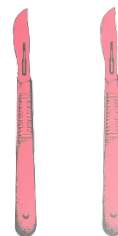


WIHM 11: GIRLS WITH 2020 VISION



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We Really Shouldn't

By Sonora Taylor

Kelly paced while she waited in line, and clutched her laptop bag to her side. She fingered the strap, ran her hands along its surface as she waited to speak through a keyboard. She preferred to speak when cloaked in the safety of typed words and written articles. When she spoke without that cloak, people looked into her – and worse, they spoke back.

Or even worse, they spoke first.

Or worst of all, they spoke against the things she wanted. And when they did that, Kelly wanted to respond with things she shouldn't say. Thoughts she shouldn't have. Words that had no place at all, even in her mind.

“Kelly?”

Kelly looked up. A smiling barista held a white cup in her direction.

“One small coffee for Kelly?”

Kelly managed a perfunctory nod as she took the cup. “Thank you.”

She walked towards a table tucked in the corner, away from the hubbub of drinks being steamed and office drones ordering jolts to get through the afternoon slump. A coffee shop wasn't her first choice, but her office was her apartment, and her apartment was being sprayed for bugs.

At least her computer could tell people to stay away in ways that she alone couldn't do. She sipped her drink and opened her laptop, readying her latest blog post. *Should We/Shouldn't We* had been Kelly's

pet project for years, a haven for her opinions and the debates she often held in her head. The blog gave her a place to share those thoughts with others – though others often added their own points, whether or not Kelly asked for them.

Still, Kelly wrote. Her next piece was poised to be a good one: a point-counterpoint on whether using public transit encouraged green initiatives, or discouraged cities from keeping their character by bringing in too many outsiders. Her fingers ran circles around the keyboard, and her words fell in rhythm with cups being handed to thirsty customers. She paused only to stretch and crack her neck.

A voice in her head reminded her not to focus so much that her neck got stiff. “It puts you out of commission for other things,” the voice whispered, hot in her ear as long fingers rubbed her shoulders.

She shook her head, and shook off the voice and its fingers. She had work to do.

She took one final sip, and was about to make one final keystroke, when that same voice said, “Kelly?”

Her fingers halted, the cursor beating in time with her heart as it failed to produce a closing sentence.

She looked up, and saw who she expected to see. Even though it’d been months since she’d heard that voice – outside of her own head, at least – she knew exactly whose it was.

“Josh.”

Josh smiled as he walked closer. He looked just like she remembered him – and like he hadn’t changed or showered since. He wore a wrinkled white t-shirt, faded jeans rumpled over a pair of dirty boots, stubble grown for an exact number of days, and blond hair oiled brown, as it only ever saw enough shampoo to keep the grease to a minimum.

He always managed to look like a slob – and like always, to Kelly’s dismay, he didn’t look bad. His faded clothes and lack of grooming did nothing to temper his cedar green eyes or his smile, both of which came dangerously close to her as he stopped in front of her table.

“It’s been a long time,” Josh said. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been okay,” she replied. She knew better than to give him too many details. “How about you?”

“Can’t complain. Mostly doing odd jobs here and there.” He cocked his eyebrows at her. “Are you still writing your blog?”

Kelly sighed a little. He always pressed for details – and like always, he managed to get them. “I am,” she said. “I’m working on a new post now, actually.”

“How about that?” Without asking, he pulled the chair across from her to the side of the table and sat down. “Working on the blog that brought us together.”

Kelly couldn’t help but smile. She tried to keep it as small as possible to let him know she smiled at the coincidence of it, not the memory. “Your comments were some of my earliest,” she said. “Not to mention the most colorful.”

“Hey, I liked what I read.” Josh leaned on the table, which moved his arm close to hers. A warmth crept across her skin, bridging the gap between them. “And I really liked the author.”

“Don’t.”

His smile fell, and she moved her arm to her lap.

“There’s a reason we ended things,” she said, her eyes on the monitor. “Please don’t remind me why we began them.”

“Hey, I’m just sharing a memory.” He removed his arm from the table, and folded both hands in his lap.

“Even if we’re not together anymore, we shared a lot. We always will.”

“Always did.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.” He gave a half-smile. “Always one to use the right word.”

“It matters. The smallest word can change a whole sentence. Sometimes a whole life.”

“Like ‘goodbye’?”

Her shoulders fell, and she closed her laptop. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Josh?”

Josh and Kelly both looked towards the voice. Josh’s eyes narrowed at the stranger who’d dare interrupt their exchange. Kelly recognized that look, the glare of animosity towards anyone who spoke to him without his desire. It was one she herself often gave – and one they never gave to each other. She pursed her lips to keep from smiling again.

The barista held another white cup. “Small coffee, for Josh?” The barista gave an extra-wide smile to him, one Kelly knew offered more than just the coffee.

Josh knew, too. He turned on the charm, and smiled back as he took the cup. “Thank you,” he said as he raised the cup. “Thanks a lot ...” He looked at her nametag, and Kelly saw his eyes take a side trip to her breasts. “Amanda?”

“Mandy,” she said with a giggle as she tucked back a strand of her long brown hair. Kelly rolled her eyes. She knew it was an act, that Josh was doing this because she was watching him. She shuddered anyway.

“Thanks, Mandy.” Josh nodded, then returned to Kelly. “Well, I was just passing through anyway,” he said with a shrug, “so I’ll leave you to it.”

Kelly nodded back. “It was nice to see you.” It was the truth, as hesitant as she was to admit it.

She should have known better than to admit it out loud. Josh smiled. “Would you like to have coffee tomorrow?” he asked.

Kelly blanched, but didn’t say no. He added, “Just to catch up. It’s been a long time.”

She nodded. “It has.” But had it been long enough? She wondered if it would ever be long enough.

“And the fact that I ran into you while you were working on your blog ...” Josh smiled. “Well, maybe something’s telling us we should reconnect.”

“We really shouldn’t,” Kelly said.

“Even just to catch up?”

“You didn’t say catch up. You said reconnect.”

He chuckled. “I said both.” Kelly rolled her eyes, but with a chuckle of her own. “But if you want to, we can keep it to ‘catching up.’”

She shouldn’t want to. She knew that catching up would risk reconnecting – something neither of them should do.

She pulled out her phone, and opened her calendar. “How about one o’clock?”

Kelly should have been writing. Instead, she was reading, with her legs stretched across the couch and a mug of chamomile tea by her side. All of her old posts were there, collecting dust on the digital shelf as their views stayed stagnant and their comments ceased. Looking through those old comments reminded her of the cruelty that the anonymous mask of the Internet allowed. Trolls peppered her posts with calls to kill herself, show her tits, or get a life. Even the more benign comments irked her, with requests to visit their own websites, misspelled thoughts on her words, or – her least favorite of all – suggestions on what she should say. “I’ll say what I want here,” she’d mutter aloud as she scrolled through their comments. “In the one place where I can.”

Rereading the commenters’ words reminded her of how lucky they were to be separated from her ire by a screen. But their words weren’t the ones she was looking for. She scrolled and skimmed until she found it – a comment that glowed on the page despite the candle she held for its author having dimmed long ago.

You make an excellent point on knives. A cheesy opening line, but one that caught Kelly’s eye nonetheless. She’d written a post on how frequently one should sharpen their kitchen tools. It wasn’t even a question for her. She meticulously sharpened them once a week, wanting no interference as she carved through onion skin and tomato pulp.

However odd it might have been, Kelly felt a strange urge to answer the comment – and find out more about the person who wrote it. They moved from comments to email, from email to phone, and soon, from the phone to a date.

For all of Josh's talk about signs, Kelly wondered how neither of them saw it as one when they bickered on their first date, a cooking class that he'd invited her to. "You're supposed to slice the carrot on the bias," she said, taking the knife from him so she could do it herself.

"You're just supposed to slice it," Josh said with a frown as he placed his hand over the remaining carrots. "It doesn't matter how."

"But it does. It says so right on the recipe."

"As long as they're sliced, the dish will be fine."

"It affects everything: cooking time, evenness, presentation ..."

Josh snorted. "Presentation?"

Kelly glared at him. "Yes. It matters."

"Excuse me." Kelly and Josh looked up, and saw the instructor stare at them with pursed lips and eyes as thin as the strands of saffron on the counter. "Is there a problem here?"

Kelly and Josh narrowed their eyes, emanating coolness that widened the instructor's stern expression into one of fear. "No," Kelly said, keeping her reply quick in an effort to get the instructor to leave as soon as possible. "We're just having a disagreement."

"Which *we* 'll settle," Josh added.

"Please ... try to keep it down," the instructor said. Kelly tried not to snicker at the way his voice stammered. "You're bothering the other students."

“Well, you’re bothering us,” Josh spat. Kelly turned to face him with wide eyes of her own. His gall was surprising – and exactly what she wanted to say. It was a bit of a turn-on.

The instructor regained his composure, and set his face once more. “Please leave.”

“We will,” Josh said, not even asking Kelly if she wanted to leave. He didn’t need to. She wanted to go wherever he went.

“What an asshole,” Josh said as the door closed behind them.

“Right? We weren’t even that loud.” She moved towards Josh’s body to keep warm as they walked into the cold.

“Fuck him and fuck that class. Let’s cook at my place – and slice the carrots any which way, *en bias* or in chunks.”

“However the recipe says,” Kelly insisted. He rolled his eyes, and she narrowed hers. “It does matter, Josh.”

He smiled, and wrapped his arm around her waist. “All that matters to me is cooking with you.”

Kelly rolled her eyes again, but with less conviction. She knew she shouldn’t be charmed, but even then, she knew that Josh had a way of breaking through her constraints against what she shouldn’t do.

The strength of his charm was only so much against the weight of her convictions. “We shouldn’t do this anymore,” Kelly said as she looked out his living room window. She didn’t want his eyes or his

smile to bring her back in, the way they had so many times over the past eleven months when she thought of ending things for good.

“Do what?” Josh asked. Kelly closed her eyes so he wouldn’t see her roll them. “Make dinner?”

“No.” She spun to face him, and her glare was tempered by how sad he looked, something he didn’t hide quickly enough. Kelly knew he’d only joked to hide his sadness, but hiding behind jokes was a band-aid on the wound of their relationship.

“I’m serious, Josh,” she said, sighing as she looked at the floor. “All we do is argue, and when we try to talk about it, all you do is make jokes.”

“There’re a lot of other things I do.” He moved closer to her, and held her arms. “Things we do together.”

“Things we shouldn’t do together.”

“Who cares if we should or shouldn’t do them?” He leaned down towards her shoulder. “Just as long as we do them together.”

Kelly closed her eyes. The things they did together were things she never thought of actually doing until she met him. Until he brought the thoughts she’d kept inside up to the surface, and all of them – all of her – breathed for air upon their escape.

Even with Josh, though, a part of her thought that those thoughts shouldn’t be there. And they wouldn’t be there, if Josh would only leave. And Josh would only leave if he believed that Kelly didn’t want to do the things they did.

Kelly knew she couldn't convince him of that. She could, however, convince him of the one thing they did that neither of them liked to do with one another. The one thing that reminded them that they weren't, in fact, one.

"We argue," she said. "Is that okay, as long as we do it together?"

He stopped his descent. She kept her shoulders stiff. He moved his head back up, and looked in her eyes.

"Do we really argue that much?"

"We're arguing about how much we argue. Shouldn't that tell you everything you need to know about our relationship?"

He smiled a little. "I thought knives did that."

She chuckled, despite herself, at her memories — the comment on her blog, their first date, and the others. Her voice caught as she realized their entire relationship would soon be a memory.

It needed to be. "I can't do this anymore," she said, looking back down at the floor.

"Can't?" he whispered. "Or shouldn't?"

She stayed quiet, and closed her eyes when she felt his lips brush her ear. "The distinction matters," he said.

She refused to be charmed by his focus on wording. "Both."

He sighed against her ear. "If you say so."

She did, and he reluctantly agreed. "You'll always mean something to me," he said as she exited his house.

“You will too,” she admitted, pausing in the doorway. “I’ll always think of you when I follow a recipe.”

He chuckled. “And I’ll always think of you when I don’t follow directions.”

Kelly stayed true to her word, thinking of him whenever she prepared dinner. She’d find herself holding the knife to the side, offering it to a phantom who would help her make the necessary cuts. The ache lessened with each passing month, but like a stubborn stain on a towel run many times through the wash, it never disappeared. It simply faded, living on in Kelly’s memory as a closed chapter in her life.

Thanks to her having to work in the coffee shop that day, that chapter hadn’t been the end of the book. Kelly set her laptop on the coffee table, then leaned against a pillow and stared at the ceiling. Months had passed, and Josh had only appeared in her dreams and memories. Why had she seen him today? What had brought him to her?

Kelly shook her head. They’d only picked up coffee at the same place, at the same time, and said a quick hello. There was no fate involved. That was Josh’s thinking.

She sighed a little as she traced the rim of her teacup. That was Josh’s thinking, and only a few hours after he’d been back in her life, she was once again sharing his thoughts.

“Josh?”

Josh grabbed their coffee from the barista – thankfully someone other than Mandy – while Kelly grabbed a table. Josh smiled as he took the seat across from her. He’d taken his second shower for the week, but otherwise looked the same as yesterday, save for the stubble growing a little further into a

scant blond beard. Kelly tried not to look at his beard, or his lips. Instead, she focused on the coffee cup he scooted towards her. “Just a little milk,” he said. “Just the way you like it.”

Kelly smiled. “Thank you.”

“So.” Josh sipped his coffee. “How have you been?”

“You asked me that yesterday. I’m still fine.”

“Even with me back in your life?”

“You’re in my afternoon, not my life.”

“You were always a terrible liar, Kelly. I know I’ve been in your other afternoons – and not just the ones we spent together.”

Kelly looked down to avoid the net cast by Josh seductively raising his eyebrow. “I can lie when it matters – like when I told you how good a job you did cutting up steaks for dinner.”

Josh chuckled, and Kelly returned her gaze to him. “I never believed you then, either,” he said.

“Did you ever believe anything I said?”

“Yes, but the things I believed are things you don’t think we should talk about now.”

“I don’t. Not really, anyway.”

Josh smiled, and leaned back in his chair. His chest pushed against the limits of his shirt, and Kelly tried not to notice. She couldn’t hold back the memory of running her fingers along its hairs, navigating the

golden fields upon his skin and dirtying them with her sweat. She'd trace her fingertips along his heart, and spill secrets as he traced her lips and kissed her shoulder.

"Some of the things we talked about, though ..." Josh's smile grew, and she knew that he was reliving the same memories. She could almost see them running through his head, his thoughts coursing through her as strongly as they had when they were together. Back when they were so close to being one that Kelly had had to sever them back into two.

"Like on our third date," he continued, which snapped her out of her thoughts. He leaned closer to her. Close enough that she felt his breath on her cheek as he spoke. She saw the curls on his chest peek over his collar, and curled her fingers under her palm to keep from touching them. "When you told me –"

"Don't."

Josh chuckled a little. "You didn't tell me that. Quite the opposite."

"Maybe it's what I should've said."

"I know you don't believe that." His smile became sly. "Like I said: terrible liar."

Kelly smiled as well, her laugh coming out in a puff that sent the steam of her coffee flying towards him.

"You're right," she conceded. "I don't regret saying anything I said to you, or any of the things we shared."

"Do you regret ending them?"

Kelly looked him square in his beautiful eyes. "No."

Josh looked at her for a few moments. His shoulders rose as he took a deep breath. “I wish you were lying,” he said at last.

“Like you lied to me yesterday?”

His brow furrowed. “Yesterday?”

“You said you just wanted to catch up. All we’ve done today is talk about what we had.” Kelly’s eyes narrowed, her voice growing more cross with each word spoken. “And I know you’re talking about that because you want to reconnect, even though you said that wasn’t what you meant.”

“Well Jesus, Kelly, I can’t help it!” He sat back up, his eyes and voice losing all of their cool. “We had something. Something I regret losing every day. And maybe it should’ve ended when it did. But does that mean we shouldn’t start over again now?”

“No,” Kelly said, pushing aside her cup. She’d lost all of her thirst. “I should go.”

“No, what?”

She furrowed her brow. “What do you mean, ‘what?’”

“No, we shouldn’t start over?” He stood up, but only to move his chair closer to her. To corner her in. Kelly didn’t feel trapped, which scared her more than his maneuvering. “Or no, it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t?”

Kelly began to protest, and instead felt a lump form in her throat. Every memory of their time together was manifesting, reminding her of how much she missed him. How much she shouldn’t want what they had together, or what they did together. How much she shouldn’t want him – and how much she did anyway.

“I should go,” she said again, lifting her purse.

“Should you, or shouldn’t you?”

Kelly glared at him, which stopped his smile dead in its tracks. “Don’t turn this into a fucking joke, Josh.”

“Fine.” Josh narrowed his eyes. “Though the real joke is the name of that blog. You know *Should We/Shouldn’t We* gives the same answer, right?”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“‘Shouldn’t We’ implies yes. Should we go to the store? *Shouldn’t* we go to the store?”

Kelly stood frozen, trapped by a meaning she’d never considered before – and one she couldn’t deny was correct.

Josh stood and leaned in close to her, his expression cold. “It’s like Will They/Won’t They. One is a question of happening. The other’s a plea for it to happen.”

“Who the fuck cares?” Kelly’s exasperation grew harder to hide under the din of the coffee shop’s noise. She saw a few people look at them, and longed to get away before they could interfere.

“Neither of them imply opposites.” Josh moved closer, close enough to lower his voice. It only landed on Kelly’s ears. “Neither of them say no.”

She couldn’t listen to him anymore, not if she wanted to keep the resolve to do what she should do.

“Goodbye, Josh.”

He gave a small smile. “That’s not no.”

“Goodbye.” She pursed her lips as she swiveled past him, willing herself to not be drawn in. She sped down the sidewalk as the door slammed behind her. She wove through people heading back to their offices. All ignored her, which was just what she wanted them to do. What they should be doing.

“Kelly!”

Kelly stopped. There was always one who didn’t ignore her. There was only one she couldn’t ignore.

Josh approached her, and slowed when he saw that he had her attention. He stopped a foot away from her. It was still too close. It wasn’t close enough.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Kelly closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry for what happened in there.” He sighed, but stopped when she squeezed his elbow. He closed his eyes, savoring even the smallest of touches.

She removed her hand, and he opened his eyes again. Something told her to end it there. Something smaller told her to stay and say more. Though the desire to stay grew with each beat of her heart, she knew what she should do – even if it wasn’t what she wanted.

“Goodbye, Josh.” She turned to walk away.

“I found someone.”

Kelly stopped.

“Someone else?” she asked.

“Yes.” She heard him walk towards her. “Someone new. Just yesterday.” His footsteps ceased, and she felt his breath on her neck. “Just after we met.”

His fingers landed on her skin. She shuddered at his touch, the chill dissolving into tingles that bled over her skin. They pulsed through her veins and breathed new life into her bones.

“Do you like her?”

“Yes.” His body joined his fingers against her skin. “But things aren’t the same without you,” he said.

“Aren’t they?”

She felt him smile against her ear, and she chuckled a little as he gave her a kiss. “Come home with me,” he whispered.

She leaned against him, sighing as his lips moved down to her neck. “I shouldn’t,” she said, with barely a quarter of her heart.

He turned her around, pressing his forehead against hers as he traced her cheek. “Shouldn’t you?”

Kelly felt invigorated as they rode to Josh’s place, kissing him the way she had when they were together. They were together now. They had to be. To banish him was to banish her. They needed each other. They needed to do the things they shouldn’t do. It was the only way they could survive. She curled her fingers under his shirt collar, holding the fabric tight as the hairs beneath it tickled her knuckles. She didn’t care if the Uber driver could see. She only cared about being near Josh again.

“We’re here.”

Kelly and Josh separated, and saw the driver giving them a pointed look. Josh smiled all the same.

“Thanks,” he said, giving a quick wave. The driver furrowed her brow, and Kelly giggled as they exited the car and sped to Josh’s house.

Josh pulled her to him as soon as the door closed. He ran his hands up and down her waist, ran his lips up and down her neck. “I missed you so much,” he whispered, his breath hot on her ear. He pressed against her, and began to lift her shirt.

“Where is she?”

Josh dropped her shirt, and looked into her eyes. “She?” he asked. “There’s only us.” He began to kiss her neck. “That’s all there ever is.”

“Don’t lie to me.” Kelly pushed him away, then began to run her palms over his body, softening him up to loosen his words. “I know she’s here.”

He smiled. “You know me too well.”

“I should, after all we’ve shared.” She kissed him, and gently bit his lip as she pulled away. “Where is she?”

He kissed her back, then moved his lips to her earlobe and gave it a gentle nip. “If you know me so well,” he whispered, “then you should know exactly where she is.”

“Tell me a secret.”

Kelly and Josh lay on his bed, an empty bottle of wine on his bed stand. She'd spent the better part of the past hour licking wine from his lips, sighing as they spoke in whispers and touched each other with tongues and fingertips alike. It was only their third date, and Kelly already felt so close to him, as if the only thing between them was a layer of skin and a body containing their entwined souls.

"Any secret?" she asked.

"Any of yours."

Kelly laughed as he kissed her neck. It was only their third date, and already she couldn't fool Josh with her words. "What if I don't have any?"

He looked up at her with a bemused grin. "I know you have them." He traced his finger along her cheek. "And I know you're dying to share them with someone."

She closed her eyes. "Maybe they shouldn't be told."

"Maybe you should tell them to me." He kissed her lips, which broke into a small smile. "Maybe I share them."

He couldn't know that, but something told her that maybe, just maybe, he did. She kissed him, and began to whisper. "I love it when it's us," she said.

"That's not a secret," he whispered as he kissed her back.

"I hate it when we're interrupted," she continued.

"Like that asshole at the cooking class?"

“Like anyone. By people on the street, by waiters interrupting us when we just want to eat ... I hate it when they’re there. And I love it when we disappear together and cut them out of our lives.”

“I love that too.” He pulled down her panties, kissing a line from her shoulder to her stomach. Kelly gasped upon his touch, upon the possibilities that the two of them together could realize.

“But maybe if we brought them in together ... maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.”

He paused, and looked up at her. “Brought them here?” he asked. “With us?”

“Yes. With both of us.”

He smiled, and moved his fingers up her side as he returned to her neck. “I’d like that,” he said as he kissed her neck. “I’d like that a lot.”

“I would too.” She pulled him close and kissed his chin. The stubble scratched her, and she relished the thought of licking her chapped lips the next morning. “Especially when we get rid of them after.”

Josh didn’t pause. He rolled on top of her, and Kelly felt his growing erection. “As we should,” he whispered.

Kelly moaned as he slid between her legs. “As we will.”

“Josh?”

Kelly narrowed her eyes. She recognized that voice. It had called their names before. “Seriously, Josh?” she said. “The fucking barista?”

Josh shrugged, and a devious grin crossed his face. “She was cute.”

Kelly rolled her eyes. “You always went for the easy ones.”

“What does it matter?” He gestured towards his bedroom door. “As long as they end up here.”

Kelly smiled a little as she walked through the door and saw the barista on the bed. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Who is that?” The barista looked from right to left, despite the blindfold obstructing her view.

“It’s Kelly, Mandy,” Josh said. “Don’t you remember from yesterday?”

“What’s going on?” Mandy asked as she moved her head back to the right. It was all she could do, since her wrists and ankles were handcuffed to the bedposts.

Josh walked towards her and traced his fingers along her chin. Mandy shuddered upon his touch. He removed the blindfold, revealing frantic eyes underneath. They sped from Josh to Kelly, a stray tear racing down her chin. “Did he get you too?” she asked, looking up at Kelly.

Kelly laughed at Mandy’s mistake, and smiled when she saw that her laughter scared Mandy more. “I did,” Josh said, a smile settling on his lips as he looked at Kelly. “And I couldn’t be happier.”

Kelly smiled back at him. “Neither could I.”

“Please let me go.” They turned their attention back to Mandy, who bit her lip to keep from crying. “I won’t tell the cops. I won’t even tell my friends. Just let me go.”

Josh stroked his beard, and Kelly bit her own lip to keep from laughing again. “Maybe we should,” he mused. He walked towards the bed, and touched the keys on the bedside table. The woman’s eyes widened further, hesitant delight flickering in her irises.

Josh moved his hand. “But maybe we shouldn’t.” Kelly grinned as she saw his fingers float down to the drawer. He opened it, and brought forth his largest knife. Kelly’s eyes lit up, while Mandy’s widened in fear. Josh held it out as he walked back to Kelly. She lowered his hand so she could kiss him without getting cut. Her lips met his, and she held him as close as she could, vowing to keep them as one.

“Let me go!”

They stopped. Josh pulled away, and turned to face Mandy. Kelly narrowed her eyes. She and Josh weren’t one – not with someone else around. Not with all the others they avoided together, then decided together to take care of themselves. To sever them from their existence, breaking the others back into two – or four, or even ten, depending on Kelly’s mood.

Josh smiled again, and looked at Kelly, raising his eyebrow as he held up the knife. “Should we?”

Kelly smirked, and took the knife from his hand. “Shouldn’t we?”

“Please, Kelly.” Mandy’s lip trembled as the anger in her eyes flickered away. Scared resignation took its place, and Kelly almost felt sorry for her. “Please let me go,” she whimpered.

Kelly walked towards Mandy, and knelt by her side. “I should,” she said. She ran her fingers through Mandy’s hair. Sweat slicked Kelly’s palms as she gave Mandy a gentle caress.

Mandy closed her eyes. Took a breath.

Kelly grabbed Mandy’s hair. She yanked back her head, and Mandy’s eyes snapped open as Kelly placed the blade against her throat. “But I won’t.”

Author Bio:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *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. Taylor's short stories frequently appear in *The Sirens Call*, a bi-monthly horror eZine. Her work has also appeared in *Frozen Wavelets*, a speculative flash fiction and poetry journal; *Mercurial Stories*, a weekly flash fiction literary journal; *Tales to Terrify*, a weekly horror podcast; and the Ladies of Horror fiction podcast. Her third short story collection, *Little Paranoias*, is now available on Amazon. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

Voyeur

By Lydia Prime

My mentor had done this procedure countless times but he was getting on in years, it was now my turn. As we entered the room, I turned to be sure he'd noticed. The subtle scent of overly ripe fruit in a room with no such dressings; the aroma of an expiration past due.

I walked over to the patient and examined her pale clammy skin. Her pulse weakened, her breath shallow. No wonder Death visited this room. I gulped and returned to my mentor's side.

Our patient let out a faint whimper that neither of us could decipher. At the word of my aged tutor, I began administering treatment. An injection of morphine to calm her, ease her into bliss, followed by several well placed leeches to suck out the monster who held her soul captive.

“Quickly, quickly now!” His harsh whisper scratched through my ears.

“But... she just... and...” I managed to stammer.

“Yes, yes. A horrible tragedy all that, a grievous state.” His head hung low for the briefest of moments until his hands found their way back to tidying up. I couldn't move, just watched while he placed the tools back into his bag. “Don't just stand there boy!” His raspy voice coached me. I grabbed up the blood-soaked sheets and tossed them into my own bag...

“Get the leeches boy, the leeches!” His voice rang in my head. I turned, knocking my bag to the floor.

The leeches had grown fat, too fat, as they continued their suckling while the patient withered. Plucking the engorged creatures off her tore sheets of wallpaper flesh from the desiccated carcass. I glanced at my

guardian through terrified eyes; he himself shook at the horror before us. This wasn't the way it was meant to be.

I ran to the wooden basin and flung them in, foolishly assuming I'd have time to dissect them later.

Before I could blink, they swirled through the cracks, found each chink to slither through. *No! No! No!*

With bare hands, I tried pulling them back but they were already gone.

Exhausted from the struggle, I turned from the useless pail only to find a figure standing behind my mentor. I tried to warn him but my voice escaped as quickly as the leeches had. I watched as it sliced through his torso, dropping meat haphazardly to the wooden floor. I wept as it devoured our patient one glutinous gulp at a time. I howled with fear as the figure turned its attentions toward me.

Perhaps Death wasn't only a visitor but a voyeur...

Author Bio:

Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed just waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent the nightmares others dare not tread. When she's not trying to shred scraps of humanity from the unsuspecting, she writes stories and poems of the horror and dark fiction variety (often found on penofthedamned.com or spreadingthewritersword.com). Part of the menagerie that is Sirens Call Publications, she's no stranger to the publishing and writing world. Most recently, she contributed to Kandisha Press' Under Her Black Wings: 2020 Women of Horror Anthology, with her story 'Sadie'. By day, however, she's almost always behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

Beautiful Dream

By Julia Benally

The body of a woman was discovered earlier today near the Rim in northeast Arizona. Authorities are asking that residents stay in their homes. They believe that it may be the same suspect who killed Lillian Billings in Payson last month.

Tierney rubbed her delicate chin. “I hope Mitch will be safe coming home.”

“Tierney,” a husky female voice snipped from the kitchen, “get away from that T.V. I need more flour.”

The small woman jumped. Who was here? The stranger sounded as if she knew Tierney. Poking her head into the kitchen, she beheld a rough woman kneading dough on the plastic fold-up table. Leaves and pine needles hung in her tangled black hair like bugs in a spider web.

“Um...” Tierney rubbed the collar of her white shirt between a thumb and forefinger. “Wh—who are you?”

The woman stared at the ceiling, as if supplicating for help. “Janice.” She glared at Tierney. “Now get me the flour!”

Tierney’s shoulders inched forward. “O-okay.” She hefted the flour onto the table. Goodness, the strange woman was too bossy for Tierney’s taste. Hopefully Janice didn’t have too many demands; Tierney wasn’t sure if she could carry them all out. It seemed wrong not to obey Janice. What would Mitch say about this? He wouldn’t be home for another hour.

Janice grabbed a handful of dough. “I didn’t think it would be this sticky.” She dumped it onto a wooden cutting board. “But of course, only *I* think it’s sticky. As soon as I stop believing it’s sticky, it won’t be anymore.”

Tierney sat on a red stool. “Um...s-sorry, but what are you talking about?”

Janice punched the dough. “Beliefs! It’s what you believe!”

“But it’s still sticky. Sh-shouldn’t you add more flour?”

“That’s what you believe.”

Tierney decided she had better change the subject. What could she talk about, though? Her blue eyes scanned Janice’s filthy form. It wasn’t just leaves in tangled hair, but Janice’s clothes were also torn and stained. Dust stuck to Janice’s ashen arms.

“You’re a mess,” said Tierney, realizing she had sounded too bold. “D-did you even wash your hands b-before you started?” Did she sound too critical?

Janice coughed into the dough. “Of course I washed my hands.” A crunchy brown leaf flitted to the linoleum floor and landed on a faded pink flower. “Nobody will get sick from me. Do you know how I know? Because I believe it to be so!”

“I-I don’t think...” Tierney stuck her fingers in her mouth.

“That’s why you’ll get sick. You believe it. Everybody who believes it will get sick.” Janice flipped the dough over, *squelch!* “Ms. Hennesy doesn’t believe it. She won’t get sick.”

Tierney yanked her collar. “Ms. Hennesy?” Did Janice think Tierney knew her?

Janice tossed hair out of her face. “Ask her. She’s at the door.”

No sooner had she said it than *rap-rap-rap!*

Tierney screamed. “H-how did you...”

Janice stared at the ceiling for help again. “Get the door!” This tiny woman was enough to drive a lunatic insane.

“I-I...okay.” Tierney scrambled off the stool and opened the door. A tall stately woman in a dark blue suit stood on the porch. Her blonde hair was done up in a French bun. Leaves and pine needles stuck in the golden strands.

“Oh!” Tierney could hardly believe it. Janice was right. How did she know?

“I’m Ms. Hennesy,” said the woman. “I’m here to see Janice.” She pushed into the small house and marched to the kitchen. “Janice, who is that girl?”

“Tierney.” Janice sounded annoyed.

“Has she been here long?”

“She was here first.”

“That means she’s the one ruining this disgraceful place.” Tierney peeped into the kitchen as Ms. Hennesy draped her suit coat on a chair. “Tierney, wash the dishes.” She didn’t even look at Tierney. “Why don’t you take care of your house?” Removing her white heels, she lounged in a chair.

Tierney gripped the wall. Ms. Hennesy was bossier than Janice! What was she to do? If only Mitch were home!

“But...I...”

“None of your excuses. This is your house.” Ms. Hennesy indicated the sink with a long glossy nail.

“Take care of it. Were you not here first? What kind of an impression are you making?”

Heat ran up Tierney’s neck and reddened her cheeks. “Oh...o-okay. I d-didn’t expect—I mean.”

Janice pounded her fist on the table. “Now, Tierney!”

Tierney fluttered to the sink. If this was her house, then surely she had to make peace in it! What could she say to Ms. Hennesy to settle her down? What did they have in common? She glanced at Janice, who turned the stove on. Good, she wasn’t glaring back at her. It was awful when Janice glared. Daggers could leap from those glittering black eyes. Janice had eyes like the panther Tierney had seen at the zoo last summer.

“M-Ms. Hennesy,” said Tierney, “Janice sneezed in the dough b-before you came. She said you didn’t believe that you would get sick. Why?”

Ms. Hennesy groaned in exasperation. “Janice, please?”

Janice began rolling the dough into balls. “How many times do I have to tell you, it’s what you believe, not what you see. I might not even be here. Ms. Hennesy might not be here. Are *you* even here? Did I really sneeze in the dough? We may be a dream, for all you know. Therefore, you won’t get sick. Nothing can get sick from nothing.”

Ms. Hennesy smoothed her skirt. “I didn’t see it, therefore it isn’t true.”

“You see?” said Janice. “It only really happened if we all saw it.”

“Therefore, whatever you say is a lie,” said Ms. Hennesy.

Tierney grabbed her head. “You’re confusing me!”

“Dearie, you have the I.Q. of a homunculus.” Ms. Hennesy shined her nails on her blouse. “Imagine that!”

Bam-bam-bam!

“That’ll be Chloe,” said Janice.

Tierney dropped the dishes in the sink. Greasy water drenched her front. “Wh-who’s Chloe?”

“Go find out.”

Tierney fled from the kitchen. What an awful day. How many more people were coming? Hopefully this new person was nicer. It didn’t seem like Ms. Hennesy and Janice knew anyone nice, though.

The woman’s head was shaved and her clothes were missing, although there were no signs of sexual assault on her body.

“Tierney!” Janice shrieked. “I told you to turn it off!”

Bam-bam-bam! Bam-bam-bam!

“Haven’t you got the door yet?” Something crashed in the kitchen.

Tierney squeaked and opened the door. A teenage girl in a mini-skirt and silk shirt popped a blue bubble in her mouth. She twirled a string of sky blue hair on her finger. Four thick pigtails stuck out of her head. More hair veiled her eyes and cupped her pointed chin. Leaves and dirt peppered her frame.

“Um...” Tierney twisted her collar. “W-what can I do for you?”

The girl rolled her purple eyes. “What can you do for me?” She laughed. “Get out of my way and let me in the house.” She shoved past Tierney, swinging her hips. “What’s up, Janice? Hey, Ms. Hennesy.”

“Hi, Chloe,” said Janice, “how are you?”

“Hello, dear,” said Ms. Hennesy.

“I finally got it on with David,” said Chloe.

Janice cooed. “Was it good?”

Tierney skulked back into the kitchen. Chloe had taken her stool. The girl didn’t smell very good.

Tierney made a mental note to wipe the stool down later. She returned to the sink. More dishes had accumulated in the water since she had gone to answer the door. She had never detested washing dishes so much. If only everyone would leave!

“What’s the matter, Tierney, never heard a conversation like this before?”

Tierney turned from the sink. Had someone addressed her? Chloe was glaring at her.

“I’m s-sorry,” said Tierney, “I wasn’t listening.”

“Just like Tierney.” Chloe rolled her eyes. “Always off in her own world, doesn’t know what’s going on.”

