



Villa Diodati

**A collection of short
ghost stories**

**From the writers behind
Novel in a Day**

Villa Diodati

a collection of
ghostly short stories



VILLA DIODATI

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Introduction

The summer of 1816 was unseasonably wet and miserable. A near bankrupt, scandal-plagued Lord Byron had fled England and was staying at a villa near Lake Geneva with his personal physician, John, and their new friends Percy and Mary. The relentless deluge kept them indoors, so they passed the time reading ghost stories to each other from a collection of magazines that came with the house. When those ran out, Byron suggested they have a competition to each write a ghost story.

John wrote “The Vampyre”, the first modern vampire tale that went on to inspire Bram Stoker and spawn countless toothy progeny across the following centuries. For her contribution to the game, the 18 year old Mary Godwin crafted a tale that proved to be one of the most imaginative psychological ghost stories ever written, and in the process single-handedly invented Science Fiction. Before it was published, Mary and Percy got married and she changed her last name to Shelley...

Over 200 years later, following a re-animation ceremony involving precise constellational alignment, sacred incantations, pentagrams and a bottle of ketchup, a bunch of writers all across the planet resurrected Byron’s challenge and wrote an original ghost story each. This collection is the result.

We hope you have as much fun reading it as we did writing it!

Tim

27 October, 2024

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I Am The Ghost That Haunts Me

by Jaysen O'Dell

Jack wasn't sure why he was looking at his own body. Why Cindy, his wife, was crying in the hallway. Why the doctor was saying "time of death, 12:18AM". Jack was supposed to be making a joke about how he had the high score for pulse rate and blood pressure.

Jack watched as several nurses cleaned his corpse. Piss and shit on the bed. Flecks of foam around his mouth. Blood specks from IVs and shots. A priest came to comfort Cindy. They walked into the room. "Earlier today he was working in the yard, adding a bench to the deck. Now he's gone. Forever."

She grabbed the lifeless hand and fell into the chair a nurse pushed under her just in time.

Jack had not survived his heart attack. Years before he had been warned about his weight and blood pressure. He had made great progress but in recent years, stress and age had caused him to lose ground. "We are all going to die sometime!" he would say with a smile. He never expected it to be 3 weeks after his daughter's wedding and 1 week after his 49th birthday.

Cindy pulled her cell phone out of her purse.

"What are you about to do?" Jack asked her.

His words went unheard. The dead and the living do not talk to each other.

"Amy, dad just died." Cindy started sobbing.

"Um Amy? This is Father Mike MacDonald. I'm supporting B* Hospital tonight. Your mother is in good hands here. Your father has succumbed to cardiac arrest but I'm not able to discuss that as I'm not a medical professional. A nurse is coming to talk to you and I will ensure your mother is looked after. Here is Sam to discuss your father. Nancy and I will attend your mother while you are talking with Sam. You have my condolences... Sam, Mrs.

O'Donnell's daughter's name is Amy..."

Father Mike and Nancy gently helped move Cindy to a more comfortable position while Sam walked around the corner talking to Amy.

Jack tried to hold Cindy's hand but, being dead, he had no physical body. His hand just passed through hers. He leaned over and put his lips to her ear. "I love you as much now as I did the first time I saw you, the first time you kissed me, the first time we made love, the first time we held Amy and John. I will always love you!"

She couldn't hear him. His non-existent lungs were not able to move actual air over his non-existent larynx to make the needed vibrations to move her physically existing eardrums. Jack would never again profess his love to his wife.

"Mrs. O'Donnell, I've explained the situation to Amy. She is calling John in Korea and the Red Cross to arrange emergency leave for him. The hospital will provide all the needed documentation. Amy and David will be leaving their home in thirty minutes to be here with you. The hospital is arranging a counselor for you. Her name is Sarah. She will be here in eight minutes." Sam handed the cell phone to Father Mike who slid it into Cindy's purse.

For eight minutes, Jack watched as Cindy alternated between "all he ever wanted was for me to be happy" and crying. Jack watched Nancy and Father Mike do Jack's job of comforting his wife. A shoulder to cry on, someone to pull tissue from the box, a hand to hold, a whisper of "it is ok to be sad" or "there is no ugly in your crying, the ugly is in the situation". Jack was powerless.

For years Jack had played the tough guy. "There's no need to go to the doc until something falls off!" "If nothing hurts, let's not give them a chance to make something hurt!" "It's just a little blood... give me some tape and it'll be good!"

While he had watched his diet and had been exercising, the fads in most programs frustrated him. He tried to eat well, more vegetables than meat and carbs, lower fat. He walked the dog and tried to do chore and hobbies with hand tools to offset the idleness of his "desk job" career. A few months prior to this night, he felt a

funny “pain” and then developed a cold that he could not shake.

