glistening and thick with mucus, long stringy gobs draped over his fingers. Parts of it were puke green, parts jaundice-yellow, all of it enticing. Staring at the glossy mess was a fascinating and time-consuming process for Bubba Junior Junior. He squeezed the sludgy trail between his fingers and examined the small chunks that had mysteriously appeared in his snot.

“When the hell did I have corn, Uncle Daddy?” He went to wipe it on his overalls, and Bubba Junior grabbed the boy’s hand.

“What the hell you doin, boy?” He grabbed the boy’s hand. “I said what the hell you doin’? Was you gonna waste that?” He chomped down on Bubba Junior Junior’s finger, taking the pulsing snotball and the tip of Bubba Junior Junior’s finger into his mouth. Not too much damage was done, however, since Bubba Junior only had one tooth.

He rolled the booger around in his mouth like it was a cherry Lifesaver, waiting for it to melt on his tongue, prodding the wet squishiness against his gums. Soft and salty and sweet. The best kind of booger.

“Yummm!” Bubba Junior cried. “Never waste yer protein, boy! Now let’s go.”

Bubba Junior peered through the field glasses he picked up at Woolworth’s right before they went bankrupt. “Hooo weee, boy! We got one!”

“Lemme see!” Bubba Junior Junior said, jumping up and down. He peered through the glasses. “Ain’t much left. Looks like stew tonight.”

Bubba Junior nodded. And he’d really been hoping for steaks.

They bumped and slid down the hill on their asses, slipping through the mud from the last downpour. Once they reached the road, Bubba Junior

Junior stared at the smear on the pavement. “Holy sheeeit, what the hell was it? Ain’t hardly enough ta scrape on a cracker!”

“That thar was a wummin.”

“You shur?”

“Yup. Lookit them titties. There’s one—over thar. Hey, c’mere, son. Take a look over here.”

“Comin, Uncle Daddy!”

Up the road a piece was the upper half of the roadkill.

Bubba Junior lifted the corpse's arms and dragged it across the asphalt to the side of the road, chunks of flesh sticking to the scattered pebbles, the woman's freckles smearing across the tar.

She was intact from the belly up. Sort of. One arm was bent in a permanent wave, splintered bone jutting from the forearm, congealed blood coating the skin like warpaint. Her skull had apparently lost the fight with the concrete and was smashed in from numerous bounces on the road. Her jaw rested below her ear, puffy purple tongue sticking out like a spoiled child's.

"Lookit, Uncle Daddy!" Bubba Junior Junior cried. "She wantsta French Kiss!" Using his grubby mitts, he lifted her head, and with a nauseating sucking sound it wrenched free of her neck, squishy spongy tissue slipping off the ripped flesh, desperate flies fighting Bubba Junior Junior for possession. He slipped her tongue into his mouth and sucked on it. The bloated appendage popped, leaking ichor into his mouth and down his lips. One strong bite too many, and with a wet slurp the tongue severed from her mouth. He pulled it all the way into his, chewing on the sticky and salty tongue like a piece of saltwater taffy.

"Goddamnit boy! That's our dinner yer kissin'!"

Bubba Junior Junior pulled the tongue out of his mouth and stuck it in his pocket. "Where the rest a her?"

Bubba Junior looked around. "I think I see'd her bike go off the road up there."

Bubba Junior Junior dropped the woman's head and it rolled off like a gutter ball, bumping against a tree with little wet crunches, leaving a trail of bloody brainy bits on the pavement.

The two Bubbas ran up the road and peered into a ditch.

“Yup, there’s the rest a her,” Bubba Junior said. They climbed down into the ditch.

The woman’s legs were still wrapped around the motorcycle. Her pants were shredded, the flesh cleaved from the thighs and calves, white-red bone glistening like dew.

Thunder rumbled in the sky. Bubba Junior looked up. “Rains is comin’ fer sure, Junior Junior. Ain’t no time to scrape this up.”

“Nothin’ much there anyway,” Bubba Junior Junior said, hand inside his underwear, picking at his asshole.

“Gotta learn to impervase, boy. No time for gatherin’, ain’t no time fer cookin’. Gotta learn to eat it raw like them richun’s in New Yawk and Ohier. They calls it tarter.”

Bubba Junior carved into her stripped thighs with a shank, strings of marble muscle and gristle dangling from his hands like a field of hot rancid cheese, bits of the fresh kill steaming in the cooling air.

They stuffed the flesh into their mouths, blood dribbling down their chins. Bubba Junior Junior grinned, shoving the chunks of thigh into his mouth as fast as his hands would move. “Tastes like piggy!” he snorted, choking on the gob of woman hanging out of his teeth and throat.

“Goddammit, boy,” Bubba Junior said, pounding on his nephew-son’s neck, trying to dislodge the thighmeat. He fished his slabby fingers down

Bubba Junior Junior’s throat and pulled out the half-chewed, half-digested soft reddish cheese-ball of fat and saliva. He examined it, popped it in his mouth, chewing slowly. He pulled open Bubba Junior Junior’s mouth and let it all slide back in.

“Chew better next time, ya thick-headed moron.”

“Thanks, Uncle Daddy!”

“You ever had fried twat, boy? I think we can take some with us.” Bubba Junior began carving out the woman’s vagina from between the bloody stumps of the leg/motorcycle amalgam. “Tastes better’n possum!” He reached into her twat and pulled at the string dangling out of the hole.

“Oh sheeeeit ...” Bubba Junior said, fishing out the surprise. “Come sit on my lap, boy,” he slurred, dropping his drawers, dangling the tampon dripping thick, black, clotting blood. He smiled real big. “I gots you a lollipop.”

Just Two Guys Looking for a Good Time

Sheri White

Sheri White has lived in Maryland all her life and has the crab-picking skills and the big can of Old Bay in her pantry to show for it.

Her stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Be Very Afraid* (edited by Edo Van Belkom), *Decadence 2* (edited by Monica J. O'Rourke), *Once Upon an Apocalypse* (edited by Scott Goudsward and Rachel Kenley), and *Fresh Blood, Old Bones* (edited by Kasey Lansdale). Magazine appearances include *Lamplight*, *The Sirens Call*, *Devolution Z*, and *Beware the Dark*.

She is also the editor of the UK magazine *Morpheus Tales*.

Find her on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/sheriw1965>

Just Two Guys Looking for a Good Time

Sheri White

They shoot the white girl first.

“God damn, her head fucking exploded, man! Like that guy in *Scanners*.”

“What the fuck is *Scanners*?”

“It’s a movie from the eighties, dumb ass. My dad showed it to me when I was a kid. I made him rewind that exploding head scene like ten times.”

“Check her out, man. Nothin’ but gore on the floor.”

“Yeah, I’d still fuck her, though. The head doesn’t matter.”

“Unless you want a blow job!”

Jimmy laughed, his mouth full of beer, and sprayed it in Len's face.

"What the fuck, asshole!" Len kicked Jimmy under the table.

Jimmy threw his empty bottle, missing Len's face. The bottle shattered on the concrete floor.

They got up, chairs scraping the cement, the table wobbling on its three good legs. Len's bottle fell over, spilling his beer across the table.

"You know I can drop you down, Len. Are you sure you want to get into it?"

Len fell back in his chair. "Fuck it, whatever." He dried his face on his sleeve.

"Come on, man. We're supposed to have fun tonight."

Len smacked the table. "Let's do it. You pick the next one."

Jimmy ran up the basement steps. "Here I come, piggies! Let's see who gets to play with us now."

He returned a few minutes later, dragging the pirate by his pony tail. The pirate kicked at the steps on the way down, screaming behind duct tape. A zip tie bound his wrists behind his back. Jimmy ripped the tape from his mouth and rammed his boot into the pirate's ass, sending Mr. Pirate face first into Snow White's brain bits. He thrashed and squirmed until he got onto his back.

"Holy shit, Jimmy! Looks like pirate man chowed down at a zombie buffet!"

Bloody skull pieces stuck to his goatee. He coughed out flecks of his broken teeth mixed with brain matter.

"How does the princess taste, Redbeard? Not as good as her pussy, but still pretty sweet, amirite?"

The pirate vomited, adding to the stinking mound of princess brains.

“Wow, looks like pizza, Len!”

The pirate screamed and cried.

“Man, that’s nasty. Don’t say shit like that, Jimmy. Turns my stomach when you talk about food that way.”

“Okay, Len – what’s next? We need to speed this up.”

“Too bad Redbeard here doesn’t have his sword. I’d love to watch his guts spill out.”

“No, please! Please don’t kill me! Why is this happening? Who are you?”

“I don’t want to listen to this shit.” Jimmy grabbed a handful of clothes out of a basket by the washing machine. “Here, Len – shut him up.”

Jimmy tossed the laundry to Len. He picked out a sock and jammed it into the pirate’s mouth.

“Check it out, man – we don’t have a sword, but this will work.”

He pulled a folding hand saw from a tool rack on the wall.

“Gimme it. It’s my turn anyway.”

Jimmy slapped the saw into Len’s palm. “Have at it, bud. Enjoy.”

The pirate screamed against the sock, flinging his body back and forth.

“Aye, matey – you’re going to Davy Jones’s Locker!” Len thrust the thin blade into the man’s soft belly, than yanked it across. The serrated teeth caught onto his skin and innards.

“Fuck, man. A sword would have been easier.”

The pirate leaned forward, spilling blood, no longer screaming. He swayed on his knees and his eyelids fluttered, like a child fighting sleep.

Len tugged the saw through the man's belly as if he were fighting a stubborn zipper. Finally, the stomach split open, rewarding Len's efforts.

"Look at that, Jimmy! Just like a horror movie!" He held a fist out to Jimmy.

"A fucking fist bump? You look like a moron. Redbeard probably fist bumped his loser friends every time they took a dump."

"Sometimes I really fucking hate you, Jimmy."

"Back atcha, asshole." He grabbed a beer from a cooler next to the table and handed it to Len.

"Thanks, man." Len twisted off the cap and snapped it across the basement.

"Look at that distance. I'm still the master."

"Yeah, master-BATER, maybe."

Len shot him the finger and they laughed.

"Len, man – I'm getting old. I think I'm done for the night. It's a long way home."

"That's cool. I have to get to the bus station anyway."

"I'll give you a ride."

They went upstairs, opening the basement door leading into the kitchen. Len grabbed a banana from a fruit bowl on the counter, peeling it as they walked through the house.

They stopped in the living room.

"What about them, Jimmy?"

Jimmy looked at faces white with fear, wet with tears; heard whimpers and sobs behind duct-taped mouths. Extra zip ties littered the floor.

“It would’ve been fun to see how far back the ballerina’s legs bend until they break.”

She whipped her head back and forth, pushing “NO NO NO” into the duct tape.

“But I’m ready to go. Come on.”

“Little Miss Tutu, you got lucky tonight.” Len opened the front door, letting Jimmy leave first. “Thanks for the banana!” He tossed the peel at the group and shut the door behind him.

They didn’t talk on the way to the bus station. Jimmy let Van Halen fill the silence. Len closed his eyes and listened to David Lee Roth sing the praises of beautiful girls.

“Len, wake up. We’re here.”

Len opened his eyes and stretched his legs, pushing them against the car floor. He grabbed his duffel bag from the back seat.

“Thanks for the ride, Jimmy. See ya next year?”

“Yeah, but I’ll pick the place next time. I’m thinking East Coast, Florida maybe. Somewhere warm.”

“Hot chicks at the beach? I’m in.”

“I’ll make another Facebook page, hook up with some locals. When it gets closer and I get evites, I’ll email you.

“Okay, sounds good.” Len opened his door.

“Hey, take off your Lone Ranger mask before you go in the station.”

“Will do!”

“Happy Halloween, Len. This was a good one.”

Len saluted, mask in his hand, and headed into the station.

All the Pieces Coming Together

Sonora Taylor

Sonora Taylor is the author of The Crow's Gift and Other Tales, Please Give, and Wither and Other Stories. Her short story, "Hearts are Just 'Likes,'" was published in Camden Park Press's Quoth the Raven, an anthology of stories and poems that put a contemporary twist on the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Her work has also been published in The Sirens Call, a bi-monthly horror ezine. Her second novel, *Without Condition*, is now available on Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07NJDCWGO/> She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

All the Pieces Coming Together

Sonora Taylor

The branches whip in the wind as the sky bruises and bleeds into night. A lone bird chirps, desperately seeking a mate, but the only call back is the rustle of pine needles that cling to their branches. There is not a human soul for miles.

It's the perfect place to hide a body. The trouble is, there isn't anybody to hide.

I'm a serial killer — or at least, I would be if there were anyone around to kill. I picked an amazing spot to begin my life of murderous solitude. I soon realized it was a little too solitary, though, so my career has largely been dicking around online (when I can get a connection) and watching movies.

I've had some practice, of course. I began where we almost all begin: helpless animals. They were easy to start with because many people didn't think twice about them. "Oh, don't

mind him, he's just a boy — boys sometimes hurt animals.” Normal boys sometimes squash bugs or kick the family pet. A normal boy doesn't dismember dogs and bury each piece in a different part of the woods that, if unearthed, would spell their name in binary code.

It's a good thing I started with animals, because that's all I've got out here. I even tried to get as creative as I would with a person. Unfortunately, the deer just can't pick up on the patterns. I worked really hard to shape their limbs into that peace sign, and what did they do? Nothing. Ungrateful bastards.

Further, there are too many deer for their absence to make much difference. People are limited, which makes their disposal all the more rewarding. Their disappearance leads to a crisis, which leads to a puzzle, one that I've created and know they'll never solve. People are limited. People are missed.

I miss them.