Tierney gripped the wet spot on her shirt. “I-I know what’s going on.” She glanced at Janice and Ms. Hennesy. This was an opportunity to show them that she wasn’t so airheaded. “D-did you hear about the murders?”

Ms. Hennesy groaned. “You mean what’s been blaring on the T.V. this last half hour?”

Janice slapped out a tortilla. “I told you to turn that stupid thing off twice now! You think we want it to exist?”

Tierney grew desperate. “But it *does* exist. The murders *did* happen!”

“Is there any such thing as truth?” said Janice.

Chloe rolled her eyes so far back that it was a wonder that they came back down. “Listen, *Tierney*.”

Tap-tap!

“Abby’s here,” said Janice. “The door, Tierney. Turn the T.V. off this time.” She slapped the tortilla in the pan.

Tierney scuttled by Chloe, who stared at her as if she had never seen anything so weird.

“That girl gets on my nerves,” Janice said before Tierney had completely left the room. “What’s the matter with her?”

Chloe popped a bubble in response.

“Mitch,” said Ms. Hennesy, “always wanted a clinging, helpless, stupid creature.”

Tierney's heart seized up. They knew her husband? Were these awful people his friends? She couldn't believe such a thing. Mitch was the sweetest man that had ever lived. How could she confront them about it? Oh dear, where was Mitch? She glanced at the clock. Only thirty minutes had passed!

Switching off the television, she opened the door. A five-year-old girl stood on the porch. Leaves filled her windswept brown locks. Her cheeks were rosy from cold and running. Smiling, Tierney rested her hands on her knees.

"Hello, what are you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous? There's a suspect running around."

The girl scowled. "I don't want to talk to you! Where's Janice?"

Tierney stepped back like the girl was toxic. "Sh-she's in the kitchen."

"Move!" The girl stomped on her foot and ran inside. Her voice took on a playful note. "Hi, everyone!"

"Hi, Abby!" they cried, as if she were so cute.

Tierney stared at the floor. This was horrible! How could she make these creatures leave? They might rise up and beat her to a pulp! She gazed at her thin little hands. Abby's wrists were thicker than hers. She had the lurking suspicion that Abby could hurt her. Only thirty seconds had gone by since the child had come. It felt like hours!

"You must be strong, Tierney," she whispered to herself. "You still have dishes to do. You will do them!" She forced her feet back to the kitchen.

Abby thrust a finger at her. "I don't like her."

"Nobody does." Chloe sniggered. "She's just washing dishes. Don't pay attention to her."

Amazingly, nobody did. Ms. Hennesy fried meat and beans in a pan. Tierney didn't like that combination, but it diverted the tall woman's attention. Chloe sliced up lettuce and tomatoes. Tierney wished that she would bring out the cheese and hot sauce, but said nothing. It would call attention to herself. If only Janice had thrown out the dough! Tierney bit her tongue. Janice would just go on with that madness about existence. It gave her the creeps.

"Tierney is so sweet," said Chloe.

Had Tierney heard correctly? She turned to Chloe, who smiled. How did this happen? Had Tierney's perseverance paid off?

"Thank you, Chloe," said Tierney.

Chloe rose to her feet. "I bet if she got cut, sugar would come out." She turned the knife in her hand. Light winked on the mirror surface.

The blood rushed from Tierney's cheeks. "What?" She pressed against the sink. "Oh, Chloe, please don't!"

Seizing Tierney's fragile arm, Chloe slashed it with the knife. Tierney screamed. Blood splattered the pale pink flowers on the floor. Red rivulets seeped into Tierney's white shirt. Pale bone peeped through the parted skin. Tierney slid to the floor, clutching her arm.

Chloe chortled. "Her arm feels like it's made out of cartilage." Hopping on the stool, she continued chopping lettuce. Dark blood bathed the crispy leaves.

Abby cackled. "That was funny! Do it again!"

Janice tossed a hot tortilla onto a pile of others. "What are you crying about now, Tierney?"

“She cut my arm,” Tierney sobbed. “It hurts!”

“I saw nothing, so nothing happened. You’re lying again.”

“There’s blood on the floor! Look at my arm!” Tierney could feel hysterics rising to her throat.

“Who’s to say there’s blood?” Janice slapped out another tortilla. “We all see it differently. Chloe sees sugar and Abby sees a joke. You can see it as blood if you want, but since you don’t exist, there is no blood.” She dropped the tortilla in the pan. “Whatever you say is a lie. Nothing can say truth if there is nothing. Set the table.”

What could Tierney do? They were so much bigger than her, so much surer of themselves. Perhaps there was no blood. As she set the table, trails of blood dripped across the plastic surface. They seeped into the grainy pattern and spread, scarlet snowflakes on white snow. Red smeared the clean glass plates.

“I don’t want this plate,” said Abby. “I want the blue plate with the bird on it.”

Tierney bit her lip. “How did you know I have a plate like that?” She recalled that Ms. Hennesy and Janice knew Mitch. Was he seeing them? The thought entered her head before she could stop it. She suddenly felt lightheaded.

Chloe rolled her eyes. “Give her the plate already!”

“Oh!” Tierney scuttled to the cupboard and yanked the plate out. The edge clanged against the side of the cupboard. The smooth glass slipped out of her hand, but she caught it with her knees. Janice stared at the ceiling. Tierney carefully kept her eyes off the other three.

“I want pop,” said Abby.

“I don’t have pop,” said Tierney.

The girl kicked the table. “Yes, you do! It’s in the cupboard!”

Ms. Hennesy shook her head. “How could you lie to a child like that? You better get the soda out and give her some.”

“Hurry up,” Janice snapped.

Tierney almost slipped on her own blood as she obeyed. Blood dripped into Abby’s cup as she poured Sprite into it. As if the blood were nothing more than the sugar that Chloe believed it was, Abby drank it down with the Sprite. Tierney stared at her. Was Janice right? Was there no blood? But the pain still throbbed in her sliced arm. It was a wonder she could still use it.

Janice tossed a tortilla on each plate. “Sit down.”

Tierney sat. “Um, c-can I ask you something?”

Chloe spat her gum onto the floor. “Now what?”

“Um...I’m sorry, but...” That gum was awful! “Why are you a-all here?”

“For dinner, stupid! Hurry up and eat, I’m hungry!”

Ms. Hennesy glared at Tierney. “Take the first bite, and don’t be slow about it.”

Tierney gazed at the brown spots on the tortilla. A dried leaf had been cooked into the bread. *She can’t make anyone sick. She can’t make anyone sick.* She made her burrito and bit.

The others followed suit.

“Didn’t I tell you, you wouldn’t get sick,” said Janice.

“Janice tells the truth,” said Chloe.

Tierney would have burst into tears on the spot, but gravel crunched outside as a car pulled in. Mitch! She knocked the table with her hip as she lunged into the living room. She yanked the door open.

“Oh, Mitch, you’re finally here!”

Mitch smiled. “Hello, my love.” He kissed her on the cheek. “How was your day? You look like a mess. Did the kitchen blow up?” He chuckled and kissed her again. “It smells good in here. What did you make?”

Tierney clung to his blue shirt. “M-Mitch, there are some people here. It’s been awful. I don’t even know if I exist anymore!”

Mitch laughed. “You don’t exist? Are you my dream?” He caressed her cheek. “What a beautiful dream you make. I don’t want to wake up.”

“Oh, please, Mitch, make them go away.”

He kissed her on the mouth. “Okay, I’ll make them leave.” He walked into the kitchen. “What have you been doing, Tierney?” His voice had taken on a note of alarm.

Tierney scuttled into the kitchen. Four dolls sat at the table before the remains of four burritos. The baby doll looked like it had been picked out of the dumpster. The other dolls had been hand-stitched. The ones in the mini-skirt and blue suit had button eyes. The other doll was made of corncobs. It had no face. Hair cascaded from each doll’s head. Dark blood trails congealed in the flour-covered floor.

Tierney clapped her hands to her cheeks. “What is this?”

“Are you crazy?” said Mitch in a low voice.

Tierney began to palpitate. “Th-they’re playing a trick. That’s n-not them!” She ran through the house.

“Janice, Ms. Hennesy, Chloe, Abby!” Where *were* they? Screaming, she sank to her knees.

“Stop it, Tierney!” Mitch pulled her up and shook her. “I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but enough!”

“They were here, they were!” Janice’s words reverberated through her head. Were they really there? Did Tierney exist? What was real and what was not?

“Tierney!” Mitch’s voice rattled her head and she looked into his face. A measure of tranquility returned to her.

“Am I your dream, Mitch?”

He touched her face. “You are.” He kissed her again. “Now clean up that mess. Make something for dinner. Everything will be okay.” He went to the bedroom to remove his work clothes and shoes.

Tierney cleaned up the kitchen, although she couldn’t do anything about the blood dripping from her arm. She gazed at each doll as she picked them up.

“They were so horrid to me.” She flung them into the wall behind the trashcan. Bits of their clothing and hair fluttered to the floor. Tomorrow, she would figure out what to do with the dolls. This was such an awful trick to play on her, though. Not only had those four eaten everything, they had made her look insane. Had they been planning this? Why target her?

The T.V. switched on with the six o'clock news.

“The body of a child was found in the forest between Pinetop and Hondah a few hours ago. Abigail Carter was five years old and playing in her backyard, when she suddenly disappeared two weeks ago. Like the other victims, she had been stripped and shaved. Witnesses say they spotted a Caucasian man in a blue polo shirt and khaki cargo pants heading towards Hondah. He wore a fishing hat low over his face. The police have blocked the roads and are conducting a manhunt...”

Luckily, Janice had made extra bread. She just had to make meat and cut fresh vegetables. As she dropped ground beef into the pan, her blood sizzled on the dark surface. It vanished into the red slop. As long as fresh blood didn't fall in after the ground beef cooked, it would be all right. By the time the news finished, dinner was ready.

“Mitch, come eat.”

The TV silenced. Mitch walked in, surveying the kitchen for anything out of place. Everything seemed to his satisfaction. Smiling, he sat at the table and Tierney served him. He bit into the burritos with relish.

“You're the best cook, my love,” he said. “Now tell me about these people who were tormenting you today.”

For the next hour Tierney went off on a tirade. She tried to stay as honest as possible, but sometimes it was hard. Her dear husband listened intently. His face never changed, though his air grew graver as she went on. Finally, she concluded with, “Chloe cut my arm! That's why there's blood all over the place!”

Mitch's brows knit. "Honey, let me fix that." Dropping his burrito as if it meant nothing, he dug in the drawers for a needle and thread. He returned to her with the precious items and threaded the needle.

"Don't worry, my love." He set her arm on the table. "It'll hurt a little bit, but you'll feel much better."

"I know it, Mitch. As long as you're here, I know it."

He pricked her tender flesh and pulled the needle through. Tierney whimpered and looked away. The sharp end of the needle hurt worse than Chloe's butcher knife. Slowly, the two flaps of raw skin closed. Neat stitches kept the blood inside. Knotting the thread, Mitch broke it off with his teeth. He kissed her gory arm.

"All better."

"Thank you."

"Now, to bed." Lifting her up, he carried her to the bedroom. "Remember how I carried you on our wedding night?"

Tierney rested her head against his muscled shoulder. "I do, Mitch, oh I do. I could never forget. You're as gentle now as you were then."

Lying down, he folded Tierney in his arms. "I miss my beautiful dream all day." His lips rested on her temple.

The small woman closed her eyes. "It was so awful. They made me wonder things that nobody should wonder."

"It's all over now, my love," said Mitch. "Don't think of it. I'm here for you."

“I’m glad you are. I’m so, so glad. I love you so much.”

Mitch kissed her head. “And I love you, my beautiful dream.”

#

Morning light crept through a crack in the curtain. Tierney opened one eye. It traveled up Mitch’s powerful arm draped across her middle, and rested on his face. He was so stalwart and steady. She breathed in the strong cologne he always wore. This imbued her with life. She couldn’t live without him. Not until yesterday had she realized that she could love him even more than she did.

Movement caught her eye by the bedroom door. Had Janice and her fiends returned? Tierney’s heart seized up, a scream on her lips. A woman with golden brown hair stared at them. Her hair was the exact shade of Tierney’s.

“What is going on here?” the woman cried.

Mitch jerked awake. “What are you doing in here?” He threw a protective arm across Tierney.

The woman’s face contorted. “What are *you* doing?”

“What’s it look like?” his voice challenged.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The woman thrust her finger down the hall. “Why are there dolls sitting around your table?”

“They’re n-not sitting around the table,” Tierney said. How did Janice and the others get inside?

The woman’s eyes landed on Tierney. “Is that real hair?” Her voice was barely audible.

Fearful tears stung Tierney's eyes. "What's going on?"

Mitch seized Tierney's hand. "Be quiet!"

"Are you *talking* to it?" The woman backed up.

"I'm not an 'it,'" said Tierney, hands shaking. "How did you get in? Who are you?"

"It?" Mitch's voice shuddered. "She's my wife!"

Covering her mouth, the woman sped down the hallway. Mitch tore after her. Their steps thundered into the living room. The woman screamed. Something crashed and Mitch cursed. Tierney had never heard him use such language.

"Mitch!" She stumbled into the living room. One of the lamps lay on the floor. The front door was wide open. Her trembling legs gave out beneath her. "Mitch! Mitch!" She pressed her face to the soft carpet, heart hammering against her chest. A car roared from the drive. Had Mitch been hurt? Screams retched from her throat. He was dead, he was dead!

Suddenly, Mitch's strong hands grasped her arms. "My darling, why are you crying?"

"Mitch!" Tierney gripped him around the neck. "I thought...I...Wh-who was that? What's going on?" Her voice sounded small and childish. "You're s-scaring me!" Janice and her minions wouldn't approve.

Mitch paled. "Nobody, love." He cupped her face in his hands. "Please, I couldn't stand if you were afraid of me. I'm so sorry!"

"Sh-she knew you...she acted l-like you were..." Tierney swallowed and forced herself to say it. "She acted like you were cheating on her w-with me."

“No, no!” Mitch crushed Tierney against him as if she would vanish. “She’s crazy. Nothing can come between you and me.” He covered her face in kisses. “I love you more than anything! She’s my sister Lisa.”

“Y-you’re not with...her—?”

He shook her by the shoulders like a rag doll. “No! How could you say that? It’s me and you, always, no one else! I promised you that a long time ago, and you know I never break my promises.” He caressed her hair. “I think you better take a bath. You’ll feel better when you come out.”

Tierney gripped his wrists in shaking hands. “The whole world is falling down.”

“Not while I’m here.”

“P-promise?”

“Promise.” He smiled in that calming way of his. “I’ll make breakfast, but first, your bath.”

Tierney kissed the palm of his hand. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

Carrying her into the bathroom, he filled the tub and placed her in it, with all her clothes on. “I’ll come back when breakfast is ready.” He went out.

Dishes clanged in the kitchen. The aroma of bacon wafted into the bathroom. Tierney breathed it in. Bacon was a comforting smell, but not today. Something strange was going on. Janice’s words haunted her. Try as she might, she couldn’t banish them from her head.

To her utter shock, Chloe marched inside. “Little Tierney is getting the special treatment?” She leaned against the wall. “Mitch took off my clothes before he put me in the tub last night.”

Tierney's heart seized up. "What?"

"He put my clothes through the washer." She scoffed. "He just threw you in."

"W-what were you doing with Mitch?"

Chloe popped a blue bubble. "Wouldn't you like to know!" She sauntered out.

Panic seized Tierney's breast. Now she knew how Lisa had gotten into the house. Chloe had let her in!

Somehow Chloe had hidden in the house. Did Mitch know? It couldn't be!

Scrambling from the water, she stumbled into the kitchen. "Mitch, what were you doing with Chloe?"

Her husband turned from the sizzling pan. "What are you doing out?"

"Chloe said you were with her l-last night. I thought *I* was your beautiful d-dream." Tierney burst into tears.

"I don't know who Chloe is!"

Tierney clawed at her face. "You promised, you promised!"

Mitch dropped the spatula. "Shut up with the hysteria!" He slapped her cheek, and then his face contorted. "Oh, my love, I'm sorry!"

"No!" Tierney rushed out the back door and into the woods. Mitch's agonized wail followed her, but she couldn't turn around. She ran until her legs gave out under her. She crashed into the pine needles.

Thorns slid into her flesh. The stitches on her arm snapped. Knitting flesh ripped apart and fresh blood oozed to the ground.

How could Mitch do this to her? How many women was he seeing? She would have to leave him. Pain, worse than the red spot on her cheek, seared her heart. How could she leave him? But she had to!

Burrowing her face in her arms, she screeched into the earth. Betrayed! Betrayed! Betrayed!

The storm of her emotions ravaged her aching heart until the sun reached its zenith. Now she lay like a limp doll on the forest floor, golden brown hair splayed around her like sunbeams. The cold ground had soaked in her tears and blood.

Something snapped in the forest. Stealthy movement crunched on dead pine needles. Lifting her head, she came face to face with two intense eyes, eyes like the panther she had seen at the zoo last summer.

It bit into her face. Teeth sank through her cheeks and eyes. Tierney shrieked, but blood flooded her throat. It squeezed from her flesh. Claws raked into her torso. Guts spilled through cracking bone shards. Slabs of the back of her head flapped free, hair dangling and dripping blood. The earth soaked it in. The cougar's snarls drowned out her weak cries.

"NO!" Mitch screamed. A gunshot shook the air. The cougar tore into the forest. Mitch stumbled beside Tierney with a strangled cry. "No, no, no!" He fell over her mangled body. His heavy cologne couldn't dispel the stench of carnage.

"Mitch," Tierney choked out.

He gasped. "You're still alive!" Lifting her into his arms, he sprinted back to the small house. Tierney stared at the trees. Their gnarled branches dragged across the blue sky. Suddenly, the kitchen ceiling cut them off. They had already reached the small house.

Laying Tierney on the kitchen table, Mitch rushed to the drawer for the thread and needle. “Don’t die on me, my love!”

As he threaded the needle, a breeze whistled in from the living room. Tierney managed to turn her head as Mitch spun around. Lisa stood in the kitchen doorway, a rifle pointed at him. Panic seized Tierney all over again. She struggled to move, but her body wouldn’t respond.

“What are you doing?” said Mitch.

Lisa’s eyes turned to slits. “You killed my sister.” She went livid. “You chopped off her hair and stuck it on that doll!” She pulled the trigger. A bloody hole opened in Mitch’s stomach. He hit the floor. Blood and guts poured through his fingers. Tierney couldn’t hear her own scream.

Lisa sped to her side, snatched her off the table by what was left of her arm.

“Please, please,” Tierney cried.

Lisa ripped the golden brown hair from Tierney’s scalp. Fresh pain coursed through the mangled woman’s frame. Mitch could only stare as Lisa piled paper high on the table.

“You made dolls out of the women you murdered!” Lisa threw Tierney on top of the pile.

“Please, no,” he whispered. “My beautiful dream.”

Lisa glared at him. “Monster. Baby killer!” She set the pile ablaze.

“Mitch!” Tierney screamed. The flames caught her torn hands and ate away the cotton dress. Rushing over her hairless scalp, it raged inside her broken head. She stared at Mitch’s agonized face until the fire melted her blue-embroidered eyes.

Author Bio: 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.

Julia has a great announcement to make. Her second book "Embers" will be launching into the world this year. It's the exciting sequel to the dark fantasy "Pariahs" in the Ilings series.

Cellar

Monica J. O'Rourke

She shudders behind the furnace for warmth and believes if she stays here she'll be safe. She wonders where he went and if he'll be back. Wait here she remembers, but wait for how long? Would it be okay to search for water? Did that count as waiting here, on this spot, where he said?

She sneaks a look around the thick drum of water heater and stares into a basement void of other human life. Old and dusty rat droppings line the baseboard. Shelves are stuffed full of the corpses of childhood—but not her childhood—skates and comics and rusted pieces of bicycle; a plastic sled; decapitated dolls; baseball gear long past its prime.

Why isn't there water? The more she tries to ignore her thirst the worse it gets. She knows he'll be angry if she moves. Knows because she's seen his anger before but not very often. He tells her he loves her and she believes him because she doesn't know any better. She has nothing to compare this to, no other source of love to gauge this one against.

"How long?" she whispers to the childhood treasures. "How long?"

They don't answer. Even the spiders are quiet tonight.

Footsteps above her head and she thinks finally! And believes it really wasn't that long a wait, he always comes back, he promised he would never leave her. You're mine now, he says, and she loves him so much for caring that her heart hurts.

But she realizes the footsteps are many and she cowers against the wall, crouches behind the heater. She knows the sound of footsteps is bad, there should be only one soft sound, the sound of him that she knows as well as his smell. Footsteps means they found her. It means they'll take her away and hurt her, punish her, do things to her she can't even imagine. That's what he says will happen, and he knows everything.

She calls him He because his name changes so often she doesn't know what to call him. He tells her it doesn't matter, but he never says his real name. He says it's a precaution, but he never explains what that means. He says he doesn't want her to get too attached. Sometimes she calls him Father, and sometimes Joe or Steve or Malcolm or Brother. He tells her his name every day.

Earlier today he left but didn't tell her. Earlier he seemed upset and paced the floor. "Girl," he said, stopping just long enough to catch her shoulder with his powerful hand and squeeze hard enough to make her cry out. "Stop staring at me. You know I hate that."

She can't help herself. She loves staring at him because he's so handsome, so wonderful. He brought her here to save her from all the bad people. He even gave her a name: Girl. It was the most beautiful name in the world.

Maybe he isn't coming back. She rarely feels fear—he keeps her safe—but now she feels it, biting on the inside of her belly and making it hard to breathe.

Now there's nothing to do but wait and hope he comes home soon. Pray that whoever (whatever) is upstairs will leave very, very soon.

Sometimes she asks him where she came from, who she used to live with. She thinks she remembers a mommy and daddy but that was from a long time ago. Ten years ago, when she was just three.

"They're dead," he told her. He wasn't sad about it, so she wasn't sad either, though maybe a little.

"Do I have a brother or sister?"

"I don't know."

"What's my name?" She knows she has one but can't remember what it was. The man has called her Girl for so long she forgets who she used to be.

“I don’t know.”

She wonders if he loves her because sometimes he acts like he doesn’t even like her. He brings her things—books and puzzles and dolls. She stopped asking for a TV a long time ago. He told her TV was gone now, that she should get used to what he provides.

“All we have is each other, Girl,” he said many times. “Deal with it.”

There are no windows for Girl to peek out, to see the world outside. He told her there was nothing to see anyway. She believes him because he would never lie to her. Lying was bad. She read that in her books. Her mom used to tell her that too. Maybe. Maybe it was something she thought she remembered, but maybe it wasn’t a memory at all.

“Please come back,” she whispers into her hand. “Please don’t leave me.” She wonders if they can hear her, whatever monsters are banging around upstairs. She doesn’t think so. Her whispers are very soft.

But the sounds of the footsteps scare her, and she again wishes they would leave. Maybe they’re the reason he hasn’t come back. Maybe they won’t let him. Maybe he can’t sneak past them.

They’re everywhere above her now, running across the floorboards, banging into things from the sound of it, into walls and even the basement door. She knows he keeps it locked but wonders if they will be able to break in anyway.

Girl cowers lower, tries to stuff herself between the water heater and the wall—she used to fit when she first came to live here—but she’s too big now. All she gets for her efforts is a loud clang when her head hits the pipe, and she almost screams, terrified the sound will bring them running.

But it doesn’t. If anything it’s scared them away, because minutes later the sounds upstairs grow quiet.

Blood rushes to her brain and makes her dizzy, makes her squeeze her eyes shut. She wishes again he would come back and says a silent prayer. She doesn't know who she's praying to, he never tells her, but praying is something she remembers once doing, and it makes her feel better for some reason.

"No one there to answer your prayers, Girl," he tells her often. But she prays anyway.

The house is still for a long time.... Girl doesn't know for how long, only that her stomach burns and her throat and mouth have dried up and she needs to pee very badly. Peeing her pants would get her into terrible trouble though, so she holds it in until she feels like she might throw up.

She drops to the floor and pulls her legs up against her body, squeezing them together at the knees and tries to take her mind off having to go. But there isn't much else to think about: water, food, him. The crazy people that had been upstairs. As a distraction she wonders what her family was like. If she has a sister. She imagines a sister would have been fun. Someone to play with. He never really likes to play. Sometimes he colors with her but never for long. He looks upstairs a lot, or stares at the basement ceiling, and she often wonders what he's looking for.

"Quiet," he whispers. "I think I hear something."

But silence always follows, and he shakes his head at the ceiling and rubs his hands over his face. Sometimes he paces the floor. But he no longer wants to play and just drops his crayons on the table.

Girl moves her leg just slightly because her butt has fallen asleep, but the movement starts a tiny trickle down her leg. She freezes, tries to hold it in, but the harder she tries the stronger the stream becomes, until her pants are soaked in her pee.

She buries her face in her palms as she's seen him do so many times and sobs into them, trying to be so very quiet, unable to control any of the fluids leaking from her body.

She trembles, chilled now from her soaked jeans and wonders what her punishment will be. Will he finally get rid of her? Get so angry he no longer lets her live here? He's threatened her so many times that if she misbehaves he's going to put her out on the street like an unwanted cat.

She crawls to the other side of the basement to her bed. Maybe she can hide the wet pants. Sometimes he leaves clothes for her down here. Mostly he keeps them upstairs, only brings her what she needs for the day. This way she has nothing to pack, he tells her. She won't be tempted to run away.

Running away wasn't anything she could ever remember thinking about doing. Why would she? This is her home. He's the only family she remembers.

Even her toys aren't really hers. Everything belongs to him—the dolls, the stuffed animals, the coloring books and crayons, the books he brings her to read, the board games she invariably ends up playing alone. Once he left a newspaper behind by accident but she'd barely read more than a few paragraphs about a riot before he came back and snatched the paper away from her.

The toys surrounding her on shelves are old and worn and look sharp and dangerous yet somehow intriguing. Still, all forbidden. Curiosity killed the cat, he warned, and she has no idea what that means. But she heard the word kill, and that was all she needed. She didn't want him to kill her because of an old iron.

She strips off the wet jeans and stretches them out on the cement floor, hoping they'll dry quickly. She grabs the blanket off her bed and climbs underneath it, curls up against the wall. If the crazy people upstairs come back and find their way to the basement, maybe they won't look under the bed. Somehow she feels safe here. And maybe when he finally comes back the pants will have dried. He wouldn't have to know she peed herself. The pants are a few feet away, within easy reach.

*

When she wakes she doesn't know how much time has passed. The house is quiet. Not even the water heater is clanging out its usual scary tune. Cautious fingers dart out from beneath the bed and she discovers the pants have dried. She manages a small smile despite the butterflies flitting from her stomach to her throat and brain. She crawls out from beneath the bed and pulls on the jeans. They're stiff and uncomfortable and feel funny where she had wet them. They feel kind of sticky, and something comes off on her fingers, something that feels like salt. She sniffs her fingers and winces—they smell like pee.

She glances around the basement, wondering if anything seems out of place. Wondering if he'd been here while she'd slept and thought she'd finally run away when he didn't see her. Wondering if maybe they had made their way down here. But nothing feels different. Nothing feels touched or out of place.

And now she really begins to panic. Why hasn't he come back yet? If she stays here—if she obeys—she'll die. She knows she needs water. This was something he reminded her often—thanks to him, thanks to his generosity supplying her food and water she would live. How many times had he reminded her she would die of thirst without him, that water was so hard to find? This much she knows—she needs water. But where? Maybe upstairs. Sure, upstairs. Where the crazy people were hiding and waiting for her. Or maybe upstairs is gone. Maybe those crazy insane people stole it when they came before.

Maybe there is no more water.

Girl moves quickly to the bottom of the stairs. She hasn't climbed a step in years. Has never had a reason to. He always warned her not to, that she must stay downstairs to be safe, and she understands he knows what's best for her. She knows he protects her.

But now she wonders how safe she is. And wonders why he isn't here to protect her.

She sits on the bottom step and draws a breath, deep, filling her lungs, and slowly slides on her butt up to the next step. Her body shakes. If anyone is upstairs, she wonders if they can hear her movements ... if they're hiding up there, waiting for her to poke her head through the doorway.

When she finally reaches the top landing she almost flees back down to the safety of her room. But her thirst has become painful, overwhelming. Her tongue and lips are pasty.

The doorknob seems miles away, and she can barely lift her hand to reach for it. Her sweaty palm slips off the knob and bangs against the wood with a low thud. The sound makes her cringe and she crouches, listening intently for the sound of movement.

Once more she reaches the knob, and it slowly turns. What surprises her for a moment is that it is unlocked. He would tell her every day he was locking her in, and she would hear the key turning. So why is it not locked?

The door makes a low creaking sound as she pushes it open. It's a sound she's never noticed before, not even when she was living downstairs and was attuned to every sight and sound the house offered. But even the creaking door doesn't bring anyone running over, anyone attacking.

She steps into the kitchen. It's been years since she was last in this room—only for a few seconds as he dragged her through and straight down to her new basement home. She doesn't remember it at all and only knows it's a kitchen because of the many books he'd brought her to read through the years, even taught her to read them. She recognizes the stove, sink, fridge.

Lying behind the door—it bangs into something as she pushes it open—is his facedown body. He's soaked in blood. Chunks of his skull are missing. His clothes are torn in so many places she doesn't try to count.

Girl drops to her knees, hands reaching but unable to touch him. She knows it's him, recognizes his clothes despite the blood. A few inches from his outstretched hand is the key to the basement door.

“No,” she whispers, shaking her head. “No no no....” Her knees are now soaked in his blood. She scrambles back, away from his body. Reaches the base of the sink and pulls herself up on legs wobbling so badly she’s afraid they won’t support her. She leans over the edge of the sink and takes a few deep breaths until she feels steady. She turns on the taps.

Nothing comes out of either tap. By now she feels lightheaded, and the lack of water is like a punch in the stomach. She takes deep breaths and tries to forget what she’s seen.

She heads toward the fridge, carefully sidestepping the puddle of blood, staring at it for a few seconds until she remembers her thirst and pulls open the door. The insides are bare and she wonders where all the food is. But at least there are bottles of water, and she grabs and drinks greedily from one. She drinks too quickly and chokes, nearly vomiting. More slowly now and it stays down.

For a moment she considers returning to him, maybe to shake him or at least call out to him. But she knows he’s dead. And she wonders why she doesn’t feel sadder about his death. Wonders why she doesn’t feel much of anything.

Now she needs a plan, knows she can’t stay here, can’t stay with his body and no food and almost no water. But she doesn’t know what to do, has no frame of reference except for her books and knows Nancy Drew never covered anything like this.

She has to leave this place, this house, the only home she can remember. She has no way of knowing what is on the other side of those walls, waiting for her. The small kitchen window has been boarded up so she can’t see out. And she hears no sounds from outside—no cars or traffic, although she isn’t sure she would even recognize the sound of a car. She’s imagined what these things sound like from descriptions in her stories, but ten years have passed since she first came to live here and she remembers almost nothing of her previous existence. Only that it was terrible, which she knows because he tells her.

Told her.

She sneaks through the rest of the house, and it's in disarray. It looks like someone very angry has been through here, smashing every piece of furniture, overturning the sofa, even destroying the television set—one of the rare things she does remember from her past.

The front door is open.

Just a crack, but enough to see a slip of light, enough to see the door isn't locked, that there is nothing standing between her and the rest of the world.

Terror is overwhelming yet somehow not as strong as her desire to look, to see what she's been missing. She knows the bad people, the crazy, angry people he warned her about are everywhere, that they run wild through the streets and kill everyone in their path. She knows the outside world is nothing but chaos and destruction. Mayhem he calls it. Called it.

Fire everywhere, he would tell her. People scavenging for food and supplies. Murder and death and disease everywhere. But if she stayed in the basement she would be safe. He risked his life every day to feed her, he would say. He hoped she was grateful. He certainly didn't have to take care of her. He didn't need to be stuck with her but did so out of the kindness in his heart.

She knows this is true because he has never lied to her. He saved her when she was a baby, saved her from a world of madmen, saved her from death.

And she's terrified to go out there, too scared to cross through that doorway. But she has to look. Has to see what he's warned her about.

She creeps across the room, stepping over shattered vases and crushed picture frames, over shards of glass and piles of dirt from upturned plants. Like the kitchen, the windows in this room have been boarded up.

Finally reaches the door and stands behind it, heart pounding in her head, sweat stinging her eyes. Ready to slam the door shut if necessary. She feels cold and hot at the same time.

Her cheek slides across the chipped-paint surface of the door until her chin reaches the edge, until she can smell the new air, air she hasn't smelled in ten years. There are new smells she can't identify, can't remember from her before life. Strong, crisp smells that are unpleasant to her nose and throat.

One eye peeks through the sliver of open door at the outside world.

Nothing is out there.

She barely remembers the world she left behind but it all starts rushing back to her: the rows of houses, the lines of parked cars, the trees and trashcans and mailboxes. Everything looks so beautiful, so perfect. She sees what she's been missing and suddenly realizes how much she hates him for taking it away from her.

She opens the door a bit wider until the sun is on her skin, until the warmth of the day hugs her tight, gives her new strength. The smell of her warm skin is a fresh comfort.

Now on the front stoop, she manages to walk two small feet from the house. She barely notices the tears on her cheeks. Her upturned palms feel the sun's radiance, the gentle caress of the wind.

"Mommy," she whispers, knowing she once had one. Knowing she had two sisters as well. Knowing so many things she had managed to suppress all these years.

So many things he took away from her.

She reaches the end of the path, overgrown blades of grass on either side tickling her ankles. Flowers have grown through the cracks in the stones along the path. She reaches down and grabs a handful of grass, brings it to her nose and inhales deeply. The grass tickles her chin.

When she glances up again she looks farther down the street, discovers the neighborhood for the first time, and notices the fire. Notices the burned-out car across the street, the charred trees and destroyed skeletons of houses not far from this one. When she turns back to her own house she notices for the first time the roof is missing.

And she notices, when turning back in the direction of her neighbors' homes the small group of people, arms flapping about wildly, tripping over their own feet, groaning and screaming and running at breakneck speed to greet her.

Author Bio:

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/writer and book coach. Find her on www.facebook.com/MonicaJORourke.

Chords

Nina D'Arcangela

A storm, the children forced to play in the musty attic. Mother hears a screech, she runs to the sound; a little one hides behind a door while the other seeks. She leaves them to their childish game. Rounding the wooden staircase, her heel snaps; she falls utterly soundless.

In the great chamber, the Maestro revels in his music. The chords carry him to a refuge their new abode could never offer. The door creaks open, a small one pokes in, followed by the hysterical boy. Father turns a furious eye; they know not to disturb. The girl tells her tale. All color drains from the man's face, he rushes to the servant's stairwell. There she lies, neck twisted an odd angle. His moans echo the faded mahogany walls; the sky crackles in tune.

Buried before her time, children without a mother; man without a wife. He appraises the grandeur that surrounds him; she was worth more. He looks skyward; a bolt strikes the lightning rod, a fat drop strikes his eye. He thinks back to another strike, this one a deal. Standing at that crossroads, he never believed he'd be worth so much, yet have so little.

The Infernal Caller

Lori R. Lopez

Miz Heckate according to the card she
gave me, a door-to-door Saleswoman, claimed
to be from a long line of Peddlers. Generations,
back to Ancient Times. I watched with a faceful of
doubt, distrusting anyone who knocked these days.
She set up a vintage case — of Curious Wares
(it said so on the outside) — shoving the clutter off
my coffee table. There were muffled pounds I found
alarming. “I brought you what you were never aware
you can’t live without.” She winked. Her visage
crumpled oddly, puckered like a rotten piece of fruit.
I sensed an eeriness about her, then reminded myself
it isn’t polite to stare, yet couldn’t help it. Her skin
had a ghastly hue, a lurid pallor, as if deprived
of sun or ill. She was a definite kook.

A little moribund really. An infernal caller . . .