Now Jack is dead watching his family’s world turn upside down.

Jack watched as Amy and her husband David helped Cindy home and attempted to keep things normal. Hot meals with Cindy’s favorite dishes, flower arrangements with her favorite colors, and a spotless house. When John arrived on an emergency flight he attacked the paperwork and bureaucracy with the violence every soldier is trained to use when fighting an enemy.

In the alone times, when the only “person” that could see them was Jack, Amy and John would mutter “dumb ass bastard couldn’t even die slow enough for me to tell him I loved him.” Their tears infuriated Jack. They shouldn’t be crying for him. It was his own fault he was dead.

In the end, Jack died of advance coronary disease and arterial sclerosis. If he had gone to a doctor they would have seen it and helped prevent his death. If Jack had removed his head from his ass he would be at home right now, holding his wife while they talked on the phone with the kids.

Jack’s family would survive. Amy and David would live “happily ever after”, telling their children stories of a man who played guitar and built small sailboats. John would find a beautiful woman to start a life with, telling her stories of a man who set an example of “husband and father”. Cindy would... she would move on. She would never be happy. Jack was her true love.

Jack would see it all. Jack would be an outsider as his hopes and dreams for the lives of his wife and children became real. So would their pain. All without him.

I am Jack. At 12:18 AM on May 2, 2022 I watched as a nurse held his thumb over the red button on the defibrillator. The nurses and doctors tell me the only thing I said was, “Tell my wife I love her. I hope she knows how much I do. I don’t think I do a good job telling her.” Unlike Jack, I am able to tell my wife exactly how much I love her. I do every morning. Every afternoon. Every evening. Every night.

In the hours and days that followed that frightening moment, my children’s worlds were tossed around. My daughter delayed

starting her new job to attend to her mother while I was in the hospital. My son, stationed overseas at the time, was denied leave (because I did not die) and was already in process of returning stateside. A, her husband D, and J (their names are not Amy, David and John) told my wife and me of their plans to arrive at our home while I was still in the ICU. A nurse overheard the conversation between the five of us.

She would later tell me how the story normally ends for people in my condition. The majority become Jack, they die. Of those that survive, it is most common for the survivor to be abandoned by their families, struggling alone through their recovery, fighting to regain physical stability and then hoping for improvement. I was in a very small group of people who had the unconditional support of everyone in my life. “Make the most of it”, she said, “and do the work. They are here for you now. Be there for them later.”

As of October , 2024, I have had three additional heart attacks. Multiple cardiac surgeries. Multiple rounds of post-operative physical therapy. Like Jack, I had been avoiding preventative medical care for decades. I assumed I didn’t need it. I didn’t smoke. I was not a “drinker”. I failed to consider basic genetics.

My the coronary disease and arterial sclerosis are significant. Like Jack I had already been working on my weight and diet. Thanks to my genetics, I will never be able to “work” my way to healthy. I will always require medication.

I tell you all of this because a ghost story haunts me every day. The story of my own ghost watching those I love, helpless to participate or to help. It is the story of me. My own looming death. This is a horror I pray you never have to know.

I am the ghost that haunts me.

The Christmas Lights

by Annie Percik

The Christmas tree lights blinked in the most infuriating manner. Slow - red...blue...green... Fast - red-red-red, blue-blue-blue, green-green-green. I couldn't imagine how Robert could bear them, flashing away like that all the time. Stuck as my consciousness was, in the angel on top of the tree, they coloured my entire field of vision, blanketing the room in alternating shades every few seconds.

The angel was bigger than most - a small mercy, since it was still only a tiny space to house whatever spirit form I'd been reduced to since my death. There was little of interest in what I could see from my position atop the tree, especially with the blasted lights flickering all the time.

A thought struck. Could I use the lights somehow, affect their rhythm to create some kind of message? To let Robert know I was there... Would he even notice if the pattern changed? And how would I go about making that happen? I thought about the angel being packed away in a box soon and shoved up in the loft for another year, and whatever sense of corporeality I retained shuddered. It had to be worth a try.

So I concentrated on the lights, focusing my energy and my will in an effort to try and manipulate them. I put all of my effort into it, pushing my will against the bulbs and cables, but nothing happened. The colours continued to blink in their relentless rhythm: red-red-red, blue-blue-blue, green-green-green. I was frustrated, desperate to make a connection, to make something happen, but it seemed that my influence over the world was sorely limited.

Then, something shifted and the lights did begin to flash in a different sequence. They blinked slowly, then rapidly, then off-off-on, on-on-off, red-red-blue, blue-blue-green. The pattern went on

and on, a strange and alien code that spread through the room like a wave of energy. Had my efforts had some kind of effect after all?