I want to be near them again. We all want closeness and companionship. Some of us just gain that by burying people in the floorboards. The floorboards of my lonely cabin, in these lonely woods, where no one can find them – and where I can't find anyone.

I need to get out of the woods and find some people.

First, I need to find a place to go.

Fortunately, my Internet is working, perhaps suggesting that tonight is my night. I look at what's around here. Not much of anything, naturally. There are schools further out, but it's late and most students will have walked home alone by now. There are churches, but I don't trust anyone in church on a Tuesday.

Ah, here we go – a bar, called The Best Shot. Fitting, as it's my best chance at finding someone tonight. It's about an hour away, though I could probably speed most of the way without fail. There aren't any cops out here either.

I quickly make myself presentable. I shave the scant beard I've grown and run a comb through my short brown hair. Before moving here, I was a man who'd charmed quite a few panties into my palm. I was ready to turn that charm back on, albeit for a much different purpose.

I hop in my piece-of-shit car and drive down the highway. It's a pretty night — lots of stars, a cool breeze. It is insanely dark. It's the kind that can almost make you feel enclosed by its opacity. My first couple nights sleeping out here, I almost had panic attacks. I couldn't see my own hands in front of my face. What if I could never see again? What if darkness was all I had left? At least in death, you're unaware of the darkness surrounding you. It's a courtesy I hope to extend to others.

The road drags on endlessly, even as I speed. Fortunately no deer are slowing me down. Maybe my artwork is working well enough to deter them from running in front of my car.

Slowly the darkness opens into streetlamps and a Wal-Mart. It's always the first sign of civilization when you leave the middle of nowhere. The lone Wal-Mart gives way to occasional gas stations, ones so isolated that I'm sure you could see Jason Voorhees pumping gas and not think twice. The gas stations become strip malls and the strip malls become chain restaurants.

Finally, tucked between some pine trees just past a Lowes, I see it — The Best Shot. I'm relieved to see some cars parked out front. I'd worried slightly that even if there were people around, they'd be choosing to smoke meth in the privacy of their own garden sheds instead of getting drunk in a bar.

I walk inside, and it looks like every stereotype of a podunk bar you'd come to expect: one of the nation's last surviving jukeboxes, an assortment of old men and hard women, and a bartender who probably got a few of her tats in prison. The scent of vodka and beer hangs in the air, and it looks like the kind of place that would've smelled of cigarettes if it weren't against the law to smoke inside. This is one law I'm thankful for. An asthma attack is the last thing I need when scouting potential victims.

I move towards the bar, some money in my pocket. I came prepared for a couple of beers — enough to seem loose (and loosen up) while staying sober enough to drive someone back to the middle of nowhere. I'm not going to be driven home by someone and then kill them in their own house. I'm perfectly able to host a murder, thank you.

I take a seat, and the bartender comes over with a look on her face that tells me she'd rather be anywhere than here. "What'll it be, hon," she says as a statement, not a question. Age and — from the sound of it — smoking since kindergarten have not been kind to her.

"Just a Bud, please." Do people still drink Bud? I keep reading about craft beer online. I doubt this place even knows what craft beer is.

She wordlessly pours my Bud, one of two tap handles (confirming my craft beer suspicions), and places it in front of me.

"Keeping it simple, huh?"

I stop mid-sip and look in the direction of the voice. I see a woman I hadn't noticed previously. She's suspiciously hot in these surroundings. Auburn hair in a ponytail, rimless glasses, tits peeking out over a pink bustier. She's drinking what looks like a whiskey sour, dunking the maraschino cherry up and down in the ice. The effect causes a ripple in her breasts, one I try very hard not to stare at.

“Simple?” I ask. Well, stammer. I am a cool and collected killer, but I am also a warm-blooded man, one who hasn’t even seen a woman in a very long time.

“Just a Bud, please.” Her imitation man voice makes her sound even sexier. Jesus, I hadn’t accounted for being turned on. “You’re just going to ask for that? You’re not going to see what else they have to offer?”

I sip my beer to try and quell my ever-growing boner, and say calmly, coolly, “Well, forgive me for assuming that this place doesn’t have much creativity to offer.”

She has a small and wispy laugh that disappears like a puff of smoke. Her eyes reconnect with mine, and she says, “Sometimes all you have to do is ask.” Her eyes don’t leave mine as she slowly bites one of the cherries and sucks it off the stem.

That’s it. Killing is 50/50, but I’m definitely fucking tonight.

I scooch one barstool over so that I’m next to her. She doesn’t move, much to my delight, and we start the small talk that precludes fucking. I tell her my name, that I work in lumber and live out near the woods. It’s lonely, but it pays the bills. I’m hopeful that sympathy works in my sexual favor — as does buying the next round, which I do at this point.

Her name is Candace, and she’s a nurse. She’s off tonight, and she figured she’d stop in for a drink or two, have a little fun, maybe find a little trouble. Our knees have moved toward each other at this point, so she has no problem dropping her finger on my wrist when she says this.

I stare at her finger with its perfect pink tip. I imagine it disconnected from her bangled wrist, floating over my own. Each piece of her starts to detach from itself, floating in various places in my mind. The human body is nothing but fragments, held together by sinew and bone; and I can take it apart, piece-by-piece. I can reassemble as I wish, or scatter the pieces to points

of no return. It's a control I crave, one that, combined with the sexual longing an average person would be feeling right now, begins to consume me. I can feel my dick stiffening against my pants, my pulse raising rapidly.

It's the pulse that Candace notices first. She places more fingers on my wrist, turning it over. I let her. Giving her some control now will make it easier to completely master her later. I already imagine her hands on my face, her legs on my bed, her breasts on my mantle. I can't wait any longer.

"All I have to do is ask, right?"

She returns her gaze to me, and gives me a sly smile. "Depends on the question."

I take a final gulp of beer. "Do you want to get out of here?"

Everything is going according to plan. Well, it will once we stop making out.

We haven't even left the parking lot of The Best Shot. One minute I'm all set to drive her to the cabin, and then she brushed my hair before I could open the passenger-side door, and I couldn't help myself and we started kissing against the car. No, kissing's too demure a way to describe it. The only thing keeping us from getting arrested is the fact that we have our clothes on.

I'm not one of those killers who's afraid of sex or women, or can only do it on top of a corpse or in a bathtub full of someone's blood or something. I love sex. Another disadvantage of my chosen locale. I really didn't think that one through. And now, I risk letting my hormones get the better of me and precluding Candace from reaching her final destination.

"We've gotta get to my place," I manage to croak out. She continues kissing my neck while I speak, and I can feel her breasts brushing against my shoulder.

“Okay,” is all she manages to say. I’ve moved to her shoulder, and we move back to each other’s mouths. I run my hands up and down her sides and she grabs my ass, grinding against me. Surely she can feel my erection. I contemplate just doing it on the hood of the car.

“The sooner we get home,” I say, pulling myself away again, “the sooner we can do this right.”

This stops us both. She turns back to face the car, and I open the door before I have a chance to change my mind and start taking her from behind. She’s barely in before I slam the door shut, rush to the driver’s side, and peel out of the parking lot, heading home for an evening of sex and murder. My heart — not to mention my prick — can barely stand it.

The road is even emptier than when I made my way out here earlier. Candace rolls down the window and lets her fingers float in the breeze, arching her back ever-so-slightly against the seat and letting out a delicate moan of pleasure. She’s pleasing herself, playing with me, or maybe a little of both. I try to keep my eyes ahead of me. The last thing I want is a car wreck to rob me of this kill.

“You really do live far away,” she says after we’ve been driving for some time, when the strip malls have become the lone Wal-Mart but have not yet become trees again.

“I like to be near the source of my work,” I say. This in itself isn’t necessarily a lie.

“I kind of like it,” she replies. “Seems peaceful.”

I sigh, thinking of how long it’s been since I’ve had sex, and of all of the dead deer.

“Sometimes it’s too peaceful.”

I feel her hand slink down onto my leg, and hear her seatbelt unbuckle. She moves closer to me, and I pray she isn’t contemplating road head —it would be amazing, but I really need to be able to drive.

Her head stays above my pants, though, and rests on my shoulder. She whispers, “It won’t be tonight.” And then she bites my ear.

I speed up substantially. We have to get home.

In my chosen line of work, it helps to be handsome. Drawing people in is part of the battle. People have to trust you if you’re going to successfully kill them. A great way to get people to trust you is to get them to want to fuck you. And a great way to get them to want to fuck you is to be handsome. Which, fortunately, I am. At least that’s what I tell myself. Otherwise, the fact that my potential victim has gone from straddling a barstool to straddling my lap in roughly three hours just seems a little too easy.

We’ve made it to the house — well, to my driveway. We have yet to get out of the car. As soon as I put the car in park, we started making out again. Candace’s jacket is in the backseat, but otherwise, we stay clothed. This hasn’t stopped me from rubbing her through her panties, or her from grinding on my cock.

“Let’s go inside,” she finally breathes. I almost don’t hear her, as I’m focused entirely on her body. Seduction was a tactic I had in mind, but this is bordering on madness. I cannot stop touching her, nor her me. I try to cool myself off by thinking of the after party, of carving her up and spreading the pieces, but this only makes it worse. It gives me a secret, one she’ll never know until it’s too late. And here she is, giving herself to me. It’s too delicious to bear.

And giving herself she is — in full. We make it into the house, finally, but only to the couch. She drops her giant purse on the floor, a loud thwack echoing across the floorboards as she quickly sheds pieces of clothing: glasses, jewelry, skirt. My shirt and belt follow suit, until I’m down to my briefs and she’s annoyingly clad in her underwear and bustier.

I grab at her top and she takes my hands, showing the first sign of resistance all night. She pushes my hands away, holding them firmly on the couch.

“What are you ...” I start to say, praying she isn’t stopping things here. I also start to contemplate a much sooner death for her than I anticipated.

But she interrupts me, placing one hand over my lips. I forget my frustration and start biting her thumb. She takes it back and slowly unfastens her bustier from the back. It’s the slowest thing she’s done all night, and it’s worth it.

The moment her breasts spill into view, things become an immediate blur. I’m aware of launching myself into them, kissing and biting with abandon while she holds my head close and groans with pleasure. Soon we’re standing up, because a couch is a fine place for fucking, but not nearly as good as a bed. Hell, it’s not even as good as a kitchen table, where we make a pit stop so I can pull down her panties and start eating her out.

I am aware, as we stand back up and continue on to the bedroom, that my plans have gone somewhat off course. I’d forgotten how hard it is to stay focused when a hot naked woman is present. But for the time being, as we roll around over my old comforter, I don’t care. Her time will come. For now I’ll happily kiss and bite various places on her skin, groan while she scratches my back, and thrust my cock inside of her from various positions.

I could fuck her all night and probably most of the next, but I’m only able to come so much. I lay next to her, regrettably spent, as she is still able to cuddle on me and nibble my earlobe. Women will never know how lucky they are to be able to keep going after they come. Hell, at least with Candace, coming seems to make her want more.

She slows when she sees that, for me at least, the fucking is finished. “Where’s your bathroom?” she asks. I merely point, still out of breath. I pray this is the only indication I might

have given her of how long it's been since I've had sex. I watch her as she walks, naked, to the living room to grab her purse and then shuts herself in the bathroom. I hear her loudly pee.

Okay, maybe now I can begin to focus. What next? I recall my various hiding places for assorted weapons and drugs. None of them are immediately under the bed. I could go looking for them while she's in the bathroom. Then I hear her flush, and abandon that idea. The door stays closed, and I hear her rummaging through her purse, brushing her hair. Time is slipping away.

Stay the night — she'll probably stay the night. I did drive her here, after all. I'm her ride home. In more ways than one. I smile, and feel myself stiffen again. She'll fall asleep, breathing lightly next to me, and then ...

I'm broken from my glimpse in the future by the sound of the bathroom door opening. I look forward and she's back — hair brushed, fresh coat of lipstick, still naked. Her purse is in her hand. Her eyes fall on my newly-awakened cock and she smiles. "Not completely spent, huh?" she says, moving towards me.

I don't want to make her promises I can't keep, but it's hard to speak as she drops her purse on the bedside table and straddles over me. "I - I guess not ..." I manage to say, before I'm silenced by her mouth.

Okay, no falling asleep yet. I'll deal. I run my hands over her ass, kissing her, keeping it slow. She grinds on top of me while her hands run all over my body. Well, her hand. Where's her other hand?

She pulls away, and I realize three things — both my legs and one arm are pinned under her surprisingly-strong legs, one hand is pinning my free arm down, and her other hand is pressing a rag into my face. It smells off. Oh fuck, oh fuck, OH FU -

Thankfully I wake up. I'm still naked and still in bed. Now I'm tightly secured to the bedposts by my wrists and ankles. The room gradually comes into focus. I don't see Candace. Where did she go?

I can't believe this. I knew it was too easy. I never should have let her take control like that. God, letting her get on top? Yes, hindsight is 20/20. But you need to be more aware. Victims don't fall into your lap, and Candace isn't a victim, not by a long shot.

Candace isn't even here. Where the fuck is she? Did she just decide to tie me up and peace out? Maybe she took the car. Well, I won't exactly miss it. But these binds are pretty strong — they'll take hours to get out of if I'm here alone.

I hear her footsteps, dashing that theory aside. Then what? I don't suppose she's secretly into BDSM and this is just a precursor to more sex.

My vision is almost completely focused, and restores itself just in time to see her walk into the room. She's no longer naked, but wearing purple nursing scrubs, just unfastened enough to show her cleavage. Where did she get those from? I notice her purse in her gloved hands. It's huge — probably big enough for the scrubs. And the rag. What else?

"Oh good," she says, stopping next to the bed. She rubs her hand through my hair. What had been a major turn-on now sends a sickening chill down my neck. My toes curl and my heart rate quickens. "You're awake."