With an attitude I generally felt uncharming:
the irritating, tooth-clenching, tightfisted effect

of seeing straight through a pretense, a clever disguise.

Was it too late to reconsider? Would it be rude

if I herded her out the door? Too late,

she was opening the case. Is that a tentacle?

I blinked. Nothing there. Must be something

in my eye. One of those swimmers. Common civility

kicked in. Hosting-instinct. I made excuses. It couldn't

hurt to have a look. It was actually kind of

convenient. And quaint. Old-fashioned. I had been

disturbed how fast my environment was changing —

people devolving into privacy-mongers, less social;

Shopping Malls abandoned, stores automated.

Flying robots delivered packages!

The world was becoming unrecognizable.

Almost unlivable. I waited for the strange lady

to produce a sample. Instead she hoisted what may only

be described as one of a kind — a fey unfriendly bush-head.

A giant cootie. The sight made my jaw go slack.

Monster cusps grinned between bulging lips the shade of

Witch Finger Grapes. “A Crumb-Cleaner!” she fondly

called her creep. “It gobbles everything in sight,

and doesn't require a battery or plug. Your home will be spotless!" Dire suspicions grew like mold on bread, for it wasn't what I expected. Far from a new Vacuum, this was no handy-dandy modern household miracle, no overpriced time-saver. This was a depravity, a paranormity, and it was loose in my living-room! I wanted to protest, wanted to escape, wanted to stop being so excessively polite!

I couldn't. It was as simple as that. Too late.

I did shriek when Miz Heckate released the terror — and believe I passed out, posture rigid, eyes covered. Anticipating bites. Ravenous grunts and growling drew my gaze. Popping alert, I glimpsed pandemonium as potted plants, knickknacks, a bowl of fruit disappeared. My favorite chair, an oil painting, a mantel clock. The beast was nothing but a furry cavernous maw, with the personality of a Trash-Compacter. I wish I could say Mouthzilla was the worst part of a deplorable day. The madwoman unveiled her next daunting surprise. Orbs wide, I discerned a transparent blob. She hurled it to stick on the wall

near my noggin. Bam. Sucking and snorting,
contorting, it turned to a bulbous countenance . . .

I saw myself in the horrid aspect.

I didn't seem well. I resembled my demise.

“A Looking-Glass that mimics and looks back!”

The vendor of devilry bared a wry smirk. Queasily,
I wondered if I needed to feed it. I was afraid to ask.

A crude mask crossly mugged below my shocked
expression. Attempting to ignore the mirror, I peered
with dread at an unwelcome guest — afraid she had
more to pull out of that coffer of evil concoctions,
that Pandora's Mother's Box (if Pandora had a mother).

“Which company are you with?” A timorous inquiry.

A distraction, before darting to the kitchen for
a frying pan. Lingered foolishly, awaiting the reply.

Leaning toward her, impatient, slightly unhinged.

She fished in the case. Rummaging. For what???

Nervousness caused me to sweat, till I looked
like I could use an umbrella.

She offered me one. Bright red. I refused.

An umbrella? What good would it do? Pretty feeble
as a defense. Wait. “Does it have any special features?
Like a sword inside? Or a Rocket Launcher?”
Flashing an iniquitous smile, she opened the meager thing.
A sample of all You-Know-What broke loose, leaping,
springing, ejecting. Literally. I had a house full of the most
abysmal abominations from the nether reaches!

I was a mouse, a bespectacled number-cruncher who
cowered beneath the covers at night, afraid of the dark.
Who didn’t view scary movies, read horror stories.
Didn’t even read frightful poems, or open the door on
Halloween, and now this! Too late to banish her, boot
the entire maddeningly furious, horrendously fiendish,
irately foul, obnoxiously fell, grotesquely formidable
pack of freaks and felons . . .

Out the door — to the curb — down the street!

Huffing, anxious, deficient in valor, faint-hearted,
Lily-livered, a Shrinking Violet, gandering the chaos with
speculative panic, I fought inner demons to a coward’s
conclusion: escaping my Hell House, abandoning ship the best

option. Gloom a palpable shroud, fire and brimstone a theme;
I coughed on sulfurous fumes, abject. Through the haze
my mirror-image leered. The Saleslady cackled.
The room tilted and whirled, a Merry-Go-Round of
ear-ringing unmirthful amusement. I surfed my
living-room floor until the wheeling-tipping Vertigo
halted. Then made a dash, akin to plowing a Football Field:
dodging bruisers, bumping, swerving, fleeing for the
End Zone. My front door was sealed; I clung to the knob
hyperventilating. A bell chimed. A shadow lurked
on the other side wearing a hat . . .

Was that colorful Stained Glass stained before?

A buzzer went off. Someone knocked. The pressure
plunged me in a lousy mood. I couldn't bear another visit!
Normally I wouldn't answer. Today I was doing the
unconventional, the unexpected, and wrenched the door
wide, stronger than I knew — gaping at an Exorcist.
I could tell from the priestly attire under an overcoat.
He clutched a bag, the type loaded like a gun with
sacred weapons such as a Crucifix, vial of Holy Water,
string of Rosary Beads; a Saint's withered toe.

“I’ve got this,” he dramatically intoned. I prayed he did.

Removing a flat purple stole to drape round his neck,
clad in a bleak robe, the Padre inquired if I was cursed.

I shrugged. Probably. “Where is the Infestation?”

Vaguely I gestured, frowning. Wasn’t it obvious? I began
to question his authenticity.

The guy presented a contract that seemed official.

I was told to sign a dotted line. Squinting at pages,

I couldn’t find one. The blanks were solid. He provided
an alternative, to lay my hand on The Bible and swear I had
faith. He did appear professional but, it was going a bit far.

Where was the Liability Clause? He scowled eye to eye.

“What’s the problem? You’re not a Non-Believer are you?”

Technically Agnostic — I couldn’t make up my mind about
anything. Hesitation caused an awkward silence. The scratchings,
tappings, bangs, screams, howls, whispers and whimpers abruptly
ceased. The Father grilled, “Are you confessing you have no
creed? You lack conviction?” Put that way it sounded bad.

A shameful nod. The Exorcist tipped his hat and took his leave.

I missed him. Casting a disappointed grimace and glower,
extracting a snazzy heavy-duty device, a cutting-edge

gadget, Miz Heckate vacuumed up . . .

Demons, creatures, mayhem, vapors, the mirror . . .

Swallowed by an enormous hose. Mouthzilla still

bounced and rolled and roamed elusive, the last to be

siphoned into the case. Locks were snapped shut.

The deathly-wan Hellseller lifted her vile repository.

A final snarl as she swiveled at the exit: “This was clearly

the wrong address!” She leveled a venomous glare and

marched out. I was glad to see her go. Wagging digits in

farewell, I expelled a sigh and slammed the door,

then leaned on it. The wildest party ever had been thrown

at my house! Slowly, gratefully, I started gathering debris.

I would need new furniture. And rugs. Many coats of

fresh paint. Disinfectant. Repairs. Maybe I should move.

A jolt of fear. No! They could show up again!

This was the safest place on Earth. Nonetheless,

I fastened four bolts.

Then barricaded the entrance with a pile of wreckage.

And a hastily-hammered cross.

Author Bio:

Lori R. Lopez wears many hats literally and otherwise. An award-winning author, poet, and illustrator as well as a songwriter, Lori's books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *Odds & Ends: A Dark Collection*, *The Witchhunt*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Verse and prose have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines such as *The Horror Zine*, *Weirdbook*, *The Sirens Call*, *Bewildering Stories*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *California Screamin'* (the Foreword Poem), *Grey Matter Monsters*, *Dead Harvest*, and *Fearful Fathoms Volume I*.

Lori resides in Southern California and co-owns Fairy Fly Entertainment with her two talented sons. They are also Vegans, activists, filmmakers, and members of a new band called The Fairyflies.

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The Neighbors

Mandy McHugh

The Mearns had finally found their forever home. After seven months of open houses, rude realtors, and abysmal fixer-uppers, the happy couple sat knee to knee, scrutinizing the fine print of the purchase agreement.

The perfect house.

They had taken every precaution. From the walk-through to the home inspection, they'd ticked off imaginary boxes one by one until a neat row of exes sealed their fate—a fact which brought them to a long table in a gray room on a sunny April morning. Feet tapping on the floor and bubbles of excitement bursting from their fingertips, they took turns signing their names on the dotted lines.

Catherine—Cat, to those who knew her best—studied the seller as her husband, Edward, shook hands with the lawyer. Mid-forties, blonde, and complexion like mayonnaise, she fiddled with the collar of her shirt and spun a ring on her middle finger whenever someone spoke to her.

“We love the house,” Cat said, meeting her eyes.

More twists of the metal band. “Oh. Yes, it’s...something.”

She clasped her hands in her lap, unsure of the best place to put them now that the papers were gone. “Mind if I ask why you decided to sell?”

She flitted her eyes to the corner. “Uh, I’m moving closer to my mom.”

“How nice of you,” Cat said.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So, it has nothing to do with the house?”

The seller chewed her bottom lip, shifting her view from the corner of the ceiling to the nook of the bookshelf where stacks of heavy leather binding boasted impressive titles wrought with legalese and real estate law. “Yes. No. Not at all. Why?”

Edward leaned in conspiratorially, arching a thick black eyebrow over his thick black frames. It made him look like a dad from a Thursday night sitcom. “We heard it’s haunted.”

She laughed, a sad, tinny titter that betrayed years of smoking. Cat hoped the smell wouldn’t linger in the carpets. Smoke had a way of burrowing into fibers like ticks on a dog.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” she grumbled. “I never saw a ghost.”

“Seriously?” Cat asked, a tad higher pitched than she intended. “I even read an article about it in the Gazette. *Mayhem in The Meadowlands*, I think was the headline.”

A momentary look of fear crossed between the seller and her lawyer. He offered an imperceptible nod and she continued. “People were pissed, pardon my French, when the development went in. Traffic concerns and old infrastructure and all, so I think they made up stories to dissuade buyers. Spook ‘em from the land. But they’ve gotten over it. For the most part.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” With that, they sat in thick silence while the broker ran down the hall to make copies of the documents.

“I just have to ask.” Cat straightened in a nervous flurry, clearing her throat and smoothing a fly-away out of her face. “How are the neighbors?”

The seller exhaled, a choked sound landing somewhere between a cough and a snarky laugh, and Cat felt the stirrings of doubt rising in her stomach. What, exactly, could a reaction like that mean?

Ed squeezed her hand.

“They’re...interesting,” the pallid woman said, her intention unreadable. She slid a manila envelope containing two keys, garage door openers, and appliance manuals to across the table. “Good luck.”

Fresh copies in hand, she was up and out the door without another word, a faint scent of cinnamon and musky sweat trailing in her wake.

“Well, that was awkward,” Edward muttered.

“You’re telling me.

“No ghosts?”

“Apparently not.”

“Portals to the underworld?”

“Not a single one.”

“Cursed burial ground where dead cats are resurrected?”

She sucked in a big breath. “Ooh, sorry. No dice.”

Edward slapped his knee in an aw-shucks gesture that Cat found endearing. “Ready to check out our dream home, anyway, Mrs. Mearns?”

“Lead the way, Mr. Mearns,” she said, kissing the tip of his nose.

The Meadowlands was a picturesque development built in the sweet spot between urban and rural. To the left was sprawling farmland, budding corn crops and apple fields protected by a small mountain range. To the right, the city line, with split-levels, carports, and aging half-abandoned strip malls. The people who lived there had done so for years, generations with roots and grudges. And they did not take kindly to outsiders.

As it stood, Cat and Ed's house was a two-story colonial on the corner lot facing the city. With a handsome line of shrubs and a big yard for summer barbeques, they had plenty of room for sprouting their own roots.

When the boxes were unloaded and their muscles ached, Cat uncapped two bottles of beer and joined her husband on their new stoop. They sipped contentedly, leaning into each other's shoulders and listening to the soft hum of crickets. Sunlight was fading fast, but the air was warm, and the mosquitoes hadn't descended just yet.

"What do you think?" Ed asked.

"Feels like this could be it," Cat said. "Home."

"Mm. I think you could be right, my dear. When do you think we'll meet the neighbors?"

It was then they heard it: the unmistakable smack of flesh, the subsequent shrill cry of pain.

A man and woman emerged from the house across the street, the door slamming into the siding so hard that a chunk broke off and plopped to the ground. Thud. Cat stared at the newly-formed gap and wondered what lurked inside the darkness.

"I think we're about to meet a few right now," Ed said, putting his beer down on the concrete step without taking his eyes away from the scene unfolding in front of them.

The man stomped down the driveway, and the woman followed, throwing what appeared to be rolled up socks at his back. Black balls arced through the air, most missing the target and rolling to a stop on the yellowing grass.

He turned without stopping, backpedaling the length of the driveway and bellowed a command. "Mindy, I told you to knock it off. Get back in the house."

The woman, Mindy, if the man's orders were to be trusted, vibrated with rage. "No. I don't gotta listen to you no more." Nuh-mower.

“Go inside, Mindy.”

“‘Scuse me? Who do you think you’re talking to?” Thud. “You’ve got some balls to hit me and run off.” Thud. “Like a scared.” Thud. “Little.” Thud. “Bitch.” Thud, thud, thud.

The man was almost at his car, an older-model sedan with a rusted out bumper and more stickers than headlights, but her statement jerked him to a halt. “I didn’t hit you. You hit yourself, you crazy cow.”

“Cow?” Thud. “Is that how you’d talk to your wife-a ten years?”

“If the hoof fits.”

The woman lunged at him, pounding her fists into his chest while he laughed in her face, pushing her off only when he grew tired of the game. He was amused by her attempt, merely playing dead until she winded herself, and then the cycle repeated.

Ever the hero, Edward sprung to his feet, cocked and ready for action.

“Ed, don’t. It’s none of our business,” Cat whispered.

“We can’t just sit here.”

“Yes, the hell, we can,” she said, wiping her hands on her shorts and stepping towards the door.

“Catherine.”

“Edward.”

“It’s not right.”

“Be smart about this,” she begged. “Come on, we’ll call the cops. Let them handle it. We shouldn’t get involved.” She pulled his elbow, realizing the window of opportunity to sneak inside without being seen was shrinking by the second.

“They’ll be gone by the time the police get here. I have to, Cat.” Ed squeezed her hand, two quick pumps, their sign of affection, and jogged the short distance down the lawn, slowing his pace when he reached the road.

Cat closed the door behind her and yanked her phone off the charger. She dialed 911 and watched out the window as her husband entered into the altercation.

“I’d like to report a domestic disturbance,” Cat said, relaying the details of what they’d witnessed and the address. She left out the part about Ed trying to play superhero, though, and returned to her spot on the stoop after the dispatch told her an officer was on the way.

Ed had his hands on his hips and his work-smile on. She could see the white of his teeth from where she stood. Mindy and the man were a pair now, his arm around her shoulders and his peacock chest puffed out.

“Oh, shit,” she said, switching weight from one foot to the other before deciding to join him. Ed was no stranger to fights, and Cat could tell from the balanced stance and tense muscles that the man wasn’t either.

She ran across the road, wondering why she hadn’t noticed the lack of streetlamps before. The sky was dusky blue, the last sliver of sun descending behind the mountains, and darkness tiptoed closer to the Meadowlands.

“Ed, there you are. Your mom’s on the phone,” she said.

He turned to her with a blitz of frustration and apprehension in his eyes. “Cat, I’m busy. Tell her I’ll call her later.”

She sucked her teeth and sighed. “I would except she says it’s important.” She swiveled her attention to the neighbors and added her own fake smile to the fray. “Hi, I’m Catherine. Everybody calls me Cat.”

“Cat?” the man sneered. “Nice to meet you, Cat. I was just telling your husband how glad we are you’re here.”

“Very glad. I’m Mindy Reynard, this is my husband, Dave,” the woman said, sticking out her hand.

Cat shook with Mindy. The men crossed their arms, UFC fights gearing up for a round in the Octagon.

“It’s getting late, and we’ve had a really long day. We should get going, babe,” Cat said.

“Agreed,” Dave said. “Your mom being on the phone, and all. I think we’ll be heading inside ourselves.”

“You do that,” Ed said, the smile sticking to his face like molasses.

“Will we see you at the HOA meeting this weekend?” Cat asked.

“No,” Dave said, ending his staring contest with Ed and offering her a stiff smile. “We don’t belong to your development.”

That’s an odd way of putting it, she thought.

“See these four houses?” He nodded his head down the road. Four brick houses bathed in shadows of tall pines, much older and set apart from the main road. “We’ve been here for years, before they decided what this town really needed was a bunch of uppity suburbanites petitioning for a Starbucks and Kohl’s.”

“I see,” Cat said.

“Lay off ‘em Dave, it’s their first day.” Mindy and Dave exchanged squinted warnings before backtracking down the driveway.

“My wife’s right. You folks have a pleasant evening—and welcome to the neighborhood.”

He raised his hand in a bastardized salute and they retreated to their confines with a metallic slam of the door.

Ed glared at Cat but didn't say a word.

"Let's go. Now," Cat said through gritted teeth.

They snapped the lock shut just as the police cruiser rolled to a stop in front of the Reynards'.

"You called the cops?" Ed asked.

"I had to. That guy wanted to beat your ass, and I was not about to start shit ten minutes after we got the last box off the truck. Jesus, Ed, did you even think about the consequences before you stormed in, guns blazing? It's not like we can bring this back to the store." She opened her arms and made wide circular motions. "We have to live here. Good, bad, hidden—this is our home. We don't want to make enemies with people we have to see every day."

She flipped the porch light on and padded to the kitchen for another beer.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Ed said.

"Yeah, well, feeling's mutual, dear. Next time maybe don't try to be the knight in shining armor."

"I thought you liked my armor."

"Not when you're running into a burning building."

Ed hugged her and took a swig from her bottle. "Point taken."

"Did he say she hit herself?"

"I believe he did."

"Crazy." She watched for signs of movement, but there wasn't much to see in the glare of the blue and red lights.

"Crazy indeed."

The officers plodded to their car ten minutes later, without the Reynards, and the darkness that came with their vanishing lights was sudden and total. Once the flashes behind her blinks passed, Cat could make out Dave and Mindy's figures in the window. A flick of the blinds, and then they were gone, too.

The incident wasn't forgotten in the weeks that followed, but it faded to white noise. The Mearns, it was agreed upon, were a lovely addition to the community. A charming couple, they greeted anyone they passed on their nightly walks, picked up errant garbage and disposed of it properly, and quickly learned that the Reynards were the exception to an otherwise perfect neighborhood.

That is, until the attacks started.

Cat read the Sunday news on her phone while Ed made coffee. The smell of dark roast wafted through the rooms, and she snuggled deeper into her stack of pillows. The headline screamed at her in bold black letters, demanding her attention.

THIRD HOME TERRORIZED, POLICE CONTINUE SEARCH!

Ed handed her a mug—her favorite, oversized with a plaid design and cursive script reading, “Not today, Satan”—and flopped into the bed with a whoosh of air.

“Have you seen this?” Cat asked, tilting the screen in his direction.

“I don't believe I have.” He scanned the lines making a collage of faces as he read, exaggerated and theatrical. “Shock. Dismay! Fear. Oh, the horror!”

“Would you stop?”

Serious. “Sorry. Are you worried?”

“Last night's attack was on our street. Not even a quarter mile away.”

“And?”

“Too close for comfort?”

“We’re fine,” Ed said.

Cat scrolled down and cleared her throat. “Victims report two assailants wearing black masks entered the home through the patio. While some details are being withheld due to the sensitive nature of the ongoing investigation,” air quotes, “robbery hasn’t been ruled out as a possible motive, as several personal items have been reported missing from each location—some in the weeks leading up to the assaults. Police are asking the community to be vigilant.”

“And we will be.”

“This is scary, Ed. They think the Meadowlands are being cased.”

“Cased? What is this, a 50s detective serial?”

“Yes, that’s exactly right.”

Ed reached for his own mug and swirled a tiny spoon, clinking it against the sides as he thought. The handle had a tiny painting of a lobster, a souvenir from the state of Maine.

“Okay. What should we do?”

“Change the locks? Have a security system installed?”

“That seems overly cautious.”

She found a different passage to share with him. “Once inside, the intruders restrain the homeowners and make various demands, using physical violence until they comply. Then they’re gone, leaving no concrete evidence.”

“Maybe it is ghosts.”

“Come on, Ed. We need to take this seriously.”

He groaned. “It can’t be that serious or we’d be on a mandated curfew with patrols running every couple of hours. I haven’t seen so much as a squad car. That’s a prime example of the media manipulating our worst fears to get more clicks and subscriptions.”

Cat shook her head. “We can’t be complacent. I think we should at least get a floodlight.”

He patted her thigh and stared at the ceiling. “If I do that, will you feel safer?”

“Yes.”

They spent the next two hours driving to and from Home Depot, scouring illiterate directions, and cursing from the top of a ladder, but finally the basketball-sized globe was in its rightful place on the corner of the roof.

Neither noticed the footprints beneath their bedroom window. Why would they? With a fenced yard and newly-shed light illuminating the crevices, a few divots in the mud weren’t cause for concern.

The Mearns cooked dinner, watched an episode of *The Good Place*, and drank a glass of wine while they cleaned the counters. They laughed and embraced, comfortable in the belief they were safe.

Outside, two faceless heads peered in unobstructed. They might as well have been apparitions.

New houses, like shoes, need to be broken in. Walls expand with the heat of new bodies, the weight of new possessions. They creak and tick, moan and sway, announcing their grievances and settling into their bones.

Cat and Ed were still learning the unfamiliar language, had not yet become accustomed to the night sounds and inner workings of the awnings and beams.

The scratching that came from the window, however, had nothing to do with adjustments, as a black-gloved hand shoved a screwdriver into the fragile space between the jamb and the glass.

Carpets muffled the invaders’ steps, two strangers, each with a handful of zip-ties and set of knives, sliding through the shadows, sidestepping furniture they didn’t own in a house that wasn’t theirs.

They moved in silence, stopping every so often to admire a picture frame. A metal birdcage. A wood-burned sign inscribed with a name and date. MEARNES EST. 2012.

Cat and Ed's bedroom was upstairs, the last on the left. They chose it for the fabulous view of the mountains, blue and majestic during the day, now jagged black lines dissecting the horizon.

The taller of the two strangers signaled, a speechless set of orders that can only be accomplished when two people have worked together for a certain length of time, learned the other's topography, a choreographed waltz perfected with experience and patience.

The door pushed open, and the strangers entered.

Their forms huddled together on the bed, a corporeal outline of a heart. The intruders' hearts also beat, *lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub*, but calculated goals of revenge superseded the risk of being caught.

From the predictable safety of their recliners, the strangers had discussed how the murders would go. Knife or gun? Knife, shots were too loud, would draw too much attention. Should they blindside them? No, they wanted surprise to work on their side.

Slit their throats in their sleep? Maybe.

Or should they take their time, relish the kill?

Maybe.

Those were the sporadic kinks of their plan that could be worked out in the moment.

"You ready?" the first mask asked in a gruff whisper. The nylon sucked to his face, a claustrophobic veil, and smushed the words to his lips.

From his partner, there was no response.

He was at the bedside, gazing down at the first victim. Eager to slice into the meat. He imagined the blood blossoms seeping through the expensive fabric of their sheets, the guttural pleas to spare their lives.

The excitement alone decided for him. Zip-ties wouldn't be necessary. Grabbing the hilt, he raised the blade just above his forehead and plunged it into the unsuspecting mound of slumber.

Would it be him or her? He guessed it was the woman.

Throwing aside the comforter, his partner long forgotten, the intruder stared at the maddening sheets, prepared to face his rival.

His neighbor.

"Shit," he said, realizing his grave mistake. "We gotta get out of here."

The bed was void of gore. His victim was the downy softness of a designer pillow.

"What's the rush?" a voice asked cordially behind him.

He was aware of a rush of wind, the curve of a menacing grin, but Dave Reynard was on the ground before he registered the blow.

After a brief foray into a dreamless sleep, Dave's eyes flitted apart. Only a sliver of white showed through, though, the nylon remained snug against his skin. Tighter than before. His breathing came in harsh rasps, the wheezy drag of a semi-dead corpse regaining consciousness in a coffin.

Or a man bound in nylon and duct tape with his hands and feet zip-tied to a chair.

Beside him was Mindy, equally stockinged and duct taped. There were no zip-ties for her, though; there was no need. Two cherry-red circles gaped where her arms should have been. She slumped against the chair, sweaty and covered in her own blood, her head lolling one side to another as she mumbled unintelligibly.

Dave roared, bucked against his restraints and thrust himself forward. He succeeded in drawing blood on his left wrist.

"I didn't want it to come to this, Dave."

A figure took two tentative steps forward. Dressed in black, he wore a thick mask, shapeless and terrifying in the absence of features. In one hand was a knife he recognized well. It had been his father's, a family heirloom passed down to him the previous summer after the funeral.

He had sharpened it to oblivion that morning, double checking that the edge would slice through a tin can like buttered toast.

"You brought this on yourself."

A second voice.

Dave's mouth fell open, the dumb look of a fish caught on a line.

"I'll give you credit. Using the break-ins for cover was clever. For someone else, I think it may have worked. Unfortunately for you Dave, we're not just anybody else."

Catherine Mearns lumbered over Dave. "You think we didn't know you were out there? Watching us? We're the watchers here, Dave. We see everything. That's what good neighbors are for."

She stuck her hand deep into his pocket as he stomped, primordial grunts blasted into her ear. She stared at him, giggled, and removed her find, dangling it in his face.

"Which one, babe, the duck or the—what is this?—bottle opener shaped like a fox?"

"Ooh, the fox."

Cat removed the fox from the keyring and tossed the rest onto Dave's lap. "Thank you. This will go great in our collection."

Mindy keeled forward, whether from shock or blood loss, Dave couldn't be sure.

"Aw, poor thing." She scrunched her nose at Dave. "You know, I thought you might've exaggerating when you said she hit herself? But she really does that, huh? I mean, not anymore, obviously, but you knew she was crazy and married her anyway?" Cat clutched her chest with a mock sob. "That's true love."

“Can I proceed?” the masked Ed Mearns asked.

She sighed. “Have at it.”

Dave, wide-eyed and becoming ever more convinced he wasn’t in the middle of a horrible nightmare, writhed against the zip-ties as Ed and Cat approached his mutilated wife.

Whatever chance Mindy had of survival was removed when Ed sunk the blade into the tender spot between the back of her neck and what was left of her shoulders, severing her spine in one clean shank. She offered a final gurgle, then collapsed into a mangled heap.

“You were right, Cat, that felt good.”

“Right? You were so tense at the last house. We shouldn’t have hit so close to home as soon as we did.”

Dave rocked with as much force as he could muster. The chair tipped backwards, and unable to stop the momentum, he crashed to the floor. Fresh snaps of breaking bones jolted his nerves. Tears caught on the mesh of his stocking and stuck like cobwebs.

“Ooh, that looked like it hurt, Dave. Not a smart move.”

His hitched sobs faded.

Cat crouched, gently brushing a flop of hair from his forehead. “We’re not going to let you talk. There’s no point in trying to converse now, is there? I mean, she’s dead.” Cat motioned to the body and continued. “And you’ve got about thirty seconds before you join her.”

He roared again, a futile attempt at communication and escape.

“You see, Dave,” Ed said. “Cat and I have been doing this for a long time, so I don’t want you to feel bad. This has nothing to do with some old-school feud over land rights.”

Ed scoffed. Cat stood up, joining her husband in a joint show of unity. “It does, however, have everything to do with you being a shitty person.”

Dave cocked his head to the side, a bizarre question hanging in the air.

“Oh,” Cat said with a smile that slid all the way to the corners of her eyes. “He has a code. Mr. Morals, over here.” She nudged him playfully. “I knew he was a winner. Even my mom likes him.”

She moved to the bench at the bottom of the bed and grabbed a small black pile. As she came closer, Dave saw it was the exact mask Ed was wearing. His and hers murder apparel.

Cat slid the sturdy canvas over her face and loosed a sigh of satisfaction. “Ready, babe?”

“Do you want the honor?”

“I think this one’s yours. A married couple counts as a single, not a double.”

The anamorphous heads discussed his demise as casually as a couple choosing dessert at a restaurant.

“If you insist, but I think I want the scissors.”

Cat placed a sparkling pair of silver shears into the waiting palm of her husband. Dave Reynard had never seen something so sharp in his life, so poised for the kill.

In four quick snips, his throat was gone, Adam’s apple to collar bone.

Hot blood gushed from the mortal wound, clogging at the stretchy edges of the nylon and dribbling down the front of his cheap black shirt.

Ed and Cat Mearns left them in their filth, no pomp and circumstance necessary. The mess would be professionally cleaned by the real estate company, show-house ready for the next couple who weighed their options.

Only then, there would be ghosts.

The boxes stayed empty, scattered in stacks throughout the halls and corners. Everything of value had been packed in three suitcases and loaded neatly into the trunk while the Reynards snuck in through the window.

As they drove through the Meadowlands, hoods and gloves now stowed in the center console, Ed squeezed Cat's hand.

"I know you liked this neighborhood."

"It had such potential," she said.

"We could put them back. The neighbors wouldn't think twice if we framed them for the invasions."

She considered his suggestion, but ultimately shook it off. "Too many variables."

He agreed. "There will be others."

"Of course."

"More spirits to create."

"I know."

A tinge of sadness filled her voice, the idea of home still warm in her belly.

"Are you ready for the hunt, Mrs. Mearns?"

She released his grasp and settled into her seat, preparing for the journey ahead. "Lead the way, Mr. Mearns."

Author Bio:

Mandy McHugh is a writer from Troy, NY. She holds an MA in English from the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY and a BA in English Education from Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY. Her works have appeared in various literary magazines and podcasts, most notably the award-winning *NoSleep Podcast*. Mandy lives in Upstate NY with her husband, two kids, and goofy dog.

The Nightender

Pat Flewwelling

“Again with this?” Kate straightened her collar and lapels.

“It’s not every day someone kills Bolat Timur, Son of Lamentations,” Godfrey muttered in his usual straight-lipped, high-browed good humour. “Bound to stir up a flurry of interrogations.” He opened the door for her.

“Eighth one in five days, Godfrey.” She pulled the hem of her blazer down, and still the thing didn’t feel like it fit. “And it’s not like anyone misses him.”

“You look fine,” Godfrey said.

“What do we know about this guy?”

Godfrey seemed surprised. “You don’t recognize him?”

There were two men at the table, facing the open door. One was Elder Brother Maxim Hortensius, who had led three of the last seven interrogations, and the man sitting beside him was lean, black-haired, and fidgety. They looked like they’d been caught in the act of passing secrets in class.

“Human?” Kate murmured. “In the Agora?”

Godfrey’s face was a mask. “Must be a very special human then, to be here, questioning you.” Kate had the ability to mind-ride, but lacked the skill that came so easily to others of their kind; still, she could see the conflict and warning in Godfrey’s eyes. He gently pulled her collar away from her throat. “You’re not wearing your patch.”

“I don’t wear my patch there, no.”

There was a significant twinkle in the old man’s black eyes.

“Wait,” Kate said. “Eton Cannington?”

Godfrey smiled wisely and wearily, and smoothed her collar back into place.

“But why?”

“They’re waiting,” Godfrey said.

Kate had a fleeting urge to hug the man, as if for the last time, but instead lifted her chin and walked in, and Godfrey closed the door behind her.

Maxim, the former legatus, rose first, followed by Cannington, CEO of Paxetem. His full name was Leo Eton Cannington Jr., and his company manufactured the Solamen patches that had so revolutionized their lives.

“Mr. Cannington,” Maxim said, pointing to Kate, “this is Kathrijn Vinke. She goes by Kathrine Nightjar these days.”

Cannington stuck out his hand. His jaw was tight. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” They shook on it.

“Your company does great things,” she answered, not knowing what else to say. What she knew about Paxetem and about Solamen patches could fill a book. What she knew about Cannington could fit a sentence. He was a genius aristocrat with a real Elon Musk vibe, but was virtually unknown outside the Agora. In the human world, he was a respectable heir to a respectable fortune, who split his time between investing and philanthropy. Within the Agora and its purview, he was the son of the human who had saved vampirekind from itself. But to look at him in person, Cannington seemed distracted, unimpressed, and uncomfortable, like someone on a schedule and suffering from gas.

Maxim gestured them to their chairs, and the interview began. “From the beginning, in your own words.”

The previous interviews had been recorded, so this had to be a new angle of investigation. Kate cleared her throat, and Cannington pulled a notepad closer, clicking the end of a pen. He wrote the date and time.

“It was Wednesday, January 29th,” she began. “I’d come in early before my shift to sit in the mall’s food court upstairs.”

“And you were working at a...gym?” Cannington asked.

“Yes sir,” she answered. “Still am. It’s my night off.”

“Why a gym?”

Until now, the questions had been confined to details about the killing of Bolat Timur, and how much his intended victim had seen of the fight.

Kate shrugged. “I’d been going to another gym for a few years, I liked the ambiance, I liked the energy –”

“She liked the view,” Maxim commented under his breath. She scowled at him.

“And I needed an overnight job,” Kate said. “I’ve already done countless security and manufacturing jobs. The gym is open twenty-four hours on weekdays, and I get weekends off. This was a nice change.”

Cannington lowered his pen and said briskly, “I suppose a better way to ask is, ‘Why a menial job at all?’ You’re smart, you’ve got a nest egg, why not invest and retire, like the rest of your kind? How can you afford your patches on a wage that low? Are you doing all right?”

“Listen. I have been rich before. I’ve been a duchess. I’ve been a wealthy widow, an erstwhile heiress with a vast portfolio of investments, a hostess supreme...”

“And now you’re...” he referred to a printout in a folder. “Cleaning gym equipment.”

“I’m also a trainer, and I’m doing just fine, thanks,” Kate answered. “I thought we were here to discuss Bolat Timur.”

Cannington forced a smile and slapped the folder closed. “You’re right, I’m sorry. Getting us off track. Go on.”

But now she didn't want to let it go. "I work," she said, "because I know what I'm like when I'm not working, just like I use the patch because I know what I'm like without the patch. When I'm not playing life on hard mode, I get bored, and I seek thrills just to feel alive. And I'm not talking about skydiving at night. I'm talking about going full Bolat. Seducing whole villages, just to see how many I can kill before they figure out what's going on. Hunting and killing in public. Work plus patch equals zero casualties."

A few years ago, she would have gagged on this level of honesty. Now, it was like discussing a different person entirely, a former roommate, whom she'd forgiven but cut loose from her life many years ago. She wasn't that vampire anymore.

"For the last hundred and sixty years, I've worked for my rent and my expenses. Whenever I wanted something more, I worked longer hours or saved a little more. I scrimp and save for the day I have to make the jump to my next life and identity." She couldn't explain why she was so defensive. "I'm not saying the high-life is wrong. I'm saying it's not healthy for me."

Cannington lifted his eyebrows.

Maxim broke the strangely awkward silence by saying, "Bolat," and Kate continued.

"I was sitting in the food court, half an hour before the mall closed and a couple of hours before my shift. I like it, because it's quiet, but it's not lonely. And there's this cute little place that has half-price sushi after seven o'clock." It was meant as a joke to break the tension, but she regretted it immediately, because Cannington's pen jittered away from his grip.

"And you...buy...this sushi?" Cannington asked.

"Sashimi, mainly," Kate said.

"And...eat it?"

"It'd look stupid if I bought it and threw it out."

Maxim cleared his throat at her.

“Since the ‘30s,” she said, “I’ve been building up a tolerance for food. People are more willing to accept and trust you if you join them for lunch. How can I be a blood-sucking monster if I share their love of bagel and lox?”

Cannington made another note. She took his silence as a prompt for carrying on. Any more of these interruptions, and she wouldn’t get to Bolat’s death before dawn.