But no. I felt another presence in the room, a presence that seemed to be watching me, a presence that seemed to be listening. I sensed an otherworldly energy that wasn't me and a chill spread through the air, despite the three-bar heater blazing in the corner. Robert gave a shiver and glanced over at the window, as if checking to see if it was open. He scooted off the sofa, over to the heater, and turned it up.

I had other things to worry about than the temperature. Had I called some other spirit to this place somehow, by trying to mess with the lights? In my brief weeks out of the attic each year, I'd never sensed any other beings in the space I was confined to. Lonely as my basically non-existence was, I wasn't sure whatever this was would be an improvement on my usual frustrating solitude.

Time slowed to a crawl and, breaking the tense silence, I heard a voice, a voice that seemed to be speaking directly to me.

At first, it sounded as if it was coming from far away and there was the sound of static overlaying the words, obscuring their meaning. My mental grip on the angel figurine tightened as I heard the words becoming clearer.

“You can be more than what you are, if you are prepared to do what needs to be done.”

The voice was somehow familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. I was too afraid to ask who it belonged to. What I did know was that this presence might have the power to grant me a way out of my current existence and I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity.

I hesitated, unsure of how to communicate with the other presence in my current state. I'd never been able to make any noise when I'd tried before. But the voice wasn't speaking aloud on the human plane. It was clear Robert hadn't heard anything. So I concentrated on articulating words as clearly as possible in my mind.

“What do I need to do?”

“Take my offer,” the voice replied. “And you will have the opportunity to live again. You will be able to experience life and the world in a way you never have before.”

The prospect was tantalising, though I was aware of a certain amount of misgiving creeping through my being.

“What do you mean - your offer?” I asked. “You'll show me how to escape this dreadful limbo - but what do I have to do for you in return?”

I wanted to say I'd do anything, anything at all to break free from the blasted angel, but I wasn't so far gone as to throw common sense wholly out the window.

The voice chuckled, a sound that seemed to reverberate through the air around the Christmas tree.

"I'm offering you a chance to take control of your destiny, but it will involve taking a risk. Trust me, you won't be disappointed."

I felt a thrill of excitement as I considered the possibilities. Could I really escape this fate? Could I really be free once more, to live an existence outside my current confinement? I hesitated, not wanting to make a rash decision, but at the same time feeling an urge to just leap into the unknown.

“Do it,” the voice said, as if sensing my hesitation. “Take command of your fate. Do it and you will have a life again. I can help you make the transition.”

I was swept up in the excitement of the sudden and unexpected possibilities for a moment. Then I realised something that brought me up short before I could commit myself too far.

“You still haven't told me what you're getting out of this,” I said. “Am I meant to believe you just travel about, looking for stranded spirits and helping them out of the goodness of your own heart?”

There was a grim edge of grudging respect in the next words the voice spoke. “Of course not. After all, I no longer have a heart.”

Robert was still oblivious to the dramatic scene that was playing out in the ethereal plane surrounding his Christmas tree. I caught a glimpse of him through the flashing lights, munching on a biscuit as he flipped the page of the book he was reading.

The mundanity of that scene pulled me out of the whirl of confusion and apprehensive excitement the voice's arrival had plunged me into.

“So,” I prompted, almost wishing I could go back to haunting the Christmas angel and forget this whole thing. “What is it? What do you want?”

There was no going back now. I had a taste of hope for a new future and I couldn't let it go.

The voice gave a low moan. “I want you to promise you will help me find the last of my descendants, so I can wreak revenge on them for the horror their predecessors wrought upon me at the end of my life.”

“And how exactly will I do that?” I asked.

What was I thinking? Why not just agree and worry about the details of the bargain later? At this rate, I might talk the spirit out of helping me altogether, by presenting myself as more trouble to save than the benefit of whatever grudging assistance I might later give.

“Do not worry yourself over that,” the voice replied. “I have ways. I just need a physical agent in the mortal realm to do the things that remain out of my reach.”

It was crunch time. Yay or nay.

Well, there was really only one way this was going to go. I'd known that from the start.

“Okay,” I said. “You help me and I'll help you.”

There was a pause, and then the voice spoke again. “Good. Then we have a deal.”

The tree lights suddenly faded and the room returned to its normal state. Robert had continued to read his book without interruption, seemingly oblivious to the ghostly interaction that had just taken place. He had noticed the change in temperature, but apparently not the altered light pattern.

I felt a strange sense of peace. I had a purpose again. And with it, a chance at a new life. But how to proceed now? The presence I'd felt was gone, but had left no instructions for me. Was I just supposed to wait until it came back? I was used to that, at least. But the promise of more had fueled my frustration at my imprisonment and the peace of the moment before vanished like smoke. Now I was impatient to begin.

“Good,” the voice said. So it wasn't really gone. “You will need

that energy for what lies ahead.”

“What do I need to do?” I asked.