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask. She gets on top of me again. It's amazing how that suddenly feels old and unwelcome. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

"Just put you to sleep for a little bit," she replies, tracing her fingers over my chest.

“Put me to sleep?” I snort in disgust. “You knocked me out, you fucking bitch. Why did you tie me up?” I give her a coy look, one final bit of hope. “If you were into this, you could’ve just asked.”

She laughs. It’s a little sexy, but mostly ugly. I do the worst thing any potential serial killer could do: I get scared. I don’t like the way she’s touching me, especially as her fingers near my throat. I start panicking, thinking she must know who I am, what I am, and plans to stop it. To stop me.

“Look,” I say, just wanting my own freedom at this point. “Whatever you think, it’s ... Just let me go. I’ll drive you back, and we can go our separate ways. I won’t hurt you, I promise, I —”

A flash of genuine confusion crossing her face before it disappears and settles into smug control. “Hurt me?” She leers. “You can’t.”

“And I won’t,” I continue. “I don’t know what you thought, why you wanted to tie me up, what you know or think or figured out ...” Her face stays stoic, though I can see her thoughts racing. “But whatever it is, I won’t do it. Not now.”

“Do what?” she asks.

I mentally kick myself for panicking. I sigh, resigning myself to just telling the truth. “I won’t ... you know, kill you.”

She stares at me blankly for a few long moments. Then she cocks her head, keeping eye contact with me as she straightens her posture. Her hands leave my chest.

“I didn’t tie you up because I thought you were going to kill me,” she says at last. I quietly sigh, and simultaneously feel my heart sink.

I notice that one hand is reaching into her purse. My pulse races as she withdraws a single, sharp scalpel.

“I tied you up,” she says, looking me dead in the eyes, “because I’m going to kill you.”

You’ve got to be shitting me.

I stare at her. I’m not even scared. I’m fucking pissed. “You’re fucking kidding me, right?”

I can tell she was expecting a different reaction. She can’t hide the flicker of disappointment that runs across her eyes. “No,” she says, trying to scare me — and failing. “I’m not kidding. I’m going to kill you.”

I roll my eyes so far back that she almost won’t need to bother gouging them out if she wants to. I finally leave this fucking cabin, finally go scouting for victims, finally find one, and it turns out that she was also scouting. Just fucking great. I knew it was too easy.

“Un-fucking-believable.” I laugh, which I’m sure only confuses her more. “So this whole time, you were luring me?”

“Yes.” She stays still, but her stoic expression is wavering.

“And you picked me out, and came home with me, and intended to kill me this entire time?”

“Yes.”

“So the talking, the flirting, the sex ... that was all one big orchestration to kill me?”

“The first two, yes.” She’s lowered the scalpel by now, but it still rests in her hand and against my hip. “I didn’t originally plan the sex, but —”

“You didn’t?!” I jerk back up, careful not to jar the scalpel too much. I feel it just barely poke into my hip, and still wince. Christ it’s sharp. “You decided to kill me, then changed your mind and decided to fuck me first?” The irony of my anger is not lost on me, but I’m too furious and, frankly, too embarrassed to care.

“Well, why not? It’s been awhile since I’ve gotten laid, and well ...” She shrugs and smiles a bit. “I wanted to fuck you. You’re pretty hot.”

See, what did I tell you? It pays to be handsome. Well, except for right now.

Her voice brings me back into focus. “You said you wouldn’t kill me now.” She presses her hand closer to my hip, and I wince involuntarily, despite the blade not pushing further. “What did you mean by that?”

I’m too focused on the scalpel to answer her right away. It’s also too humiliating. I not only have to admit I had almost the exact same reasoning as she did — even down to taking a side trip to have sex first — but I in turn have to admit that I failed at it. She’s won, I’ve lost. And I’ve lost because of my own stupidity. I deserve to die.

“What did you mean by that?” she asks again, pointing the blade against my side.

I bring my thoughts back to her – well, her scalpel. I’m going to die, but I don’t want to sooner than I have to.

“I meant what you probably think,” I say, looking her cold in the face. I’m doomed. I’m already tied up. I have nothing left, and nothing to hide. I set my jaw, lift my head up a bit. “I brought you here to kill you.”

She doesn’t change her expression, and I continue. “Yes, you picked me before I picked you. I picked you after I saw you. I picked you because you were coming onto me, because I

wanted you and figured I could get some action before killing you. And yeah, I put it off because I wanted to get laid. I think you're hot too.

"So yes, Candace, I had every intention of murdering you tonight. I mean, Jesus, look around you." I wave my head around the span of the cabin. "Why the fuck do you think I live out here in this godforsaken cabin? It makes it easier to hide people when they're dead!"

"Yeah, I noticed that," she says, interrupting me. "I couldn't believe my luck when you said you lived out in the woods. This place looked like a dream come true when you pulled into the driveway. It's the perfect place to hide you afterward."

See? It's the perfect place to hide the bodies. I'm so good at planning murders, I perfectly planned my own.

"So I know why you're here, and what you're doing," I continue. "Because it's what I was going to do to you. We're exactly the same."

"Not exactly," she says, coldness entering her voice once more. She delicately runs the scalpel over my chest. "We were both going to fuck the other one over. But the difference?"

A sudden rush of nausea runs over me, as I guess what's going to happen next: she's going to try and be clever. I swear to God, if she says she came first ...

She leans next to my ear. "I came first."

I should've killed her sooner.

"Why?"

She ceases making a long, shallow cut up my chest – the third such cut she's made – and looks up at me, glaring. Her expression matches the cuts she's already made over my skin. Just my luck that I not only pick up a killer, but one who likes to draw out the pain.

“Why what?” she asks, thankfully pausing for a moment. “Why you? Why now?”

“No,” I say, breathing deeply and trying to not notice the growing pool of blood on the sheets. She’ll have a hell of a time cleaning them up. I hope pieces of me get all over her. Good luck covering your tracks, you cunt. “Why killing?”

She laughs. “My motive? You want me to go all James Bond villain on you?”

“Come on, I’m about to die. If you’re not going to kill me straight up, at least talk to me.” I shift to bring some feeling back into my ass. One cut has stopped bleeding, but the other three still trickle over my waist. “Why killing? What made you want to do this?”

She looks at me, contemplating whether or not she wants to answer. Despite the circumstances, I can tell that she kind of likes me. It’s a liking that I’m sure confuses her. This has been the basis for a lot of my friendships.

“My entire life,” she finally says, “involves saving people through very controlled, precise rules.”

I raise my eyebrows at her, and she continues, “I really am a nurse. I didn’t lie about that. Hell, where do you think I got all this stuff?” She holds up her purse, the source of the rag, the scrubs, the scalpel, and I hope to God nothing else. “It’s a profession that found me. All day I’m surrounded by the threat of death, and it’s my job to stop it. I always have to stop it. Even when there’s no hope.”

She sighs, losing her coldness. “It wears on you. I’m supposed to make dying people better. All day I’m covered in blood, in shit and vomit and disease. I have people yell and scream at me, even though I’m trying to help them live. Sometimes in the chaos, I find myself thinking, what if I did the exact opposite of what I’m supposed to do?”

A small smile seeps across her face. “At first I’d simply imagine mistakes here and there. A slipped scalpel. A fatal medication dose. It’s so easy to kill someone in a place that’s meant to help people. It’s really fascinating, if you think about it. Almost thrilling.”

Her eyes are looking away from me now, and I can see her imagining every patient she’s treated dying a horrible death. I recognize that look, the one of macabre possibility that only killers possess. I get that look every time I imagine taking someone apart. “You seem like a wonderful nurse,” I murmur.

Her attention returns to me. “I actually studied nursing to try to curb that thrill,” she explains. “My whole life, I’ve had fantasies about slipping up, of breaking the rules. What-if scenarios where I’d break something, make it irreversible. Where I’d hurt someone, and they’d never recover.” She returns her gaze to me. “Where I’d kill someone, and they’d never come back. I thought maybe if I devoted myself to helping people, I’d stop thinking about ways to hurt them.”

Her blade touches my chest, and I feel my pulse quicken. “But I was wrong. It only made it worse. It made me want to do it even more.” She looks back at me, holding my eyes with a cold stare. “And it taught me how to do it more effectively.”

She makes a quick swipe across my chest. I cry in pain, watching fresh blood spill over. It’s always just enough to hurt and bleed, but not to make me pass out or find sweet relief in death. I’m sure she knows that. It’s all on purpose.

“So you’ve done this a lot,” I say, talking through the pain.

“Actually, no,” she says, chuckling. “Congratulations — you’re my first victim.”

Of course I am. “Great. I feel so special.”

“You should.” She runs her hand over my cut, tracing blood over my skin. “You’re leaving a mark on me, just like I’m leaving them on you. I’ll never forget you.”

“Awesome. I’m so fucking flattered.” I’d love nothing more than to snap off her hand and shove it up her ass right now.

“I just can’t believe I bested you in so many ways on my first try. I got to you before you got to me.” Her leer turns into a grin. “And, I got to make my first kill before you.”

Little does she know.

The term “serial killer” implies multiple killings and patterned murders. In this sense, I am not a serial killer. I’d hoped to be, but I didn’t meet that criteria.

This is not to say, though, that I am not a killer. That only requires one murder.

My life has always been pretty unremarkable. Well-off parents, reasonably adjusted childhood. I sometimes wonder if my killer instincts subconsciously came from wanting to break up the monotony. All I know is that, at a pretty young age, I stopped seeing people and started seeing their parts.

I still remember the first time this happened. I’d watch my teacher in school, and entertain myself by imagining her head floating off her body, her hands suspended in the air still writing on the chalkboard, and her feet tapping silently under the desk. Then one day I imagined taking those pieces apart myself — ripping them off, and placing them one-by-one around the classroom. I quickly squelched that fantasy. It was wrong to think that.

I never hurt anyone when I was young. I still listened to adults, people on TV who sent criminals to jail for hurting people. They said that hurting people was wrong. But seeing them in

pieces never really went away. It came and went in flickers. I'd do it with strangers, with actors in movies. Kept it at a distance.

I toyed with having those thoughts about my friends. If the thoughts arose, I quickly banished them. Strangers only. No one close. But they kept popping up, and after a while, I let myself have them, if only to make myself feel the horror that came with them. It shocked me to think of my friend's head lying on a carving block. It frightened me to imagine my girlfriend's pussy dissolving over my hand while I fingered her.

I grew concerned when those thoughts stopped being repulsive. I became a little more concerned when I started thinking them intentionally.

Soon, though, they became an escape. Things around me could spin chaotically — my friend could die of cancer, my girlfriend could leave me, people could come and go and school could wear on me and jobs could suck, but I could take it all apart in my mind. It was the only place I could do that, and sometimes, it was the only place I could feel content.

Those fantasies were comforting because they gave me some illusion of control. I could decide if someone lived or died. I could prove to their bodies that I could control their fate. Bodies were too taken with themselves. They could disappear just as easily as they could stand, walk, or talk. I could take them apart, or I could leave them alone. What would it be?

I never fully withdrew, but it did become harder and harder to not imagine the people I spoke to lying in pieces. I shouldn't hurt them. I wouldn't hurt them.

But oh, how I wanted to.

My parents both died suddenly. They were in a car accident. When I heard the news, I didn't even cry. I imagined their car tearing through their bodies. One minute whole, the next in

pieces. I only saw their pieces, as they were cremated as soon as I identified them. I never touched them, never took them myself. Something else taken away from me.

One night, a few weeks after they'd died, I went out driving. I drove past the strip malls, the gas stations, the lone Wal-Mart. I wondered how far I could go before I left people behind forever, and how much further I could go before finding them again.

Almost in answer, my eyes chanced upon someone walking ahead on the road. They were walking away from me, strolling casually on the side of the road, as if they did this every day. I only saw them because their white shoes and vinyl jacket shimmered in my headlights. They were alone. Their back was turned to me. They walked as if nothing could hurt them — as if they were in complete control.

I'd show them.

I sped up and jerked the steering wheel to the left. I don't even know if they knew I was coming. They never turned around, not until I'd already hit them. And even then, they didn't turn around so much as land on the hood of my car.

They — or he, as I then saw — ricocheted to the side, and I slammed on the brakes. I turned around, saw him lying on the road.

I ran over him again.

I did it once more for good measure.

I put the car in park. He lay on the road, not moving. I'd killed someone. I'd finally done it.

I looked in my rearview mirror, and saw him staying still. He had to be dead. No one would survive being run over three times.

But I had to make sure. I had to control this.

I got out of the car, scooped up his broken body, and placed him in my trunk, his arms crumpling under his torso. As luck would have it, I had some plastic garbage bags back there. It'd make clean-up easier. But where could I take him?

I continued driving forward, figuring these woods would do me well. These woods. They seemed pretty familiar. I drove by a sign with a couple town names. Meadow Rush and Thatcher's Hill. Nature names that probably described some pretty places, but nowhere anyone would actually live. But Meadow Rush rang a bell.

We'll see you next week, son. We're going to the cabin out in Meadow Rush.

The cabin. Mom and Dad had a cabin in the middle of nowhere. I'd gone with them for a month one summer and hated every day of it, but they adored it. It had been their private getaway, a place where they'd go to escape people for a while. Mom would go out there alone and write. Dad would go there and hunt. And as far as I knew, it still stood, unaware that its beloved patrons were reduced to ash and buried closer to civilization.

Fortunately, I now remembered where it was. I turned down a couple of side streets and drove deeper into the woods, until the trees suddenly cleared and there it was.