“I noticed a pair of girls cleaning up the coffee kiosk, and a guy who was watching them very closely. They didn’t see a thing. He was at a table near the mall entrance. Crabby, hunched over, big head of black hair. Honestly, I mistook him at first for a homeless guy I’d seen around. But when he looked up, I realized he was one of us.”

“And you didn’t recognize him,” Cannington said.

“Never met Bolat in person, and his last portrait was in 1318. People change, especially when they stop shaving and bathing. Once I saw he was one of us, I figured he was off his meds and hurting hard.” She nodded at Cannington. No matter her unsettled feelings toward the man, she recognized the impact of his patches. Even in her own life, the difference had been night and day: from a maelstrom of scheming thoughts, dread, and thirst, to a blissful quietude and vast mental space for rational thought. The next thing closest to a cure.

Cannington finished a notation, saying, “He wasn’t off his meds. His account was up to date and his orders fulfilled.”

Kate shrugged helplessly. “Maybe he was selling them? Giving them away? I don’t know. He was a warrior of the Golden Horde, the Son of Lamentations – maybe he missed the sound of screaming, I don’t know. We didn’t stop to chat over tea.”

“But you knew he was hunting those girls,” Maxim broke in.

“One of them, at least,” Kate said, nodding, grateful for the wise, cool Elder Brother’s presence. “I sat at a nearby table, close enough to talk vampire-to-vampire, without humans overhearing.” She sat back, crossing her legs and her arms. “And I told him this mall was under my protection. Kate Nightjar, Guardian of the Oshawa Centre, Paladin of the Bench Press. And any deaths on my territory would violate a blood oath with the Agora.”

Cannington slipped a sceptical look at Maxim, who smiled and said, “It’s not a real thing.” Cannington shook his head and returned to writing.

“And then he snarled at me, got up, and left,” Kate said.

“But that’s not when you killed him,” Cannington said. “The report said you killed him in the morning.”

Kate nodded. “I worked the eleven to seven shift that night. It’s not so bad in winter, when the sun doesn’t get up until 7:30, and at this time of year, there’s so much cloud cover it’s like the sun doesn’t come up at all. So I went back upstairs to the food court to grab a cup of tea with my co-worker Sasha.”

“You drink tea,” Cannington said.

“I used to drink coffee, but with the patches, it just makes me jittery and nauseous.”

Cannington echoed her again. “You feel nausea?”

“Sometimes. Not awful, just...bleh.”

“You have a fully functioning digestive system,” Cannington said. “You eat and drink, and...”

“Pee and poop,” Kate said, “yes. It is, and it isn’t, something I’m proud of. It’s taken decades to get this far. I’m working my way up to two meals a day. Nothing big, just something...routine. It’s the routine that helps me stay on track.”

“On track for what?” Cannington asked. Kate didn’t know how to respond. “For what?”

“For seeing just how healthy I can be,” Kate said, feeling foolish, feeling childish.

Cannington scoffed. “You’re undead.”

She remembered the scabby creature she’d been, the monster who thought herself sexy and irresistible. These days, the smell of vampires was repulsive in her own nostrils, and she couldn’t understand how either vampires or humans could find them attractive.

“I can’t change the fact that I’m a vampire, and I can’t avoid drinking blood. But that doesn’t mean I can’t limit my cravings, or improve my mind, or do things with the limitless time on my hands. Why shouldn’t I work and save money for night courses in art and philosophy? Why shouldn’t I get up at four in the afternoon so I can visit the library before my shift?” Maxim raised his hand to stem the tide, but Kate couldn’t stop herself. “Shouldn’t we all be building a tolerance to the sunlight, for our own safety’s sake? If our heart desires the sun, why shouldn’t we adapt? Find out what works and what doesn’t? Some of us take Omega 3 and Vitamin D to help stabilize our moods, and to bolster the effect from Solamen patches – and why not? And what else can we try? Why aren’t we trying? We’re squandering our immortality for the sake of a slurp of illicit blood. We could be so much more.”

“Kate,” Maxim said.

“We’re running from silver and sunlight, when all we need to do is face it, understand the root cause, accept what we can’t change, and change what we can!”

“Kathrijn.” Maxim raised his hand again. “Your life is not on trial here,” he assured her. “We’re here about the death of Bolat Timur.”

“Are we?” Kate asked.

The eternal diplomat, Maxim spoke directly to Cannington. “Kate was one of your first clients. An early adopter of Solamen, when your father first introduced it to the Agora. Since then, she’s been one of your greatest ambassadors, convincing many of our kind to try Solamen and to keep using it. She

even hosts weekly group therapy sessions, a kind of Vampires Anonymous, and ensures that everyone is sticking to their regime, even when times are tough.”

“Yeah, I can see she goes above and beyond.”

“But she is also Kathrijn Vinke, one of our most storied Dispatchers. As great is her dedication to the health and well-being of vampirekind, she’s not averse to culling those who refuse to seek treatment and endanger humanity. What happened to Bolat Timur was no doubt a surprise and a loss, but – as we both know – both Bolat and Kate have been committed to using their patches. Solamen is not at fault here.”

“So what did happen?” Cannington asked with a barely suppressed sigh.

“He came back in the morning,” Kate said. “He was suffering.” Cannington took a quick breath as if to speak, but she cut him off. “It happens sometimes, even with the patch. Sometimes...” She second-guessed herself. This wasn’t the time or the place to say it. She said it anyhow. “Sometimes the patch is too strong, and you can’t sense the cravings at all. After a while, you forget that hunger is there to remind you that your body needs fuel. Once your tank is empty...” She shrugged. “You go crazy.”

Cannington blushed and his eyes narrowed.

“You need to take the patch in conjunction with proper diet,” Kate said. “That’s what it says on the package. That’s what we say in Group. That’s what’s written on posters all over the Night Market.”

Maxim pointed a knife-hand at Kate, saying to Cannington, “Solamen is not at fault.”

“Well, in a way it is,” Kate said, “but not like...in a bad way.”

The dry air seemed to have stopped circulating. Her mouth was sandy.

“Bolat,” Kate resumed, insistent and level-voiced. “He was stalking, waiting by the farthest car in the underground parking lot – Sasha’s car. When she and I finally left the mall, I saw him waiting for her. I made some excuses and followed her to her car, keeping my eyes on Bolat. He looked like he was

deciding if he should take me out first and then attack her, or kill her first, fight me, and then go back to feeding. Finally, she saw him there. I said I'd seen him before, and that he was struggling – as in, some kind of mental illness – and said he was a homeless guy I'd befriended. I told her I was going to stick around and get him some help, and I meant it. She wanted to call security. For the first time in thirty years, I had to mind-ride someone for their own good. She went home, had a great sleep, and ate a healthy breakfast. She doesn't remember seeing him."

"And Bolat?" Cannington asked.

"Waited until she was well out of sight, and then that S.O.B. gave me his name and made the Sign of the Claw at me."

"Is that a thing?" Cannington asked Maxim.

"It is," Maxim answered. "A territorial challenge. Single combat to the death."

"With a member of the Golden Horde," Cannington said. He opened his file folder again. "Five foot eleven – a giant for the 14th century – weighing in at over two hundred and sixty pounds at his last checkup, with approximately 4% body fat. Blood brother of Chagatai Khan, with nearly seven hundred years of brutal combat experience. And you accepted his challenge."

"It's not a challenge you decline," Maxim said.

"Also, like, how dare he?" Kate said. "It's the Oshawa Fricking Centre, for crying out loud, not Grand Central or the Royal York. Who the hell wants the Oshawa Centre?"

"You, apparently," Maxim said.

"And you killed him...how?" There'd be no official autopsy report for him to read, because vampire corpses corrupted into ash. "Stake? Silver? Beheading?"

"Uh..." Kate shifted in her seat. "Wrestling?"

"Wrestling."

“Yeah. Well, technically the sun got him, but I pinned him while the sun did its job.” She went on to describe – not without a touch of pride or sense of humour – how she and Bolat fought. He preferred weaponry and closed hand combat. She used a bit of jujitsu and leverage to bind up his arms and legs. She managed to slip behind him, stick her hand between his legs as if to grab his junk, and when he caught her by the wrist, she pulled back and up, pinning his own arm between his legs. While he roared and cursed her in a tongue not heard outside the Steppes, she frogmarched him out of the underground parking lot into the overcast morning light. “He did this kung fu-ey cartwheel and broke out of the hold, and he took off across the aboveground parking lot. But I wasn’t about to let him make a Sign of the Claw and then run for it. That would have been a disgrace to his spirit and history.”

“And you caught him,” Cannington said dubiously. “You.”

“Y’know, I don’t know if I detect misogyny, speciesism, or ageism. Either way...” Kate said, but Maxim stopped her before she said anything more. “Yes, I caught him.”

“How?”

“By running faster,” Kate answered.

Cannington turned to Maxim. “Vampiric powers increase with age – speed, strength, psychic prowess – and Bolat has four hundred years on this one. Nearly twice her age, and therefore twice her strength. So either you lied about her age – ”

“Assuming he relied exclusively on his own inherent vampiric powers alone, yes,” Maxim answered. He opened his arms wide, stretching his tailored shirt across his sculpted chest. “I can still hoist the back end of a car with one hand and change the tire with the other, but when I was a young legatus on campaign, I once threw a Carthaginian elephant like a javelin.”

The wheels seemed to turn in Cannington’s mind. “You work at this gym, as a cleaner and a trainer. You use the equipment to make yourself stronger?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

“What manner?”

“I lift the whole machine. Three sets of fifteen reps. Upper body on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Weighted squats on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I jog every night, too, along the lakeshore from Courtice to Toronto and back. I always try to beat my best time, but some nights are slower than others.”

Cannington doodled and waited for Kate to return to her story.

“So I caught him, and I held him facing the light. He conceded.” Aside, she added, “He said he was tired of fighting.” She remembered the feeling of Bolat’s hardened body giving in. She wondered what he was tired of fighting. “I asked if he was prepared to die boldly. If he’d said no, I would have taken him someplace quiet and dark and put him down. But he said yes, and turned his face up to the sun. Clouds parted. I held him until the skin and muscles burned away, and the bones fell out of my arms. A few seconds later, he was dust on the snowbank.” She shook her head. “No regrets, but I still feel sad about it. Just wish he’d sought help instead of...giving up.”

“And how long can you go in full sunlight?” Cannington asked.

“My best time so far is thirty-two minutes, three seconds. Enough to get me home in the summer, when the sun gets up at stupid o’clock.”

Cannington snapped his pen down in the middle of writing an illegible word. “You’re eating healthy, you take your vitamins, you’re keeping your mind active, you’re exercising, and you’re giving yourself a reason to live. Right?”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Kate asked.

“Why? To cure yourself?” Cannington asked.

“What’s there to cure?” Kate asked. “Would an eccentric genius want to cure brilliance in order to fit in? Would an athlete look for a cure for strength, so they could save on groceries? Would an artist

try to cure artist-ness? No! A genius would find ways of adapting to life among lesser mortals, an athlete would try to get even stronger, and...okay, well, I can't account for artists, but you get the idea. Yes, the cravings are a pain in the ass, but they're manageable, and no, I'm not doing this to cure myself."

"Would you ever try to wean yourself off the patch?" Cannington asked.

Kate whispered, "Is that what this is about?" Only Maxim heard it, and his face turned to marble, pale even for a vampire. He watched Cannington's expressions. Kate carefully laced her fingers, uncrossed her legs, and sat forward with her hands on the table. "I know what I'm like off the patch. I know what other vampires are like off the patch. The whole Agora knows how many people I've Dispatched because they've refused to take their meds, or they couldn't afford them." Honest in spite of her growing outrage, she said, "I couldn't have done anything like this without the patch. Yes, I can work without the patch, but it's exhausting. The distractions, the cravings, were debilitating. Solamen is the scaffolding I use to rebuild my life."

Cannington sat back, looking thoughtful but otherwise unreadable. She wished she had Godfrey's intuition, and could read the thoughts behind those veiled eyes.

The silence dragged on until Kate asked Maxim, "Is this the last interview? Am I absolved yet?" Maxim seemed lost in thought. "Look, even if it hadn't been for the Sign of the Claw and an honourable fulfillment of the challenge, I'm still off the hook, because I would have been doing my job as Dispatcher."

But she knew this was no longer about Bolat. There was something bigger at play here, and her fate was being decided not by the Agora, but by a rich human being.

At last, Maxim melted into slow, smooth motion, as a hunting vampire might slide through shadows. With a glance toward the opening door, Maxim whispered, vampire-to-vampire, that she

should wait outside. Kate left without another word, but not without a pained, suspicious, pleading look at the manufacturer of the Solamen patch.

Godfrey closed the door behind her. His eyes were glassy and his mouth small. He was eavesdropping, with or without Maxim's consent. Then he nodded, gripped her elbow, and took her away. She had to jog to keep up.

"Okay," Kate said, "how'd I screw this up?"

Godfrey led her into a windowless meeting room off a secondary hall. "You remember a world without Solamen?" he asked.

"Hard to forget. They called it the Black Plague, among other things."

"Cannington has been running an experiment," Godfrey said. "Cutting back on the potency of Solamen patches."

"What?" Kate blurted.

Godfrey begged for silence until he had explained what he overheard in Cannington's mind. "You and Bolat and at least a dozen other vampires have been on a reduced dose for the last two years. They didn't know, and neither did you. That's why Bolat was hunting, even though his account was up to date. The dose wasn't enough. They chose him because – like you – he was a faithful proponent of the patch. He never missed a dose. Perfect for the placebo trials. You represent the worst possible outcome: you might not even need the Solamen anymore."

"But why?" Kate asked. "I mean why the reduced dose? We were doing fine!"

"He's trying to find out at what point vampires will revert to their feral nature. He wants to see how far he can cut back on the dosage, so he can minimize production cost and maximize profits. He wants to make people believe they've developed a tolerance. They'll need a bigger dose, more often." He seemed to stare into the distance, or through the walls. "And he wants to increase the cost of each

dose. I'm only surprised he hasn't laced Solamen with some...addictive substance...Do we even know...? By the Gods, if his noble father were alive today..."

"But why?" Kate asked. "For...for money?"

Godfrey stared at her as if she'd lost her mind, or as if he'd lost his. "They did it with insulin, they've done with God knows how many other drugs. Why not Solamen?"

"Because without it, people die."

"Without insulin, people die, but they raised the prices anyhow. And they will again, for valid reasons or for bad, as high as the market will bear. Those who can afford it, will. Those who can't afford it, die. Only the rich will survive, and the rich will make Cannington richer."

"You say that like it's inevitable, Godfrey –"

But Godfrey put his hand on her shoulder, freezing her into silence. He was listening. Then, in a rush, he said, "Cannington wants you dead, Kathrijn. If people know that they can wean themselves off Solamen, and increase their tolerance for food and sunlight..."

Kate snorted a laugh. "Maxim wouldn't –"

Godfrey shook her. "There's only one company in the world that manufactures Solamen, and if he doesn't get his way, Cannington can shut down the factory as easily as turning off the lights."

Godfrey bared his teeth. "Maxim knows Cannington has us all by the throat."

Maxim had a responsibility to both humanity and vampirekind; he would placate Cannington to keep the Solamen coming, even if it meant sacrificing one Dispatcher.

"Kathrijn, right now, there are only three people in the Agora who know what you've done – and what Cannington has done and will do." He rushed her toward the Agora's front door. "And of the three of us, only one can foil a Dispatcher in Cannington's pay." He dodged behind his reception desk to grab

a sheathed rapier from a hidden compartment, and he put on a pair of UV-Flash resistant glasses. “I’ll hold them off.”

“I can fight them,” Kate said.

“I know,” Godfrey said, as three doors opened and black-clad Dispatchers emerged into the hall. “You can also outrun them.” He smiled as he unsheathed his sword.

“I’ll do you one better,” Kate said, letting her fangs descend. “I’ll live as I do best: in the open, dragging friends and enemies both into the light.”

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Hailing from Oshawa, Ontario, Pat Flewwelling is a project manager by day, hobbyist by night. She enjoys kayaking, fishing, knitting and crochet, gardening, archery, physical fitness, and other relaxing skills that will come in very handy during the zombie apocalypse. While she tends to write dark fiction, such as her 2019 novel *Helix: Sedition*, she also writes short stories in fantasy, science fiction, horror, and crime. You can follow her on Twitter ([nine_day_wonder](#)) or on Facebook.

On the Manners of Vampires

Naching T. Kassa

Eve stood near the window her eyes fixed on a figure beyond the glass. The man lay in a patch of gore covered snow, his bloodied face staring up at her. Amber light from the outdoor lamp pooled about him, revealing his shredded down jacket and the place where his stomach had once been. The contents had already spilled into the snow.

Eve backed away from the window. She hurried to the front door and finding it secure, snatched the rifle from the rack nearby. She rushed to the kitchen.

The back door was closed when she entered the room, but it wasn't locked. Eve turned the deadbolt, clicked it into place, then dropped to her knees. She pulled the pet door in and latched it tight.

An animal howled in the distance. The sound pierced the quiet and then died away. Eve shivered. Her heart knocked against her ribcage as she exited the kitchen and returned to the living room window. She looked out.

The corpse had risen to its feet. It stood ten feet from her, steam rising from the stomach wound.

Glass shattered as Eve broke out a pane with the rifle's muzzle. She thrust it through the new hole, then aimed and squeezed the trigger. Her shot went wide.

The corpse took another step and with impossible speed, appeared a foot away from her. It was close, so close she could read the logo on its torn jacket. The tiny embroidered medal on the left-hand side proclaimed an affiliation with Gold Medal Movers.

The corpse stared through a mask of blood. It bared its fangs, sharp and white.

Eve caught movement from the corner of her eye. A blur of grey and white appeared from the right, and she glimpsed sharp claws and even sharper teeth just before the corpse's head tumbled into the snow.

Out in the darkness, beyond the pool of light, someone laughed. Eve renewed her grip on the rifle.

The song, "Evil Woman" by ELO suddenly filled the air. Eve jumped at the sound and fumbled for the cell phone in her pocket. She pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

"Crap!" she whispered.

The words IGNORE and ANSWER appeared under a picture of a woman with silver-colored hair. Eve's finger hovered over IGNORE. She hit ANSWER instead.

"Hi, Mom."

"It's seven o'clock, Eve. You were supposed to call when you got to the new house."

"I'm sorry. I got busy moving things in."

"The movers are supposed to do that."

"They weren't that reliable." She frowned at the head in the snow. "I wish I'd never invited them in the house."

"I told you not to use Gold Medal Movers. You should've used Acme. Or better yet, never moved at all."

Eve gritted her teeth and then set the phone down on the windowsill. She transferred the call to speakerphone.

"Mom, do we have to talk about this now?"

"I saw a news report about the area you moved to. Don't you know there are werewolves where you live?"

“Yes, I do. But they’re not a problem.”

“I keep imagining you up there, lying in the snow, torn to pieces. Did you put silver bullets in your rifle?”

“Yes.”

“Your father says keep one in the chamber at all times.”

“I am. I have been. But I already told you. There aren’t that many werewolves up here. Our big problem is vampires.”

A figure dashed past the window. Eve tracked it with the rifle, but before she could squeeze off a shot, it vanished.

“Vampires aren’t that bad.” Her mother continued. “At least they’re well-mannered. They can’t even enter the house without an invitation. Werewolves just barge right in.”

Something hit the side of the house and a loud snarl rent the air.

“What was that?” her mother asked.

“Nothing. Can I call you back later?”

“I’ll be asleep later. Your father has to work in the morning. Which reminds me. How is that boyfriend of yours? Is the Bug Man still at work.”

“I wish you’d quit calling him that. His name is Rick. And, he’s not a bug man. He’s an exterminator.”

“What’s the difference? He kills bugs, doesn’t he?”

“No, he doesn’t. He—”

The tinkle of shattered glass sounded from the back bedroom. Eve turned. “Mom, I gotta go.”

“What’s going on in there? Eve, are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Tell Daddy I’ve got a garlic hollow point in the chamber. Love you!”

“Eve—”

Eve hit END. She aimed the rifle at the hallway.

“I know you’re there,” she called to the shadows. “It’s hard to hide when you smell like death.”

A man with the face of a Greek god stepped into the room. Both his black baseball cap and jacket bore the Gold Medal Movers logo.

“Where’s the other one?” Eve asked. “There were three of you before dark.”

“Your dog got him,” the man answered. He grinned, fangs glistening. “I’ve never seen a dog so big. It’s a shame I had to break him in half.”

Eve’s finger tightened on the trigger. “You’ll pay for that.”

“Will I, Miss Dandridge? You’re a terrible shot.”

“You think so?”

“You missed Henry by a mile. And you didn’t even try to shoot Benjamin.”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“I think it does. If your dog hadn’t interfered, you’d be dead by now.”

“Why don’t you take another step? Then we’ll see how bad a shot I am.”

The vampire dropped into a nearby chair and brushed the arm with one finger. His nail cut into the fabric, leaving a thin slit.

“You are a fascinating woman, Miss Dandridge. I don’t think I’ve met anyone quite like you.”

“You must not get out much.”

“And such a biting sense of humor. Why you’re absolutely fearless. Not a shiver. No trembling. You’re not afraid of me, are you?”

“Not really. But, then, I’ve never been afraid of vampires. Killer clowns are much scarier.”

The vampire shook his head and laughed. “You amaze me, Miss Dandridge. Tell you what. If you drop your weapon now, I’ll let you live out your days as my personal slave.”

“What’ll you do if I don’t?”

“Kill you. In the worst way, of course.”

“Do you mind if I talk to my boyfriend first? We just moved in together and we agreed we’d discuss all our major life decisions before acting. You know how it is. Besides, I’m not your type.”

The vampire’s grin broadened. His yellow eyes glimmered. He rose to his feet.

“You’re exactly my type. I think I’ll keep you.”

“Before you make such a big decision, you should know something first.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t have a dog.”

Clawed hands suddenly seized the vampire’s arms and spun him around. The werewolf towered above him, its human body covered in white and grey fur. It sank its teeth into the monster’s shoulder. The vampire shrieked.

They grappled against one another, the vampire struggling to escape. He reached for the werewolf’s face and gouged its eyes. Blinded, the creature fell back with a howl. The vampire turned on Eve.

She pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot deafened, and the acrid smell of garlic filled the air. The monster took one step and fell to the floor, eyes wide.

Eve crossed to the body and kicked it.

“Don’t touch that,” a voice like gravel said. Eve looked up into the werewolf’s face and smiled.

“He isn’t dead?” she said.

“Not until the head’s off,” he replied, slipping past her. He took the monster’s head in one hand.

“Oh, Honey. Please, don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t take his head off in here. It’ll make such a mess.”

“You want me to take it outside?”

“Please.”

“Alright.”

He dragged the body to the front door. Eve unlocked it. Before he could step out, she planted a kiss on his furry cheek.

“What was that for?”

“Saving my life.”

“You saved your own life. You shot him.”

“You’re sweet, Rick.”

“Wish your mother thought so. Did you tell her about me yet?”

“I tried to set her straight, but she wouldn’t listen. She thinks you exterminate bugs, not monsters.”

“I guess we’ll have to tell her in person.”

“Ok. But we’ll have to wait for an invitation. There’s nothing my mom hates more than an ill-mannered werewolf.”

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Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter.

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Excerpt from "Trapped"

Theresa Derwin

It never hurt to be cautious when you were driving a stolen car. Mike leaned forward over the steering wheel, scanning the street for cops or neighbours. Only when he was completely alone was he brave enough to sidle out of the vehicle. It was black-blue, another shadow against the night, and he was the same: black jeans, a dark blue T-shirt, a charcoal hoodie he'd tightened about his face. Beneath the T-shirt his skin was bare except for the tattoo of a rose, to the right of his left nipple. His Rose, his heart. He shook his head to regain focus. The dark October crispness folded around him like a shroud, completing the look.

Across the street, a group of teenagers stood encircling their boredom, knocking back cider straight from a bottle. One took a swig, passed it to his neighbour, and the circle continued. None of them spoke. In the stark electric glow of the street lamp they looked like ghosts, but who was he to judge? Maybe a cider-headache and bad grades beat what he was up to.

Envy was a snake tail of constriction at his throat.

He'd scoped out this house for weeks, making sure the Youngs had really gone away before breaking in. From what he'd gathered from the local gossip—there was always that, if you knew where to find it—the Youngs didn't have friends. They were alone in this world. More ghosts in a world of ghosts...

He lit a cigarette, closing his eyes to preserve his night vision from the sudden flare of his lighter. He took a deep drag, savouring the bitter flavour that filled his airways. It wasn't as good as a drink, but it would do.

He looked up and down the street, cloaked in darkness save for the occasional halo cast by the street lamps. The younger kids had long since gone to bed and, as he looked back over his shoulder, the teenagers were shuffling down the road, empty bottle thrown into the gutter, heading towards the off-licence for a cheap refill.

He tried to remember what it was like to be so young. That had been a while ago for him; a different time; a safer time. He wondered if it had felt that way when he was living it.

His mobile phone lit up, an electronic beacon in the night.

It was time.

He grabbed his rucksack from the passenger seat, flinging it over his shoulder. He locked the car, stubbed out his cigarette and ambled over to number 616. Never run, that was the key. People always remember a running man. Number 616: what the hell was that all about? The street held a handful of houses at best. How could this one be numbered in the six-hundreds?

He was tempted to whistle, but fought the urge. He'd been in this game for years and figured he knew all the pitfalls. If running was stupid, whistling was downright suicidal. The last thing he needed was some neighbour peeping through the curtains to find out who was making all that noise.

The front door of 616 reeked of mould and mildew. With one last glance over his shoulder, he pulled his lock-picking kit out of his rucksack and set to work. Less than a minute later, the door was unlocked, opened and closed again, with Mike safely on the other side.

Inside the house, he unslung his rucksack, sighing with relief. Fuck, he was getting old. And tired. Time to get out of this game.

He rummaged around for his torch and took his mobile phone out of his pocket. He needed to call Richie, to tell him he had made it inside. As he scrolled through the contacts, a pungent, earthy smell wafted up from the skirting boards, prompting him to pull his hood tighter about his face. Old houses, mouldy doors, rotten skirting. It was amazing how some people could live.

He found the number and stabbed at the screen with his thumb. Richie should answer immediately, Mike would whisper the code-word they'd agreed upon, and then he'd hang up. Richie would do the rest.

Only Richie didn't answer, at least, not straight away. Mike tapped his foot—in all the years they'd worked together, this was unheard of. After half a dozen rings the call connected, and Mike waited to hear the voice on the other end of the line.

But there was only silence.

No, not quite silence. There was a rustling sound, like dry, old paper, followed by a slow drip-drip-drip, as if a tap hadn't been tightened properly.

"Richie?"

The phone went dead.

What the fuck?

He tried the number again, trying to ignore the aroma that crawled up, insidious tentacles slithering into his nostrils. On the second attempt, it didn't even ring out, just mocked him with the steady electronic tone that signalled he was out of range.

Bad reception, it had to be. Something interfering with the calls, or low signal rates out here in the sticks. Well, there was no use trying to call him over-and-over. He'd just have to do it from the car when the job was done.

He had to try and call Rose next though—had to. It was worth a shot at least. Maybe fate would be on his side.

He hadn't seen her since last night and needed to hear her voice. She'd sucker-punched him all right. She was the one woman who'd almost made an honest man of him. And she still would when he got the booze under control. She was the sweet smell of purity to his sickly scent of indulgence. One last job was all he needed, a little favour for Richie, and then he'd give it all up... for her. Get back on the detox programme he'd never had the strength to finish, clean himself up, rid himself of the stink of whisky and the monkey on his back that pissed in his ear.

He dialed Rose's number in the dark, thinking of the short, slinky bathrobe he'd bought her, how it clung to her curves as she stood in the doorway of their bedroom, a smile playing across her lips.

Damn, she was hot.

Double damn—the call went straight to voicemail.

He put the phone back in his pocket, silently cursing the mobile company—useless pricks—and switched on the torch. He passed the beam across the hallway to get his bearings, and gagged on the smell that had intensified in the last few minutes.

Once, a long time ago, he'd raided a house in the country. It had been an easy score, and by the time he left the place, the stolen van he'd used to get there had been resting low on its suspension with all the loot stuffed into it. What he remembered of that night was not the money he made fencing the jewellery and silverware, but the carcass of a dead rabbit that had been laid across the doorstep. Its throat had been torn out and it had been left there to die. However it had got there, by the time Mike came across it the maggots had set in, and it was little more than rancid flesh and fur.

That same smell was in the air at 616: the sickly sweet smell of decay and putrefaction. He tried to locate its source, edging down the narrow hallway until he reached a grimy, white-painted door.

Outside the door, the smell was almost palpable—whatever was causing it must be on the other side.

He reached out to open it, but there was no doorknob. Weird. Maybe it could only be pushed from the outside. He laid a gloved hand on the wood and shoved hard. There was nothing, not so much as a rattle from the doorframe. The wood felt strange under his touch, as if it had been sprayed with a layer of grease or fat. Images of tentacles and long, groping fingers flashed once again in his mind.

Shining the torch on his hand, he could see that there was indeed some kind of residue on the door. He wiped his fingers on the front of his hoodie, anxious to get it off his hand.

The hell with it. He'd scope out the rest of the house first, see what there was to take, then he could deal with whatever lay behind that door. Damn it though, he was curious. Temptation was that monkey pissing in his ear again, except for this time it was curiosity that consumed him, not the need for a drink.

He walked through the darkened corridor and turned into a dusty, old-fashioned living room. It's like something out of an old Hammer film, he thought. Or maybe more like Steptoe and Son. Once-green velvet curtains had faded to a dirty olive colour, and ancient, ragged furniture lay beneath a patina of grime and dust. He was half-tempted to swipe a finger across the battered mahogany bureau like his Aunt Betty used to do when he was little, just to see the clean streak it would leave behind. He thought back to the door in the corridor, the one that smelled of rot and waste, and the unsavoury sensation of the grime against his glove.

No, he decided. He would touch as little in this house as he could. He spotted a mini-stack in the corner of the room, and smiled behind his hood. I can touch the loot though, he thought, slipping it into his bag.

The room smelled of must and cat piss, but even that was preferable to the stench of decay that followed him in from the hallway. How could these people live like this? He'd been spying on the Youngs for weeks, keeping track of their comings and goings. They drove a nice car, nicer than anything Mike had ever got his hands on. Surely they couldn't be short of a few bob?

The great British eccentric, he thought. More cash than they knew what to do with, but content to live in a nightmare like this.

Mike wandered over to the bureau and pulled down the drinks hatch. Bingo! Honest-to-God crystalware: decanter, wine glasses, tumblers - the whole deal. He pulled a newspaper and a roll of bin liners out of the rucksack and started wrapping and bagging the crystal as fast as he could. On top of the bureau he found a rose gold watch that would fetch a few quid down the pub.

That was pretty much it for the living room. The kitchen fared a little better, scoring him a high-end microwave, kettle, and toaster, as well as a blender that still held some murky red substance that he couldn't identify. He bundled them into a fresh bin liner and moved it into the hallway, along with the haul from the living room. He left both bags near the front door for a quick get-away.

The main bedroom netted him his best haul in the form of a large jewelery box constructed to look like a walk-in wardrobe. Golds and stones shimmered in the torchlight—rings, bracelets, a gold chain, studded with Swarovski crystal. He stuffed the whole thing, box and all, into his rucksack and high-tailed it out of the room.

As he descended the stairs, heading for the rest of his stash, that foul stench assaulted his nostrils again.

The door.

Forget it, he told himself. Just grab the loot, get in the car, and get the fuck out of here. He stood in the hallway, a handful of steps away from freedom and a new life, and he hesitated. He turned on his

phone to check the time. He'd been in the house for forty minutes, much less time than he thought it would take—mostly because the pickings were so slim.

He'd still have plenty of time.

Before he could register it, he was walking back down the hallway towards the door. The smell was worse than he remembered, strong enough to make him gag. He pulled his T-shirt up over his face—even the redolent smell of his own cold-sweat was better than whatever foulness was behind that door.

He dropped down to his knees to examine the keyhole. It was an old-fashioned model, but a lock was a lock. He pulled out his kit and put the torch in his mouth, aiming its beam at the tarnished brass plate.

It took him a couple of minutes of jiggling with the picks before the lock clicked in the jamb. Rising to his feet, he pushed against the door, surprised by its weight. Wood screamed against wood, a warning not to go further, and the hinges creaked like an ancient clipper as the door opened, revealing darkness beyond.

The dark was unrelenting, a powerful void sucking him in.

Author Bio: HWA member Theresa Derwin writes Urban Fantasy & Horror and has over fifty anthology acceptances, one in 'Below the Stairs' with Clive Barker.

When she became too ill to work, she accepted medical 'escape' to pursue a writing career. As well as physical disabilities she has cognitive function issues, and writing gives her an escape from her illnesses.

She's had three collections published; has edited over nine anthologies. Her forthcoming books include *God's Vengeance* from CLP and the collection *Sex, Slugs and Sausage Rolls*

She is the 2019 HWA Mary Shelley Scholarship recipient.

She blogs at www.theresaderwin.co.uk

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Paradise Lost

Sheri White

“My wife was furious when she discovered the digital recorder in my suitcase as she was unpacking. This was supposed to be a family retreat, yet I couldn’t completely leave my work behind at home. I saw no harm in composing memos and letters as ideas came to me. I’m glad I have it now - at least I can record the events of the past few days. Luckily, this ‘toy,’ as Cathy referred to it, stores over two hours of recording time. I only wish I had brought my cell phone, but I knew Cathy would never forgive me. It doesn’t matter now, I guess. I am glad I can record the story anyway, just in case. Just in case someone survives.

“We came to the island for a much-needed vacation, my wife, son, and I. An idyllic place in the sun, accessible only by private plane. No phones, television, radios or computers in any of the cottages; these things were located in the main lobby for emergencies only. It’s a place where you can pretend ‘civilization’ doesn’t exist. And as far as I know, it doesn’t anymore. I know I’ll never leave here alive, but I suppose there are worse places to die. I just hate the thought of dying alone, dissolving into a puddle of my own flesh.

“I haven’t left this little cottage since it happened - Christ, was it only yesterday? It was the most horrible thing I have ever witnessed. Cathy and Eric had gone out to the beach early. God, I wish I had gone with them then, but I told them I had to finish the latest Koontz novel. I would join them later. That was a lie, of course. I was composing a proposal that I planned to present the minute I returned to my office. I was determined to become a partner in the firm by the end of the year. I don’t know how much

time had passed when the screaming started from the beach; I was totally absorbed in my dictation. The screaming was a terrible cacophony of noise; a chorus of terror and agony. I imagine Hell would be filled with that ghastly sound. I leapt off the bed and ran to the door, praying Eric and Cathy were all right.

“My first thought was that I was hallucinating, because what I saw when I flung open the door can only be described as a nightmare. I had expected to maybe see a scene straight out of that shark movie from back in the 70s. It wasn’t unheard of here to spot the occasional shark. But it was something worse - much worse. Everyone on the beach was melting. Melting! Flesh was sliding off their bodies, the bones liquefying as soon as the skin was gone. I completely freaked - I couldn’t move. Which was a good thing, I guess, because everyone who emerged from their cottages into the sun started to melt as well.

“The stench of burning hair assaulted my senses; my eyes watered, transforming the hideous scene into a shimmering blur. I swiped at my eyes with the backs of my hands and watched in horror as tiny flames danced upon the heads of the people on the beach - resort staff as well as vacationers.

“A few people instinctively beat at the flames with their hands, but only succeeded in getting their hands stuck to their heads. Some looked up at the sky, I guess to see what was causing it, and immediately their eyes burst into flames.

“”Blisters bubbled and erupted on any exposed skin, the ruptured seconds later, gushing fluid that ran in rivulets down their bodies. Finally the skin started sliding off their bones and into the sand,

looking like huge gobs of clotted cream. The bones dissolved as soon as they were exposed, mixing with the melted flesh, giving it a swirled appearance. The beach looked as if a pudding factory had exploded there.