“Bring Robert over to the tree,” it told me. “If you change the pattern of the lights again, he will see it this time and be drawn to investigate.”

I wasn't even sure what I'd done before. I thought the spirit behind the voice had been the one to change the light pattern, but apparently not. So, I focused my will on the lights again, imagining as clearly as I could a different sequence of colours and flashes. For a long moment, nothing happened. Then all the lights went out and Robert looked up in surprise.

“Bloody fuse,” he muttered, getting up.

But before he could head out of the room to check the fuses, I concentrated again and the lights flickered back to life. I pushed my will into them with greater force and they started to speed up, flashing with the urgency I felt for a new lease of life myself.

Robert turned towards the tree, eyes wide. Then his steps brought him closer. It felt as if he was moving in slow motion, but eventually he was only inches away. I watched as he reached out one hand, a tight screw of anticipation squeezing my very essence. One finger made contact with a flashing bulb. There was a tremendous bang, a blinding light, and Robert was thrown backwards across the room.

Somehow, I felt myself pulled with him, all my awareness arcing through the air, away from the angel and into open space. There was a sense of impact and then nothing.

I don't know how much time passed, but slowly I became aware again, with the sound of laughter echoing in my thoughts.

There was a crushing heaviness to everything, as if I was lying beneath something massive that was pinning me to the floor. Hold on - how could I be lying on the floor? I didn't have a body. Or did I?

The sense memory of being in a body started to filter back through to my startled brain and I opened eyes I hadn't realised were mine. Only they weren't mine. I stared up at the rough swirls of the awful paint effect on Robert's living room ceiling. Robert's body was lying on its back on the floor, and I was the one inside it.

The laughter increased. “Yes,” the voice said. “You understand. And with your return to life, you have already fulfilled the bargain we struck.”

I drew in a breath - my first in a very long time - and coughed. I tried to wrangle my - Robert's - tongue around my - his - teeth and managed to spit out some words.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

There was deep satisfied malice in the voice as it replied. “Robert was my last target, the last of my descendants to sully the mortal realm with his disgusting existence. You have forced his spirit out into the ether, where I can chase it down and punish it as I have all the others. And, in doing so, you have been granted a new life, as I promised. So we have both achieved our aims and now I bid you farewell.”

This time, the sudden sense of absence was more complete and I knew the spirit had now gone for good.

Robert's - my - chest heaved up and down, fighting against gravity and horror at the situation.

I had killed Robert and taken over his body. Apparently, my obligation to my rescuer was already fulfilled and now I could live out the rest of Robert's life as my own. A chill returned, deep in my bones.

Would I have agreed to the bargain if I'd known what was really involved? Would it have made a difference if I'd known Robert would be the recipient of the spirit's revenge, rather than some nameless stranger? It was far too late to ask that question now, and there was no way to know the answer. I had done the deed - intentional or not - and now I was...

Free...

Satisfaction. Resolution. Relief.

by Joel Glover

The bottle smiled up at her, its glass the blue green of a stream carving a niche between mountains, the black wine inside a dark pupil which looked into her soul.

The wine flinched.

She picked up the bottle and drank it.

Fuck it.

The fluid made a strangled gurgle as it vacated the embrace of lightning struck sand.

She took the bones from their repository.

The final joint from the smallest finger of a garotte obsessed murderer. The largest tooth of the sharp-skinned speckled fish, a relentless predator which could never sleep lest it drown. A carnotaurus vertebrae; a drowned baby's forearm; eight chips from the skull of a demon prince.

They fell onto the table with a grimace.

The smoke that was thrown up from their burning had a particularly pungent odour that had the gorge rising in her stomach. She did not want to waste the good wine so she choked the sour metallic tang back down. The rose petal and fruit scent continued to fill the room regardless. There was wind in the room, no breeze, no draft at all. The smoke was moved by currents pressed from the Eighth Realm into the Third Realm, pulled by gravity and the movement of the uncountable stars into the shape of a singular figure.

“You are such a disappointment,” it shrieked.

Palishtania, Seer of the Eighth Realm, turned her back on the spectre she had summoned and reached into the crate beside her. It rattled like a furious hail as it relinquished another bottle.

“Ever the weakling, afraid of what might be, afraid of what you might see if you only let yourself.”

Death had not improved her mother, nor had it made her worse. It had preserved her, like blood in a sausage. The gore that trickled from the fatal wound, the bones that showed through as the meat sloughed slowly from the image of her carcass, these were the seasoning.

Her mother did not have to bleed, of course, she did not have to rot. But she expected to. In this, her expectations were at least met.

This wine tasted much like its sadly departed sibling.

“I wanted you to watch this,” Palishtania replied.