I got out of the car and looked around. There wasn't a soul for miles. It really was the middle of nowhere. I was amazed there was even electricity. Trees stretched in every direction beyond the clearing, carved only by the road connecting the driveway to the main road. A lone vein to the heart of humanity. Could I sever that too?

I checked to see if the spare keys were in the same place. Sure enough, there they were, under the fake log by the porch. I pocketed them, and opened the trunk. My victim was still motionless, still breathless. I picked him up, his arm hanging limply over mine as I carried him to the cabin.

Inside, it was musty and quiet. I flicked on the light, and saw everything that had made the place a home away from home for my parents. Furniture, an ancient computer, lamps. The bedroom door was open, and I saw a fully-made bed with a linen cabinet next to it. I laid the body on the floor and walked around, finding signs of my parents but no one else. The only sounds around me were crickets, toads, and the occasional bird. There wasn't a soul for miles. I was alone.

Well, not completely alone.

I looked back at the body. It lay in a heap of plastic. He was dead, and I needed to make sure he'd never be found. There were the floorboards. I could just leave him in the cabin, maybe burn this place to the ground or something.

As I thought, my eyes continued scanning the cabin and found the kitchen. They stopped upon a full knife set. I paused, then walked over to it. Despite a light layer of dust, they were in pristine condition.

I returned to the living room with a meat cleaver. He lay on the floor, dead. Was he dead? I was sure he was dead. I had to make sure he was dead.

I could make sure he was dead.

I could control this.

I imagined taking him apart, piece by piece. I imagined burying the parts in precise locations. I could make a pattern, one that spelled out the make of my car or some other clue.

I imagined him broken and buried. And I didn't even try to blink it away. I didn't remind myself that this was wrong. Because here, it wasn't. Here, there was no one for it to be wrong to. There was nobody here — and as such, I could hide anybody in any way that I wanted.

I smiled.

“Why are you smiling?”

I’m staring at the ceiling. I bring myself back to Candace, to the present. I look down and see I’m still bleeding.

“No reason,” I say. I won’t give her the satisfaction of my own background. “Just remembering things.”

I had decided that night that the cabin would be my home, and that killing would be my new normal. It was the only normal I could keep.

But even that hadn’t worked out. I never wanted to leave the cabin, since it was the perfect place to hide. I never saw anything in the news about a missing man. I hid anyway, just in case. I made small trips at night to clear out some essential stuff from my apartment, but otherwise, I abandoned what I had before so I could fully become what I’d always been.

The initial thrill, however, wore off when I realized victims wouldn’t just fall in my lap. I had to find them. But I didn’t want to. Until I did.

And now I’m here.

I still remember how I felt after that first kill. Years of confusion, suppression, and chaos had been set in order at last. I finally had the control that I craved, that I longed to demonstrate, that I was eager to show others. But I couldn’t do that when there was no one around.

And that was the ultimate problem. I couldn’t control bodies that weren’t there. I had to go to them. And even when I went to them, I couldn’t necessarily control what they did to me. Tonight is clear evidence of that.

Maybe tonight is that man's retribution. Maybe I'm learning a cruel lesson about life by losing my own. Maybe it's happening because it's happening and there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. Whatever the reason, I know one thing for sure: I lost.

"Hey!" Candace smacks my leg. Zoning out has become less voluntary. Maybe the blood loss is finally catching up with me. I blink and make eye contact with her, show her I'm still alive — even if not for much longer.

"What?" I manage. "Why do you even want me conscious right now?" Couldn't she just kill me?

"I only want you unconscious," she says, "when I make the right cut."

"So make it," I say, closing my eyes. "I've got nothing to say to you."

I feel her grab my hair and lift up my head. I open my eyes, and she's glaring at me. "I'll make it when I'm ready," she says. "I make the rules."

"No, you don't." I gain enough of a second wind to furrow my brow and speak through clenched teeth. "You think you do, but you don't."

"What are you talking about?" She keeps her grip on my hair.

I know I'm talking to myself more than her, but I don't care. "The rules. You think you've made them, or broken them, or made them by breaking them. You haven't. You got me, but because I came to you. You'll kill me, and leave me here, and feel like a success. You can see it all ahead of you, one kill after the other to counter your stupid job. But you don't know what will happen next. You don't know if the cops will find me or find you. You don't know if the person you find next will do the exact same thing to you. You don't know the rules, because in the end, there aren't any. You don't know anything!"

I use my ever-dwindling strength to spit at her. It lands on her face, and she barely flinches. She calmly wipes her face, keeping eye contact with me.

“You’re right,” she says. Not what I was expecting. It’s a running theme this evening. “I don’t know what will happen after this. Everyone thinks they know what will happen, that if they do X and Y, that Z will happen. But that’s bullshit.”

We’re so much alike. Maybe in another life, we could’ve worked together.

“I watch people die every day, people who did X and Y and expected Z, but got something else entirely.” She twirls the scalpel against her finger. “They expect me to give them Z. And I have to try my hardest to do so.”

She leans towards me. “But not here. Not now. Here and now, I can give whatever answer I want. Here and now, I not only know the answer ...” The scalpel leaves her finger, floats to my arm. “... I determine it.”

She smiles. “And it feels great.”

She makes a sudden slash. I look over and see a long, cascading cut crawling up my entire arm. Blood starts pouring out immediately. As the sight sinks in, she turns and does the same to my other arm. Both cuts long and vertical. Both slashing their respective veins. Both marking the end.

I cry in pain, but that’s about the only amount of panic I can muster. I lie helpless, watching my arms drain. Watch her watching me, still smiling. She gets off of me, and stands by my side. She runs a palm through my hair, keeps it on my head. Strokes me. “Shh,” she says. “It’ll be over soon.”

I look ahead. I don’t want her to see inside me as I die.

I remember the first time I fell asleep in this cabin, during that month from hell with my parents. My heart had raced when the lights went out. I'd never been surrounded by that much darkness. It was suffocating. I'd held my hand in front of me, and couldn't even see it. I knew what blindness felt like. I felt trapped under a blanket, one I could claw and tear at, but never rip away.

Now though, I don't panic. I see that blanket as a comfort. The bleeding, Candace's stare, her cuts, the pieces, the loneliness — it'll all be over soon. It'll all be shut out by this darkness, one I now fully embrace.

I close my eyes.

He's gone.

I keep my eyes on him as I grab some rubbing alcohol, pouring it over the scalpel to clean it. He doesn't move, he doesn't breathe. He's no longer here. He's gone — and I took him away.

I smile. All in a night's work.

I leave him tied up. I use his shower. Air-dry instead of using a towel. I've left enough evidence of my presence without adding more. I debate doing a complete scrub-down of the place, but part of me wants to leave clues. More of me also knows no one will ever come looking for him.

I put my bar clothes back on, walking through the various places where I shed them. He was one of the best fucks I've ever had. A shame I'd already decided on his fate. Maybe in another life, we could've lived out here, fucking and killing together. It wouldn't be the worst life. But it wasn't in the cards. Not this time.

My medical supplies are back in my purse. The scrubs I'm not sure what to do with. They're covered in his blood. Laundry will only do so much.

I consider his fireplace, then feel the floor wiggle beneath me as I move towards it. Of course — the floorboards. A classic hiding place, and one without the presence of smoke to draw attention. I'll leave them there. No one will find them. No one else has been here.

I lift up the board, and see that I'm mistaken.

Lying underneath of the board is a single, decomposing arm. It still has much of its skin, the fingers gnarled with death. A bit of cloth from a shirt remains. Enclosed by the bit of cloth is an open wound, which is crawling with maggots.

I'm smacked by both the sight and the stench of it, and slam the board back into place. I press the board down further with my foot, hoping that's enough to keep the bugs, smell, and as silly as it is, the arm from resurfacing.

He hadn't died victimless — he'd gotten someone. Maybe he got multiple someones.

He could've gotten me.

My heartbeat begins to climb. Part of me thought he was just bullshitting when he said he was going to kill me — that he was just scared, or trying to scare me. But his words, the isolated cabin, and most of all the severed arm confirm he wasn't bluffing.

I think about all the times I could've died tonight. The minute we left in his car and drove far away, where no one would see who we were or what we did. As soon as we walked into the cabin, me letting him put his hands wherever he wanted on my body. I remember catching a glimpse at his kitchen while he was going down on me, and seeing that collection of knives. I didn't think for one second he'd use them for anything except meal preparation. I didn't think he'd do anything on his bed except sleep and fuck.

I look in the direction of the bed and jump at the sight of him.

Dead. He's still dead. Of course he's dead. I've killed him.

I shudder, thinking he could just as easily killed me, and keep telling myself that he didn't. I killed him. I dismantled his paint-by-numbers night, injected my own chaos. I won.

Did I?

I can't dwell on it now. I straighten my shoulders, getting myself together. I stuff my scrubs in a plastic bag lying near the kitchen. I'll burn them at home. I do a quick glance through the cabin, looking for any remaining things. I take one final look at him. Still tied up, still covered in blood. Still dead. I hope he'll stay that way.

I grab his car keys from the shelf by the door and make a swift exit. The car will also need to be disposed of, but I'll take care of that later.

I climb in the car and rev the engine, trying not to peel away too quickly. The last thing I want to do is wreck the car before I even get on the highway. I take one final glimpse of the place that almost held me forever, the final resting place of the man who almost got me. The perfect place to leave the body.

The Beast

Kiah Page

Kiah Page is a 23 year old blogger and horror fanatic from Liverpool, UK. She has had a lifelong love of horror and the macabre, and after many years blogging, has recently decided to try her hand at her own horror fiction.

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The Beast

Kiah Page

I assessed the scene, bile churning in the pit of my stomach, burning at my throat and threatening to overflow. Her strawberry curls, matted with sickly crimson, lay bold and stained against the silent sheets of snow, glowing in the pallor of the mist. Mascara-coated lashes framed the stark stare of her unseeing eyes, wide and frozen, punctuating the scream that was never heard from her contorted lips. Navy lace and frills, soaked in drying and coagulated life, were mercilessly torn apart to reveal shreds of pale flesh, pink viscera, and the mangled engine of her humanity. The puddles of violence faded into the ice, giving way to a sinister trail of prints. Snow crunched beneath my boots, sounding not dissimilar to bone, as I examined the path to her

butcher. Gritting my teeth against the whipping air, I followed the disconcerting shape of the prints deeply into the woods. My quickening pulse rang a death knell in my ears as I attempted to desperately convince myself that I could not make out claws at the ends of the red-dripped shadows, that it must simply be grips on walking boots or some heinous trick of the light. With every step into the stoicism of the evergreen forest, every metre that tipped the scale from sunlight to shadow, my eyes adjusted as did my resolve. Marching onwards, the twists of leaf and wood grew ever more dense, the wind whistling in a secretive whisper. A rock formation flanked the the entrance of a cave, presenting the pitch blackness of the abyss like wings to a macabre stage. It was then I heard the rumbling snarl, curling my toes and grating to my sinews. It was then I saw the luminous scalpel stare in the dark. It was then I met the beast.

Smile

Jenny Marie

Jenny Marie is an artist and writer who lives in South Jersey. Her work consists of extra acting work , rock videos, several modeling projects including working with Zakk Connor Photography. She is business partners with TDW Moonlit Imagery which creates one of a kind stories that go along with the photoshoot for the client. She writes for The Horror Syndicate with a special interest in highlighting women in horror.

Jenny bartends in a nightclub, is a team leader for The American Cancer Society Making Strides For Breast Cancer and raises money for animal rescues and wildlife protection.

When Jenny is not working you can find her breaking traffic laws saving turtles, chasing shots with shots or eating pizza in bed.

You can follow her projects on Facebook Jenny Marie or Insta

Hugsnhisses. www.hugsnhisses.com

Smile

Jenny Marie

I could feel the broken glass slipping into the skin more easily as I dragged it back and forth on Dale's face . He whimpered as he tried to wiggle out from under me.

"DON'T FUCKING MOVE" I yelled as I sat back to admire my work. The blood was starting to drip down the sides of his face. I carved another piece of skin.

"SMILE!" "SMILE! BIGGER!!! NOT BIG ENOUGH !!!" " I yelled as loud as I could until my throat was burning . " YOU ARE SOOOOOO PRETTY WHEN YOU SMILE !!!!" I laughed as I traced the jagged glass around the outside of his upper lip . I was laughing so hard that I could

barely breathe.

Dale whined and whimpered as the cuts began to bleed more.

“ SMILE !!! SMILE !!! SMILE !!!”

“ LOOK INTO MY EYES !!! My evil smile was the last thing he would see in his lifetime.

The satisfaction filled my soul. A soul that has been dead for a long time but how did I get here?

It was 13 degrees out. January in New Jersey is always gray, cold and rainy. Today was no different. My name is Genevieve and here's my story. I woke up to the sound of my alarm going off. Ugh another day. I was so depressed. My now ex boyfriend was sleeping with my now ex best friend. He had abused me for eight months. Constantly telling me what I thought was wrong, what I did was wrong and everything that made me happy was wrong. I was constantly accused of cheating which was ironic considering the situation. After my dog, who was my heart and soul passed away, what was left of my heart died with him. I was broke. The company I was working for had suddenly closed down and my new work place felt unfamiliar and strange. I wanted to die. There were no tears, no sadness , no anger inside me.

However, there was a feeling of nothing which was actually worse than feeling something. I got up and got ready for work just like any other day. One thing I learned through the years is when times are tough no one is there. It's like your sadness is contagious.

I arrived at my new job at Sal's, the small, local restaurant/bar located in a poor blue collar working class part of town. The people I worked with were just different from me. Something about this town was just odd. I had always lived and worked in a city. The small town vibe was never my thing. The locals were fiercely aggressive and very protective of their small town.