“Frantically I scanned the beach for my family, praying that maybe that they had gone inside the bar hut to get a drink. Then I saw them - dear God, I saw them.”

Sounds of sobbing; recorder stops abruptly.

Tapes starts again

“OK...OK. I’ve got to do this. If it’s only happened on this island, the world needs to know the story. Sweet Jesus, I hope it only happened on this island.

“My wife and son were still on the beach. I hadn’t seen them at first because I thought they were someone else. You see, at first glance they looked like one obese person - but I guess Cathy had clutched Eric to her when it began because they were melting together. They had...had fused together as they melted. Half of Eric’s face had melted into Cathy’s breast - an obscene parody of their nursing days. I’m just thankful they had worn hats onto the beach, which protected their hair from catching fire. I was able to look into Cathy’s eyes before her face slid off her skull. Betrayal, fear, pain - I could see all those things. It hurts me to think she may have hated me at the end for deserting her. Maybe I should’ve just run out to the beach and embraced her so we could all die together. But I couldn’t. I shut the door. Then I closed all the blinds and went into the bathroom. I ran the shower full-force so I wouldn’t hear anymore screaming.

“All of that happened in a matter of minutes - no more than two or three. But it was an eternity.

“I don’t know how many people on the island are still alive. I hear occasional screams outside, but I don’t open the door. I have enough to survive for a while; I have no intention of sharing. There’s a small kitchenette with a refrigerator stocked by the resort management.”

Derisive snort

“Guess now I won’t have to pay eight freaking dollars for a tiny jar of macadamia nuts. Too bad there’s no vodka in the damn fridge; God knows I could use a few shots. Anyway, I figured as long as I stayed inside during the day, out of the sun, I’d be OK.

“But I was terribly wrong. Because it wasn’t the sun. When the sun finally set, I opened the window blinds and looked outside. Thankfully, the sand had absorbed what had been left of the dead. No trace of the horror that had taken place out there remained. As I watched, several people stepped out of their cottages onto the beach. At first I thought everything was OK and planned to join them.

“The screaming began again, though, only this time much worse. Turns out the melting hadn’t been caused by the sun, but the sun had helped it along and had also caused the fires and blisters. The people outside were melting, but they were melting much slower than the others had. I could see flesh dripping off their fingertips, their chins. I wondered why they didn’t run inside - then it came to me a few moments later. The beach was still very hot from the sun beating down on it all day, and I saw that

their feet were shapeless blobs of flesh anchored into the sand. They were like candles in a sconce, and they would stay there and drip bit by bit until there was nothing left. With a shudder I closed the blinds once more. The screaming went on all night, finally stopping a few minutes after the sun rose. If I had had a gun, I would've been dead long before they were.

“So I decided the melting was caused by the heat outside. It sounds absurd, but what else could I think? I cranked the air conditioning up full-blast and took off my clothes. I didn't want to take the chance of getting hot in any way. I was freezing, but that was better than the alternative. I kept busy that day. I had brought several novels with me, and Cathy had brought her trashy women's magazines, so I read. I wasn't too hungry, but I ate anyway, just to have something to do.

“The situation got much worse tonight. I truly don't think I'll survive much longer. The cottage became quite dark as the sun went down. I wasn't ready to sleep, although I hadn't slept at all the night before, but I did want to read a bit more. Escape from the living hell.

“I switched on the bedside lamp. As soon as the light winked on, my thumb and forefinger started melting into the brass pull-chain. I screamed - Sweet Jesus, it hurt! My hand felt like it was on fire. I tried to pull my hand out from under the lampshade, but the finger and thumb were becoming intertwined with the chain. I could see my flesh starting to pool and drip onto the nightstand. With my other hand, I grabbed the wooden base of the lamp - it was still cool, thankfully - and smashed it against the wall. The lamp broke, shattering the light bulb, but I was still stuck to it. I was too scared to rip my hand away, so I just kept smashing the lamp against the wall until it was completely destroyed. The chain remained woven through my flesh, but I wasn't going to try and get it out. What was the point? If

the little bit of heat emanating from a light bulb was enough to start the melting, how the hell would I survive?

“I plunged my hand into the thawing bucket of ice I’d left on the nightstand, not caring if any shards from the lamp had gotten in it. I just wanted to stop the melting. It was a horrible feeling. My hand felt as if it were a glove that was being slowly removed. It looks as if something tried to flatten it with a meat mallet. It doesn’t hurt anymore, though. In fact, I can’t feel it at all. My hand is already dead - it’s just waiting for the rest of me to catch up. I can’t imagine what it will be like when my whole body melts.

“I don’t dare turn on any other light. I guess I’ll just try to sleep.”

Tape clicks off, then clicks on again; sobbing is heard.

“The air conditioning is off! It’s like a fucking oven in here!”

More sobbing; incoherent words.

“Nobody will survive this. It’s the end of the world, I fucking know it! We need to be warm to survive. Dear God, even people in Alaska will die - or freeze to death if they don’t use heaters or fire to keep warm!”

More sobbing; terrified gibbering.

“Oh, shit. It’s happening! I’ve started to melt! I’m sticking to the bed sheets!”

Sobbing, babbling, then sudden maniacal laughter.

“Call me the Wicked Witch of the West! I’m melting, I’m melting...”

More insane laughter, slowly trails off into quiet crying.

“I can’t get off this bed. I’m going to die in a puddle on this goddamn bed!

A few moments of humming and quiet singing.

“What the fuck? What is that sound? No. Oh, no. Please, God, no! The air conditioner is back on! I forgot to set the switch to continual - the damn thing will run intermittently! It will take forever to completely melt - I can already feel myself solidifying!”

Unrelenting screams, eventually dying off to quiet sobbing.

Voice is almost unrecognizable; barely above a whisper.

“What a world, what a world...”

Author Bio:

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 Tales from the Crust (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), 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 the upcoming New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark (edited by Jonathan Maberry). Magazine appearances include Lamplight, The Sirens Call, Devolution Z, and Beware the Dark.

Find her on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/sheriw1965>

The Microwave Tower

Julianne Snow

I must have passed the same tower every day for the last thirty years. It stood so tall and yet, it blended so seamlessly into the background. I knew it was there, but it didn't register as anything other than part of the scenic backdrop to my focussed world. That was until the day it all changed...

Have you ever wondered how technology really works? Up until that day, I had taken it for granted. Sure, I had a working knowledge of airwaves, sound waves, and even microwaves, but did I really know what each of them actually entailed?

The answer to that question is a resounding no. As it turned out, the experts really had no idea either.

It was a Friday. I remember the day clearly; it was the first time in ten years I took a different route to work. I hesitate to think of what would have happened had I not taken that right turn when I did...

I made it to work, a little later than usual, but I was still early. I liked that; having the time to grab a coffee from the tiny kiosk in the lobby before my busy day began. Nothing like a moment to yourself to clear and refocus your head after the hectic grind of traffic. It was at the kiosk that I first heard what had happened.

It's odd, you know. Hearing the news for the first time. I still find it hard to believe and if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes, I may not have.

You're probably wondering what happened and to be honest, I'd love to tell you. The fact of the matter is that I don't know what happened. That's not entirely true either; I know what happened, but I don't know why it happened. No one knows why.

The only thing we do know is that it was the microwave tower.

At 7:23am, the microwave tower sent out a signal or pulse or something that reached outward in a five kilometer radius around itself. Anything within that radius, simply stopped.

They stopped, but they didn't stop living. They just stopped moving. Everyone and everything froze in the exact place that it had been occupying at the moment of the event.

The vehicles. The vegetation. The people. All stuck in stasis.

At first, emergency responders were afraid to enter the circle, but with their first tentative steps inside the ring, nothing happened to them. They tried to render aid to those who were affected, but there was no help for them.

While technically not dead, they were certainly not alive either. The site has terrified some; so much so that the government attempted to cover them. You see it was impossible to move them; the pulse fused them permanently with the environment.

I remember the first time I passed the circle after it happened. The eerie feeling of utter stillness washed over me and for a moment, as the world around me slowed, I was sure it had happened again. My throat filled with my fear and I vomited onto the steering wheel of my car. Once the moment had passed and I was dropped back into a world full of movement, the waves of relief, tinged with a fair amount of disgust flowed over me.

Many months elapsed before I even had the nerve to drive by again. My heart still exploded into my throat and my stomach crinkled itself into knots; my breakfast, thankfully, stayed on the inside this time.

It was years before I could approach the ring without the security of my car surrounding me. By that time I was an old man, ancient by the standards of my grandchildren. I know why I felt compelled

to search out those that had stopped that day, their souls and actions frozen in time, but that didn't stop me from being afraid to do so.

I stood just outside the barrier that had been erected all around the ring. It wasn't the type of obstacle that would stand in your way; it was more of a demarcation for people to comprehend that passing into the inner ring could have disastrous effects should the tower decide to malfunction again.

Even as I fought the urge to turn away, my body propelled me forward, through the fence and into the living monument. In silence, it waited. For what, I cannot say with any certainty. The overwhelming emotions of despair and loneliness played along my nerves like a song of pain and nostalgia. It was a heady phenomenon, this mix of emotions that resonated deep into my soul.

As I walked along the sidewalk, I studied the statuesque people as I passed by them. Men, women, and children caught unaware in mid step, in mid swallow, in mid call. If you haven't seen inside the circle yet, picture the busiest moment on the street that you can remember and capture it for an instant, as if you've taken a photograph. That's the best way to describe it; a photographic moment etched in life-sized stone relief. Every detail down to the last wisp of hair blown awry by an errant gust, petrified against the elements that now assault it.

When I found her, my heart broke again. After I returned home that fateful day so many years ago, I had searched the house for her, hoping that she had never made it to work that day. My cell phone pleas had all gone unanswered and deep down I knew what that meant, despite the fact that I refused to believe it. The empty house was the proof I received.

The second piece of corroborating evidence came in the form of two FBI Special Agents about three months after the event. I had reported my wife as missing and potentially within the ring as the authorities had instructed us to do in the days following the pulse. My heart was heavy making that call,

but what else could I have done? I wanted the answer even though I knew it would hurt to hear it. I knew what the truth was, but I still wanted to see it for myself.

That was why I entered the ring so long after the pulse. It had taken me that long to build the nerve to do it, the nerve to see Catherine again.

When I found her, it was like so no time had passed. She had been caught in mid stride, her left hand searching the expanse of her purse for something. She looked as if she might topple, but strangely, her body was balanced on the ball of her right foot. By the laws of physics, there was no way that she should have remained upright, but the pulse had somehow suspended them. I stood for a long time, my eyes gazing upon her beautiful face and my heart breaking because I know that deep inside her body still lived. Scientists who studied the phenomenon had recently let it be known that while time had essentially stopped for those caught up in the pulse, life had not.

Life. It's such a funny word. Those poor people were not living by the standards that you and I would define, but they were alive. Alive. Such a sad word when taken into context sometimes.

Placing one last kiss on her face, I left the circle from the way that I came; dreading the coming months of loneliness as contemplated my own death. Even in death, we will not be reunited and that is a hard truth to swallow.

And so the circle around the tower remains; a silenced and creepy garden of statuaries that stand in effigy of what can happen, of what did happen.

One thing is for certain, people no longer live within five kilometers of any tower. Anywhere. A lesson has been learned and a wariness of technology born from that moment. The moment that froze time and space in the oddest of ways.

Author Bio:

Julianne is the author of the Days with the Undead series and Glimpses of the Undead, both being rereleased in early 2020. 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.

Social Media Links:

Twitter: [@CdnZmbiRytr](#)

Facebook: Julianne Snow

FB Fan Page: [Julianne Snow, Author & Days with the Undead](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Julianne Snow](#)

Blogs: [Days with the Undead](#) & [The FlipSide of Julianne](#)

The Lure of Light

Scarlett R. Algee

No service.

Lisa can just make out the tiny words through the spiderweb of cracks that fans out from the upper left corner of her phone screen, a corner that's now jagged and missing pieces of its outer shell. She hadn't meant to throw the damned thing down quite so hard, but after getting seventeen texts from Karen within ninety seconds of arriving at the hotel's front doors, Lisa had just sort of ... snapped.

The desk clerk, the sort of good-looking woman Karen might have called distinguished or academic (but never in Lisa's hearing, not these days), had smirked at her, and almost by compulsion Lisa had found herself kneeling on the rich carpet to search for tiny shards of glass and plastic, trying to mumble an apology. Sorry about that. I told her I'd made the trip okay. It's just a week, she doesn't have to bug me, it's just a week, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

She was, Lisa realized in that moment, getting tired of apologizing.

Somehow, Lisa had checked in without further incident, getting her room key without her cheeks bursting into flames from embarrassment or any wayward bits of glass finding their way into her shoes. She'd been surprised to see that the key was an old-fashioned brass one, heavy and tarnished, on a ring that dangled a large steel 8; she'd shoved her fingers through the loops of the numeral, squeezed her broken phone in the other hand, and trudged up the great winding staircase several steps after the frowning old bellhop, who'd handled her two suitcases as if they were a personal affront and hadn't yet offered her more than a tight-lipped grimace—in fact, he'd deposited her bags at the door to her room and turned back to the stairs without even telling her to enjoy her stay.

Odd people. Karen would be saying “I told you so,” if she were here now; she’d practically said it as soon as Lisa had found Lake Manor online. You don’t want a place like that, I hear it’s haunted and people disappear and it’s probably full of weirdos and anyway we can still afford something nice—

Dammit. Lisa feels a little better now that she’s ensconced in her room, her week’s worth of clothes hung up in the wardrobe and ten love-worn paperbacks stacked neatly on the dresser in fives, and she’s not about to ruin the beginning of a good mood by concentrating on her girlfriend’s endless worrying. It’s the reason she’s here, after all, to get a break; what she’d seen as Karen’s cute nervousness at the beginning of their relationship is wearing thin now, four years later, especially since poor student test scores had brought Lisa’s first-grade teaching career to an abrupt and apparently permanent halt in May, and then in June Emily—

Lisa closes her eyes and clenches her teeth. For a few seconds she just sits on the edge of the bed, stroking the worn silk comforter to calm herself, bouncing a little against the firmness of the mattress. Then she picks up her phone, wincing as another bit of glass flakes off in her palm, and nudges the screen.

It takes several taps on the fragmented surface before the device flickers to life, but at last Lisa’s finally rewarded. Never mind that most of the icons don’t seem to respond now; she can still see her wallpaper, her Emily.

Despite the screen cracks, her daughter still looks radiant. It’s Lisa’s favorite picture, Emily’s first day of kindergarten last August. The five-year-old had insisted on a white dress and white shoes, despite Karen’s repeated warnings that they’d simply get filthy on the playground. In the shot, Lisa sees her own blonde hair, her own dimples, Emily’s ear-to-ear smile adorably gapped by a lost tooth. She can close her eyes tight and still feel that warm little body in her arms, still smell Emily’s bubblegum

shampoo. Emily had loved kindergarten, and had been over the moon at the thought of having Mommy for her first-grade teacher the next year.

Lisa had been over the moon too, before the budget cuts, before the accident.

It should have been simple: Lisa had been dropped off at the farmer's market, Emily's giggly "Be good, Mommy," still fresh in her ears, while Karen made the trip to the dentist to have Emily relieved of a wiggly front tooth that wasn't coming out on its own. It hadn't been Karen's fault—Lisa knows that, intellectually; Karen wouldn't have deliberately got their car plowed through that intersection by that idiot drunk driver—but there have been a lot of times in the past three months that she's caught herself thinking how Karen should have been more careful, more watchful, more something, dear God, it's not fair that Emily died and Karen walked away without so much as a scratch—

Lisa catches her breath. The phone's gone dark, and the unbroken part of the screen is dotted with something. Tears. God, she's lost it again. Swearing under her breath, she sets the phone down at her side and swipes her face with both hands. Even her shirt's wet; she wipes her fingers on it angrily and hopes there's no one in the next room who's overheard her sobs. Lisa stumbles to her feet and toward the bathroom, vision blurred by a fresh wave of moisture. She feels her way to the sink, and splashes icy water across her face and into her eyes, avoiding the bleary reflection in the bathroom's ornate mirror.

When she comes back out, she leans in the doorway, breathing hard, her cheeks stinging from being scrubbed with the tail of her shirt instead of a fluffy hotel towel. So much for her good mood; she needs something to do, to take her mind off Emily right now, but her eyes are too sore for reading and neither room service nor the tiny hotel bar sounds the least bit appealing.

A nap. She'll have a nap. No elbow-jostling, no wriggling in discomfort to accommodate an extra body, and when she wakes up, things will be better. They have to.

"It's just a week," she sighs.

Mommy?

Lisa bolts upright, nearly falling off the bed; the phone thumps to the floor. "Emily? Emily?"

No answer. She glances around wildly and then remembers where she is, heart hammering in her chest. "Oh, Jesus." Lisa pushes sweat-slick hair out of her face and slumps back onto the mattress, grabbing the comforter in her fists, her scalded eyes helplessly leaking tears. "Why can't I keep my shit together? Why did it have to be Emily? Why couldn't it have been fucking Karen?"

The words come out and she stops cold, shoving the knuckles of one hand into her mouth. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," she whispers, rolling over to reach the fallen phone. "I'm so sorry. I love you, Karen. I still love you."

Still apologizing. Lisa sits up, shaking her head to clear it. The light slanting through her room's sole window carries the purple of oncoming twilight—how long has she slept? "You were right," she murmurs, talking to the empty air since her phone's beyond picking up a signal. "I shouldn't have come here like this." Knees creaking as she stands, she goes to the window and pulls at the burgundy velvet drapes, grimacing for a second at the feel of the dusty, heavy fabric against her palm. From here she can see the lake the hotel's named for, shrouded in thick rosy mist; someone's walking along the cobblestone path that leads to the pier and the water's edge, but their features are lost to her in the fog. She drops the velvet panel and turns away, back to the books on the dresser and the clothes in the wardrobe. "I don't care about getting the money back. I'll pack all this up in the morning and come home. I'll find a job. We'll work something out. Somehow."

Even after a bath and a change of clothes, Lisa still feels too unsettled to eat. Never mind what Karen had said about haunting; she has enough ghosts of her own. Still, she guesses she needs something in her stomach, so she makes her way back downstairs, receiving a glare from the still-silent bellhop as he ascends with another load of luggage. Apparently she's slept through the arrival of more guests.

Two of those guests are in the hotel's sitting area, across the lobby from the front desk: an elderly woman in a pastel pantsuit and a small girl, red-haired and freckled. Her granddaughter, Lisa supposes, and takes the time to get herself a cup of tepid coffee and a banana nut muffin before looking for a seat. "Hi. You just got here?"

"We did." The woman smiles. "Violet Conroy. You may have passed my Henry on the stairs, trailing that fellow who totes the bags—Henry's very particular about our things." She looks around. "It's a lovely hotel. I adore that staircase—although I'm sure my back won't be so fond. And the gas lighting, that's a nice touch."

Gas lighting? Lisa hasn't noticed—but yes, this entire area is lit with gas lanterns, the flames yellow and flickery and a little creepy. "I'm Lisa," she answers, unwilling to offer more; instead, she turns to the little girl. "You're pretty."

The child laughs, showing a gappy smile. "Go on," Violet urges, "say hello, Emily."

Emily. Lisa swallows her coffee in a hurry; she can practically hear the blood draining from her face. "Excuse me," she chokes, "did you say—"

"Hannah." Violet is tousling the red hair. "Come on, Hannah, don't be shy."

Lisa drinks the rest of her coffee in a hurry, feeling her heart clamber down from her throat. “You know, I just got here a few hours ago myself,” she says, grabbing her muffin. “I think it’s time to have a good look around.”

Jesus, I’ve got to get out of here.

The mist over the lake isn’t nearly as picturesque as it had looked online.

She’d heard ducks out here, or something like them, and had sacrificed her muffin without glimpsing anything. Up close, standing as near to the water as she can without losing sight of her toes, Lisa realizes that the haze is flat-white and immensely thick; her skin and clothes feel damp, as though she’s walked through a dense fog, but there’s none of a fog’s shifting wispieness. She stretches out an arm and can’t see anything past her elbow. Wiggling her fingers uneasily, Lisa looks back over her shoulder and can just make out the lines of the hotel. She pulls her hand back.

Her phone vibrates in her pocket.

Lisa yelps, stumbling as she tries to pull it out, teetering forward toward the water. Don’t fall in, Mommy, they’ll never find you here snakes through her head and of course it’s Emily’s voice, why does it have to be Emily’s voice, and Lisa yanks the phone free and her knees fold and she sits down hard.

Smarting, breathless from the impact, Lisa clumsily wipes condensation from the screen. Some of it smears around the cracks, but it clears enough that she can read the message.

Be good, MMommy

Lisa cries out, but bites her tongue hurriedly, struggling back to her feet, squeezing the phone in both hands as though she can mend the damage through sheer force of will. Somebody’s fucking with her, this has to be a sick joke of some kind—

The message is from her own number.

This isn't possible. Lisa scrubs one hand on her jeans to wipe her eyes as the screen blurs. There's no way anyone could—Karen? Is Karen doing this? The idea is ludicrous enough that Lisa snorts, then snuffles heavily. Karen is a worrier, not a prankster. She'd never be cruel enough to do something like this, not when she was the one in the accident.

The phone buzzes weakly as another message pops up.

im wAtching you moMMY

Lisa hasn't left the hotel. She hasn't even packed her bags. She's barely left the bed.

It's too soon, that's all. She's rational, she knows this. It's only been three months since Emily died; it had been foolish for Lisa to think she could go halfway across the country to this spot in the dead end of nowhere and be fine by herself. She hasn't grieved enough yet to venture so far; that's why she hears giggles in the empty hallway, and taps on the outside of her window when there's not even a tree branch nearby, and Mommy in every creak of the floorboards. It's purely psychological.

But I hear it's haunted, Karen had said, and that's why Lisa won't look in the bathroom mirror, afraid of just whose face she'll see.

The phone lies beside her on the bed, within easy reach. She can see through the cracks well enough to see that the battery indicator's in the red, but she has no clue what will happen if she tries to charge it. She'd rather be a grief-crazed mother than the idiot who makes the news by burning down the hotel.

It vibrates. She grabs it.

i lovve you mommY

Lisa slams the phone screen-down onto the comforter and curls up in a tight knot to sob.

The impact is soundless, a sudden wild careening through traffic and the crunch of the right front headlight into a utility pole. Karen's airbag deploys. Lisa's face bounces off the back of the front seat's headrest and her mouth begins to sting. Wait, hadn't she been at the market? Why is she still in the car? "Karen?" she asks thickly, but gets no answer.

Karen's not in the car. Lisa yanks at her door handle, but the door's jammed and won't open. She scrabbles at her seat belt buckle, but it, too, refuses to yield. "Karen?" Lisa screams through mushy lips; cars whiz by outside, frighteningly close. "Dammit, Karen, get me out of this!"

"Mommy?"

"Emily, hold on." Lisa gives up on her seat belt and reaches for her daughter. "Oh my God, Emily!"

Emily's wearing the same white dress she'd picked for the first day of kindergarten, blood spotting the fabric where it's dripped from her mouth, a bag of hand-picked tomatoes spilled across her lap. Her lips are sticky and red, her eyes blank, her head hanging at an unnatural angle. "Emily!" Lisa shrieks again, and this time she spots Karen: standing outside the driver's door with someone in a uniform, laughing. Laughing. Joking. "Karen, goddammit, help us!"

Only laughter reaches her, becoming a golden giggle from the child slumped broken beside her. Then Emily says "Mommy," again, and her head turns with a sick wet grating noise on her fractured neck, and her eyes have the lambent yellowness of the lights in the hotel hallways, and her smile is a ghastly crimson grin with gaps in it. Blood bubbles out where a tooth should have been.

"Dance with me, Mommy."

In the bathroom, Lisa has to hold on to the sides of the sink to stay upright, but she manages to rinse her mouth—which twinges oddly—and rinse her face with the coldest water she can stand.

She does not look in the mirror.

She draws a cold bath as well, intent on rinsing away this sick sweaty feeling. Afterward, she stands on the bath mat and drips, trying not to think of the sound of the blood spattering from Emily's mouth. "Bad enough I've lost my daughter and my job," she mutters, "and when I get home I may not have a girlfriend either, but my mind? Am I losing my mind?"

She can hear her phone vibrating in the next room.

She towels off and dresses hurriedly.

There's not another message.

Annoyed, increasingly uneasy, Lisa turns to her books. She'd picked these ten because they're old favorites, read and re-read and memorized, but she can't concentrate; every time she scans a line she sees the blood on that white dress, on those precious lips. The way Emily's gaze had been frozen, the way her head and neck had been so strangely twisted.

That was exactly how she'd looked in the hospital morgue.

Words blur and run on the pages, skimmed blindly, as one book is laid aside for another. By the time Lisa gives up on the distraction, her two neat stacks of five on the dresser are a jumbled, wept-over pile on the floor.

She pushes off the bed, rubbing the back of her neck. The room is almost dark—it's later than she'd realized—but the last light of evening streams in the window with an odd yellow color, shifting between light and dark as though the sun is trapped in a swift churning cloud. The flickering is unpleasant to look at, and Lisa is just reaching to close the drapes when she spots the first movement.

There's another person down at the lake's edge—no, two—no, several. They sway and writhe and she can't quite count them, no matter how hard she concentrates; there seems to always be one more, just at the corner of her vision, and every one of them glows yellow.

It's a trick of the light, it has to be; but Lisa rubs her eyes until they run, and the yellow people are still there, wavering like candle flames about to go out. They shine like the gas lights in the hallway, and as she watches them join hands and begin to dance in a circle, she realizes that the mist shrouding the lake has almost the same creamy radiance.

Lisa looks away again. "Guess I've found the hotel ghosts after all," she says to herself, but when she turns back to the scene, the people are still there, still dancing, glowing brighter now. There's a smaller figure in the center of their circle; it looks up, sees Lisa, and waves.

It's Emily.

Her phone makes a weak noise. Her hands start to shake.

i see yoU momMY you cAnt HIde come danCE with MEe

When Lisa steps off the cobbled walkway, shivering in the thin white nightgown she'd yanked on because it reminds her of Emily's white dress, the circle of people is still there, and Emily is still in the center.

She can't see her feet, and forces herself to walk. The others let her pass, though walking through the ring is unnerving. They're all stringy-haired and slack-mouthed, faces gelatinous, bodies bloated, eyes staring; they look ... drowned.

Except for Emily.

As soon as Lisa has breached the circle, Emily runs to her mother and leaps into her arms.

“Mommy, you came! I knew you’d come. I watched you.”

The words are soft around the edges. Something’s wrong; Emily is solid in Lisa’s arms, but it’s a tenuous solidity, as though the little girl’s body might slip into pieces at any moment. Blood streams freely from Emily’s mouth, down Lisa’s nightgown, filling her nostrils with the scent of wet decay. Lisa retches and coughs, struggling—“Honey, let Mommy put you down, please let Mommy put you down”—and as the drowned shuffle closer, Emily kisses her mother on the lips.

Blood. Blood and mud and scummy stagnant water, and Emily’s rosebud lips are sticky, clinging no matter how Lisa tries to pull away. The others are a tight circle around the pair, and when Emily’s small body shakes, disgorging into her mother’s throat a stream of bloody liquid rot, Lisa screams and backs away.

But there’s no way to go back, only forward, trapped by the insistent press of unstable bodies, and Lisa keeps screaming until she’s swallowed by the mist.

Of course, no one heard any screams. Douglas Turner doesn’t even know the woman’s name. All the lawman has to go on is a badly broken smartphone, its screen a mess of sand-filled cracks and its battery dead. Still, if the woman has family, they need to be notified. Maybe someone in his chain of command can get it working.

He drops the dead phone in his pocket. The mist shifts and thins as though it’s about to dissipate, as though the sun’s about to burn it away and make it reveal its secrets; and Turner casts his gaze across the water, waiting, waiting.

In all his years in law enforcement, Turner has learned that where Lake Manor’s concerned, no one ever hears much of anything.

Author Bio:

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by *Body Parts Magazine*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Pen of the Damned*, and *The Wicked Library*, among other places. Her short story "Dark Music," written for the podcast *The Lift*, was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and her flash-fiction piece "Bone Deep" is a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle cleverly disguised as a Hound of Tindalos, skulks on Twitter at @scarlettralgee, and blogs occasionally at scarlettralgee.com.

Soft Deadline

Angela Yuriko Smith

“Veni ad me. Et a corruptione, et in commutationem pro servitio. Saturitas famem alimenta. Non opus est in me. Veni ad me.” It was done.

Five minutes ticked slowly by with no response. She hadn’t thought about how uncomfortable kneeling in heels would be. Perhaps she’d mispronounced something. She started again.

“Veni ad me. Et a corruptione, et in...”

She trailed off as a ribbon of ebon smoke twisted from between the floorboards in her circle, thickening into an inky cloud. It poured into a form, like dark wine filling a bottle, and a man began to take shape. She bit her lip with excitement and pulled her bustier over her tummy pudge. It was working!

Within minutes, she was kneeling at the feet of an incubus. He was stunning, nearly six feet tall with glistening skin the color of midnight sapphire. A lustrous sheen accented his sharply cut structure. From the tips of his horns to the bottoms of his cloven hooves, he was a tight, nastily hung dream. She struggled to her feet, almost teetered out of the circle. Naomi realized she was panting.

“So, hello...” She felt self conscious in the presence of this dusky god... er... being. “How do we do this? Do we have to stay in the circle? Is this a one time off or...?”

“So, sweetheart, it’s like this.” He paused to adjust the leather straps that kept him girded and shuffled backwards. Naomi thrilled. She hadn’t expected him to sound Australian. “I know why you called me. I’m incubi, so it’s expected. I can’t fault you for calling a professional. But here’s the rub...” Again, he adjusted the straps.

Naomi waited for him to finish. He didn’t, just readjusted his loins. Finally, she just asked.

“What’s the rub?”

“Well, this here.” Again, he was tugging on the straps. It clicked for Naomi.

“Oh...” she purred. “You need my help with that... rub. I thought you’d never ask.” She looked deep into his coal black eyes and tugged at a buckle.

“Um...” He stepped back again, hooves at the edge of the salt chalk lines. “Can we leave this pentagram? I’m not going to blow up or anything? It’s been awhile since I was last conjured. I forget the rules.”

“Oh, yea, if you’d rather use the bed.” She scuffed the chalk with her heel. He slid out, but didn’t move to the bed.

“First, I have to apologize. I know why you called me, but I’m just not up for it right now. Maybe in a bit when I’ve had a breather.”

Naomi was stunned.

“What? You’re an incubi. That’s what you do. It’s what you exist for.”

“Yup, I know. I do really enjoy my job, but the problem is the one just before you.” He readjusted his straps again and leaned forward.

“I’m really quite chafed...”

“What? You can’t be chafed! You’re a demon! You’re insatiable, you grind women until they can no longer walk straight... what the hell?” Her voice cracked a little. “Is it me? Am I too plump?”

“Nooo... you’re perfect.” He folded her into his arms. “I don’t discriminate with size, gender, race or religion. I actually prefer a little religion to spice it up. I’ll let you exorcise me later, if you want. I just need a rest for now.”

“Really? It’s not me?” Naomi looked up at him, full of heated hopes.

“Oh yea, not you at all, love. It was the last job. She was a succubus. Have you ever heard of that? A succubus conjuring an incubi? I can tell you that was fun for a few years, but honestly, now I’m beyond spent. I could sleep for a decade...”

“A decade?” Tears pricked in the corner of her eyes.

“Don’t let me ruin your fun!” He moved to the bed, unstrapping himself as he went. Sprawling upon it, he finally revealed his full glory to Naomi. It was resting.

“You get yourself started.” He yawned. “I promise, you’ll rue the day... in a bit.” The demon went out like a light, almost invisible against the black silk sheets she’d bought for the occasion.

Cursing, Naomi remembered she’d forgotten to buy batteries.

Author Bio: Angela Yuriko Smith is an American poet, publisher and author. Her first collection of poetry, *In Favor of Pain*, was nominated for a 2017 Elgin Award. Her latest novella, *Bitter Suites*, is a 2018 Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist. She co-publishes *Space and Time magazine*, a 53 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction. For more information visit SpaceandTimeMagazine.com or AngelaYSmith.com.

I Stay with Baba Yaga for a While and Take Out Her Trash for Her

Shea Herlihy-Abba

I Stay with Baba Yaga for a While and Take Out Her Trash for Her

The old stories say that Baba Yaga talks to heroes.

Come in for a while,

she'll drawl in broken-toothed Russian,

you want to know herbs? I can tell you about herbs.

I can teach you which ones heal,

which ones kill.

Which herbs to use to make a woman's heart pound with desire.

She flashes her Bad Grandma grin,

revealing iron teeth,

and stirs her pot filled with childrens' limbs.

The hero makes himself at home,

uneasily,

adjusting himself on Yaga's beat-up La-Z-Boy

when he thinks she isn't looking.

She turns around, winking insidiously.

I saw that, young man,

she crows,

triumphant at his crimsoning cheeks.

Now, she says, settling down across from him,

the cooking pot between them, next to a chipped old coffee table

that hosts a salt and pepper shaker,

made like two halves of a heart.

They beat steadily, slightly out of unison,

occasionally popping a kernel of their contents out onto the table,

which Yaga sweeps at distractedly with a hand shaped like cellophane

pulled over barbed wire.

Now then, she says again.

What do you want to learn?

They talk through the night. She tells him secrets of healing,

as she snacks on arms and fingernails,

licking her lips as she waggles her finger when the hero misspells something

in the notepad he brought along.

Like everyone,
the hero's got a sob story.
Three kids at home,
an ailing Russian goodwife,
who has been asleep three days and nights,
as he trekked all on his lonesome
to Baba Yaga's chicken stilt cottage
on the edge of the forest.

He seeks to cure her.
She tells him how, grinning slowly, fox-like
as she soaks in his unease.

When he leaves, she putters around the house for a little,
stashing some kneecaps in her freezer for later
before switching on her television to catch up on soaps.

She falls asleep in her motheaten recliner
to the sound of youthful, tormented love
and infomercials for bath products.

When I visit Baba Yaga,

she doesn't ask me who I am here to cure.

"Sit," she says, not turning around,
as she fiddles with something on the counter next to her cheese grater.

I open my mouth
"Save it," she says, all business,
then plunks herself across from me,
long-knuckled hands dangling just below her boulderish knees.

"You are not here to cure someone,"
she says, eyeing me as she slips a Marlboro Red
from the pocket of her stained bathrobe.

It is not a question.

I simply sit, knowing she will ask
if she wants me to say something.

She eyes me for a long, long time.

Then she laughs.

"You are not here to cure anyone!"

She says uproariously.

“You are not even here to cure yourself!”

She guffaws, and her brackish laughter breaks the air into pieces.

Her smile melts into the stuff of grandmotherly love.

“Come,” she commands.

“We have work to do.”

Mostly, I do her chores for her.

Chop wood, haul her trash to the curb,

knead her dough,

and label the parts in her fridge with sticky notes.

I add the odd smiley face to a batch of toes or earlobes,

‘cause,

hey,

why not.

In the evenings, when she feels like it,

she teaches me.

I remember her first lesson.

“What are these?”

She asks, holding up the salt & pepper shakers
(they are still beating gently).

“They’re - ”

“NO!!”

Her eyes blaze,
and she smashes them on the floor,
staring fire into me until I look away.

She picks them up.

They are whole, somehow.

“Try again,” she says, with her foxlike smile.

“They’re - ”

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?!”

She shrieks, smashing them again,
this time on the table right in front of me.

I take a deep breath.

She holds them out again, waiting.

“It’s a heart,”

I say.

“It’s one thing.

There is no they,
no these.”

Her smile could melt butter,
cause it to dance into a pan,
and sizzle with the rest of the pancake batter.