The second spell she was casting was more complex than the first. It had required serious preparation. Seventeen assassins had lost their lives on the floor of the crypt in which she sat, shitting out rich meals they had hoped to finish digesting. The runes carved into the walls were etched with a witch’s ribs and then filled in with molten abilaydum and the souls of widows. The final step required a week of fasting and abstention. By the time she had started to trace the runes of summoning onto her skin she’d been almost delirious.

Her mother had put her on this path. The Volva of The Peak Underwater had hoped to gain a powerful ally by drowning her daughter over and over until she could see through the veil between life and death. Instead she created a nemesis.

A nemesis who could drag her spirit back from the Realm Beyond Life, over and over, to bear witness on the visions which had been inflicted upon her only living kin.

And sometimes to bear witness to something far, far worse.

The walls tore from the catacomb, taking with them the words of summoning. Beyond, the dirt of the grave was replaced by an everlasting vista, perpetual light of the purest white, no shadow, no horizon, whiteness forever.

“Who have you brought?”

The voice was violet, dryer than any desert, coated in the flavour of greed.

“What is this?” Her mother’s shade remained indignant.

“This is what I see.”

This is what she had always seen.

The light grew brighter, closing in with an avalanche's speed and menace. It was silent as the lungs of a day-old debtor.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

The third voice spoke again. Not to the Seer, to the ghost. It should have sounded pleased. It was beyond pleasure, beyond pain, beyond anything other than patience.

"What is happening?"

Palishtania had never heard her mother afraid. Not when facing down demons she had dragged from the Second Realm to bend to her will. Not when the dragon Vanity had descended on The Peak Underwater to attempt to claim her mother's throne. Not even when Palishtania had plunged the knife into her liver, spilling out her bile for the final time.

She was afraid now.

"Who are you?"

"Where are my manners? Welcome to my Realm."

Palishtania turned. She had seen it before, on countless nights in her dreams. A figure with no centre, no core. An outline, beautiful and monstrous, bending colours away from it. Perhaps it had arms, or legs, tentacles or limbs, within that shimmering surface. Perhaps it was a vapour, no more than that.

It was the Lord and Lady of the Eighth Realm. A being with no name. Death.

"What is happening?" Her mother was begging. Palishtania had never heard her beg before.

"The End."

For the first time emotions entered the sesame coloured, sharp and grainy voice.

Satisfaction. Resolution. Relief.

"Do you see, now?"

Palishtania turned her mother's spirit to face her, cupping the rotting remnants of that familiar face with hands she could only feel in this space between life and after.

"Goodbye."

Her final spell was one of forgiveness. It swirled around what was left of her mother and carried her off into the space beyond all creation.

“See you soon,” the Master of the Realm told her.
For Death, there is no time.
For Palishtania, there was little left.

Home, Sweet, Home

by Dan Hallberg

“It’s about 20 years old, and it’s in great shape!”

The broker’s saccharine demeanor was beginning to wear on me, but finding someone willing to show houses between the hours of 8 pm and 4 am is difficult.

“3 floors fully furnished, a spacious basement, which is rare in this town. 2 baths. The kitchen is updated and very modern, it even has a dishwasher-!”

“Alright, what is the catch?”

This was the eighth place she had shown me and it was the first that wasn’t either too small to fit my somewhat cumbersome bed, or covered in vermin and filth that was more vile than I’d seen in the trenches at Sharpsburg.

After the war I worked several decades as a longshoreman simply because I did not know what to do with myself. However I did not need to buy my food and lodging was supplied by my sister, so my wages just collected. I built up quite a nest egg. That said, I had since changed my career to musician in ‘23. Combine that with a budding interest in fine clothes and suddenly I needed to be economical about my choice in lodging.

The now clearly nervous agent’s eyes shifted back and forth. Clearly she was hoping I’d just be so pleased with the first home she’d shown me that was habitable that I wouldn’t ask.

“Ah, I was worried that you might not have heard what happened since you’re so new to town. I’m sad to say that a woman was killed here about a month ago. The papers said that the husband pushed her down the stairs and ran off. Probably with some woman, it always is. The courts want to settle the estate for the poor woman’s daughter quickly, hence the short sale discount. Poor girl, I can’t imagine having that happening to your own mo-”

“Oh, is that all,” I interrupted, genuinely disinterested in the

details, “well then, if that’s the case, I’ll take it.”

The broker’s eyes widened, “But, don’t you want to hear anything else? There have been rumors about some strange activi-”

“That’s all fine and good. I assure you, I can handle myself. When can I move in?”

Any trepidation previously visible on the broker’s face was wiped away now that her commission was in sight, and her cloying affability from before returned.

“It will take a few days to get all the closing documents together, but since you’re a cash buyer everything should go pretty quick!”