“No outsiders “ seemed to be the unwritten law . If you weren't one of them you were in for trouble.

I moved through my shift just like any other day. Dale, who sat in the same seat at the bar everyday decided he was going to start in on me. "Hey there girl you need to smile" he yelled at me over the music. I glanced over at the smirk on his face. "Hey ! Hey ! I said smile or I will tell Sal you aren't smiling enough and you will lose your job !" I walked over to him. Everything that I was going through started to make my body feel hot. I said "Dale I have been waiting on you all day and listened to all of your stories and made sure you had everything you need so what is the problem?" He tapped the side of his Bud Lite as he looked at me "I need to see that smile and make it a good one because you are sooooo pretty when you smile and if you don't you will be sorry". Every single part of me hated him. I walked away.

God damnit I need this job replayed over and over in my head. Why do people have to be so mean ?

I was just about to leave work when suddenly two men I've never seen before walked in . Immediately the locals stared at them .

I went over and introduced myself. Chuck was tall with dark hair and resembled a younger Ben Affleck. Patrick had a smaller build with light hair and blue eyes. There was something about Patrick that just drew me to him. The two men were passing through town looking for a new location for their business. I locked eyes with Patrick and I could just feel the connection. We chatted and he walked me to my car at the end of my shift . He asked if he could take me to dinner. After all I had been through, the thought of spending time with another man was the furthest thing from my mind. He looked at me and said "it's just dinner I promise to have you home by 9. We went to dinner at the local diner and talked until midnight. He was so sweet and interesting. He drove me back to my car and we said goodbye. I went to bed that night dreaming of what could be. It was the first time I've slept in weeks. It was the first time I didn't

wish for death in my sleep.

A few hours later I had to be back at work. I pulled into the parking lot and noticed two policemen talking to the owner Sal. Sal was a short Italian man weighing about 350lbs. He was always sweating and walked with a slight limp due to his bad knees. The older officer was George. The young rookie with George was named Jeff. Jeff was such a kind young man. He looked like Justin Timberlake. A all American boy next door. He had a crush on me . I wondered in a different lifetime if we would be the couple who drank coffee out of “wifey “ and “ hubbs “ mugs , walked hand in hand in Bed Bath and Beyond and had nicknames for each other like baby cakes and schmoopy.

The three men stopped talking and walked over to me. My heart began to beat fast and I started to feel light headed as Jeff explained that the two young men who were in yesterday have gone missing without a trace. He asked me to please give him a call if I had any information that could help their investigation and he handed me his card. I immediately sank to the ground. Sal’s wife Charlene, a bleached blonde overly tanned mean drunk of a woman, came barreling down the steps from upstairs . She was always watching us on the bar cameras. She screeched, “ get up and get back to work Genevieve!”

I finished my shift completely zombified . As I walked to my car Dale and Rich (another local) came out of nowhere and were laughing as they yelled “you will never see your pretty boy again.”

I snapped my head around and said “what the fuck did you just say “ as Dale turned to Rich and said, “forget her, she will get hers” .

I got in my car with my anger consuming me. Those two idiots were up to something and I wasn’t going to just sit back and do nothing .

I parked my car around the block and waited to see what Dale, Rich and Sal were up too. When the bar closed they all came walking out together. I crept quietly out of my car and hid in the bushes to hear what they were saying.

Sal was telling Dale to remember to lock the basement to the bar and he would see him tomorrow same place same time.

Something wasn't right.

I waited until they drove away and then I snuck back to the basement door of the bar.

I took out my iPhone to call Jeff. I pressed send and then changed my mind. I hung up as it started to ring. I didn't trust the cops in this town. I was going to do this myself.

I didn't have an easy childhood . Both parents were drug addicts and criminals. I learned how to be street smart. I pulled my bobby pin out of my ponytail and picked the lock. "POP" there went the lock. I was in. My heart pounded out of my chest as I ran down the basement steps. I was breathing so hard I felt like the sound was echoing off of the cold dark dank walls. My eyes scanned the basement frantically. It was hard to see. My eyes struggled to focus. The only light I had was from my iPhone. Nothing seemed out of the norm. Beer boxes, bar supplies , empty kegs, ice buckets etc. but then out of the corner of my eye a small gleam of light was shining from underneath the walk in door . I ran over and pulled as hard as I could on the door. It flung open and there before my eyes were Chuck and Patrick. Their bodies were strapped into chairs and there were lines hooked up to their veins syphoning their blood and distributing it into empty pickle barrels. Their eyes were wide and lifeless. I screamed as I covered my mouth in horror. Just then I heard the basement door slam! Sal, Dale and Rich were back! I ducked behind the chair where Chuck's body was.

I heard their heavy footsteps coming down the stairs. "I'm telling you Sal someone is in

here.” Dale yelled. Sal and Rich laughed. Sal said, “you are just paranoid “ “they haven’t caught us in 37 years what makes you think they are going to catch us now”. As he grinned. His overweight sweaty body heaved with laughter. He huffed and puffed as he walked back up the basement stairs.

Dale followed after him.

Rich stayed behind to give the basement one more sweep. As I fought back tears I thought to myself I have nothing left to live for. I have nothing to lose. I can sit back and do nothing or I can just go for it. Sweat poured down my face, my heart pounded , my eyes stung from my makeup as I wiped my tears away. Fuck it! I’m not letting these inbred hillbilly no teeth backwoods losers get away with this!

I lept out from behind the chair “surprise motherfucker “ I yelled. Rich let out a “what the “ as I jumped on him knocking him to the cement ground. The impact of the fall knocked him out cold and a pool of blood started to form around his hair. I felt a short sense of relief until the basement door flung open and Dale yelled “what the hell is going on down there “ as he ran down the stairs.

Sal was right behind him. We locked eyes. This was it. Sal’s eyes widened. He couldn’t believe he had been caught by me. He couldn’t believe Rich was knocked out unconscious underneath me. Dale ran towards me and the fight of my life began. I pushed him as hard as I could knocking him into Sal. Sal clutched his chest. The situation along with the impact had caused him to have a heart attack. He fell against the wall breaking the neon glass “It’s 5 O’Clock Somewhere “sign. Dale reached out and began choking me. I started to feel my body go limp. Different scenarios flashed through my head and I considered giving up. Then a vision of Patrick lifting me up in the air and swinging me around as I giggled came to mind . I

wasn't giving up! Not this time. I picked up a piece of shattered glass and plunged it as hard as I could into his side. "Ahhhhh you bitch" he screamed as he jumped back. I gained my balance and took a deep breathe and ran full force into him as we both fell to the floor .

We struggled. My heart pounded . He punched me in my jaw. I could feel the warm blood filling my mouth. We kicked, pulled and scratched each other. We rolled around the basement floor fighting for our lives. I kept struggling to reach the tap of the keg that was laying just out of arms reach. I closed my eyes and prayed "please god give me the strength to do this "I stretched as far as I could and grabbed it and hit him as hard as I could on the side of the head . His body collapsed on top of me.

I pushed him off and tied his hands together with his belt. I looked around but couldn't find anything to tie his feet with. I tied his shoelaces together. It was the best I could do.

I took the broken piece of glass and tried to decide what my next move was. Just then he began to wake up he looked at me in disbelief. I raised the glass and without hesitation sliced his mouth.

I continued to carve a joker like smile into his face. With each drop of blood that splattered onto my face I felt the sweet taste of revenge.

What I didn't know was in the struggle my phone had dialed Jeff.

Jeff was standing behind me watching me butcher the man who killed and tortured so many people. The man who killed the one man who made me feel like I had a soul again. The man who taunted women for no reason. The man who told me to "Smile".

Fade to Black

Julianne Snow

Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves.

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Fade to Black

Julianne Snow

The Harlot

“My name is Harlot. Well it’s really Sandra—” a scream of pain comes from the young woman as a figure in black rushes into frame and backhands her across the mouth. Her face is streaked with the paths of many tears and her eyes are swollen, rimmed in red.

“I’m here because I’m a harlot. I am Harlot. I’m promiscuous and that’s bad, sinful, and evil. I deserve each and everything thing I’ve received plus all the punishment coming to me.”

Her bright blue eyes track an area off the right of the screen as if she is reading from a script.

She’s being made to do this; someone is making her debase herself and her morals like a one act play, a monologue. The figure in black.

Her eyes look up for a moment and it’s as if she can see through the screen. They are imploring you, on the other side of the lens, to save her.

It’s too late already.

“I’ve had sex with most of my town—men and women. I’ve sold my body for money and done everything I can to devalue the temple God gave me. I am Harlot and I deserve to die.”

The shot widens and the scene is fully realized for the first time. It’s dank, dark, and appears to be a basement. A sole light is strung overhead, a bare light bulb dangling from a section of thin wire. It dances slightly in the room, either from vibration in the ground, or perhaps an errant draft.

The young woman is scared. Sandra. She must be about twenty-five years old, perhaps a little older. Bright blue eyes hold a fear that cannot be forgotten, though it’s now harder for you to see it. Her face is dirty, still tear-stained, but there is beauty hidden under the layers of dirt and terror.

Sandra wears a vivid green neon shirt, the colour so bright it almost vibrates in the swinging glow. Her tension and stress can be easily seen in the way her body struggles against the ties that bind her. Sandra is a fighter and while she may look afraid, there is a level of resolve held taut in her muscles.

The jeans she is wearing are stained and wet. Her fear had gotten the better of her at some point, her bladder voiding against her control. Delicate feet with red painted toenails are rudely strapped to the legs of the unfinished wooden chair in which she is seated. Sandra is lucky; her pants protect her from the small slivers that adorn it. While the least of her worries, there is some small grace in that.

“I have to pay for what I have done. I must atone for the transgressions of my past.” The camera focuses in again on Sandra face. Once a beautiful girl; now a terror filled victim.

The camera shifts for a moment to pan left slightly, the whirring of the zoom mechanism can be heard. A table of instruments have waited partially off-screen, behind the chair and its occupant. Sandra’s eyes drift to them, her reaction blurrily captured in the bottom right hand corner. Aghast, her face tightens and then loosens in acceptance, her resolve rushing away. It’s as if the moment of her surrender has been captured, immortalized.

The figure, somewhat slight in build enters the frame. Sheathed in black, from head to toe, the excess material hides any distinguishing characteristics. The figure is tall, maybe five foot ten or eleven. It’s hard to tell without the ability to compare it to the surroundings. It saunters over to the table, light on its feet, and picks up a scalpel. The light glints off the blade for a quick second as it maintains its gentle arc through the room.

In the foreground, Sandra’s pupils dilate. Her reaction to her own fear cannot save her; it only serves to expand what she is going to see. Sandra will be the witness to her own death, the torture of which is to come shortly.

The darkened form moves closer to Sandra, teasing her with the horror of the scalpel before returning to the area behind the camera. As the frame zooms out, both Sandra and the

table come into full view. Moisture puddles on the dirt floor beneath her chair; fear has gotten the best of Sandra. Again.

The body in black comes back around the camera, the silver instrument clasped tightly in its right hand. It moves behind the seated woman, trailing a gloved left hand over a tensed shoulder. The contact is met with a jerk from Sandra, the electricity and intimacy of the touch too much for her to bear. The scalpel comes down to rest upon her throat, stilling it.

All attention is on Sandra as she looks at you, her eyes imploring you to save her. She needs you, but there's nothing you can do. Those eyes will haunt you.

A small drop of crimson flows down Sandra's neck. A nick. A slice. Just the barest of movements has split her delicate skin.

"Oh God, please help me!"

One last ditch effort at salvation fails as the executioner roughly grabs a handful of knotted auburn curls. Twisting the strands around a leather covered fist, Sandra's head is yanked fully back, her scream protesting the roughness of the action.

Not a word is spoken as the figure in black moves to stare directly into the complacent face of its prey. The scene is blocked by the cotton inkiness of its back. An elbow moves at the edge of the torso. Whimpers of pain can be heard. Green fabric is cast to the side, out of shot.

In a moment, the scene clears as Sandra is revealed again. HARLOT has been rudely etched into her flesh. Tiny rivulets of ruby red blood cascade over her breasts, turning her once white bra pink. Her face mirrors the path of her blood as tears flow freely from her bright blue eyes. Eyes that look directly into your soul, speaking to you of their acceptance. Sandra understands she will die tonight. Her crime engraved into her chest for the world to see.

It takes only a few minutes for the unbound individual to cut into Sandra, carving her flesh like a roast fowl of some kind. Her eyes continue to probe the depth of the camera lens. She wants you to see the moment her life bleeds from her completely.

The moment it happens, the face of the killer turns to the camera. Heterochromia is all you can see; one blue, one green. The eyes of a killer now taunt you—the message: I dare you.

The Gossipmonger

“My name is Gossipmonger. I lie. It’s what I do and it’s what I have always done.” The older woman dissolves into a torrent of tears. Her eyes, brown and limpid look alternately between the camera lens and to something behind the camera. You know it’s the killer.

The scene is very similar. The same unfinished pine chair sits under the same gently swaying naked bulb. On it a woman is bound, her hands hidden behind her back and her sandal covered feet tied to the simply hewn legs. Dressed in a once flowing summer dress of a vibrant coral colour, the woman hangs limply against her restraints. She has accepted her fate with no thought of fighting it.

“I am here because I deserve to die for the lies I have told. I am a gossip; I spread untruths with every breath I utter. I ruin the lives of good people and I have never given it a second thought.” A fresh batch of tears erupt from a pair of eyes fringed with heavy dark lashes. This is a woman who spends a lot of time on herself. Not to be confused with self-improvement, the bulk of her time is spent on making herself beautiful. Time that could have been spent developing compassion for others but was spent destroying anyone who crossed her path.