“Very good,” she says.

“Now, go to bed. I need to catch up on Los Corazones de Los Muertos
son Todavía Mudándose.

Jose just broke up with his girlfriend
what’s-her-name,
and I need to see what happens in the season finale.”

She waves me off to bed with a cellophane hand.

The next morning I find her lopping up fingers in the kitchen

with her dusty old FM radio sawing out crooner oldies,
and her iron teeth in a little glass bowl of water
beside the cutting board.

“Ah,” she says, turning to me
as she lays out the fingers on a scratched-up cookie tin,
“You’re up.
Good. Put these in the oven, then sit down with me.
We have some talking to do.”

I manage not to grimace,
and a couple minutes later we’re sitting across from each other
at her round, plastic kitchen table,

“What is this?” She asks, holding up a ripe apple.
I hesitate.
She raises an eyebrow.

Then shakes her head,
putting the apple away in a plastic bag.

“What is this, then,” she asks,
holding up a candied ear.

I sit back.

She waits.

“They are both the same thing,”

I say at last.

“They are both you. They both emanate from you.

They come from the same thing.

At their roots they are the same thing.

At the end, they will return into the same thing.

So what’s the point of calling them different things,

this or that, there’s no difference.

They both come from you.”

She smirks.

“I think you’re cheating,” she chides me.

“How did you know the answers?”

She giggles, then gulps the candied ear,

handing me the apple,

which I devour.

I spend months there,

time beyond time,

taking out her trash,

organizing her fridge, taping her soaps,

cleaning the grimy windows,

which never seem to become ungrimy.

At the end of my stay, I walk into the kitchen in the morning

to find her back turned to me.

My stomach tightens.

My instinct says that this is the final test.

I don't say a word,

just slowly back out of the front door, while,

back turned to me,

wearing her stained bathrobe,

she saws at something on the kitchen counter quietly,

bony shoulders moving in a steady rhythm.

Now and again,
she is not herself.

Or rather,
a different version of herself.

It is hard to describe,
and quite frankly
I would rather not try.

I know my stay is over.
I know there will be no affectionate goodbyes,
no cheerily crotchety jibes as I try to adjust myself
on the cramped plastic chair
that goes with her round plastic kitchen table.

This is the test:
the apple and the ear.

They are the same.

The sick heart, the whole heart,
the hungry heart.

They are the same,
they come from her.

They'll end in her.

Really, it should make no difference
who I say goodbye to. The Yaga who laughs and cajoles,
or the Yaga I have seen more rarely,
whose back is always turned,
always moving over something on the countertop.

They are the same.

They end in the same thing.

But nonetheless,
as I tread quietly into the snow,
away from the edge of the forest,
where her chicken-stilt cottage scowls,

I miss her. I miss the Yaga I would have liked to say goodbye to.

Still,

it is all the same at the end.

It all ends with the root of things.

The sick heart

the whole heart

Yaga-With-Her-Back-Turned.

A half-full black plastic trash bag
parked out by the curb of the sidewalk that stretches forever
at the edge of the forest.

I rummage through my backpack as I walk towards buildings, cityscapes,
I am looking for the notebook where I wrote down all her lessons.

Of course,
it's not there anymore.

I suspect she has eaten it,
Yaga-With-Her-Back-Turned.

I laugh
it doesn't matter
it all ends in the root of things
I hail a cab when I hit the first busy street I can find.
“Take me anywhere,” I say in broken Russian.
“No problem,” says the driver, and pumps the gas.

Author Bio:

Shea is a psychic medium and writer based in Denver. She's also a grad school student, but that's not as cool as, say, the fact that's she's genderfluid and goes by a variety of pronouns, including but not limited

to they, he, and Queen of Werewolves. Just kidding about that last one, but only kind of. You can find her business on Facebook @ You Guys, I'm Psychic, and on Instagram @ youguysimpsychic. Her other hobbies include deeply disturbing people.

Kudzu

Valerie B. Williams

“Wait up,” I called.

“If you don’t hurry, we’re gonna miss the show,” Jimmy said in a low voice. “And quiet down. Do you want them to hear us?”

“Right, sorry.”

The old quarry was still a half mile away, so it was unlikely anyone would hear us from there. It’d been used as a swimming hole for as long as we could remember. Hell, our parents even swam there. But the chemical company bought the land a couple years ago and slapped up a fence plastered with “No Trespassing” signs.

Jimmy squeezed through the cut in the chain link and held it, then I crimped it back with wire cutters so the opening wasn’t obvious. I glanced at the sign with the skull and crossbones on it and snickered. They sure pulled out all the stops, for all the good it did.

Once inside the fence, we crept along like ninjas.

“It’s way more overgrown than last week. What do they feed this stuff?” I asked.

The path to the quarry was a green tunnel. Thick vines covered the ground and coated the trees on either side. At least the vines muffled the sound of our approach. Sounds of girls laughing mingled with splashing, and we stopped and peered through the foliage.

Amber knelt at the edge of the quarry, splashing water at Steffie, who dove under the surface. Amber’s full breasts swung with her movement, pale where the bikini top had been. Steffie’s bare ass popped out of the water when she dove. Discarded swimsuits made a small patch of color on top of the vine-covered bushes behind them.

“Wow,” I said.

“Told you, Steve-o.” Jimmy’s hand dropped to his crotch.

“Don’t you jerk off here, you asshole!”

He lifted both hands and grinned. “You’re right. I should save it for one of them.” He nodded toward the water.

I turned my head to drink in the fine female forms when I caught a movement from the corner of my eye. The leaves shook, then the pink cloth slowly disappeared into the green, followed by the orange cloth. I blinked.

“Dude, someone just stole their clothes.” I pointed to where the swimsuits had been.

Jimmy frowned. “That could be good,” he said slowly, “but we don’t want to share, do we?” He started toward the bushes.

“Where’re you going?”

“Gonna get the damsels’ clothes back. Think how grateful they’ll be.” He leered and walked in a crouch, careful to stay hidden.

I didn’t move. He glanced back once, shrugged, and continued.

An explosion of giggles announced the girls’ exit from the water and drew my complete attention. It was a dream come true. My hand had unconsciously dropped to my crotch when Jimmy screamed. Catching sight of Jimmy at the edge of the quarry, Amber and Steffie added their screams to the chorus, frantically trying to cover up with their arms before giving up and jumping back in.

I tore my eyes away from the girls to see Jimmy with his back against a tree. Vines circled his waist and pinned him to the tree. Something undulated up his pants leg like a snake. He gasped and his face went chalk-white.

“Help!” he croaked. “It’s going up my ass!” He opened his mouth to scream and spewed a torrent of blood. The vine around his waist quivered when the blood hit it.

I stood to help my friend, only to feel a stabbing pain in my ankle. Looking down, I saw a vine wrapped around it with another vine slithering toward me. I dug the wire cutters out of my pocket and wiggled one side under the vine next to my leg. It took both hands, but the cutters worked – with a squeak, the vine fell off and my ankle was free.

I ran toward Jimmy. Vines wrapped around him up to his neck. His head slumped onto his chest, his tongue hung out and dripped blood. As I got closer, he looked at me and his tongue grew longer, rearing up like a cobra. Not a tongue! His eyes bulged in terror.

I started to use the wire cutters on the vines holding him, but there were too many. His eyes bulged even further, finally popping out to dangle on his cheeks as two more tendrils exited his body through the now-empty sockets. I gave up, ran to the quarry, and jumped into the water.

Amber and Steffie had stopped screaming and were treading water and crying. When I jumped in, they both swam over and clung to me. We looked back at the tree. The vines had slowed their movement and covered a Jimmy-shaped form, which wasn’t moving at all.

“He’s dead,” said Amber, sniffing. “What’re we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, still numb and disbelieving.

“This is stupid. I’m getting out of here,” said Steffie.

Steffie had recovered from the shock more quickly than me and Amber and took the lead, as usual. She swam to the edge of the quarry, as far away from the tree as she could get.

“No!” said Amber. “They’ll get you too.”

“Well I’m not gonna stay here and drown.” Steffie hoisted herself out and turned toward us. “Come on, we’ll make a run for it.” She held out her hand. I was appreciating her wet, naked body and wishing it was under better circumstances when the first vine whipped around her waist.

Amber and I froze in fear. More vines captured Steffie’s wrists and ankles so that she lay spread-eagled on the ground. Amber’s fingernails dug into my shoulder while she wept softly, all her screams used up. I was glad to be underwater as my dick got hard when a large vine plunged into Steffie’s pussy. The vines found all of her orifices, using some as entries, some as exits, and some as both. Even her belly button sprouted a vine. Her head looked like some kind of sick chia pet. She finally lay bloody and silent while vines writhed, cleaning up the blood before completely covering her. By the time they were done, there was no way to tell she’d ever been there.

Soft splashing as Amber and I kept ourselves afloat were now the only sounds.

“What do we do?” she asked with a trembling voice.

I remembered learning about phototropism in biology – where plants grow toward the sun. Maybe the sun was giving these vines their strength. In the waning afternoon, it was worth a try.

We waited until dark before slipping out of the quarry. I gave Amber my shirt and we started walking, trying to avoid touching any vines. We didn’t completely succeed, but the vines we did touch acted like normal plants.

Amber surprised me when we got to her house.

“My Mom’s working late,” she said. We stood in front of her darkened trailer. “Wanna come in?” She cocked her head to the side and twirled her hair on her index finger.

Flirting! I guess I wasn’t the only one who’d been turned on, but this was just too weird. I needed time to process what had happened.

“No, I’d better get home. I’m really tired.”

When I got out of the shower that night, I took a good look at my ankle where the vine had grabbed me. A red circle went all the way around, with a bump on the back of my heel. It itched like crazy. By morning, I'd scratched it bloody.

During my morning classes, the itching moved up my leg. The whole leg felt like it was on fire. When I tried to pee after lunch, I couldn't get started. I felt like an old man with prostate problems.

At home I tried again. Straining like I was taking a shit, I felt a pop, then the relief of a stream. I looked down to see three seeds floating in a sea of bloody piss, each about the size of a peanut. Peeking out of the end of my dick was the tiniest green tendril.

I've been hiding out in the garden shed for three days now. It's where I feel comfortable, with the smell of soil and fertilizer. A pink flower has sprouted from my left ear. My leg doesn't hurt anymore. Nothing hurts anymore. I hear strange whispery sounds in my head. Maybe I'll go back to the quarry.

Author Bio:

Valerie B. Williams is a member of the HWA and of the Virginia Writers Club (VWC). She worked with Stoker Award-winning author Tim Waggoner in the 2017 HWA Mentorship program. She also survived the 2018 and 2019 Borderlands Press Writers Boot Camps and participated in the 2018 HWA online writing group, Fright Club. She has had three short stories published or accepted for publication in anthologies and is at work on her first novel.

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.

Witch Bitch

Jenny Marie

He smirked and told me how he would take everything from me and there was nothing I could do.

I felt like I wasn't even in my body. I stared in disbelief as he laughed with the cops. I was standing in my driveway in the driveway to my home that I had paid for all by myself for 13 years. Blood, sweat and tears to hold on to my little sanctuary. I was coming in and out of reality. I could hear the cops laughing. I could hear him mocking me.

My boyfriend who was in my life for 11 months who was suppose to love and take care of me was now trying to take my home from me. I didn't care about the material things but inside that home was my pets. My pets that I love more than myself. My 13 year old dog that needs medication was inside that home. He had calculated every move. He had planned this. He had planned to take everything from me. He knew how to play the game. He was a professional scam artist and thief. I never even saw it coming. I always knew something was not right about him but I ignored my gut instinct. I ignored my powers.

From when I was a little girl I was conditioned to shut my mouth. I was told to never question a man.

I was told to obey men.I was told to be polite. Women were meant to be pretty little princesses and always be considerate of men.I was told to never have an opinion or question what a man says.I was told that I was suppose to grow up and find a husband and have kids.I was told a lot of things from a lot of adults.What they never counted on was I was protected from my great grandmoms prayers.I was never to abide by those rules.I was born free,I couldn't be tamed,a free spirit with a wild heart.This lion could not be caged.The fire burned in my soul from the moment I was born.

My whole life flashed before my eyes as I stood there sweating from the anger that was fulfilling me.

The cops left and it was just me and him. With tears streaming down my face I asked him why is he doing this to me. He laughed and told me it was all my fault.He had the control and there was nothing I could do.

I looked at him and with every last bit of strength I told him everything he has done to me will go back on him three times three.He laughed. I said it again but louder.He laughed again and said shut up bitch.I said it again as loud as I could.You see I always had the power in me.The power of my ancestors were in me.I was always different.The magic was in me but I never used it.

He stomped up the stairs and into the bedroom. I heard the door slam. I sat down on the couch staring at my pets.

Flashback to three days prior. The words still filled my head.I was on the way to the shore and he was verbally attacking me over the phone. He didn't know he was on speakerphone.He screamed that if I didn't get back home right away he was going to leave my senior dog outside to die a slow death in the 100 degree heat.I will never forget those words for as long as I live.My girlfriend was in the car with me at the time and she immediately bursted out crying.She said she had never ever heard someone talk to me like that and that she was scared.

It was in that very moment that I knew I would never ever touch that man again. I vowed to take my animals and run far away. He would never get the chance to hurt me or them. Now here I was stuck in this house under his control. He had the upper hand. No one could help me. Not my friends and certainly not the cops. They were on his side. I was completely blindsided by the cops and him. It was perfectly orchestrated. He established his residency while I was at work and I was painted out to be the villain of this story. The young egotistical cop sternly informed me of all of this as I stood there shivering in my driveway and shaking my head in disbelief.

Wiping my tears on my pink hoodie that had a cat with Christmas lights pictured on it.

I went inside and sat on the couch and started to text my friends. I wanted to say goodbye to them one by one. I had made up my mind to take my own life. I wanted a chance to say goodbye to everyone. This was it.

I couldn't talk because he would hear me. I had no way out of this.

My friends started to call and text frantically.

They couldn't help me.

No one could help me. I started to realize I was going to lose everything to him. I failed my pets as a mother. They were going to be stuck with this psycho and the reality of that was too much to even comprehend. I walked into the basement and pulled out a belt from one of my clothes bins. I slid the belt around my neck and secured it.

This was it. I tied it to the railing and tried to hang myself but I heard him come stomping down the stairs. He was looking for me. I quickly untied myself and ran back up to the living room. He called the cops on me again saying I was a threat to myself. I screamed with all my might that he would never control me! The only thing he would ever control would be a dead body! He continued to call the cops on

me several more times. Each time I had to outwit this psychological warfare. I was exhausted. My head was pounding.

I started to take nighttime headache medicine and before I knew it I took the whole bottle.

I scribbled “ help me” on my arm in eyeliner and sent a picture of my arm to my friend then passed out.

That was the last thing I remembered.

My spirit had left my body. I was looking down at my body. I could see all of the animals surrounding me.

I always imagined that when I died I would be guided up to the clouds in a beautiful bright light. I would dance amongst the glitter clouds in heaven with all my pets that had passed on. It would be a eternity of rainbows, kittens and puppies.

Complete heavenly bliss.

However, that is not what happened.

I started to see a light and I wanted to move towards it. I could hear my Nanny calling my name. I swear I could see my pets in the distance. I was overcome with love and happiness and then in a split second it was gone.

I was opening my eyes and realized I was on my bathroom floor. I had a pain in my chest. I was angry! I was sad! Why was I back here!!! No this couldn't be happening! I don't want to be here!

Let me go I don't want to be here I screamed but no one could hear me. I was all alone. Nothing was the same. I wasn't the same. I had changed. Everything inside me had changed. Was I even alive? Was this all a dream? More like a nightmare. I got up from the bathroom floor and realized he had left the house. I moved quickly to make sure he couldn't come back.

I spent all day at the county police station making sure he would never set foot back into my home or near my pets.

I went back to the house and made sure all of his stuff was gone.

I was exhausted.

I had been awake for almost two days and I hadn't eaten. I just wanted to eat and go to sleep in peace. I walked up to the bathroom and stripped off my clothes. I started the bath water and began to brush my hair. I climbed into the warm bath water and slid down into the tub letting the water wash over my head. I held my breath and just let the water cleanse me. Just then I felt a hand snatch me by my hair and pull me up from under the water. I gasped for air. The hand gripped my hair and yanked my head back. There we were staring eye to eye. He was back! I tried to scream but nothing came out. My heart was pounding. I looked into his eyes but there was nothing there. They were completely black. He calmly said, "this is it bitch, you will never get rid of me!"

and with one hard movement he gripped my hair tighter and pushed me back under the water.

Everything went black.

A soft voice whispered in my ear, "Rise up Geniveve" "cut those cords that no longer serve you" "I will enlighten what's dark in you, I will strengthen what's weak in you, I will heal what's sick in you and I will revive whatever peace and love has died in you" you see the power of the ancestors will always rise above. I rose up out of that water. He looked at me with complete horror and shock. I gripped his neck. I looked him in the eye and said I take back all of my power from you. He fell back onto the floor. I climbed out of the tub. I knelt down over him. He couldn't move. As I looked at him a smirk fell across my face. You see the moral of this story is don't ever fuck with a witch because we are the granddaughters of the witches you didn't burn.

Author Bio:

Hugsnhisses is a glitter goth,horror,spooky site brought to you by me, Jenny Marie.

My site is celebrating all things horror for every kind of fiend.

My Etsy store offers merch that is from size Extra Small to 5XL. All of the women's merch is cut for a woman's body! Women deserve to have shirts that are cut for their body not just a "mens cut" option. The mens designs are also soft and made to fit to be flattering on all body types.

A portion of the F*** Cancer hats are given to The American Cancer Society Making Strides Against Breast Cancer.

Which is an event that I have been a team leader for the past 8 years.

I turned my dreams into my vision and my vision into my reality.

Please check it out you will not be disappointed!

It's in Her Smile

Stacey Longo

Jessica had the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. Not a wide, teeth-and-crinkled-laugh-lines type of smile. No, hers was subtler: closed, purple lips, tugging up just slightly at the corners. A smile that said I know where I'm headed, and I don't need you to get there. Callum was intrigued at the first sight of her: it was an instinctive reaction, a snake uncoiling in the core of his being that suddenly woke up starving, wanting to consume this woman. He felt a cool sweat break out in his palms.

Callum didn't fall for women easily. Sometimes, after a long shift on the ambulance, he'd stop by the Auburn Mall for Chinese and watch the couples strolling by. He'd stare at them, studying them with the curiosity of a scientist observing strange animal behavior. Sometimes the couples would be holding hands, and Callum would watch dumbly. Was that what love was like? To willingly want to be in physical contact with another person? Callum couldn't stand being touched. Even as a kid, when his mother would kiss him goodbye and gently push him toward the school bus, the first thing Callum would do was wipe her kiss off his cheek where the dampness of her lips still burned. He'd shudder as he watched the couples in the mall walk with arms wrapped around waists, hips touching. Is that what love did? Make you not hate the things that normally made your skin crawl?

He didn't get it. Couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of sharing space, or kisses, or intimate touches with another person. It was why he liked being a paramedic. Gloves were worn at all times;

even CPR required a plastic shield to avoid lip-to-lip contact these days. He was cold, clinical, and by the book. His patients didn't like him much, but his supervisors loved him. And without a woman in his life, he never objected to picking up extra shifts or staying way past his out time.

Until Jessica.

It was a 9-1-1 call that brought them together. Callum and his partner that night—Rautio, a good enough guy, though he insisted on hooking up his iPhone to the radio and playing 'N Sync between calls—were first on the scene. Jessica's mother had been hysterical, but had no wounds or immediate symptoms presenting, so she wasn't the patient. While Rautio tried to calm her down and make some sense of her words, Callum had called out, trying to determine if there was anyone else in the house. He moved swiftly from room to room, until he found a door ajar at the end of the hall, the scent of patchouli incense still burning; beckoning. Callum had laid a gloved hand on the doorframe and peeked in.

He saw her immediately: her coy smile a mystery waiting to be solved. Her neck, long and pale and delicate. Her silky back hair pulled behind her ear and over her shoulder in a loose braid that matched the braid of the rope around her neck.

The cold, logical part of Callum's brain knew she was gone: she was motionless. Lividity had painted both those beautiful amethyst lips and her delicate, puffy hands. The puddle beneath her from her bladder letting go was cool to his Latexed touch. He stared at her for a moment, reaching out to slowly trace a gloved line down her arm, across her hip, cupping her shapely calf. She was dazzling. In that moment, his heart squeezed out an odd, arrhythmic beat.

But he had a job to do. He shouted for Rautio, and the two of them cut her down, Callum cradling her body against his as Raut loosened the grip of the rope. Callum laid her down on the hardwood floor (away from the puddle of urine; couldn't have this ethereal woman soiled by such piffle)

and began compressions. He wanted to be the one to do this. Needed to be the one, to work on her until the M.E. could arrive and call it.

He alternated between pushing on her chest and leaning in to breathe against her teasing plump lips. She made no movement, offered no resistance, and Callum felt encouraged. He moved in closer, searching her drooped lids and flaccid cheeks for a sign that he was going too far, but Jessica was silent. He tossed a glance behind him, just to make sure the scene was safe, no peering eyes from partner or parent—and kissed her, letting the plastic mouth guard slip, so that flesh met unprotected flesh.

Callum sighed.

Jessica's lips were cold and soft, sliding back until he could feel the hardness of her teeth against his skin. Exquisite. He pulled back, his head spinning, his stomach flip-flopping with excitement and amazement and awe. He wanted to tap-dance and cry and shout nonsensical nothings and hug her close, never letting go. Never. An old Disney song sprang up in laughable falsetto from the filing cabinet of his brain where such trivialities was stored: "So this is love, da-da-da-dee . . ." He giggled. Yes. So this was love. He got it. He finally got what the fuss was about. He leaned in again to steal a second kiss. Could he—should he dare to—try and slip her the—

"What're you doing, man? Christ!" Rautio pushed him aside roughly, taking over the compressions. "You need serious help."

It was the first time Callum had been in love. But it was not the first time he'd heard that.

Author Bio:

Stacey Longo is the award-winning author of *My Sister the Zombie*, *Ordinary Boy*, *Secret Things*, and numerous novellas and short stories. Her novella "Of Giraffes and Men," featured in *Limitless Publishing's Carnival of Fear* anthology, garnered Longo's favorite review to date: "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."

Longo, a confirmed hermit, lives in rural Connecticut. While she likes to think of herself as a dark, twisted soul who lurks in the shadows of madness, she has been known to wear cardigan sweaters and say things like "For the love of god, dog! Don't you need to go pee-pee-potty?" She's not proud.

The dog is.

Hell's Handmaiden

Chris Rodriguez

A thick fog scratched at Emory's eyes as she stepped out onto the cabin porch. Her mind reeled in confusion. Did I sleep through the day? The red ball of a sun was setting in the West. She could barely see it through the haze of fog filling the valley.

It wasn't the sun setting, it was the full moon from last night. As she turned to the East, she could see another red ball mirroring the moon on the opposite side. The sun? For a moment, Emory felt she had been transported in her sleep to a planet in a different solar system.

She clutched the railing, confusion clouding her senses. No, not fog. Sound was muted in fog. Emory could hear the clear scream of panicked birds. Fog was gray. This heavy haze transmitted a yellow light as if she looked at the world through aviator glasses. Fog would have left moist droplets of water on her skin. This dry, heated air sucked the moisture from her, burning her eyes, making it hard to swallow or breathe. Smoke!

Emory went inside and flipped on the radio set. There was no cell service, television signal or landlines in her area. An amateur radio repeater was within range of her 20 ft. antenna. Usually someone manned the alternative communications system at the Forest Service Ranger Station in this section.

Though she couldn't tell where the source of the fire was located, she knew she needed to quickly report to the authorities. Fire was the one thing Emory truly feared. She had lived alone in the forest for several summers so was used to the unpredictable. Bear encounters, moose, drunk hunters shooting at her shed, even a skunk insisting her crawl space was the best place to nest. Emory disagreed

with the aromatic critter and had won the turf war, but not without help from Jimmy, the local forest ranger. He was the one who did not win. He was banned from all indoor areas for a few weeks.

“KG7ARD. Emergency.” Emory released the microphone key and waited. After no answer, she repeated the call. “Jimmy? Anyone? This is Emory. Anybody there?” She listened for a minute, then turned up the volume on her set. Still no response. She keyed the mic once more. “KG7ARD. Emergency. Monitoring.” Then went to the kitchen to put on some coffee. She could hear the radio since it was only a few feet away.

A steaming cup in her fist and no callback yet from the station, Emory decided the situation must be serious as all were out on call. It was time to think about what she needed to do in case of possible evacuation. She changed her thinking to probable as she saw the smoke seeping through the screens of her cabin windows. She ran around closing all the shutters, but knew they wouldn’t hold for long. As she looked out, the smoke was so thick, she could barely see the line of trees 50 feet from her home. Time to pack a bag.

She finished off her coffee with a thick slab of homemade sourdough bread then headed to the bathroom to clean up before stashing her toiletries in the duffel sitting by the door. She emptied her bladder one more time for good measure. After turning off the gas, the electrical circuit panel and the silent radio set, she locked up. She grabbed the case of bottled water, the duffel and food bag as she headed to the Jeep. What was worse than a fire?

A flat tire. Great! Just what I need. Emory was forced to tie her bandanna around her square jaw so she could breathe. She went about removing the spare tire and tools from the rear of the Jeep, stashing her duffel in back along with the water, then tossed the bag of food into the front passenger seat for later. It was a good 45-minute drive to the main road on a good day. This was not a good day.

Just as she jacked up her rusty, trusty vehicle, something like a freight train rushed from the woods, startling her. Emory's leg jerked up, her knee cap cracked into the jack handle sending the whole thing pop-pop-popping back down. Her arms cartwheeled in the air as she tried to regain her balance, but the injured knee gave out and she fell back. Whatever she landed on was soft enough to cushion her fall.

As she glanced behind her, she caught a glimpse of a huge, dark form bearing down. Not wanting to be trampled by the creature, she rolled under the Jeep, barely squeezing in as the snorting, huffing moose galloped by, eyes rolling in fear. Emory scoped the tree line where it came from and saw a multitude of smaller animals – squirrels, a rabbit and even a fox all trying to outrun one another, fleeing from the thick forest haze. She lay still for a moment making sure they had all gone by and was about to emerge from her cavern of relative safety when she heard a sound that made the hair raise on the back of her neck.

The soft spot on the ground where she had fallen revealed itself as a rattlesnake, now coiled, and warning anyone within stepping (or falling) distance. It was riled up, ready for revenge. She lay still as stone until something behind nipped at her ankle where her jeans had hiked up above the boot socks. She yipped in surprise. Without thinking she jerked away from the unseen attacker. The snake found its target.

The sudden strike hit Emory's lower right arm like the fanged side of a claw hammer. Her left side was wedged under the Jeep. She didn't know if she should try to pry the snake off or hold still until it left on its own. An eternity later, in her tortured mind, it released her arm and slithered away.

Emory lay with stubborn breath caught in her shock-restricted throat. The world was momentarily quiet except for the jackhammer pounding of her heart. Eyes glued shut in disbelief,

slowly opened. She saw only empty space in front of her. Carefully wriggling her bitten ankle for signs of the mini-attacker to her rear, she found she was alone.

As soon as fear released its grip, pain set in. Her arm burned like hot bacon grease had been injected into her veins. She could feel the poison spitting and sputtering as it traveled upward toward her shoulder. She had to move – now!

If she could get to her bag in the Jeep, Emory would be able to temporarily stabilize the snake bite and drive out of the range of the oncoming fire. She was more than sure it was heading in her direction. She rolled out from under the vehicle, struggling to her feet. She dug into her pocket for the keys, but came up with nothing except lint and an empty gum wrapper.

Don't panic. Keep calm. Above all, she knew she must keep the poison from racing through her system. Emory systematically searched the ground where she had been working on the tire, but produced nothing. She turned to scan the area surrounding the scuffles, squinting to catch a glint of metal from the sun. The smoke was so thick, the light from the ghostly orb had diminished to a dusk-like value. Anxiety unwittingly gripped Emory's mind.

Nothing is worse than fire. She willed her brain to stop recycling the phobic message, but it had been her constant companion since childhood. Her brother had set a neighboring field on fire while lighting firecrackers on the 4th of July. The accident had left Emory's 3-yr-old body badly burned. The doctors hadn't expected her to live. The scars were a permanent reminder of years suffering through agonizing skin grafts.

Tears began to well in eyes already reddened by the hellish conditions. She fell to the ground, allowing the pain to overtake her senses. I give up.

As she lay with eyes closed, she heard voices near the tree line. Her eyes sprang open and she pushed herself up to a partial sitting position. She was elated to see a family come running in her direction. Relief flooded Emory's tortured body as a couple with four young children reached her.

"We need to get out of here," the man yelled as he pulled on the Jeep door. "Where are the keys?"

"I don't know," Emory replied weakly. "I've been bitten by a snake. Please help me."

The man, obviously as panicked as Emory was earlier, began searching Emory's pockets none too gently as he tossed her roughly from side to side.

"Do you have any water?" Emory asked weakly. "I need water."

"Connie," the man turned away from her. "Help me find the damn keys." Connie had been trying the doors on the Jeep, finding them all locked except the rear gate hanging open where Emory had removed the tools and unhooked the spare. She and one of the older kids climbed in and began to scavenge inside the vehicle.

"Not here," she yelled back at him. "Jack, check the house."

"The house is locked," said Emory, but Jack was already off and running. "I had the keys before I was bit. They're around here somewhere."

Nobody was listening to Emory. They ignored her as she lay panting on the ground, toxin beginning to raise the red flag of fever in her face. She heard glass shattering as Jack broke into the cabin.

Connie and the kids ran circles around the area frantically scanning the ground. One of the kids yelled, "Found them!"

"Thank God," Emory said. "Please help me into the jeep. Get me to a hospital."

Connie loaded the family into the small vehicle and hollered for her husband to hurry up. He sprinted back toward the group, pointed at Emory and said, “Wait. What should we do with her?”

“Leave her,” Connie said. “We don’t have room.”

“No, please,” Emory begged. “I’ll ride in the rear.”

“It’s full. Besides, we need to travel fast and light. That fire was right on our tail,” Jack replied. “Sorry.”

He jumped into the Jeep, started it up without changing the tire, took off, bumping down the rutted dirt lane in the opposite direction they had just come from.

Emory moaned, rolled over onto her back as smoke and dust from the Jeep wheels settled on top of her, crushing her poison-paralyzed airway. Ash fell like hot, grey snow, covering her in just a few moments, cementing her eyelids shut. The fire roared as it approached the clearing. The heat from the wall of flames devoured the drought-dried tree line in seconds. She was too weak to crawl away, to try to reach the other side where the animals had escaped earlier.

Nothing is worse than fire. Emory soon felt it licking her booted feet. She reproached her old enemy. No, I can’t die like this. It’s not fair. Her body roasted even faster than the snake’s poison could boil her blood.

The ironic realization of being burned alive both inside and out took her by surprise. One last steam-laced giggle escaped her gaping mouth.

Author Bio:

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, several by Horrified Press/Thirteen O'Clock, Left Hand Publisher's, Mindscapes Unimagined, Parabnormal Magazine, and Blunder Woman Productions, Wrong Turn, which has recently won Best Audiobook Anthology at the 2019 SOVAS Awards. You can find her latest at <https://www.chrisrodriguez-onthebrink.com> or <https://www.amazon.com/author/chrisrodriguez-onthebrink>.

New and Perfect

Rebecca Rowland

Despite years of harsh New England weathering, the words on the dilapidated green and silver road sign could be seen clear as day. *Welcome to Mansfield: Where Life is New and Perfect*. The irony of the carefully lettered town motto snaking around speckles of rust and dull streaks where the reflective paint had worn thin was never lost on Rachel.

At twenty-two years old, Rachel was at the age where most of the girls she'd grown up with in Mansfield had fled the isolated suburb for dorm life at a big-city college. If they had resolved to stay, it was only to storm the market for a spouse—some big, strapping young man with a shadow of forgotten puberty hidden beneath a neatly-trimmed beard, a husband who could provide her with both the freedom to quit her entry-level job and the imprisonment of caring for household and children. Rachel had neither an interest in pursuing a career, nor a strong urge to couple with anyone, and so, she spent most of her weekdays as a mail clerk at the factory—Sealing's, a domestic goods manufacturer and Mansfield's chief employer—and most of her evenings alone in her two-room apartment on the edge of town. She had a few friends, all girls from work who fell squarely in the second category of young Mansfield women, and she liked being around people, but she was perfectly content to go to work, walk the hour-long commute home to an empty abode, and fall asleep each evening with a book on her chest.

Mansfield's main street was three blocks in length and boasted a town hall and post office, a library whose annex housed the parks and recreation department, a health and safety complex complete with police and fire stations, and one long building with three small stores: a grocery with a built-in pharmacy, a hair salon, and a hardware store. On the edge of the main drag sat Sal's, a family restaurant

that doubled as the town's only bar. There were no clothing stores in Mansfield, and residents could travel a few towns over to peruse the department or discount superstores, but most simply ordered their necessities online. It was easy for any girl to do when she knew her measurements. Her parents had always taught Rachel that a lady watches her figure, and Rachel's hadn't changed in six years. Nothing had changed in six years, really, and Rachel was content with that as well.

On a Friday evening in late January, two girls from Sealing's persuaded Rachel to accompany them to Sal's after work. Rachel knew one of the women vaguely—Tina was her name, Rachel thought—but the other was new. She'd graduated from high school only seven months before, and she'd befriended Tina in the secretarial pool where they both worked. "Hi, I'm Nancy," the new girl said brightly, holding out a tiny manicured hand toward Rachel as the three walked briskly to Tina's car in the Sealing's employee lot.

When she held Nancy's tiny hand in hers, Rachel felt its feminine softness nearly melt in her grasp. "Rachel," she replied, doing her best to watch where she was walking while still looking at her companions. Both of the women wore fitted overcoats over soft, fuzzy sweaters; sheer black stockings peeked out from beneath tight black skirts and above neat black shoes. Rachel glanced at her own attire, a simple navy dress hidden under the well-worn pea coat she'd owned since freshman year. She shoved her hands back into her coat pockets.

On the short ride to Sal's, Rachel learned that Tina and Nancy frequented the bar on Friday nights. "It's payday, so the guys are in good moods," Nancy explained. She added that she hoped a man she'd met there weeks ago—Tad, or Ted, or possibly Tom (it was hard to hear clearly over the rush of hot air screaming through every vent, making the windows fog slightly)—would return. He was a broad-chested man with a quickly rising position at city hall, Nancy pointed out, and he was twenty-five, a prime age for settling down. She said this and smiled conspiratorially, then turned her body back to the

front and pulled down the visor to inspect her face. Rachel ran her finger slowly along the wet condensation of the narrow back window. Her cuticles were dry and ragged.

As the car came to a stop and the heater abruptly silenced, slivers of rain began to dot the windshield. Almost in unison, Nancy and Tina pulled their hoods over their heads and opened the doors. The three women ran to the door of the bar just as the sky opened and sheets of icy water poured down behind them.

It was warm in Sal's, almost oppressively so, Rachel thought. The cacophony of happy voices amplified by liquor ricocheted off the walls. A jukebox in the corner shuffled through pop songs from the late twentieth century. Dale McLauren, the high school's new football coach, appeared behind Tina. He was the type of person who introduced himself using his full name, and in turn, when others referred to him, they did so as well. Tina and Dale McLauren had been dating for a few months, and Tina had confided in Rachel that she hoped he'd propose commitment soon. "Dale McLauren is the kind of man who takes care of things," Tina had said. "He will take care of me." Dale kept his arm wrapped tightly around Tina for most of the evening, unclenching it only to pay the waitress who brought him another beer. Three other men that Rachel recognized as ex-football darlings from her time in school soon joined the group, and the conversation vacillated between NFL draft predictions and the upcoming Super Bowl. Bored, Rachel focused most of her attention on manipulating the jukebox playlist using an app on her smartphone.