“Splendid. Well then, give me a call in a few days, I’m in room 231 at the hotel at Club Monterray,” I learned prior to my arrival in town of Club Monterray. The hotel ownership is intimately aware of their clientele’s urgent need for daytime arrangements and spares no expense in accommodating them. The Club had the added benefit of their second alto being out on tour, and management was kind enough to let me play the chair until he returned.

Not too long after that I had a rolodex full of gig contacts that I met while sitting in with the Monterray House Big Band. With steady gainful employment secured, it was time for me to find my own place. After seven slums I was worried that there simply wasn’t going to be anything appropriate available, but it seems fortune was in my favor here. I don’t think I’d ever been so happy to hear that a woman had fallen down some stairs.

Within a week I had closed on my new abode and moved in. Given that the house was fully furnished and that I had very few possessions outside of my clothes, my horn and my resting place; setting up my new home was simple. I converted the unfinished basement into something more to my liking. It became my combination bedroom and studio. I installed some sound proofing so as not to bother the neighbors with my practicing. This also had the benefit of muffling any other noises that are occasionally the side effect of eating my meals at home.

Upstairs it was a generally comfortable, if moderately tacky home. The furnishings were to the taste of someone with the eye of Norman Rockwell, but were otherwise not overly offensive. I

had planned to make some changes to that decor, but figured it could wait until after I was more established in town and had gotten some higher paying gigs.

After about a month I had settled into regular lineups at some of the clubs near my home. Where in New York I was a little fish in a big pond, here I was something of a big deal, and work came in pretty steadily. Though the payouts were smaller, the increase in the frequency of gigs put my earnings at about the same amount I was making in New York. Combine that with lower cost of living and lack of New York's quality couturiers to drain me of my income, and I was earning a pretty fine penny.

Not everything was going swimmingly though.

Within a week of my moving in, I brought home a fashionable woman to my dwelling. I had seen her kick a beggar on the street outside of a club I frequent and was eager to make her acquaintance. I had intended to make a meal of her, but before I had my chance she ran screaming out of my house. She insisted she saw a chair moving across the floor on its own and would not stay one more minute.

A couple of weeks after that incident, I returned home and every drawer and cabinet in the kitchen and bedrooms were wide open with their contents strewn across the house. I believed that I had had a break in or something. I started to wonder whether or not I should take more drastic precautions to at least secure my personal chambers, but the idea of tackling that problem at the moment was exhausting. Instead, I went down to my studio to practice.

Overtone series are something that every saxophone player should practice, but doesn't practice enough. Because of how the harmonics of reed instruments work, with enough embouchure and throat control a player is able to produce multiple different notes while holding the same fingering. Practicing these overtones are one of the keys to building control and muscle memory in your throat so as to produce a pleasant tone. That said they are a tedious thing to exercise. When done properly, many of the notes in the overtone series sound like a goose choking on a piece of ham. As such, many players neglect them.

I however, was feeling quite settled and thought that practicing something mundane would make me feel all the more at home. I was struggling to produce a G flat above the staff while fingering a B flat below the staff when she appeared out of thin air in front of my stand.

“GOD, would you stop that?! You sound like a goose choking on a piece of ham!”

Before me stood an aproned housewife in her early thirties. She would’ve seemed quite innocent and pretty even if she weren’t holding a chef’s knife and very clearly dead. I had interacted with her type before. The kind of clubs I played during my time in New York had seen their fair share of transgressions, and as such there was usually a wraith or two around looking for some kind of closure related to their demise whether it be timely or untimely.

“So you’re the one that’s been wreaking havoc upstairs,” I unclipped my horn from my neck strap and placed it carefully on its stand next to me. I leaned back and crossed my leg over my knee to take an unbothered posture, “what brings you to my humble abode?”

“You’re humble abode?! This is my house, mister! What are you even doing here?” The specter, while angry, did her best to try and match my relaxed demeanor by pretending to lean back casually in a non-existent chair as she floated. She tucked the knife into her apron pocket and crossed her arms as she floated down to be level with my eyeline.

“I take it you are the former owner. I’ve heard a bit about you. Nothing but good things I assure you,” I added, with a playful smile, “I’m sorry to say this isn’t your home anymore. The deed’s got my name on it now, so you’re going to have to scurry off and haunt somewhere else. Be careful on the steps on your way out though, I’ve heard they’re quite slippery.”

That line got me a narrow, cold stare, but she was determined, and if the line got under her “skin” she did not show it in her voice.

“This was my house first, and I never sold it. As far as I’m concerned, your deed isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on. I am not leaving.”

I probably would've admired her spirit if it wasn't directed towards me, "well then hag, may I call you hag?"

"It's Patri-"

"Yes then. Hag," I gave her less than a second to respond before interrupting.

It seems we are at an impasse, and I'm afraid the type of people that specialize in removing people in your condition from homes don't take a particular kindness towards people like me," I said, motioning in the direction of my solid mahogany bed. It was lined with goose down and was particularly comfortable when completely shut.