Even you recognize Evelyn Brennan. Her face is hard to forget. It’s haunted you many times over the years. Lies of brutality, stories of infidelity, even fabrications of sexual

misconduct. None of them true, but vicious enough to create problems, destroy reputations.

Evelyn Brennan will not be missed, but that's certainly not the point.

"Please, please! I can pay you anything you want. Just please don't hurt me!" The sound of flapping in the background is heard and Evelyn's eyes snap off-screen, scanning what must be her script. "In the Bible, it commands that you must keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. I have built my life on evil and deceit and for that, I must pay."

Once the words were uttered, Evelyn's eyes grew even wider. The frame zoomed out a small amount, revealing more of the dank room with darkened corners. You note the shelves along the back wall, glints of coloured glass twinkling for a moment as the light dances above. The table is set with the same collection of instruments.

Again, a figure covered in black makes its appearance. The figure you have simply nicknamed Black. It saunters over to the table as if it didn't have a care in the world, or a woman bound in close proximity. Pausing at the macabre collection of tools, it reaches out a dark hand to trail across many of their surfaces. The touch is gentle, like a lover's caress. The movement clashes violently with what comes next. Picking up a pair of locking clamps used in medical procedures, Black turns to face the camera. Evelyn has not turned her head to see what is going on behind her and for that lack of attention, her hair is roughly pulled, and her head wrenched to the side.

A scream escapes her throat and with her mouth agape, the tool is used to extract her tongue. Locking the clamp down on the end of her tongue, Evelyn screams with a vengeance. Pain has never been her thing—unless she is causing it.

Releasing the handle of the clamp, Black leaves the tool hanging from the mouth of its victim. Returning to the table, it pauses in its choice. Evelyn looks up at you, her tongue hanging from between her lips, bleeding from the edges of where the clamp bites into it.

You are still focused on Evelyn, your emotions torn somewhat in two. You have, on more than one occasion, wished for her death. But never in your wildest dreams did you think you'd be there to witness it.

Black returns, saw blade in hand. The choice of weapon extreme but done so for full effect. Evelyn's eyes widen again at the sight of the saw. She knows what is coming, both of you do. The result classic in its predictability.

The frame goes black for a few moments. Tortured sounds are heard; wet shredding sounds met with whimpers.

With the action complete Black turns, displaying the severed tongue of Evelyn Brennan to the camera. Moving to the left, Evelyn herself is displayed, her head slung forward, blood pooling in her lap of coral silk. Laying the tongue in the puddle gathering in her lap, the figure in black moves back to the table. Discarding the saw, it picks up a serrated knife. Coming back to stand next to the slumped form of Evelyn, the knife is brandished with a finesse that speaks of years of practice.

The scene is blocked out as Evelyn is again hidden from view for a moment. In the next, there are long slices carved into her chest. The word written is GOSSIPMONGER. A moniker she will die with, a label she will wear forever.

In mere minutes it is over. Evelyn never lifts her head to look at you again, and there is a part of you thankful for that. You know the moment it happens though, as Black looks up and fixes you with its colourful stare. Those eyes are full of challenge.

For the first time it speaks, softly and with the whisper of a drawl “You’ll never catch me.”

The Bitch

“Give me a B!” Off camera a soft B can be heard.

“Give me an I!” Again, the same soft answer rings out, barely audible.

“Give me a T!” Unless you were aware of the other person you may not have heard the T as it is called out.

“Give me a C!” You listen for the echo and are rewarded with it.

“Give me an H!” Not disappointed, you hear the breathless response.

“What’s that spell?” So soft you would not have heard it unless you were listening intently, the word bitch floats in from off-screen.

“That’s right, I’m a Bitch. Past, present, and future. Everything I have done has been for the sole purpose of being mean and nasty.” Seated in the roughly hewn pine chair is a petite brunette, hair gathered back into a neat ponytail. Wearing a cashmere grey sweater and a black pencil skirt, the once feisty, brown-eyed girl is bound like the rest. Her hands behind her and her black stilettoed feet stretched wide, lower legs forming a chevron, she sits with an air of grace in juxtaposition to her surroundings. With head held high, she stares into the camera, her brown eyes big as a doe’s caught in a pair of headlights.

By now, word of the murders has stretched across the sprawling southern town. Women, and men, are afraid; afraid of the unknown. Why would anyone target the fine people of Rockport? What is not understood, nor could it be released, is that the culprit has reasons. Not valid ones, but reasons all the same.

“I was the Homecoming Queen, the Head Cheerleader, and most likely the Prom Queen. My beauty and popularity gave me power and I let that power go to my head. Each honour was my reward and I didn’t want to share with anyone.” Those brown eyes flick back to the camera, the weight of understanding in them hard to bear.

“I will die tonight...” Her voice catches in her throat, but she will not give into the tears. Many years of hearing the hateful things said of her have schooled her against breaking down in public. She is the popular one and as a result, she has the perfect, enviable life.

Taking a deep breath, she continues. “I will die tonight as penance for the tears and the deaths I have caused with my actions and my spiteful words.” Those eyes find yours again as you learn her name is Charity Fendelson, a high school senior. Head Cheerleader, Homecoming Queen, and rumoured to be this year’s Prom Queen. Kidnapped after her shift as hostess of the only swanky restaurant in town.

The frame of reference shifts to include the table of horrors behind her. You scan the details as best you can; you need to know. The room reeks of familiarity, but you cannot place it. Charity is nervous and takes a quick glance behind her and the killer, still dressed in black, stalks on screen. Her brown eyes are back on you again and you notice the tip of a pink tongue peek out from between her lips.

Fear is evident in those dark brown eyes. They glaze slightly as if tears might soon follow, but none do.

At the table, Black runs its hands over what is displayed there. The tabletop, on a slight incline has allowed the camera to catch the collection each and every time you’ve seen it. This time is no different.

Selecting a box-cutter from the polished wood, the shadow stalks back to Charity's side. The blade extends with the telltale clicks and is dragged against a peach cheek. Droplets of blood cascade down her face, dropping onto the silver cashmere covering her right breast. A replica of the cut is made on the left side, another thin river of blood tracks down her face.

The entire time those eyes never leave yours. The intensity of that stare compels you to stare back. In your periphery, you see the parallel lines of crimson and know that soon, those eyes will lose their light.

As the screen is darkened with the back of the executioner, you continue to stare at where those eyes used to be. You know what is coming, but you cannot look away. It's your sworn duty to watch.

When Black moves, the cashmere front of the sweater is shredded to reveal the décolletage of the young woman. Instead of milky white flesh, it is now a carved wasteland depicting the word BITCH in capital letters.

Those brown eyes are still locked on your own and while you want to help her, you know it's already too late. The rest of the carving begins and so do the tears, finally released from the floodgates. Her agony is silent as her flesh is carved from her body.

You know the moment her life is extinguished. It's the second those eyes leave yours. With her head slumped forward, Charity is dead.

Small giggles escape the individual, and it skips to a spot just behind the slackened head. Lifting it up, a quick kiss is delivered to the cheek of the dead girl and more soft laughter can be heard.

Looking into the camera once again, the lips part in the mockery of a frown. Breathlessly the voice protests, "Even I liked her a little bit..."

You slam your hand down on the table in front of you, setting your cold cup of coffee over on itself. Standing, you stalk out of the room, but not before hearing one last final taunt.

“How many more will I have to kill before you catch me?”

The Rebel

“I’m not reading that...” The middle-aged woman sits, strapped to the chair in the same dark, dank room as the rest and brazenly stands up to the figure in black. Figuratively, of course. The flash of rebelliousness in her clear green eyes rewards her with a swift slap to the face as Black comes out from around the camera, crinkled paper in hand.

Softly, it says, “You will read this. I know the likes of you. You think you’re so special, so cool because you choose not to follow rules. Don’t think for a moment that I’m going to let you call the shots here.” The tone is threatening, almost dagger-like in its precision to incite fear and render compliance.

Dressed in a pair of faded Levis and a white t-shirt, the woman could have been the poster child for badass chicks everywhere. You’ve even had the pleasure of her company on several occasions. Always one to buck the system, Cheryl Moriarty is the quintessential rebel. Running with one of the worst biker clubs that frequents town, Cheryl has a way with words and many of them aren’t the kind you could repeat to anyone.

“Look here, you stupid little bitch! Once I’m free—”

Interrupted by raucous laughter, Cheryl can only stare at the figure still standing slightly in frame, her face beginning to show a little less confidence.

“I already killed the bitch!” More laughter, this time coupled with a doubling over as if the spoken words had been the punch line to some incredible joke.

Seizing a moment that would likely be unrepeated, Cheryl digs her heels into the blood-soaked ground beneath her chair and uses the momentum to propel herself forward. Black is waiting for such a move, reflexes ready. It carefully and effectively stepping aside, as Cheryl dives off stage right, a muffled scream the indication her body hits the hard packed dirt.

“If I had said you were going to do that, would you still have done it?” The barb comes out of Black, softly, teasingly, mockingly, before erupting into more giggling. Fluidly stepping off screen, Black picks Cheryl, chair and all, up from the ground and hefts her back into position in front of the camera. The reward for such thoughtfulness is a wad of bloody spit, which lands directly in its face.

Fuming, Black backhands Cheryl, almost knocking the chair off balance. Turning toward the camera, the spit is noted by you before Black rushes out of frame. Rustling can be heard, and you notice Cheryl is intrigued by what is going on in the semi-darkness.

“Shit, wait, I know you!” This time it’s Cheryl’s turn to laugh and she does so heartily. With her eyes closed, she doesn’t see Black come back into view, gag in hand.

In a moment of surprise, Black shoves the dirty, bloodstained rag into her mouth and effectively cuts off the laughter. Cheryl’s jade coloured eyes grow wide, fear alighting in them for the first time. Her attention shifts to you and for the first time, you think she sees you. Not that it’s possible, but you think it all the same.

Gag in mouth and will partially broken, Black grabs a similarly hewn chair and sits next to Cheryl. With white paper in hand, the following is spoken in an androgynous, childlike voice.

“My name is Rebel. I am called such because I think rules and laws don’t apply to me. I spend my days finding ways to circumvent what society thinks is good and pure and for that, I must die. Tonight, my death shall come as no shock to those around me. While it may incite

thoughts of vengeance, I know ultimately no one will care. I am a cancer the world needs not. I welcome my death for it will free me from the path I have chosen. Rebel no more, I acquiesce.”

Upon completing the passage, Black stands, draws the second chair off camera and strolls to the table of instruments in the background. Grabbing a pair of scissors, it turns to face the camera, playfully opening and closing them so their sound is heard.

Wild with fright, Cheryl locks eyes with you, but you cannot bear to maintain eye contact. Instead you follow the stalking movements of Black as it comes forward. Gathering up a fistful of golden hair and pulling it tautly away from Cheryl’s scalp, the scissors continue to squeak open and closed.

With a snip and a scream, the first chunk of hairy scalp is removed. Blood pours freely down over Cheryl’s tortured face as more chunks are freed from their hold on her scalp. Dropping the scissors, Black goes back to the table, this time selecting a scalpel. Coming back to blot out the scene from your eyes, elbows begin to flail. A white shirt, now red and pink with blood is thrown to the ground. Cheryl has not stopped screaming since the moment the first piece of her scalp was cut from her body.

In a flourish, the scene is opened again, and you see Cheryl, slumped and weak, bearing the monogram of REBEL across her chest. The tableau of torture begins, and Cheryl never lifts her head again.

Black stands for a moment, separate from the scene, but wholly within it. It appears as if it is watching, studying, contemplating what has just happened, but you know you’re just transferring your own emotions onto it.

Turning, you swear you can almost see the smile; the one that speaks through its body language. Carelessly tossing the scalpel back toward the table, you are fixed with its thoughtful stare.

“Are you enjoying the show? I’ve only got one victim left and then I’ll be moving on. I’ve given you all of the clues, can you connect the dots?”

The singsong voice is eerily creepy and for a moment you think you may recognize it. Your brain struggles to believe, but your heart refuses the truth.

The Innocent

The same unfinished pine chair is set up in front of the camera. In it sits a young woman, somewhere around the age of thirty. Her hair is a golden brown and sits in languid curves over her breasts. Her face is quite striking with a smattering of freckles over her nose and cheeks. But it’s those eyes that give her away.

They bore into you, and your heart explodes. Michelle. Your twin sister.

“My name is Innocent. My naivety has often been my own downfall. I alone am the reason others feel the need to ridicule. I place myself into situations, thinking a different outcome will ensue, but often I am wrong. I should understand by now the world is a different place for people like me. I cannot continue to go through life believing my innocence will protect me. It does the opposite. It sets me up for disappointment and despair at every turn. I am open to the evil that exists in the world and often I am used by it. It all ends tonight. Tonight, I will look to my own death as a way to cleanse the world of my innocence. Trust me when I say this, I never meant for any of it to happen. Each instance required my own culpability and for that I deserve the ultimate retribution.”

With the speech finished, you half expect that Black will make an appearance. And Black does, but not in the way that you anticipate.

For the first time you notice that Michelle is not like the others. She is not tied to the chair like the rest and as you ponder the ramifications of that, she stands and walks to the table behind her. Picking up a paring knife, from the set you gave her last year for Christmas, she comes back to the chair and sits. Over her head, she draws the black long-sleeved shirt she is wearing to reveal a network of thin, red scars on her skin. In different stages of healing, some look to be less than a week old, while others you already know are much, much older.

For the first time you see the pattern the scars make, the word they spell. Innocent.

Your eyes fly up, only to be met by Michelle's; one blue, one green. In that moment, the years of her pain and hurt overwhelm you and you finally understand.