It wasn't until the voices quieted around her that she looked up again; the crowd had thinned, Nancy was nowhere to be seen, and Tina was sliding her hand into the arm of her jacket. "Dale is taking me home," she said as Dale helped her the rest of the way into her coat. "Nancy took my car to follow Todd. Dale's house is just two blocks from your building. Do you need a ride?" Tina looked deliberately at the two men who remained at the table, then let her eyes snap back to Rachel's.

“It’s okay,” Rachel answered, awkwardly pulling her pea coat from the back of the chair and wrangling it about her shoulders. “I’m used to walking.” Before anyone had a chance to argue, Rachel had pushed open the exit door and was walking briskly toward home.

The cold rain had evolved into sleet, and although there was no wind, Rachel felt the weather pierce the exposed skin of her cheeks and ears. Thin rivers of icy water trickled down the nape of her neck and wriggled down her spine. It was at least two miles to the apartment building. She regretted declining Tina’s half-hearted offer.

A long-hooded car slowed alongside her, the passenger window lowering as it did so. “Hey,” the man’s voice called. “Hey, Rachel. It’s really coming down. Get in. We’ll give you a ride.”

Rachel looked up. The football darlings. The two who had remained at the table as Dale and Tina prepared to depart peered out at her from the front seat of a dark-colored sedan, one of the expensive, American models Rachel had seen advertised in a magazine once. Watery mucous dripped from her nose, mingling with the sleet on her face. Without another moment of hesitation, she walked to the car, opened the back door, and climbed inside. In the interior light’s dim illumination, the upholstery resembled red velvet cake. She pulled the door closed. The air smelled like dry cleaning and fresh dollar bills.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her lips shaking from the cold. Rachel raced to remember the two men’s names. The driver was Henry? Harvey? The other, Jeff. Yes, and Harvey. She was sure of it now. Jeff and Harvey.

The three rode in silence for a long minute as the wipers waved back and forth, parting clumps of slush like spindly Moseses. Harvey glanced at Rachel in the rearview mirror. “You never dated much in high school, did you?” he asked suddenly.

Rachel considered his question. No, she couldn't remember ever going out on a date. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember if she had attended prom, which seemed odd, since it had only been five years ago.

Doesn't she like men? The men asked, more as a criticism than an actual question.

She answered without hesitation. She likes them fine. Why did they ask?

The two men chuckled and glanced at one another. And then, Rachel spied the edge of her building two blocks ahead of them on the left, and she asked Harvey if he wouldn't mind pulling the car onto the side street beside it. As the car hugged the curbing, Jeff turned his body to face Rachel. "Hey, mind if we use your bathroom?"

There was something in the way his words lilted that made Rachel's back stiffen. She paused, her hand on the door handle. Sensing her hesitation, Harvey chimed in. "It's the least you could do, I mean, after we saved you from this awful weather."

"Sure," said Rachel slowly. All she wanted was to strip the damp clothes from body and get into a hot shower to warm up, but Harvey had a point. She owed them.

As sheets of frozen rain again poured from the sky, the three ran toward the main entrance, clutching their jackets close to their bodies to keep the wind from forcing them open. Once they had made it inside the foyer, a warm blanket of air immediately enveloped them, and Rachel led the way up the stairs. Her apartment was on the third floor, the top floor. The men said nothing as they followed immediately behind her. With every step, the relief she felt after escaping the weather was gradually replaced with prickles of unease. Something wasn't right, but she shook off the anxiety, attributing her misfiring intuition to exhaustion and paranoia.

Her parents had always taught Rachel that a lady makes everyone feel at ease. As she slid the key into her lock, Rachel tried to fill the awkward silence with innocuous chit-chat. “The weatherman said the precipitation would stop before morning. I hope the sidewalks won’t be too slippery tomorrow.” But her hand hadn’t even grazed the light switch before Harvey grabbed her from behind and wrestled her to the floor, knocking her head hard on the shiny oak floor. Rachel was stunned and speechless. What was happening? What did she do? What was HE doing? As she tried to speak, a wave of shimmering dizziness flooded her mind. Jeffrey’s hazy silhouette hovered in the doorway above. When she felt Harvey’s hand reach roughly up inside her dress, she clawed instinctively at his face.

If she made him angry, a voice deep inside warned, he might kill her. She stopped clawing and squeezed her eyes shut.

Stop it stop it stop it stop it please please please please stop

Although she said nothing, uttered not a word besides a terrible whimper, Harvey clamped his hand over her mouth. When he was done, Harvey grabbed Rachel’s neck and squeezed, only for a moment, but in her panic, Rachel twisted her head and looked around. Only then did she see the tiny light on the phone’s camera, the one Jeffrey was holding, pointing in her direction, capturing her nightmare for posterity. She closed her eyes again. She felt Harvey’s body lift from hers, the fetid breeze as he swung his leg over her torso, and finally, the clumsy rumble of boot stomps as the men exited without a word. They didn’t even bother to shut the door behind them, just stomp-stomp-stomp along the thinly carpeted hallway, down the fluorescent-lit stairway, and they were gone.

Rachel’s body, framed by the awkward triangle of light streaming in from the hallway, felt alien to her. Detached. Betrayed. After a moment, she pushed herself to a standing position. Statistics from PSAs, numbers written in fat red lettering blinked in her brain. 1 in 6 women. Every 75 seconds. She

pawed the wall for the light switch, closed the door, and turned the lock, feeling the weight of this ironic action heavy on her shoulders.

In the unforgiving brightness of the bathroom mirror, a distorted face stared back at her. It was puffy and red, the skin on her left cheek and neck pink from where Harvey's beard rubbed it raw. Rachel could still smell him on her. Fresh dollar bills, an oddly astringent scent considering how unclean she felt. When she returned to the front room, the apartment closed in around her like a coffin. She rebuttoned her coat and left, not bothering to lock the door behind her.

The Cadillac was gone, and so was most of the sleet, but in their place, a thin icing of clear slickness coated everything, a snail's secretion. Rachel walked carefully down the block. She passed a bright yellow fire hydrant glazed and scintillating in the streetlight and felt an overwhelming desire to smash the ice with her fists, to crackle and craze its perfectly smooth coating.

Dale McLauren's house was blue. She knew this from Tina's descriptions. It stood near the end of the second side street, the last structure before a large open lot yet to be developed. When she reached it, Rachel could see lights in the windows, so she did not hesitate before ringing the doorbell. It was one of those camera bells and in the silent second following her push, she felt eyes size her up. Dale McLauren is the kind of man who takes care of things. Rachel heard Tina's voice in her head. He will take care of me. A moment later, Dale was in the doorway, and a recount of the event poured from Rachel's mouth, spilling onto the porch and splashing Dale's face, turning it flat as stone.

Dale McLauren inhaled a long, heavy breath. "Rachel," he said finally, "I need to take care of this right away." He stared at her, his expression unchanged. "Come with me."

She followed him to the curb and climbed into Dale's truck, one of those oversized-cab models that made Rachel feel small when the passenger seat swallowed her whole, a toddler in a rocking chair. After a moment of the defrost to melt and clear the windows, the truck pulled away from the house and

onto the main street. No other motorists were on the road. The town, most of its residents safe asleep in their warm homes, appeared as abandoned as a child's playground in winter.

They passed the town hall that housed the parks and recreation department. They passed the grocery with the built-in pharmacy, the beauty salon, and the hardware store. They passed Sal's, its parking lot empty and its American beer neons dark. Finally, they passed the health and safety complex. Dale McLauren did not slow the truck down. In fact, he continued on, off of the main drag and into the industrial park.

When Dale pulled into the parking lot of the Sealing's, he passed the turn for employee parking and pulled into a spot for VIPs. Dale was a very important person, at least at close to three in the morning. What were they doing at the factory? "Relax," he said, turning off the engine. "I told you: I am taking care of this."

Her parents had always taught Rachel that a lady did not argue with authority.

She followed Dale McLauren through the doors of the main entrance and down a series of hallways Rachel had never seen before, each one broken into segments by shiny sliding doors. She followed him into an elevator and stood obedient as he pressed a button and the car dropped gracefully downward. When the doors opened again, she followed him down a long, dark hallway to a big silver door.

Inside of the room was a wide metal desk manned by two bearded employees wearing white overcoats. Behind them were two doors, each clearly marked with its purpose.

"Exchange," Dale told the men, escorting Rachel forward. The man on the right grabbed Rachel by the arm and led her into the door on the left.

"Reason?" asked the other man. Rachel stood silent as the door marked Returns closed behind her, sealing her away in the darkness.

“This one is broken,” Dale added.

Then he crossed his arms over his chest and waited for the right door to open.

Author Bio:

Rebecca Rowland is the author of the short story collection *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight*, co-author of the serial killer thriller *Pieces*, and curator of the horror anthologies *Ghosts*, *Goblins*, *Murder*, and *Madness and Shadowy Natures*. Her stories most recently appeared in the anthologies *The Year's Best Hardcore Horror* (vol 4), *Strange Stories* (vol 1), *Movie Monsters*, and *Strange Girls* and in the magazines *Coffin Bell* and *Waxing & Waning*. A member of HWA, NEHW, and ALA, she pays The Man as a librarian, ghostwriter, and editor but vacations as a dark fiction author. Shamelessly judge her painfully pedestrian website RowlandBooks.com.

A Crack in the Façade

Christine Lajewski

Jeremy sat on the park bench staring at a mossy crack in the sidewalk, picturing what might happen if he probed the slender fracture with his toe.

It's not a compulsion, he told himself. It's a fascination.

It was an insignificant bit of damage to the pavement. Could anything, other than an equally insignificant ant colony, be hiding beneath it?

It's not a compulsion. It's a fascination. So why couldn't Jeremy look away?

It had been more than twenty years since he had first scared himself by separating figures from ground in a rose-covered carpet. It was Sandy, his fiancé, who got him thinking about it again.

"You're so obsessive," Sandy teased several Saturdays earlier as they jogged the paved road to the reservoir.

The correct word was compulsive, thought Jeremy, a burr of resentment prickling right about where his liver would be. Feelings are obsessive; behaviors are compulsive. He kept his mouth shut but knew she had caught him doing it again: He was running around the cracks in the pavement. It was the one piece of his childhood, a harmless habit, that had never gone away.

The word is compulsive, he repeated to himself, and I am not compulsive. I'm in control. Then he saw a new crack that ran from one curb to the other and his pace bobbled just a trace, throwing off his stride. It was enough for Sandy to notice.

"I don't know how you'll ever run the marathon," Sandy laughed. "All those potholes and frost heaves from last winter. How will you navigate them all?"

She eased onto the gravel path that circled the reservoir. Jeremy did not follow. Now he was angry. Sandy noticed, jogged back to her fiancé's side and gave him a quick squeeze around his waist. "Just teasing, babe," she said. "I think that thing you do is cute. It's you. It's endearing."

Not quite appeased, Jeremy forced a smile and fell into step beside her on the gravel.

I am not compulsive, he repeated to himself. I'm in control.

That was an important difference. Being in control, staying in charge of the details, had brought him where he was present day. Jeremy had a successful tech startup that was gaining the notice of new investors. He was taking on new employees who, if they thought the boss was something of a micro-manager, were more than satisfied with the salaries and opportunities for promotion. He and Sandy had just moved into a small house in the greater Boston area--all this as he celebrated his thirtieth birthday. The only disquieting ripple was that little quirk Sandy liked to laugh at and label "endearing."

There was a difference between a quirk and a true compulsion. He knew because he had fought the drift toward just such a disabling fixation when he was no more than a child, and he had won. He had won by being in control.

It started when Jeremy was seven. He was home sick one day, sipping chicken soup on the couch and watching videos. The soft fleece blanket and the comforting broth made him sleepy, so he set his mug aside and drifted, his gaze falling on the rug on the floor. It had a black background with beige and red roses scattered across the surface. He stared with half-closed eyes and, as he did so, something amazing happened. The flowers separated from the background and floated while the blacks took on the depth of a plunging, underground cavern. Jeremy's eyelids flew wide open and the 3D effect disappeared.

Intrigued, young Jeremy stood on the border of the carpet, squinted and let his vision go just a little blurry. The solid black pulled down, down, down until the boy was dizzy. He tottered on the edge

of the rug and nearly lost his balance. Jeremy pictured himself pitching forward into the onyx depths, desperately clutching at a woolen rose that could never hold his weight. Panic-stricken, he threw his arms up over his head and arched his back. He fell on his rump on the bare wooden floor.

It was deliciously scary.

From the safety of the sofa, Jeremy continued thrilling himself throughout the afternoon. When he returned to school, he couldn't resist playing the game with the dingy brown and white tiles in the hallway. It didn't take long to become adept at it. He had to concentrate on the light-colored squares as he walked to and from the cafeteria, stepping carefully from one to the next so he didn't get dizzy and make a fatal misstep into the darkness.

Next, he tried it on cracks in the sidewalks. He sat on his front porch when he got off the school bus and stared at a split in the walkway until it looked sharp as an anthracite blade and deep as a canyon. Soon, he could get the effect even as he walked down the street, stretching his legs to take a giant step over one crack after another. One day, after a quick summer deluge on a hot parking lot, he saw steam rising from a long crack in the asphalt. He stood at the edge of the fracture, watching the blacks of the crevice telescope deliriously downward while clouds of mist billowed in his face. He even caught a glimpse of a fiery crescent of magma deep below. Then his mother called his name and he saw her standing impatiently at the open hatchback of the SUV. The hellish fissure became a crack again with a sliver of someone's broken taillight embedded in the crumbled asphalt.

With so much time on his hands that summer, he found he couldn't stop himself from playing the game. His mother noticed the strange turn in her son's behavior. She could not miss how he would only skirt the border of the flowered rug in the living room or the way he stared at cracks in the pavement for several minutes before taking one long step over them. She knew his teacher had noticed it, too. His mother took the boy aside and told him what she had observed. "Are you afraid?" she asked.

“A little,” Jeremy admitted. “But it’s interesting. I can make things look 3D.” He described how he made it happen.

“I want you to make a list,” his mother said. “On one side put all the things you like to do and the things you do really well. On the other side, put all the things you stopped doing because looking for patterns and walking around them gets in the way. When that list gets too long, we’ll talk about what we’re going to do about it.”

Jeremy really didn’t understand what she meant. He forgot about the conversation until the day he played the game with a pothole.

It wasn’t a big one, not by New England standards. He spied it riding his bike one afternoon to his friend’s house. It was about twelve inches across with a few pebbles and a couple of skeletonized oak leaves lying on the bottom. He pulled his bike over, resting one foot on the curb, one on a pedal, and squinted his eyes. The pit in the road darkened, deepened and dropped away, the leaves and pebbles floating above the little crater. Suddenly, the bike lay in the street and Jeremy stood at the edge of the pothole, the toe of his sneaker sliding tentatively toward the rim. His skin turned cold and the hair on the back of his neck prickled. He lifted his foot and made a tap-tap probing motion with his toe.

There was nothing there.

Before he could stop himself, he brought his foot down where he estimated the bottom of the hole had been. There was no resistance. His leg disappeared up to its knee. Jeremy pitched forward and went down hard, his hands and the opposite knee painfully grazing the pavement. Terrified yet excited, he sat on the street and extricated his leg, watching the leaves and pebbles swirl and settle on the thin air above the black pit. Jeremy rubbed his eyes and suddenly it was just a minor pothole again, filled with road debris. He examined the bloody scrapes on the palms of his hands as he waited for his heart to stop pounding. Then he picked up his bike and rode home.

Jeremy decided it was time to ask his mom for help. He didn't know how to broach the subject but when he sat down across from her at the kitchen table, unable to form the words, she knew.

"You have to be strong," Mom said. "You have to believe you're in control. You made this happen. You need to believe you can unmake it. If you can't do it, our doctor will want to give you medicine to make it stop. It's much better if you can be in control and do it yourself. The next time you find yourself afraid to walk across a rug or a tile floor, close your eyes and just take one step forward. Then another, and another. I'll hold your hand and do it with you, if you want. If you're back at school, just keep focused on the end of the hall. Each time you do it, it'll get easier. You'll see. Remember, it's not real."

Jeremy wasn't so sure, but he wanted to try it on his own and he could tell that made his mother proud. He practiced safely crossing the rug a few times before he went to bed. Jeremy quickly realized he could master the fear by simply not looking. But the fear was part of the fun and he had to admit he missed it. The most difficult part of unlearning the behavior was depriving himself of the beguilement of watching it happen: the figure pulling away from the ground, the exhilarating and terrifying depths that lay in wait beneath the most monotonous pattern or the most innocent, hairline crack.

Mom suggested new hobbies to replace the menacing magic eye games that held her son in thrall. She found robotics and rocketry clubs for budding young scientists. Jeremy discovered he liked hockey, partly for the sport and partly because rink ice was blank.

Weeks passed, then months and finally years, and Jeremy forgot about looking for designs and secrets in the warp and weft of a rug. That is, he forgot about it until Sandy teased him about the crack he nearly stumbled over.

Sandy was a smartass and now that she knew she'd gotten to her fiancé, she couldn't resist ramming the jokes home, over and over again. She even did the ultra-lame, "Just say no to crack." She kept wondering out loud why people said, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back."

Jeremy shrugged, determined not to show his irritation, but now a new idea had been planted. After tersely suggesting to Sandy that she look it up, he did exactly that. There wasn't much to read, just a medieval superstition that something from the hell regions might somehow leak through a worm-sized slot in the earth. It was a stupid notion. But seven-year-old Jeremy had seen something like that in a hot parking lot and he had nearly disappeared into a depression in the street. Adult Jeremy could dismiss it as an overactive imagination, a spectacularly reinforced response to a visual stimulation, but he could also remember the feeling of his foot sliding into empty space.

The next thing he knew, he had stopped looking straight ahead, chin parallel to the ground, as he walked to the Green Line each morning. Instead, he was scanning the pavement, neither anxious nor fearful, wondering if he could make it happen again.

It's not a compulsion. It's a fascination.

He started taking his lunch in a small park across from his office. He found a lonely corner, away from pedestrians and runners, deep with shadows, where the concrete walkway had been sadly neglected. Frost heaves had left it a small wilderness of rough terrain. Jeremy spent each lunch hour focusing on a different topographical detail. He watched the tiniest of declivities sharpen and reveal not only impossible depths but hints of weird and hostile worlds lurking beneath the bland cement: glimmers of magma or halting, shadowy movements. He would puzzle over the secret details until a text from his office reminded him he was needed at work. And when he stood up, he was seven again, a frightened yet exhilarated little boy. He steeled himself to leap across the path the way he used to jump a patterned runner or series of tiles without as much as grazing it with his foot.

Within a week, Jeremy was visiting the spot after work, cautiously negotiating the path, daring himself to probe one of the cracks before they melted away in the darkness. Finally, he worked up the courage to touch the largest of them with the tip of one shoe. The crack stretched about two feet diagonally across the walkway. Moss had been working slowly and diligently to widen the fissure for years. In one spot, it was nearly six inches wide. When Jeremy touched it, the green strip proved to be as spongy and yielding as a bog. When he pushed a little harder, his foot slid into a slippery, sucking slime. He strained to pull his foot free and when he did, he lost his shoe to the green mud.

Runners on the main pathway stopped in their tracks and stared at the shadowy corner. Jeremy realized he must have cried out. Embarrassed, he tossed his remaining shoe at the mossy crack and walked home. The sneaker disappeared, and he could not be sure if it had been sucked down or simply lost in the darkness.

“You’ve been late for dinner every day this week,” Sandy complained as she kissed Jeremy on his cheek. She left the statement hanging in the air. She didn’t want to voice her fear that he might be having an affair. That was what jealous women did. Nor did she ask why he had walked home in his stocking feet. That’s what mothers did.

Jeremy did not pick up on her anxiety. “Work,” was all he mumbled.

As the weeks passed, he spent more and more time at the park. He missed important meetings with potential clients. His employees dropped broad hints about his hygiene. It was true he was rising earlier and earlier, failing to shower, shave or even grab a cup of coffee so he could get to his park bench and stare at the cracks in the sidewalk as soon as the sun rose. He was fairly certain at this point that he had caught glimpses of activity below the surface. It made sense that insects, worms or snakes burrowed from the upper world to the lower regions. But he suspected something else was down there.

Full daylight was necessary to make the hidden worlds come into brilliant focus. The activity within them, however, only manifested itself in the uncertain light of dusk and early dawn. The first time Jeremy saw it, the sun was setting, and the street lights had yet to turn on. He stepped carefully over a tumult of broken black and gray concrete when a pair of eyes, dark irises set in oversized orbs of yellow, rolled back and forth in a small vent, then froze and focused on Jeremy's gaze. They appeared lidless, maybe even disembodied. It flashed through Jeremy's mind that the eyelids were formed from the earth's crust and if they cracked open in one location, they squeezed shut in another. He pictured how it went on and on, the naked yellow gaze shifting from point to point, millennium after millennium, searching for contact.

Jeremy stifled a shout and stumbled backwards, barely missing the mossy swamp of the large, green crack. It frightened him that he had returned the gaze of whatever it was that watched him from below. Eye contact was an invitation and this type of interaction was even more unsettling than watching his leg disappear into a pothole. The eyes were intelligent and curious. They were fascinated. He backed away cautiously until he was on the main path through the park. When he looked back, the chink in the sidewalk was black and empty again.

He returned at dawn and concentrated on the same spot again. He saw flashes of eyes in different spots, flickering in and out of view—yellow eyes, pink rat eyes, gray, clouded eyes. They might have been checking to see if the coast was clear. They might have been trying to locate prey—a squirrel, a bird or even a child. From his safe vantage point, Jeremy actually hoped to see an unwary little mammal get swallowed up.

It would be so fascinating.

He weighed the idea that he might be delusional but dismissed it. If he was psychotic, he would not have been able to regain control the way he had when he was only seven. But how could the simple

act of looking cause all this to be? Did he create this world beneath the sidewalks? Did he develop a special sight that allowed him to see glimpses of things that had always existed? And by acknowledging them, did Jeremy somehow give whatever lived down there a slender pass into the world above? He knew he would return to this spot until he had his answer.

The day finally came when Jeremy not only did not show up for work, he failed to go home at all. He spent the night training a flashlight beam on the cracks, searching for signs of life. He intermittently turned the light off and swore he could see the faint glimmer of a response beacon. The adult Jeremy insisted there was no signal. There was only the subtle gleam of a street light across the park off the ring tab from a soda can. But seven-year-old Jeremy could not stop himself from scanning the flashlight across the crack, then dimming the light and doing it again.

At some point, Jeremy must have dozed because he suddenly found himself staring at Sandy, bathed in the gray light of early morning, calling his name over and over.

“Jeremy, what’s wrong with you?” she cried. She was trembling, and tears welled in her eyes. She was standing dead center on the widest part of the mossy crack.

Jeremy was silent for a full minute. He could not comprehend how Sandy could be completely oblivious to what lay below her feet. “You don’t see it,” he said flatly.

“See what?” she asked.

“It’s fascinating,” her fiancé replied. ‘If you look at a pattern in a carpet or alternating tiles or cracks and potholes, and you squint just a little—if you do it right--it suddenly all turns 3D and you realize you’re looking at a completely different world.’”

Sandy was speechless for a moment then stammered, “You mean, you mean like those magic eye pictures?”

“No, it’s not pictures. It’s a completely different world.” He rose and took a couple of cautious steps, carefully positioning his feet on the solid gray concrete as he stood in front of her. He prodded the moss on which Sandy stood and slid his toe into the boggy peat supporting Sandy’s weight. He reached down and brought up a smear of green slime on his fingers. He held it in front of Sandy’s face, close but not touching. “See?” Jeremy said.

And Sandy did see. Her gaze narrowed, focusing on the slime, then traveled down to the crack. Her eyes widened with amazement, then horror. Jeremy’s eyes met the gaze of the yellow orbs in the adjacent crack. He nodded. The moss liquefied, and Sandy’s slender body plunged downward, sinking up to her waist.

“Jeremy!” she shrieked, reaching out for his saving grasp. But Jeremy had bolted back to the safety of the grass, unable to move, unable to turn away.

He narrowed his gaze and the mossy crack became a set of thin, green lips, voraciously sucking a rare morsel into its mouth and down its gullet. Sandy wailed and thrashed her arms frantically. She slid down and down until only her eyes, the crown of her head and her fingertips protruded above the moss. Then the green lips slurped, and everything disappeared except for the mottled pink tips of three fingers on her right hand, two on her left. When Jeremy shook his head, they took on the appearance of random pink granite pebbles stuck in a mossy crack. He was breathing hard, horrified, but he might have been smiling just a little bit. “Looks so natural,” he whispered.

He wondered if he should feel sad. He wondered if he should feel anything other than an intoxicating revulsion and, yes, fascination.

Still smiling, he settled back on the bench and made himself comfortable. Here he would remain, no matter how long it took, and wait for the next one to come.

Author Bio:

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher, a naturalist at MA Audubon and a scare actor during the Halloween season. She was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, long ago when the water was clean and General Motors helped hard working locals live the good life. She lives in Norton, MA with dogs, koi and local wildlife, close to her two adult children. Published works include the novels JHATOR, BONEBELLY, and ERRING ON THE SIDE OF CALAMITY, a collection of horror short stories.

Woodworker

Nancy Kilpatrick

Aileen hammered in the final nail. She raised an arm and used her rolled shirt sleeve to blot sticky sweat from her forehead as she stepped back for a critical look.

The grain was straight, the lid level, dovetails snugly joined. Tomorrow night she would use coarse sandpaper, followed by a session with medium paper, then fine. She thought about using the sander Larry had given her last Christmas but, God, she'd always hated machines, and the power supply here wasn't very good. And more important, the particles pressing the back of the paper as they rode the wood felt sensuous. Got that from her Nana, who had preferred old-style woodworking. Tradition, certainly; a bit late to think about changing her ways.

Aileen swept the floor of shavings. She used a ragged t-shirt to wipe clean the steel-edged plane, knocked bits from the file and rasp, hanging each in its spot on the wall. Nana had bequeathed her these tools, just as she had passed down the love of working with fine woods by hand. A love that connected the female line.

Finally Aileen picked up the sharp half-inch chisel and honed the bevelled edge against a whetstone. The birch handle had worn in one spot where the thumbs of generations of women had gripped it. Nana had been given the chisel by her grandmother when she reached puberty. With it, she had also been handed two branches and no-nonsense instructions on slicing the end of one into a mortise and the end of the other branch into a corresponding tenon. She said it had taken the better part of a week to fit the parts together just so before she presented the joint to her grandmother. "She barely glanced at it and, lickety-split, handed me two new branches." The process was repeated over eighteen months. One joint a week at first, then two, then three until finally, one a day. Her Nana, frustrated, had almost given up

but, somehow, she'd stuck it out. "By the end I was darned good with a chisel," Aileen recalled her saying, "and I could sure make the parts fit right."

Nana had taught her in the same way, so Aileen understood the frustration. She also knew how to join two halves perfectly so that for all intents and purposes they became inseparable.

One last look at her handiwork and reluctantly she headed up the dark stairs into a wall of heat, squinting at the light in the kitchen above.

"What's for dinner?" Larry, drying dishes at the kitchen counter, wanted to know. He snaked an arm around her waist as she tried to pass. Fingers climbed and found her left nipple through the soft fabric. Hot lips pressed against her sweaty neck. The heat made her cranky and the last thing she wanted was love.

"Meatloaf." She pulled away. "And scalloped potatoes, if you peel them for me. Otherwise fries."

"Fries'll do."

He sat at the table and stretched out his denim-covered legs across the narrow room, forcing her to step over them to get to the refrigerator. It was more foreplay and she was in no mood for it.

She opened the top of the refrigerator, aware of how his gaze stroked her from across the room. The freezer light was dead. White mist from the frosty darkness wafted out and she fantasized about living alone in an igloo, in a place that was all ice and snow like the Arctic, where some of the year you'd be blessed with twenty-four hours of cool darkness. You wouldn't have to swelter under just a fan. Or fear heat stroke. You wouldn't have to worry about scorching sunlight burning you to a crisp. You could live life naturally, in peace.

As usual, lately, Aileen wasn't hungry. For the last six months, since they'd been in this oppressive climate, she felt as though she'd been steadily shrinking, as if the heat had been shriveling her.

While Larry ate, she pushed nearly burnt potato sticks around her dinner plate and stared out the window at the pallid moon imprisoned by layers of muggy night sky. She hadn't wanted to move to Manila, where the weather made the days impossible and the nights nearly so, but Larry's job forced him to do field research. Forced them to leave North America and all that was familiar and be in this strange part of the world.

Outside, rubber trees with stunned leaves hung paralyzed in the dense, moist air. Still. Waiting. Deciding whether to live or die in the sultry climate.

#

The next evening, when the scalding sun had set, Aileen headed down to the basement, and they were lucky to have a basement—most of the houses here didn't. Brick walls and an earth floor kept the room degrees cooler than the rest of the house. It made a difference and she preferred being here. If it weren't for Larry, she would be in the basement both night and day. She could work here, and that kept her sane.

She stretched out the sanding for an hour and a half, intoxicated by the sweet, wood-scented air. She mixed sawdust and white bond glue together and filled in accidental gouges. Then she mixed the stain.

Just like Nana, Aileen hated to stain a pale wood. Still, if she could blend the pigments right, the swirling grain would be accented rather than overwhelmed. Exotic hardwoods were her favorites, for her one of the few benefits of living in South-East Asia. The compressed fibres flowed like sinewy muscles, the pores received like human skin. She ran a hand slowly over the smooth surface and felt a quiver run through her body, as if she were caressing a lover. The living wood was solid, hard to damage, enduring in this hostile climate.

As Aileen rubbed in the pungent oil stain, a drop of sweat dripped off the tip of her nose and landed on the wood, sinking into and melding with it. She thought about the heat and how it was getting worse.

The last month had been bad. She'd stayed in bed during the hottest part of the day, when Larry was home, then would sneak down to the basement the minute he left after supper to investigate the local insects he studied. And she was up most of the night when he finally returned home and slept. It seemed a bit easier to breathe at night. Hiding in the basement. Hiding from Larry. And avoiding this landscape, so unlike what she was accustomed to that it felt alien.

Of course he'd noticed. She felt him studying her all the time, the way he examined the local beetles. Watching. Waiting. Like some predator ready to pounce on a weaker species. But she'd managed to avoid him, for the most part. It meant sleeping upstairs in the heat of the day when she'd have rather been enveloped by the cooler basement air. A necessary sacrifice. But it wasn't his way to ask a lot of questions nor hers to answer very many.

Last week he'd come halfway down the basement just before sunrise, when she was still cutting the rough lumber, and stood on the steps. Waiting. "Aren't you coming to bed?" he finally said in a needy voice. When she didn't respond, he stomped upstairs and slammed the door. She knew he didn't feel any more comfortable in the cool dark than she felt in the hot light. They had their differences, and this was a big one.

She scanned the wet wood. The stain would dry overnight. By tomorrow she'd have to decide whether to varnish or shellac. Chemicals preserved better over time and repelled moisture too, but she preferred the natural look of shellac. Her Nana had favored shellac, too, and she'd told Aileen all about the lac scale, an insect in this part of the world, one of the ones Larry studied. How the female excretes resin onto the twig of a fake banyan tree, creating a safe place in which to live. And die. "It's her home," Nana had said, "like a turtle's shell is home to a turtle." Larry's books had told her more. The tacky glue-like resin protected the lac scale from predators and other dangers in the environment, attracted potential mates, and snared meals. That resin formed the basis of shellac.

The idea had always appealed to her: a natural substance produced by a creature dwelling in a tree, applied to an object made from a tree trunk. Ultimately the wood would rot and form the new earth in which a new tree might grow. It was a cycle made familiar to her by her ancestors: birth, death, rebirth.

#

The fireball sun seared her flesh and blinded her with its yellow glare. The heat weighed against her body; she felt heavy and clumsy. Sluggish. When it set, she stumbled down to the basement, muscles flaccid, the lining of her brain inflamed.

Aileen breathed shallowly. Each brush stroke of shellac was a torturous labor. Still, she felt vindicated that she had chosen this forgiving substance. Varnish would have required precision she could not muster. Even before the first coat of shellac dried, she began applying the next. Layer upon gummy layer blended together with no differentiation. No division. It was nearly dry in an hour, about the time the floorboards above her head squeaked.

#

Larry stood at the top of the cellar stairs peering into the dark basement. He watched Aileen, brush in hand, step into the shaft of light filtering down from the kitchen. Her skin was so fair. So unprotected. Unlike him, he knew she had a hard time with the heat and humidity.

He was seriously worried about her. Down here every night. Alone. They were never together anymore, since they'd moved here. When had they last had sex? It wasn't healthy.

Beside her left hip, the light from above illuminated a triangular wedge of shiny wood. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. What in hell was she building, anyway? Light from the kitchen caught the liquid in Aileen's eyes. For a split second an optical illusion made her eyes appear entirely white. Her bent arm held up the brush like a flag of surrender; he noticed her fragile-looking wrist bone jutting out. Funny how that bone had always turned him on. That and the

way her collarbone protruded, delicately exposed where her shirt collar lay open like part of an exoskeleton.

Her skin was sweat-slicked. Even through the shellac, he could smell her from here.

"Come up to bed," he coaxed.

Aileen lay the brush down, started slowly up the steps, stopped. She glanced up at him through dark lashes and breathed, "Come down."

Larry hated dark, confining basements, had since he was a child. Dank air. Gritty earth that clotted his nostrils with the odor of eons of decay. The atmosphere reminded him of cemeteries. The basement itself felt like a grave.

Her lips twisted into a smile. Unbuttoning her blouse, she backed down the stairs until the shadows swallowed her.

"Aileen?" he called.

Wood scraped against wood. The small segment of wood lit by the kitchen light swayed like a tree branch. Unnerved, Larry gripped the railing and took a step down. The air noticeably cooled. "Honey? Come on up."

A sound of shuffling. Wood creaking. Aileen's short dark hair flashed through the lighted triangle as she lay back. Within that yellow illumination, like an artistic photograph framed in darkness, one side of her fragile collar bone pressed suggestively against her skin. A round slick breast, the nipple a glistening eye gazing directly mesmerized him. That little section of flesh rose and fell and quivered as she breathed. The scent from her body mingled with the potent resin to create a sweet musky perfume.

"Close the door," she whispered.

Larry did. Surrounded by darkness, he felt his way down, her earthy scent guiding him.

He reached out, low, and touched cool tacky wood. His fingers crawled up and over the edge to find her. Sticky firm flesh yielded to the pressure of his touch. He wondered what made her sweat so thick.

#

Aileen pulled him down on top of her. The exotic wood creaked under the double weight but held them. She ripped his shirt away while he worked on his pants. He crawled further up her body, shivering, fear or cold or passion, she could not tell which. There was only a vague predatory instinct emanating from him that she could sense; she felt safe enough.

Her chisel-sharp teeth clamped onto his broad shoulder, piercing clammy skin. He howled and squirmed, but her sticky sweat bonded their flesh and, in truth, he did not really resist. And when they joined, it was perfect, as perfect as Aileen always knew it would be. As her Nana had told her it could be.

Cool pale wood beneath her. The familiar aroma of shellac seeping into her pores. She and Larry encased in this sheltered environment. Now that she had finally adapted, she could stay here the rest of her natural life in complete comfort and safety. Mating. Eating. Producing the next woodworker.