"I'm afraid that for the time being we're stuck with each other."

I picked up my saxophone and started at the beginning of my overtone series once again, ignoring that she was still floating there.

She floated, watching for another minute or two before scoffing, rolling her eyes and conceding defeat.

"It's Patricia," she sternly yelled and disappeared.

Not ten seconds later she reappeared to add, "just stay out of my room!" and then was gone again.

I heard a door slam somewhere upstairs, which put a smile on my face. Until that point I had never frustrated someone who could phase through walls so much so that they took the extra effort to open and then slam a door in frustration. I'm hopeful that if that's all it takes to get her riled up, then maybe I will be living the bachelor lifestyle again soon.

Realistically though I'm not overly optimistic. After all, we're playing a waiting game, and we both have all the time in the world.

Cop Out

by B. Morris Allen

“It’s a what, now?” I swear some of the uniforms aren’t worth the tin in their badges. And the badges aren’t made of tin. Here I’d thought Abedo was a better alloy.

“Angel, Ma’am,” he said again.

“Ghost,” countered Winanga. She’d said that before too.

I stopped on the stairs to the walkup apartment we were headed for. I’d say the stairs weren’t made for little people (they weren’t), but the truth is I was out of shape. Too much desk, not enough field. That’s the chief ‘looking out for me’.

“Well, which is it?” I asked with some exasperation. If the unis are going to take the trouble to wind up a new detective, they should at least do it well. “Ghost or angel?”

“Ghost angel,” said Winanga with conviction.

“Angel ghost?” suggested Abedo. He was more senior, so I gave it to him. Plus, Winanga gets on my nerves with her contrariness. Could be it’s a case of like repelling like.

“Okay,” I said, still buying time to catch my breath. “And this angel ghost,” Abedo smirked, “was ... murdered?”

“Looks that way, Ma’am.” They both seemed to agree.

“And how exactly does that happen? I mean, angel or ghost, is either one ever alive? Or visible?”

They shrugged in unison, the uni’s global shorthand for ‘you’re the detective’, and I cursed the day I’d ever moved to Hyattsville with all its weird crimes. Most of the really odd ones, we never solved. Like this one.

Things weren’t a lot clearer once I’d pushed through the curious neighbours on the landing. I always get weird looks at this point, but I let it go with some sharp jabs to the thigh and a “What, you’ve never seen a dwarf before?” Nobody knows how to answer

that.

The good thing about being a little person cop is that you never have to duck under the crime tape. That and ... no, that's about it. Makes me think about getting out of the cop game entirely sometimes.

I stepped into the apartment before the uni at the door even knew I was there. They're not used to me yet, I guess.

Spread out on the worn beige carpet was what looked like an entire Washington Post Sunday paper. And on the paper ...

It was hard to describe, and I made a note to cut Abedo and Winanga some slack. There was *something* on the paper, that was certain, though from the frustration of the photographer, it wasn't showing up on his viewfinder. It was about human sized, with what definitely looked like big, shiny wings, though whether feathery or leathery was hard to say. It was not exactly transparent — you could definitely see it out of the corner of your eye — but not exactly physical either. When you looked at it straight on, you could read the advice column and a reprint of Sad Sack painting a barracks. But you could *feel* there was something there. Something bad.

“Angel ghost,” said Abedo.

“Or a ghost angel,” said Winanga. They'd followed me in. “We took the call,” she said. “Me and Abedo.” As if I didn't know who her partner was.

“Manager found it,” said Abedo. “Came in to check the cleaning. New occupant tomorrow.”

“He found the ...” Winanga tapered off and just waved at the papers. “And the ...” she waved off in the direction of the little kitchen and its tiny breakfast table.

“Use your words, Winanga.” Norms forget that a little person can't see the top of a table quite as easily. From what I *could* see, it was Chinese take out containers.

“Pupu platter — spring rolls and veggie dim sum, tofu with eggplant,” clarified Abedo, trying to score some points.

“And white rice,” said Winanga.

“Not ghost rice?”

“Just rice.” I wasn't sure she'd realized I was joking.

I shook my head. I'd deal with the fast food later. Did angel ghosts eat?

"So, best guess?" Had McCrae, the medical examiner, determined anything? Where was she, anyway? Probably in the back bedroom considering options for a new career.

"Who is easy: devil," said Abedo. "Who else gonna kill an angel?"

"Is it, though?" asked the contrary Winanga. "*Could* be the ghost of an angel. Could be a ghost who's an angel."

"Could be a devil itself," I said, not to be out-contraried. There was something about the wings that bothered me. Come to think of it, the whole thing bothered me. "What's McCrae say?" If she was still ME when she came out of the bedroom I'd ask her myself.

"Can't touch it," said Winanga.