Sandra, the harlot, stole Michelle's high school sweetheart right out from under her nose. You had all gone to high school together, though Sandra was much younger than Michelle and yourself. From that moment, Michelle never trusted nor loved another man.

Evelyn, the gossipmonger, had ruined Michelle's quiet little life with her words of hate. All it took were a few well told lies and Michelle's boss, the Board of Education, was all too happy to fire her. But the lies didn't stop there. No, Evelyn made it impossible for her to find a job in town—not even the local Save-A-Way would hire her as a checkout girl.

Charity, the bitch, had done everything she could to ensure Evelyn had all of the information she needed. As the hostess of the only fine dining establishment in town, she had the ear of many and the eyes of even more. Her lies were believed because of her popularity and no one ever questioned the motives of the pretty girl from the good family. Simple really. Michelle had been Charity's History and English teacher and with failing marks in grade eleven, her

aspirations for Head Cheerleader and Prom Queen would never have been realized. The allegations of abuse went so far as to ensure Charity passed with straight As.

Cheryl, the rebel, had helped by not helping. Unable to stand up for what was right in the moment it actually mattered, Cheryl sealed her own fate. It would have been simple; she knew Evelyn was lying, apparently had proof too. But did her rebellious spirit stop Evelyn from achieving her goal? No, instead she kept quiet the one time in her life her voice would have actually made a difference. Michelle never would have known the truth either, but one night, Cheryl got drunk and decided to run her mouth in the local bar. Not many had noticed Michelle seated at the darkest table in the very back of the bar, but suddenly your own hazy memory clears of that night to remember her skulking out the back.

As your mind runs through all the connections, you stare deeply into eyes you have known all your life. You see the pain and the determination.

Michelle's hand raises to her breasts, and the knife begins to cut perfect, straight lines. Blood flows freely as the knife carves from right to left across the pale expanse. When she sets her hand back on her lap, the scene changes to one of static. The final delivered tape has run out.

Your mind puts all the clues together. You grab your gun and your keys and hightail it to your cruiser. Speeding down the road, your heart thumps widely in your chest.

Can you make it in time?

Rounding the curve, you see the old house up ahead. It was once your parent's home and now belongs to Michelle. All along you were staring into the basement you had once played in. The basement that had scared you often. The basement where the two of you had shared secrets.

Pulling the car to a stop, you rush into the house, scared to find it unlocked. You fly to the kitchen and pull open the door, barreling headlong down the bare wooden steps. Coming around the corner, the sight stops you cold.

Sitting in the chair is Michelle. Her body is slumped backward, and you know without a doubt that she is long dead.

Across her chest a single word is carved.

KILLER.

If you Want to
Shea Herlihy-Abba

My name is Shea; I get shouted at in public for crossdressing and work at a quit smoking call center, where I stumble toward a feasible income in a coffee-induced haze as my apathy steadily sublimates into a manic desire to work on my writing when I'm not on a call.

I also work part time as a psychic medium and shamanic healer (you can find me on FaceBook @ You Guys, I'm Psychic - <https://www.facebook.com/youguysimpsychic>), which feeds and inspires my work within the supernatural and urban fantasy/horror genres, and continues to enrich my belief that there's always more to this world than what we can readily perceive. I blog about my work with humorous poems and informative articles @ hashtag-shamanism.blogspot.com

To put it simply, I write because I love stories, and I love words. I write because one of my psychic students asked me how to summon an incubus, and it's much more fun to put my answer into a terrifying cautionary tale than to drily explain the vicissitudes of summoning magic and why that (probably) isn't a good idea - even if it's really, really fun.

If You Want To
Shea Herlihy-Abba

The problem was that he was lean. His eyes had deep pockets and his ribcage showed a little and I have a weakness for that, all right?

And his hair. The way his hair came down just a little over his eyes. It was layered and pretty and I have a weakness for that too. And did I mention his collarbones? They stuck out and looked like cliffs with caves in them in the dim light of my one-room apartment. When I stuck my hand down his pants he made a sound that was a little feminine and I have a weakness for that also.

He was pushing his hand up the back of my shirt to unclasp my bra when I warned him. “Hang...hang on,” I said.

He paused, eyes widening a little. He looked cute when his eyes widened. I might have a weakness for that, as well.

“What?” he said, voice a little raspy.

“I can’t...I dunno,” I said. “Shawn, there’s...” I looked down. “There’s something – I dunno.”

He looked at me sideways, eyes wider. I was hacking up my words like a hairball.

“Laila, what? What is it? Did I do something?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said, as quietly as I could. “I just...”

And that’s when the fizzy feeling hit. You know, the fizzy-sex-good times feeling that takes over your stomach and turns it into a bottle of San Pelegrino. When that feeling hits I can’t help myself. I guess you could say that’s a weakness, too.

“Fuck it,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I grabbed his hand and shoved it back under my shirt.

It began slowly at first. The way it always does. My legs, wrapped around his middle, became sticky. My tongue elongated little by little, twining with his. I leaned back, running my hands through his hair. The change was ecstasy this time. It isn't always.

Anyways, he was too busy thrusting to notice my sticky legs and by the time my arms had knotted around his torso he was far gone. His skin became gooey, and my sides sank into his. I plunged into him, shoving my tongue deeper down his throat as my eyes bled into his. Our heads connected, skin washing over skin as little pods of new eyes surfaced, dotting the outside of our meshing scalps. Our hair had receded. Our pelvises fused and legs made shifting, popping noises as they extended out of the fleshy mass, toes distorting and reshaping themselves into bristled claws. Arms became pincers. Our single torso became heavy, pleated.

The new thing chirped through crusted, beaked lips and looked around. I saw, from its eyes, a blurry watercolor of the inside of my apartment. The new thing chirped again. Skittered to the fire escape – a favorite M.O. for late-night feasts – and scrabbled down it, landing in a flailing heap on the street below.

The new thing's brain fizzed with Shawn's emotions: confusion, fear and terror. I was calm. I had gotten used to riding shotgun.

It scampered down the alley, sticking to the shadows. It was late, very late, and almost nobody was around. Silence ripped the streets a new one. If the new thing could have grinned it would have.

It checked the park. A lot of hoboes go there to sleep.

But, no dice. Not this time. It cantered down to the playground, where drunk teenagers hang out and smoke.

Close, but no cigar – two boys (fifteen? Sixteen? It was hard to tell in the dark) and two girls were just leaving, and they passed underneath a flickering streetlight as they went, and the new thing halted. The new thing hated light.

It found what it was looking for under the bridge. Some stocky dude out on a riverside jog had stopped to swig water from a Nalgene. The new thing crept up and waited. The built dude screwed the top back on the Nalgene. Turned his back. The new thing struck.

It was a quick meal. The new thing picked the leftovers up in its mouth and dropped them in the river. It gamboled back to the apartment and began to wither. Pincers deflated and became arms. Torsos unhitched from one another. Hair returned.

Shawn lay panting, naked, on the wooden floor of my shabby one-room apartment. His eyes were bloodshot; his chest rose and fell rapidly, like a sail caught in schizophrenic winds. I leaned over and kissed him, flicking my tongue against his in little swift strokes. Lay down beside him. I was sweat-soaked.

“What,” he panted. “God,” he panted.

I shook my head and sighed. I hadn’t thought about how he’d react. I never think about how they’ll react. Another weakness. But I go for boys with layered hair and pretty eyelashes and narrow, bony chests and what, I mean come on, what are they gonna do about it?

He was shaking, breath going in and out of him in dust bowl rattles. Probably in shock. I stared up at the ceiling, counting cracks. I ran a finger over his quaking chest, tracing his sternum to its end, circling my finger around his solar plexus, tracing another line, down to his navel and a little below.

He began to cry, deep and rich and cracking. Sobs like gashes in dry earth. Ocean-wide. “God,” he kept saying. “God, god.”

I rolled over on top of him. “Hush, Shawn. Just be quiet a little while. If you want to, you can pretend it was a bad dream.”

I kissed him again and tasted salt. I sighed into his mouth and kept kissing him. Eventually, the shaking subsided and he sank into it. “God,” he kept whispering. “Jesus god, god, god.”

“Hush, Shawn. Hush, now,” I kept saying and I could taste delirium on his tongue and it sparked the fading ecstasy on mine and as we bled into each other again, no real merging this time, I thanked god that the new thing was satisfied because now I could enjoy myself.

Newborn

Jenna Moquin

Jenna Moquin is the author of *Safe: New and Selected Stories*. "Newborn" was first published in *Macabre Cadaver* and reprinted in *The Literary Hatchet*.

Newborn

Jenna Moquin

I walked down Teluna Lane. The ice shavings pelted right through my jacket, and the wind felt more like ice than the ice did, but I didn't care. I liked the numbness it brought.

I shouldn't've left Liz in the car, but I just couldn't take it anymore. She was holding Mallory, rocking her back and forth, singing to her and pretending she was still alive. Pretending that her face wasn't blue, that her eyes weren't huge bulges, that her mouth was laughing instead of gaped open like a fish....that her....fuck it. I can't take this.

It was only a couple months ago that I brought Liz to the hospital, and after six hours of labor our daughter was born. That was the greatest day of my life, next to the day Liz said "Yes, I'll marry you Harry Watts!" and made me feel like the luckiest guy alive.

It was a running gag with her, to rhyme "I'm gonna marry Harry!" She giggled every time she said that. When she got pregnant last year, after we'd been trying for two years, I thought everything was working out for us.

Then I got laid off, and Liz got a letter in the mail saying there was no need to return to work after her maternity leave because the company was shutting down. Can you fucking believe that? And she worked up 'til two weeks before her due date.

I can thank good ole Bob Newburne for this. That piece of shit would rather close the doors than give up his swank house in the hills. Liz and I worked for Berkshire Communications for nearly ten years, and this is the thanks we get.

Past Teluna was Crescent Hill, where Bob Newburne and family lived. My feet brought me closer *to his house*. Liz and I were there two summers ago for a barbeque in his backyard. His wife...hell is her name? Beth? Betty? That's it, Betty. Bob and Betty Newburne, golden couple from college parties and crew matches. They both went to Harvard, both came from money, blond hair and blue eyes, WASP-y types if I ever saw them.

Betty took us on a tour of their house to show off the artwork, antiques displayed in cases, custom-made furniture and a kitchen that was bigger than our bedroom. We planned on getting a bigger place after Mallory was born, but we got evicted instead.

Thought I'd get a job soon enough, no big deal. I'd get a steady paycheck again, we could find a new apartment. But there's nothing out there. Nothing. Everywhere I go, boards up on shop windows. Overgrown lawns on foreclosed homes.

All we had left was the car, luckily it was paid for years ago so no one could take that away. Not exactly the best place to live in, but at least it's some kind of shelter. But it wasn't enough to keep Mallory alive. Not with this winter.

Got to the Newburne house. Their lights were on and the window shades up, I could see inside. It looked so warm, everything looked golden. Then I saw him.

Bob stood by the picture window wearing a fuzzy looking robe and drinking out of a mug. I wanted to pick up a rock and throw it through the window. Wipe that smug look off his face and drop the mug onto the floor. That sonofabitch.

Not sure how long I stood there staring at the house, just stood there until I was numb all over. The lights went out, and I couldn't see inside anymore. Then I thought about Liz, how I'd left her in the backseat rocking Mallory. My heart pumped, feeling came back and I ran to the car.

Liz was so still in the backseat. I was scared. I yanked open the door and sat next to her. She didn't move. She was so cold. I put my arm around her, and placed my palm under her nose. I felt air. Her shoulders heaved, slightly. I relaxed, but just for a second. I had to do something with Mallory.

I tried to pry her out of Liz's arms, and that's when she woke up. She screamed and slapped me, and gripped Mallory.

"We have to bury her, honey." I kept my voice as soft as possible. "We can't keep her here."

"No! I have to keep her warm, she's too cold!" She went back to rocking.

I figured what harm could it do? Let her rock the baby back and forth. She started singing again.

"Hush little Mallory, don't say a word, Mama's gonna buy you a mocking-bird."

That was her go-to song whenever the baby couldn't get to sleep. There was no harm in singing, really, or pretending Mallory's still alive. We're both going down the same path. Pretty soon we'll die of exposure too. Nothing wrong with her living in this fantasy for a bit longer.

I turned on the car to let the heat run, and noticed the gas was running low. We had nothing left to pawn, no money for gas, and just a few packages of cheese crackers in the glove box. I figured it wouldn't be much longer.

I stayed awake all night, kept my arm around Liz who finally drifted off. I kept checking her breathing, half expecting her to drift off in that final way at some point during the night. But I didn't want that. I knew what our fate was, and I wanted us to go through it together.

Maybe I should use the last of the gas in the tank to drive us off that hairpin turn in the mountains. I've often wondered what it would be like, if I made that turn too quickly one day and lost control over the car, and over the edge we went. What a way to go, right? Hell of a lot better than starving and freezing to death out here.

When morning came, the sun reflected off the snow and made everything around the car a blinding whiteness. Liz was asleep and her arms loosened their grip on Mallory. I saw my chance and carefully scooped her up, and covered Liz with a blanket. I stepped out of the car with Mallory in my arms.

I wanted to bury her properly, but the ground was too frozen to dig through with my bare hands. I had to make do with the snow. I brought her over to the big elm tree near the park. There was a crystal clean bank of snow that looked perfect. I knew when the snow melted she'd still be there, and would freak out whoever ended up finding her in the spring, probably start a police investigation. But I also knew that Liz and I would be long gone before then.

I kissed her forehead, and set her down in the snow. She looked so weird, all blue and her face scrunched up, but she still looked as beautiful as she did when she was born. I prayed to God to bring her to a good place, and to bring Liz and me to the same place. I found some comfort in the thought that we'd all be together again soon, and walked back to the car.