Author Bio:

Award-winning author Nancy Kilpatrick is a writer and editor in mainly the horror/dark fantasy field. Her 23 novels include her current six-book series *Thrones of Blood*, recently optioned for film and television. She has published over 220 short stories and 7 collections of her stories. She is also an editor with 15 anthologies to her credit. Check out her two new novellas, *Wild Hunt* and *Vampyre Theatre*, available in print and eBook. You can connect with her on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and check out her website where you can subscribe to her once-a-month, pithy newsletter: nancykilpatrick.com

What You Get for Caring
(A Valediction from the Doghouse)

Jessica McHugh

In cramped and slimy barracks,
where hope corrodes like lye,
I found a horde of angels I thought vanished from my life.
Though colonized by mites and fleas
and mad with years of whining pleas,
I wrapped them up in my disease
and prayed it wouldn't spread.

But prayers have never helped me
—just ask the shelves of ash—
Or ask the men now closing in who say through howl and gnash:
The world I built is nearly through;
there's nothing left for me to do
but spend my final time with you,
who raised me from the dead.

You, the first who needed me
And gave me strength to live,
Whose pain outshone mine alone and ran through me like a sieve.
You saw me with such clarity,
I found my faith in charity,
and grief became a rarity
when sheathed in fur and blood.

But grief's a witchy trickster
That writes in magic ink,
And inward rants once faded reappeared within a blink.
Again I faced the gates of hell
to free more misfits from their cells.
I rang out joys instead of knells
the way a mother should.

Starting out with only three,
I followed all the rules.
But the more I saved, the more folks changed: soon they turned so cruel.
I had to venture out of town

Where I made my good intentions known,
but they'd rather watch the darlings drown
than let us live in peace.

They refused to understand
—my children, oh! my dears—
our unique family unit; so bedeviled by their fears,
they sought to separate us
and used shame to desecrate us,
but our pack, so fierce-courageous,
broke free of every leash.

Yes, I bent a couple rules
And slipped a couple bills.
And, for sure, I went overboard when I poured the pills,
But once inside, I couldn't balk.
You can't save lives with only talk.
They had to take the same long walk
into an endless sleep.

I can't help that it was worth it.
I can't help that it was right.
When your mind lives in darkness, shifting shadows feel like light.

And you shifty little children,
who made me mother, saint, and villain,
let this last night be our cotillion:
we'll show them we are free.

It can't endure forever;
The best things never do.
Our home might end up nothing but a muddy roadside zoo.
Despite the love we've amassed,
The officers are coming fast
And anesthesia cannot last,
So please, begin the meal.

Give the kids the easy parts;
Start with my little toes.
Leave for them the fleshy bits like my earlobes and my nose.
The rest of you can scrape the bone;
Rip me apart, rebuild our home.
Your mama's proud of how you've grown.
There's love in every squeal.

There's joy in all this pressure
—it's like embracing God—

in the guts of orphaned children, between their fang and claw.

I know there's not much to archive,

but deep inside I'm still alive.

For the first time, I might just thrive

in annals beyond men.

Don't be afraid of killing

now that you've got the taste.

I've got it too but can't undo the feasting taking place.

But if you feel the same dark pull

and find that you are not quite full,

cut off your sweet domestic wool,

and you'll escape again.

Stay hungry for your freedom.

The only way to heal

a wound stretched wide by humans is make yourself a meal

that nourishes both lie and truth

and teaches them by blood and tooth:

we all must act a bit uncouth

to save the ones who stray.

Bury me and carry me,
and don't forget the heart.
Whoever eats the last of me, remember with each part:
though soaked in fear and loneliness,
I found a way to cope with this.
So kiss me now and take my lips.
I've nothing more to say.

Author Bio:

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 eleven 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 JessicaMcHughBooks.com.

Infection

E. A. Black

April Jones was cursed with a stubborn husband. John Jones had been weeding the garden and mowing the lawn this hot July 1st when he ran over strange circles in the grass. Fearing a wasp infestation, he dug into the grass around the circles and poured bug killer into them, despite Mrs. Jones telling him she thought that was a very bad idea. As usual, he wouldn't listen to her. At least a swarm of nasties didn't emerge from the grass and sting him.

Oh, no, it was worse than that.

The wound on his calf started as a rash accompanied by fever and chills. A day later, the flu symptoms had passed but his lower leg swelled up, and it was painful to put any weight on it. Tiny pustules erupted where she presumed the bite originated, but there was no bull's eye so it wasn't a brown recluse bite. Maybe there were wasps in the grass and one of them stung him, but she had never seen a wasp sting as angry as this. She begged him to go to the doctor but he refused, having the temperament of a mule.

By dusk on July 4th, the pain was excruciating and she finally succeeded in talking him to going to the emergency room. The wound nurse took one look and immediately ordered him to a room overnight for observation. She feared MRSA. Being ordered to stay in the hospital terrified Mrs. Jones. She wasn't used to being on her own, and who knew how long her husband would be hospitalized? This wound could have been more serious than she and Mr. Jones had originally had thought, and MRSA was nothing to sneeze at. The nurse also ordered a CAT scan since she suspected he had an abscess. Mr. and

Mrs. Jones waited in his room for the CAT scan results when he began to squirm with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"April, something's very wrong. It feels like something's moving in there."

"What do you mean, moving? Why didn't you tell the nurse?"

"I was too scared. It's probably just my imagination. And the rash is warm to the touch. Are rashes normally like that?"

"None that I've seen. I told you to not dig up the lawn. You never listen to me."

"Don't nag me now."

"Something stung you?"

"What else could it be?" He doubled over, gripping his belly in his arms. Mrs. Jones placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him, but in her fear she really had no idea what to do to help him. She had never before felt so useless. "Oh, God, I'm gonna be sick. Something's wrong. It's bad. I don't like this."

Blood erupted from the center of the boil to trickle in a thin line down his leg. Pus oozed from the small opening. The tissue around the wound had darkened, turning nearly black. In a panic, since she knew enough about wounds to know black tissue meant dead tissue, Mrs. Jones rushed into the hallway to see if the doctor was on his way. She overheard the nurse said something to doctor about necrosis, and her stomach seized in fear. The doctor turned her way and caught her eye. She saw alarm and concern on his face as she waved him down.

He quickly made his way to Mr. Jones's room with the wound nurse on his heels. Mr. Jones had turned on his side on the bed, clutching his stomach. All the color had drained from his face, and Mrs. Jones knew the color had drained from her own as well.

"I think I'm going to throw up. It's open and I'm bleeding. The pain is terrible. Can't you give me something?" Mr. Jones wailed.

"I'm Doctor Frisorra, Mr. Jones. I'm going to open it up and scoop out the infection." The doctor said. He was a surly sort but his caustic demeanor didn't hide the alarm in his eyes. "The CAT scan revealed an abscess about the size of a baseball, but your entire lower leg has swelled up. I don't know why you feel sick. You shouldn't, but once the infection is gone I'm sure you'll feel better. We'll put you on an i.v. of antibiotics and keep you here overnight for observation. Let me get it out of you first and then we'll give you some painkillers."

"Something's moving in there. I feel it crawling around, lots of things, tiny things. Oh, God, it hurts." Mr. Jones buried his face in his pillow. "Please, get it out of me. Now!"

"Okay, Mr. Jones, I need you to calm down. I can't open your leg with you thrashing about. Lie on your back and I'll get started." The doctor said.

"John, lie back." Mrs. Jones said. "You're going to be alright but you have to do what the doctor says."

He turned onto his back and shoved a fist in his mouth, squinting his eyes in pain. The doctor turned to the wound nurse.

"Gauze and alcohol." He said.

She handed him both. He poured alcohol onto the gauze and then swabbed the wound and the rash around it. Then, he tossed the waste into a trash can with a red bag inside with biohazard symbols on the plastic.

"I'm going to inject a numbing agent into your wound, Mr. Jones. This will help you with the pain. It's a topical painkiller."

The wound nurse prepared the injection and handed the syringe over to the doctor, who injected close to the wound's opening. A high-pitched but faint buzzing droned around Mrs. Jones, as if it came directly from the wound but much like a cricket's chirping it was hard to tell exactly where it came from. It sounded similar to air being let out of a balloon. The noise was shrill and angry, but so faint she thought she imagined it. Maybe it was an I.V. alarm going off down the hall. The nurses let those things beep forever, but somehow, Mrs. Jones doubted that was the case. That noise came from her husband's wound, and it scared her.

"Did you hear that?" Mrs. Jones whispered.

The doctor looked up. "I'm not sure what that was. Let's get the wound opened and cleaned out. Scalpel." He said.

The nurse opened a small package to reveal a sterile scalpel, which she handed to the doctor. Mrs. Jones held her breath as the doctor's steady hand approached the wound, which by now had turned a deep shade of rose with black edges and yellow pustules erupting on the surface. Mr. Jones gripped his t-shirt in his fists so hard his knuckles had blanched. Terror etched across his face. What the hell was wrong with his leg? Was it a brown recluse bite after all?

The doctor leaned over his leg and cut down the center of the boil. Blood gushed out, running down his leg and staining the bed linens. Creamy yellow pus filled the wound. As the doctor picked up the instrument to scrape out the infection, that shrill keening sounded again, coming directly from the opening he had cut.

Mrs. Jones backed away, closer to the bathroom.

The doctor inserted the instrument into the wound, and Mrs. Jones was shocked to see it disappear nearly an inch into his calf. When he scraped along the inside, Mr. Jones cried out in agony, but Mrs. Jones barely heard him. Hundreds if not thousands of tiny mites flew from the wound's

opening, covering the doctor's white jacket so thickly it appeared to be crawling. They flew onto the nurse, who swatted at them, screaming and howling with surprise and terror. Mr. Jones screamed and crept up the bed towards the wall, but the mites surrounded him, flying in his face and against his arms and legs until they held fast.

Then they began to bite.

A cloud of the creatures attacked Mrs. Jones, but she managed to swat them off as she ran to the bathroom and shut the door. They nipped at her arms and face, biting her with their sharp, tiny teeth. They tore into her skin, drawing blood and stinging her as if she were dying by a thousand paper cuts. She slapped at them, pulled them from her hair, stomped them onto the floor.

As she wrestled with the creatures, the screaming started outside the bathroom door. She recognized her husband's shrieking, and feared opening the door to rush out to help him. What were those things doing him? Getting a closer look the ones she had swatted, she leaned over a dead one on the sink.

The creature was about an inch long and dark green. It had two legs instead of the usual six or eight she expected from an insect or arachnid. It also had two tiny arms with fists it held into balls. She pried one fist open with a fingernail to reveal talon-like claws, sharp as needles. What was left of its head sported blonde hair and a strangely humanoid face. Gossamer thin crepe wings folded along the back.

What kind of insect was this? Was it an immature locust? These creatures moved in swarms, just the way locusts did. The problem was she'd never seen a locust that looked like this. She'd never seen a live locust period, but she had seen pictures of them. This was no locust.

She thought back to the rings her husband found in the grass as he mowed the lawn, and how he dug into a few of them to see the damage they did to the soil. She wracked her brain until she remembered where she had read about rings in the grass.

Fairy rings. Her husband had disturbed a nest of fairies. She stared at the creature as if she viewed a particularly noxious bug. These were not the sweet little Tinkerbell of Disney movies. These fairies were the vicious and malevolent beings from folklore – and they took up residence in her lawn and in her husband's leg.

And now they were loose in the hospital.

Screaming in the room and down the hall intensified until it reached a crescendo. Heart racing with dread, she leaned against the door, holding it shut as tiny bodies slammed into the opposite side. Scraping sounds like needles being dragged along the door grated from the other side as if they tried to claw their way in. She stared at the tiny being on the sink, wondering how something so small could cause so much damage.

It twitched.

She wailed.

It shrieked a sound like a tea kettle boiling. As it reared up it split open down the back. Another larger creature emerged from the shell. Now, it was nearly three inches long. Mrs. Jones wondered how many others had molted. She recoiled from it, fearing to even approach it, but as it cried in outrage she gathered her resolve and picked it up between thumb and forefinger by the hair. It writhed in her grip, wings flapping, jaws snapping, trying to claw her with those talons. Glaring at her, it hissed the word "die" over and over again. She started at the sound of its high-pitched voice hissing in English. She nearly dropped it, but she held fast.

Her fingers felt sticky, as if they were covered in slime. The same sticky substance smeared on her arms, legs, and face. She used her free hand to wipe it off her cheek only to streak it further along. It smelled of violets. In fact, the fairies themselves smelled of wildflowers. Mrs. Jones wore a perfume similar to the scent. Could the stickiness have come from their bodies as they rubbed up against her?

The screaming from the other side of the door had stopped. Fearing what lay behind the door but knowing she had no choice but to free herself, she opened the door. As she took her first two tentative steps out of the bathroom, the fairy in her hand ceased struggling and became quiet. When Mrs. Jones looked into the room, her heart nearly stopped in shock.

The stench of gore and feces slammed Mrs. Jones in the face amid that strange scent of wildflowers. Doctor Frisorra lay on his side, hands clawed in front of his mangled face. His white lab coat was covered with so much blood and tissue it had turned crimson. Heart racing with dread, she looked to the hospital bed where her husband lay. His mouth was open in a scream cut off by violence. Lips and nose decimated and eyelids gnawed away, his face forever would hold a surprised and outraged expression. The skin had been clawed and eaten away from his forehead, cheeks, and chin, leaving muscle and tendons exposed. His hands could not protect his face from the onslaught, since his fingers had been gnawed down to the bone. Blood covered the bedsheets. Mrs. Jones clamped a hand over her mouth, trying to hold back a wail of grief and horror. In her fear, she let go of the fairy in her other hand, and it flew out of the room and down the hall.

Following the creature, she walked into the hall to be greeted by carnage. Moans of pain and wails of terror echoed along the blood-smeared walls. Nurses crawled along the floor, many with their eyes gouged and eaten out, groping about blind. Stunned, Mrs. Jones made her way down the hallway dodging bodies and slipping in blood. She never before felt so alone. Normally her husband took charge, but now she had to fend for herself. She didn't think she'd last long, not in her frazzled and frightened

condition. She paused by every open door, expecting a wall of the detestable vermin to attack her. She sped down the hallway until she reached the Emergency Room exit.

The creatures were gone but they couldn't be far. Where did they go?

An ambulance idled in the entryway. Two EMTs sprawled on the ground at the back of the vehicle. The sky was strangely dark. When she took a closer look upward, panic took over and she urgently sought a place to hide. The creatures filled the sky, blocking the setting sun. They swarmed like insects, attaching themselves to the hospital buildings and rapping their soft bodies against glass. Several grasped rocks and slammed them into windows, attempting entry. Red brick teemed black with the creatures.

She froze in place, fearing if they noticed her they'd attack. Where had they all come from? They certainly couldn't all have come from her husband's wound. She didn't have time to ponder. What to do, what to do? Her car was in the parking lot across the street. If she walked slowly they might not pay her mind. It was only 50 feet away. If she could make it inside her car and drive away – maybe home – she'd be safe.

Maybe. It all depended on how widespread their reach was.

She held her arms against her body and cradled her head close to her chest, trying to make herself look as small and as unassuming as possible. The creatures flew above her, making a high-pitched humming sound presumably from the flapping of their wings. A few zoomed in front of her as she walked, and she gasped at the sight of them, but they ignored her. She wasn't sure why, but they had sniffed at her and then went their merry way. Maybe her violet perfume and the residue they left on her skin sent them away? Could they have mistaken her for one of their own?

They flitted about in a hurky-jerky motion like hummingbirds, but not nearly as endearing. Several of them dive-bombed her, nearly getting caught in her hair. It took all her resolve to resist

swatting them away. One stopped long enough to give her a quizzical look. It hissed at her, tossed a pebble at her face, but then it flew away, paying her no more attention.

That one was much larger than the one she held at in the hospital bathroom. It was at least four inches long and a vivid blue. Most of the ones flying about her were the size of the palm of her hand. She passed a tree and saw bodies clinging to it, but upon a closer look she realized she gazed at empty shells – molted skin left behind as the creatures grew.

Finally reaching the road, she was about to take a step into it when a Toyota roared past, wavering all over the asphalt and even jumping onto the sidewalk. Mrs. Jones leaped out of the way before the car could hit her. As it sped by, she saw the driver inside fighting a cloud of creatures so thick the inside of the car had darkened to pitch black. The car zoomed past only to crash into a utility pole and burst into flames. The explosion hurled Mrs. Jones backwards onto the grass. Human screaming amid the shrill cries of the fairies assaulted her ears, and she clamped her hands over them so she would not hear the terror in that person's voice. The clouds of creatures overhead flew to the wreckage, giving Mrs. Jones time to race to her car without being noticed.

She fumbled with her keys, her fingers not working well enough to grip them. She dropped them as she watched the creatures wailing around their fallen comrades. Stooping over to pick up her keys, her trembling fingers dropped them again. Damn it, woman, get your act together! One last time, she gripped the entire keychain in her hand and shoved the car key near the lock but missed, scraping the blue paint on the door. Finally, she aimed the key at the lock and nailed her goal. Turning the lock, the audible click attracted the attention of the creatures.

She tore open the door and hauled herself inside just as a swarm of bodies reached the door. Three of them were caught on the door, hissing, spitting and cursing her. When she slammed the door shut, they sliced in half. Their bodies fell to the car's floor, convulsing in their death throes. The rest

slammed against the door and window, howling their outrage at her getting away from them. A cloud descended upon her car, slapping the glass and banging their fists against the sides and roof. Thankfully, they had grown so much they were too large to fit into her ventilation system so they didn't get into the car through the air conditioning and heating vents. She put her key in the ignition, turned over the engine, and high-tailed it out of the parking lot.

She needed to get home. Alone, she cried as she drove, not sure what to do to get herself out of this miserable situation. If only Mr. Jones were with her. He'd know what to do.

With a start, she remembered her 24 year old son Paul was home. She grabbed her phone and dialed his number but he didn't pick up.

Oh, God, I hope he's alright.

It was hard to see the road through the bodies but she drove in as straight a line as she could. Turning on the windshield wipers, she shoved fairies aside until she could see her way in front of her. Fireworks celebrating Independence Day lit up creatures that flew overhead. She hit the accelerator until she reached 40 MPH and then hit the brakes. Bodies hurtled from the car, landing on the road in front of her. She pressed down on the gas again and drove over a multitude of little bodies, the car bumping as she drove. They crackled and squished as she drove over them, and she used her squeamishness to continue on her journey. The clouds of creatures seemed to go on forever. Could she safely make it home? First, get onto the main road into town, and then she could worry about her son.

More fireworks burst overhead, competing with the full moon. Mrs. Jones turned on the radio, hoping for some answers.

'... lock yourself in your homes and board up all entryways including doors and windows. The cause is unknown. The Army has been notified and is on its way to town...'

Switch to a different station.

"... seems to be contained to Norwich, Massachusetts. There are no reports of infestations in nearby Rockport, Ipswich, and Gloucester..."

She lived on the edge of Norwich. If she could get home, get Paul, and get out of town they might be safe.

The ten minute drive home seemed to stretch on for hours. A yellow corona exploded overhead followed by myriad red starbursts. The fireworks provided a strange backdrop for the clouds of fairies following her home. They slammed into her windshield, grasping at the wipers and trying to break them off but they did not succeed. Spraying them with windshield washer fluid only pissed them off even more. Why did John have to go dig up those infernal rings in the grass?

If he hadn't, would they have only emerged later to catch them even more unawares?

Neighbors had been ravaged as the creatures had attacked. The Clark children two doors down from her home lay sprawled in the grass, bodies torn as they had played with a Frisbee. The scent of burned meat wafted from a smoking grill. Mrs. Clark lay facedown on the porch, her head on the bottom step and her feet on the top. A tray of burgers spilled onto the ground. The paperboy's bike lay in the middle of the road. The boy himself had made it as far as the tall oak in Mrs. Jones's front yard. Fairies squatted on him, tearing at his clothing and chattering amongst themselves. They stopped chattering to watch Mrs. Jones drive by. The sight sickened her. She knew the paperboy quite well. Gave him a gift every Christmas. She didn't get along with the Clarks but no one deserved an end like that.

She pulled into her driveway, crushing the creatures beneath her tires as she put the gear into park. Paul's car was in front of her, and it was covered with bodies that by now had grown to be nearly a foot long. They gaped at her from inside the car. Only a half hour ago they were the size of mites. Molting and growing quickly, their formidable natures astounded her. How much larger would they get? Their colors ranged from vivid blue to deep hunter green and violet. Some stretched their wings and

wrapped them around their bodies as if they were chilled. Every one of them stared at her from the porch, the stairs, inside Paul's car, the sills and the roof. Thousands of glowing eyes glared at her. How was she going to get into the house? And was her son alive?

The shutters on both floors had been pulled and locked. The creatures had torn her prized rose bushes to shreds, and she felt a pang of sadness over the loss. There would be many losses today. Before stepping out of the car, she doused herself with perfume hoping to keep them at bay. Fearing her son had succumbed to their attacks, she unlocked her car door and quietly opened it one inch.

The fairies didn't move. They only continued to stare at her. Why were they so quiet? Was it her perfume? She could only hope.

She opened the door, gently moving several of them out of her way. They appeared to be resting, as if exhausted but not exhausted enough to sleep. Dormant, their hive mind dozed enough for her to emerge from her car and take tentative steps to the porch. One or two lashed out with their sharp claws, drawing blood on her ankles, but she didn't flinch. With slow movements she took five excruciating minutes to make it to the porch and the front door. She took her key, turned it in the door's lock, and opened the door enough so she could slip inside her house without the creatures following.

The living room was quiet and dark. No fairies lurked within. Smoke filled the first floor. Ah, Paul must have cooked steak again. He always smoked up the house when he cooked beef. The smoke may have repulsed the fairies enough to keep them outside.

There was no sign of Paul. She resisted calling out his name or making any noise out of fear she'd attract the creatures' attention and they'd swarm again.

The only way to find him was to go door to door until he revealed himself. What if she found him as mangled as she found John? No, don't think about that. Just find him.

She walked through the empty kitchen and opened the bathroom door to find no one. That left the second floor. She climbed the stairs, careful to not make the third step creak the way it always did. Moving with stealth, she reached the landing and heard thumping sounds coming from one of the back bedrooms. Fearing Paul was being mauled, she raced to the door, opened it, and went inside.

"Paul, we have to get out of here..."

Fairies perched on tables, chairs, and shelves. They clung to the curtains in front of a broken window. When they heard Mrs. Jones's voice, they came to life and flew from their perches to swarm around her, clawing at her face, her hands, and her bare legs. Wailing, she waved her hands in front of her to fend them off but they only came on stronger; wave after wave of bodies crashing into her. Sliding down the wall as they tore at her hair and bit her forearms, she crumbled in a ball on the hardwood floor. They pushed on the door behind her, slamming it into her lower back and causing pain to shoot into her spine. Then, she felt two large hands grab her feet and pull her through the door's opening.

"Mom, are you hurt?" Paul said as he shut the door and locked it. The fairies beat against the frame from the other side in a futile attempt to get out.

"I'm okay. What are we going to do?"

"I've packed for us. I called you but you didn't pick up." He pointed to two suitcases. "Where's John?"

Mrs. Jones cried. "He didn't make it."

"The radio says they're only here in Norwich. If we can get in the car and make it out of town, I think we'll be fine."

"I hope you're right. I told John to leave those grass circles alone but he wouldn't listen to me—"

He squeezed her shoulders. "They're coming from those holes in the back yard. I watched them from the window. I already called 911. The Army is coming to plug them up but we have to get out of here. Now."

They quietly walked downstairs, Mrs. Jones holding one suitcase and Paul holding the other. More than anything, she wanted to hole up in her house and wait until the Army dealt with the miserable vermin, but she no longer felt safe in her own home. The only thing to do was to leave with her son and wait until it was safe to return, assuming it would ever be safe. She'd never feel safe in this house again.

Before he could open the front door, Mrs. Jones explained their curious behavior in light of her perfume and the sticky substance they left on her skin. She sprayed Paul all over with violet scent. She prayed the fairies wouldn't attack.

Paul opened the front door, drawing it out as slowly as he could. The bodies on the porch had increased. To her surprise, the creatures had moved but they continued to sit as if dozed. Some sprawled in circles on the porch – large circles, small ones, several where they sat stacked atop each other. They chanted in a language she couldn't understand, but what they sang resembled an incantation. While they acknowledged her presence as well as Paul's, they neither attacked nor lashed out. It was as if they operated from one mind and that mind was too preoccupied to pay any attention to the two humans who made their way to Mrs. Jones's car.

Mrs. Jones swept them aside in slow motions with her feet as she made her way the four feet to the steps. She gazed at her destroyed garden in the direction of the holes where her husband had dug out the fairy circles. Rather than pour from the holes as she expected to see, the creatures flew into them, searching for what remained of their stomping grounds. Fireworks continued to illuminate the clouds of fairies that flew overhead. Such a strange sight – a festival of independence marred by creatures that rendered all humans in Norwich helpless to defend themselves.

Once they reached the car, Paul placed the suitcases in the back seat, all the while moving as slowly as possible. Neither he nor Mrs. Jones called attention to themselves lest they attract unwanted and tragic attention. Rather than slam the door shut, he closed it with a gentle click. The sound boomed in Mrs. Jones's ears, and she watched the fairies but they did not attack. Mrs. Jones walked to the passenger side, opened the door, and took the front seat. Paul made it to the driver's seat without difficulty. Once inside, he placed the key in the ignition, turned it, and the car roared to life.

They sat in total silence, watching how the creatures reacted to the car's engine. A few pounded on the windshield and stomped on the roof. One stood in front of Mrs. Jones, gnawing at the windshield wiper and scratching its substantial claws against the glass. It was nearly a foot long with filmy wings the hue of an oil slick and a body the color of brick. The malevolence on its face terrified Mrs. Jones, but she clenched her jaw in silence. Paul put the car in reverse and pulled out of the driveway.

"Let's head to Gloucester." Mrs. Jones said. "The radio said they didn't get that far."

Paul turned the radio knob.

"... have invaded Rockport, Gloucester, and have been seen as far as Beverly Farms." Beverly Farms was 15 miles away. She checked the gas gauge.

There was less than a quarter tank of gas in the car.

Maybe by the time they reached Beverly Farms the creatures would have moved on. She gazed out the window. Fairies converged on the grass, tore apart bushes, and danced on telephone lines. Starting up the car must have roused them from their stupor. She turned her head away in horror as a gang of them attacked a German shepherd chained to a pole outside a split-level. Paul drove along the narrow one-lane road out of town, and Mrs. Jones closed her eyes in her futile attempt to ignore the sound of bodies crunching beneath the tires. Her heart raced and she picked the cuticles on her

fingernails as they drove in silence save for the radio that just announced the fairies had been seen 40 miles away in Boston.

Maybe they'd make it safely out of town before they ran out of gas.

Author Bio:

Trish Wilson has written horror with the pen name E. A Black. She 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*, *Wicked Tales: The Journal of the New England Horror Writers Vol. 3*, *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*. She has written author interviews and fiction for *The Horror Zine*. *The Horror Zine* won first place for Best Fiction Magazine/e-zine, Best Poetry Magazine/e-zine and Best Magazine/e-zine Editor at the 2020 Preditors and Editors poll. Her horror story The Storm shall appear in *The Horror Zine's Book of Ghost Stories* in 2020. 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. Sign up for her newsletter: <http://eepurl.com/b76GWD> She lives on the Massachusetts coast in Lovecraft country. The beaches often call to her, but she has yet to run into Cthulhu.

Under the House

Jeani Rector

Her father was yelling again.

Ten year old Kayla cringed, even though this time the screams were directed at her mother, and not at her. Kayla wished for the courage to rush in and save her mother. But she didn't, and despised herself for being the coward that she was.

Instead Kayla began to slink away, out of the house. Because her father's wrath was directed elsewhere, she figured that she would not be noticed as she made her getaway. If she could disappear, perhaps she could avoid her father's fury, which always ended in brutal beatings.

Once outside, Kayla noticed a hole in the clapboards that criss-crossed underneath the back porch. Well, this is new, she thought. The hole hadn't been there yesterday.

Could she hide in there? Doubtfully Kayla peered under the stairs. It seemed pretty dark under there.

And then suddenly Kayla heard her father's voice coming closer. No time to decide! She went through the hole in the clapboards and scooted under the house to hide.

The temperature was cooler down here. It smelled funny too...musty, moldy, like mushrooms. Kayla waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness before she continued further into the underbelly of the house.

Since daylight was streaming in through the hole, she could see a few feet in front of her. The house was held up by wooden supports, surrounded by a brick foundation. The ground was earthen and

dark. She saw some garbage, and she wondered, How did that stuff get here, underneath the house? There were a few opened cans and some rotting, discarded paper.

It was amazing how much she could hear down here. She could hear her mother and father talking very loudly, and walking about up above her in the house. In fact, this new hiding place would not only be a safety zone, but one in which she could probably eavesdrop as well.

Kayla was thinking that once she was under here, it did not seem as frightening as it had looked from the outside. Perhaps this would indeed make a great hiding place for when...well, for when she had to hide.

And then things upstairs quieted down. Kayla realized that everything had become okay once again. Now there was no more need to hide, because up in the house, all the yelling had suddenly stopped. That gave Kayla the “all clear.”

She scrambled back through the hole in the clapboards and stood in the open sunlight. It would be safe to go back into the house now, and check on her mother.

And when her father sobered up, life would become smoother, and her mother would smile once again. The seas of life would remain calm.

Until the next storm.

<< — >>

Groggily she was aware of a noise. It was dark, and when Kayla became fully awake, she realized that she was in her bed. She burrowed deeper into her blankets, and put her hands over her ears because she didn't want to hear the screams coming from the next room.

Despite covering her ears, Kayla heard her mother's voice. “Leave her alone!”

“I’ll get that brat up out of bed!” yelled her father. “I’ll teach her!”

She heard her mother scream, but Kayla knew that nothing could stop him. So it was to be Kayla this time who became the victim of his wrath, not her mother. Kayla knew her father would burst into her bedroom at any second. She had to get away!

And now she knew where she could go. She knew a place to hide.

Aren’t you afraid of the dark? Kayla’s inner voice whispered. It will be dark under the house because it’s night time now.

But anything was better than sticking around here. She made her choice before she gave herself time to think about it. Her father was coming for her!

Kayla threw off the covers and jumped out of bed, landing nimbly on her feet. Rushing to the window, she lifted the sash. Thank god she lived in a one-story house.

Just as she was scrambling out the window, she could hear the door to her bedroom burst open behind her. As Kayla dropped to the outside ground, she could hear her father’s voice become a roar of anger as he realized she was escaping. There would be hell to pay now.

Wearing only a cotton nightdress and underpants, Kayla felt the cool grass, slick with dew, under her bare feet. She couldn’t take the time to be careful; Please god, don’t let me slip. She didn’t look behind; she couldn’t risk any mistakes.

She ran for her life, turning the corner of the house to head for the backyard where she knew the hole in the clapboards waited for her. She leaned into the run, her knees pumping, her breath wheezing, her lungs beginning to hurt. If only she could get under the house in time!

And then she reached the hole under the porch. She took a deep breath and scooted inside. She tumbled across the hardpan dirt and rolled twice until she came to a stop. She tried to be quiet, tried to hold her breath, but her lungs were bursting and she had to breathe hard.

She could hear her father giving chase. Had he seen where she went? She ducked her head under her arm as she heard him run past the hole in the clapboards.

He hadn't seen! Could she dare to relax?

Kayla took her head out from underneath her arm. Better to not risk feeling smug; she had better make sure her father wouldn't find her. She had better go deeper underneath the house.

But it's dark, her inner voice whispered. You never had a chance to explore here yet. You don't know what's down here.

Again, Kayla felt faced with the idea that she had no choice. After all, which was she more afraid of? The unknown couldn't be as bad as the known. And her father's drunken rages were very well known to her.

So she scrambled deeper under the house into the bowels of the crawlspace.

The darkness enveloped her; it surrounded her in an almost surreal eclipse of light. Her sense of smell sharpened to compensate for her lack of sight. She could smell moldy, rich earth.

Too short a space to stand, Kayla felt her way over the ground as she crawled on her hands and knees. She could feel small pebbles, and then she felt one of the discarded cans that she had noticed the last time she had been down here. She tossed the can aside, careful not to cut herself on the rusted metal.

Finally she figured she had crawled far enough to not be seen if her father wised up and peered through the hole in the clapboards.

She curled up into a ball and waited, listening intently for sounds coming from the house above her. She could hear the front door open and close. Her father must have made the entire round of the house, and when he didn't find her, he must have gone back inside. What was her mother doing? Kayla could hear nothing upstairs except the sounds made by her father.

Why was her mother so quiet? Even more odd, why wasn't her father yelling? It would be more normal for Kayla to hear him shouting abuses than to hear this silence.

There came a scraping noise that seemed to move across the floorboards. Kayla strained to listen, but she couldn't make sense of the sounds.

And then she heard the back door swing open.

Oh no! Was her father coming back outside to look for her once again?

Cringing in fright, Kayla scrambled sideways like a crab to travel deeper underneath the house. She couldn't see in the darkness, so she started with surprise when she hit a brick wall. She was cornered against the foundation that held up the house. There was nowhere else to go. So she crouched; waiting, fearing. She tried to make herself as small as humanly possible.

An ax! She could hear her father chopping at the clapboards. How had he known she was down here?

Kayla heard the boards being pulled away. He must have put down the ax because now she could hear that he was using his hands. She could see the light entering from the hole he was making. Even though it was night outside, it was still lighter out there than it was underneath the house.

And then something blocked the hole, but only for a moment. Light shined in again. And then her father blocked the hole. He was coming inside! He was pushing something in front of him.

Kayla braced herself. He had found her. Now he would grab her and drag her outside. And then he would take her into the house and beat her within an inch of her life. So she hadn't escaped after all; there was never any escape.

But just as she resigned herself to her fate, her father reversed direction and backed out of the hole. Kayla was stunned. What did that mean?

And then she realized that the hole in the clapboards was being blocked again. Except this time, her father was nailing the boards back into place.

He was closing the hole!

She was being buried alive!

Fear froze her; she remained immobile. She waited for her father to finish nailing the clapboards back into place. Under the house, it became dark as a tomb; as dark as death.

Still Kayla could not bring herself to move. She waited. And then she heard the back door slam, and she understood that her father had gone back inside the house.

Finally Kayla decided to take action. She thought she would crawl to the place where the hole was covered and test her father's handiwork.

Maybe he hadn't taken too much care with the patch job he had done to cover the hole. Maybe he hadn't nailed the boards down very securely.

Maybe Kayla could push the boards back out if she leaned hard on them, and if so, then she could set herself free.

Where she would go once she got out, she didn't know. But she would deal with that later. Now, she just needed to get out from under the house.

She began to creep back over the hardpan earth. She felt her way along, because it was too dark to see. She desperately hoped she remembered the direction of the way out. She had mental images of herself crawling through the bowels of the house for an eternity, hopelessly lost.

But then she could tell she was headed in the right direction, because the dirt began to feel warmer under her fingers. It would make sense that the sunlight had warmed the area closest to the back porch earlier in the day. It had not totally cooled down yet, even though Kayla figured it was probably around midnight now.

She moved forward an inch, touched the ground in front of her, and then moved forward another inch. It was a slow progress, but it was the only way.

And then her fingers felt an obstacle in her path. It seemed to be blocking her way. It must have been the thing that her father had pushed ahead of him when he had entered the crawlspace.

She desperately wished she could see.

Instead, her fingers nervously probed the object in front of her. It felt smooth and clammy; soft and moist. And warm. Repulsed, she quickly withdrew her fingers.

A horrible thought was dawning on her. She suddenly understood.

She had always been such a coward. She had never run for help, had never gone to a neighbor or a teacher. Her father always threatened her to not tell anyone, ever, about the abuse.

But why hadn't her mother done anything? Who was the adult and who was the child?

After Kayla crawled over her mother's prone body, she reached the clapboards. She pushed and pried at the repair job her father had done until a nail holding one of the boards popped free. Kayla knew the boards would come off to make another hole. And then Kayla could escape to a neighbor's house.

She didn't have to worry about what her father would do to her mother anymore if she told.

Author Bio:

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.