Sitting in the driver's seat, I thought about driving us over the cliff while Liz was still asleep. That way she'd die peacefully, and might not even know what was going on until it was too late. I played it out a dozen times in my head, but never turned the key in the ignition. I ate a

couple of cheese crackers and kept checking Liz to make sure she was still breathing, and sat there while it was warm in the sun.

When the sun started to fade, Liz stirred under the blanket. I panicked, not wanting to face her when she woke up and realized Mallory wasn't there. I started up the car and drove down Teluna, and when I reached the turn near Crescent Hill something made my hands turn the car onto that road instead of the one that would lead us to the mountains.

I found myself driving near the Newburne house. Dusk was settling in, I could see inside. Bob and Betty were rushing around the house like they were in a hurry. I parked the car in front of the house next door, and a couple minutes later the Newburne's garage door opened and a shiny gray Lexus rolled down the driveway. It passed us, and I glanced inside to see Bob behind the wheel, and Betty in the back as she fussed with a baby in a car seat.

When did they have a baby? Then I remembered. Betty had a baby just before Liz's maternity leave. Bob was talking about it at the office, they had a baby girl...hell is her name? Something with a C or a K. Bob was showing off newborn pictures, but I was too distracted since Liz could go into labor any minute. We had our own newborn on the way and I didn't pay much attention.

I remembered Bob saying our families should get together for birthdays and trips to Chuck E. Cheese since our kids would be the same age. Then that bastard let all of us go, so he could keep this big house in the hills.

"Where's Mallory?" Liz spoke from the backseat. I jumped, thought she was still asleep.

"Where's Mallory? Where is she, Harry?" She started to rummage around the backseat, as if I had her hidden in the empty cooler.

“Um...” I looked at the Newburne house, imagined how warm it must be inside. I bet they had lots of food, coffee...can't remember the last time we drank coffee. Hell, if we're going to die we might as well get a decent last meal. Even the guys on death row get a meal first.

“She's in there,” I said it before I thought about it, and pointed at the Newburne house. “I brought her in there so she could get warm. Let's go in and get her, okay?”

Liz looked at me, and I knew she didn't believe me. But she also knew that Mallory was dead, and was pretending otherwise. I just wanted inside that house.

“Okay, let's go get her.” Liz stepped out of the car, and I followed her. She must still be up for playing pretend. Figured if they caught us and put us in jail, at least we'd be indoors.

I remembered Bob had bragged in the office one day about the house key he'd hidden in the backyard. He thought he was so clever hiding it underneath a fake plastic rock, and the rest of us rolled our eyes when he walked away. Thankfully he still had that hide-a-key contraption. The fake rock was so obvious sitting apart from the garden, right next to the backdoor.

The door opened so easily, I half-expected an alarm to go off, but nothing happened. I brought Liz inside with me, and stopped her when she tried to turn the light switch.

“Let's keep the lights off, okay?”

I grabbed her hand and we went down the hallway. Much of the house was familiar from the barbeque a couple years ago. The end table near the guest bathroom still jutted out and I successfully sideswiped it.

The next hall led to the dining room, and the kitchen beyond that. I pulled Liz behind me and we walked through the dining room and entered the kitchen. Seemed like they redecorated, since the table looked bigger and the cabinets now had glass fronts so you could see the plates and cups inside.

I went straight for the fridge, and the sight of chicken salad, pickles and a gallon of milk almost gave me an orgasm. There was a loaf of bread on the counter, and I grabbed it along with the chicken salad. Liz took some glasses from the cabinet and sat down with me. She munched on a pickle while I spread chicken salad on the bread so fast it tore, but I didn't care. I stuffed my face with everything in front of me, and only took brief reprieves for swigs of milk.

"Slow down, Harry! You'll make yourself sick." She nibbled on a piece of bread and drank some milk.

"I don't care if I get sick, this tastes so damn good! I don't even like chicken salad!"

I started laughing. I don't know why, maybe just giddy from all the food, but I couldn't stop laughing. Liz cracked a smile, and soon joined in with me. It felt so good to be sitting there with her, laughing and eating. It'd been so long since we felt that good. I never wanted it to end.

"Think we could make some coffee?" Liz pointed at a canister on the counter with a label on it that said "Coffee," next to a similar one that said "Decaf."

"Why not?" I thought about looking around to see if ole Bob kept any cigars in the house.

Liz found some filters and started up the coffeemaker. The scent of brewing coffee wafted through the kitchen, one of the greatest smells I could've imagined at that point. I couldn't believe it when I felt myself getting hard, and wondered if Liz would be up for a little romp in Bob and Betty's bed.

The second the coffee was ready we heard a rumbling noise that sounded a lot like a garage door opening. I rushed over to the window and peered out. The shiny gray Lexus was pulling into the driveway.

“Oh my God Harry, we have to get out of here!” Liz put the food back into the fridge and turned off the coffeemaker. But I didn’t want to leave. I wasn’t ready yet. I thought if we hid out somewhere, they’d go to bed and we could sneak into the kitchen and get that feeling back.

“Harry, come on!” She grabbed my arm, but I wouldn’t move. The garage door closed, I heard footsteps. And the sound of a baby crying.

“Mallory?” Liz let go of my arm. “She’s here, Harry, she’s here!”

Liz ran out of the kitchen before I could stop her, so I ran after her. Bob and Betty with their baby walked through the door that connected up from the garage. For a few seconds, we all just stood there staring at each other. Then Betty screamed, and the baby’s cries grew louder.

“What in the name of God is going on here?” Bob placed his hands on his hips, the same way he did when he reprimanded someone at the office.

“Hi Bob, remember us?” I put my arm around Liz’s waist.

“Betty, get the baby upstairs, I’m calling the police!”

I considered letting him do it. At least in jail we’d be warm, have food and could stretch out for sleep. Bob grabbed a cordless phone from the wall and started to dial. Without even thinking about it, my hand flew up and slapped the phone out of his hand.

“You don’t remember us, do you? But I guess that’s because an asshole like you doesn’t give two shits about the people he put out in the street.”

“What? I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Berkshire Comm, you moron. You sold it, you took away both our jobs.”

I could hear the baby screeching. Liz turned toward the sound. I grabbed her hand to keep her next to me.

“That doesn’t give you any right to break into my home!” Bob reached down to pick up the phone. I let go of Liz’s hand and shoved Bob against the wall.

“Unhand me! Unhand me!” Man, he always talked like a douche bag.

“Get out of here, Liz!” I shouted and kept my grip on Bob. Liz left the room.

“Where is she going? What are you doing?”

“This has been a long time coming, ole Bobby Newburne.”

I punched him square in his jaw, blood squirted out of his mouth and he doubled over. I never felt so alive. I don’t know if it was the food in my belly, the erection bursting through my pants, or doing something I’d wanted to do for years, punch out my boss.

While Bob was trying to catch his breath, I gripped his shoulders and my knee found its way to his face. It hit his nose, and I heard this awful yet satisfying crunching sound. Blood oozed out, and dripped down his face.

Bob fell to his knees clutching his shattered nose. There was a fireplace a few feet away, and resting next to it was an iron poker. I didn’t stop and ask myself what I was intending to do. I just did it.

I picked up the poker. Bob was still on his knees, sobbing and bleeding and probably couldn’t even see what was coming at him. I held that poker with both hands, thought about the time my dad taught me how to chop wood, how to pick my mark and use the full force of my upper body.

I thought about Mallory, her frozen blue face, and that poker came down just like the axe had that day. My mark was the middle of Bob’s head, and just like that day I didn’t miss my mark.

I let go of the poker. It was stuck in his head. He fell over and collapsed to the floor, and then the poker twisted and tore out of his skull. He twitched a couple of times and then he was still. I didn't even realize I'd been holding my breath until I let it out, and felt my lungs gasp for air.

A brief thought came into my mind, that Bob wouldn't ever gasp for air again, and I shoved it aside as I ran upstairs to get Liz. We really had to get the hell out of there.

The baby stopped crying, so I had no sound to go by. The upstairs of the Newburne house had a long hallway and many doors that were closed, but one was open.

I walked over to it and stood in the doorway. The room was dark, but I could see the shape of someone.

"Liz? Is that you?" I stepped into the room. It was then I realized it was a nursery. Big crib in the middle of the room with a mobile above it, and Liz was standing next to the crib. She reached down and picked up the baby.

"We found her, Harry! We found Mallory! She's okay, she's okay!" Liz held the baby and half-laughed, half-cried. I didn't know which to do myself.

"Where's Betty?" I had the eerie feeling she'd already called the cops, and we'd be hearing sirens any second.

Liz didn't answer. She rocked the baby back and forth and seemed to be in a different world. The baby cooed and my eyes adjusted to the darkness in the room, and the rest of the nursery came into view. Stuffed bunnies and bears on a dresser, a changing table, a breast pump and on the floor a pair of feet, and then my line of vision centered on the body of Betty Newburne lying on the carpet.

She was perfectly still. Arms splayed out, with a knife sticking out of her chest. I assumed Liz grabbed it from the kitchen.

“Jesus Christ,” I whispered, and my voice was hoarse. I was partially relieved that there wouldn’t be any sirens approaching, at least not yet. I looked at Liz. She rocked the baby in her arms and had this delirious smile on her face.

“Hush little Mallory, don’t say a word, Mama’s gonna buy you a mocking-bird. If that mocking-bird don’t sing, Mama’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.”

I fell back against the wall behind me, and sank to the floor across from Betty. Liz was still singing. I didn’t have the heart to tell her the baby’s name wasn’t Mallory, but Clara. Suddenly everything I knew about the Newburnes came to me: Bob’s liking for hot pastrami for lunch, and those goofy Santa ties he wore in December; the greeting cards Betty sent us for every single holiday, even Flag Day; how depressed Bob was when his father passed away, and Betty sewed a mourning patch for him to wear on his sleeve. I always thought that was real classy. The Newburnes had always been a classy pair. Had been...the Newburnes were a “was” now.

Then, for the first time throughout everything, from the lay-offs to living in the car, even Mallory’s death, I cried. I looked at little Clara, who had classy parents and a great life ahead of her, now an orphan thanks to us. I bawled harder than she was bawling, and Liz kept singing. She kept singing, even when sirens could be heard outside, getting louder as they got closer. Betty did call the cops after all, she must’ve done it before Liz got to her.

I tried to get Liz to sneak out through the back door, but she wouldn’t budge. When I told her cops were outside, she started singing again. When I tried to take Clara from her, she shrieked and bit my hand. I leaned over and puked inside the crib. I should’ve driven us over the cliff at the hairpin turn. At least we’d be in heaven with Mallory. Now we’re going to hell.

Mommy

Jessica Guess

Jessica Guess is a writer and English teacher who hails from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She earned her Creative Writing MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato in 2018 and is the founder of the website Black Girl's Guide to Horror where she examines horror movies in terms of quality and intersectionality. Her creative work has been featured in Luna Station Quarterly and Mused BellaOnline Literary Review and she is currently writing a crime-fiction novel. She'd love if you followed her blog!

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Mommy

Jessica Guess

It shouldn't be taking her so damn long. Ruth gripped the steering wheel, her eyes never leaving the pale blue front door of 1411 Terrace. Just take the jam the old woman made you and tell her to get out. It's already 1:15. The Greyhound leaves at 3:00, but that should be more than enough time. Yeah, more than enough time. She relaxed a bit and let go of the wheel. Her hand slid down to her round belly.

Soft. Too soft. Too unlike the real thing. Too unlike hers.

Ruth moved her hand away and reached for her bag. Not that cheap purse that Darlene had given her for her birthday, but the diaper bag she had bought herself three months ago. White with pink lacey frills and teddy bears in dressed in princess dresses. Only thirty bucks. A great buy! She searched through it to make sure she had everything she needed.

Yellow onesie. Forceps. Tiny ducky socks. Scalpel. Sunflower bonnet. Retractor. Formula. Clamp. Diapers. Sponges. White baby booties. Gloves. Blankie. Everything here.

Wait, no. Not everything. Where the fuck was the syringe? Back at the house? On the counter? Deeper, deeper into the bag, push, remove, push, remove, until...

Eureka! The small silver case was hiding under a bottle. Inside of it was a hypodermic needle with liquid anesthetic for the animals at the vet clinic that Ruth would never step foot in again after today. Dr. Nelson would be pissed tomorrow when he saw how much she'd taken, but who cares? She'd be in Canada with her baby.

Oh, please be a girl. Be a girl, be a girl!

The idiot never bothered to check the sex of the baby. "We like surprises," she told Ruth at the Mommy yoga class. "Besides," the idiot went on, "we have enough baby clothes from the first four to be prepared for either." She laughed then and Ruth joined in, touching her own hollow belly while staring at the idiot's full one.

Four! She had four and a fifth on the way. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't. Not a lot of things in this world are fair though. Wars aren't fair, floods aren't fair, those damned plus signs never showing up on those fucking sticks weren't fair. But Ruth was done waiting for fairness to come to her. Today she'd make it for herself.

The door to 1411 finally opened and that white-haired bag of wrinkles walked out; the idiot waving at her from the door. There really was a glow about her. Well keep your damn glow. Today I'm gonna be a mommy.

Belly or no belly? Belly or no belly? The idiot might get suspicious if she suddenly wasn't pregnant, so belly it was. It might get in the way a bit, but Ruth was sure she could handle it. Besides, she could always take it off after she gave her the sedative.

Review one more time: lateral incision under abdomen. Cut through fat, and muscle until uterus is visible. Sponge away blood as needed. Hold open incision with retractor. Small cut to uteran wall (baby should be visible at this point). Push down slowly with fingers until head comes out of incision and...

Voilà!

Mommy.