"No shit, Winanga. I wasn't *going* to touch it." How sloppy *were* the other Hyattsville detectives, anyway?

"*Can't* touch it," Abedo clarified. He edged a foot over until it seemed like it out to be in the middle of the ghost's arm, let it swing back and forth. It didn't hit anything.

I closed my eyes. I should have stayed in Oregon, where all you get are Bigfoot sightings. I thought living close to the nation's capital would be ... sophisticated, I guess. But then, who was to say this wasn't a sophisticated kind of lunacy?

"So, invisible, intangible angel ghost who enjoys Chinese." The unis nodded. We had a little crowd with us now, a forest of dark bodies rising around me as they watched to see just what the little detective would do with it. "And we're saying murder because...?"

The question seemed to confound them, which didn't really surprise me. I mean, *some* sort of body was spread out on those papers, and it wasn't moving. One thing you don't hear much about either ghosts or angels is how much time they spent sleeping. Invisible body aside, it looked like a murder scene. And it felt ... It felt like bad.

"Get McCrae," I said after a moment. "I don't care if she's due for her new shift flipping burgers. Go get her. And get Islaw." I knew Islaw was forensics for this case; I could see him, avoiding my eye and pretending to dust a built-in bookshelf.

McCrae was a troubled, nervous type, prone to questioning her sanity at the best of times. Islaw was a certified ass coverer who'd could never be pinned down to just one possibility. They seemed like bad fits to their jobs. But then, that's a little person detective speaking.

We could argue about whether *The Lord of the Rings* has been good or bad for little people. But in Hyattsville, they already called me Gimli behind (and above) my back, so I figured I didn't have that much to lose. I wasn't going to waste a lot of time on what was and wasn't possible. My eyes and unspecified other senses told me we had an angel ghost case, so that's how we'd treat it, regardless of whether it made the forensic experts nervous.

"McCrae," I said. She'd been staring at the body, first straight on, then turning her head right and left and up and down. "Cause of death? *Is* it dead?"

Nothing. I could see her eyes rolling and the pulse beating in her neck.

"McCrae! Shape up! We got a body here. What's wrong with it?"

"Wings," she mumbled.

"Yeah, wings. Invisible, intangible wings. What else?" She just looked away. "Get your shit together, McCrae. If these were a regular body, behind glass or something, what would you say?" I pinched her in the thigh, and she seemed to snap out of it a bit.

"Dead," she said. Which I figured was a start, but I reached out my pinching fingers to urge her on. "Murdered.

"Why do you say that?" We all *felt* it.

"The paper spread out," she managed. "Why?" I'd been meaning to ask that. "There's a stain."

Now that she mentioned it, I could sense it. It wasn't visible, so it wasn't a dark stain. If anything, it seemed to shimmer faintly against the paper, like gold or silver spray paint. It was focused around the head and shoulders.

I edged over toward the head, poking some thighs to get there. Up close, the stain was even less visible. I could read the headlines clearly — war, polarization, one group pissing off another for no reason — the usual.

“Only visible from a distance, peripheral vision,” McCrae said. So she hadn’t been wasting her time completely. “Looks like ... like blood,” she said miserably. “Sort of.” It occurred to me to wonder whether she was religious. Whether anyone here was, whether they believed in angels.

“I see it,” I said. “How about the rest of you?”

We spent a few minutes comparing comments, having both Abedo and Winanga take careful notes. We were all seeing and sensing the same thing. We all felt ‘angel’, whatever that felt like, except Winanga, who was now saying ‘devil’ just to be contrary. Two atheists, one agnostic, a Quaker, a Protestant, and a Muslim. I guess that’s the national melting pot, but you couldn’t have ordered a better test group from central casting.

Everybody saw the blood too. Or maybe ichor, McCrae said.

“Islaw?” I’d seen him trying to edge away. “Get any samples?”

I could see him trying to weasel out. “Maybe.”

“Yes or no, man. Did you get a sample?” Of anything.

He twisted his mouth for a while, then gave up. “I don’t know. I put a vial down in the ...”

“In the blood,” I encouraged.

“Yeah, there. And a swab, and I cut out a section of paper. I got all that.” *I did a good job*, I heard him desperately trying to convey. “I’m just not sure there’s anything in it.” He held his hand out with a plastic baggie, a tube with a swab in it, and an empty vial. Or was it empty? Was that a hint of glitter? Or was it on his glove? I turned my head, but it didn’t look any more certain in my peripheral vision.

“And?” I demanded.

It seemed to drive him over the edge, made him abandon his usual caution. “How the hell —” His eyes went wide. “How should I know? They don’t teach angel blood in med school, for ... for Pete’s sake. What do you want me to say? It looks like sparkly, gold blood, okay? I don’t know *what* it is. And I probably can’t even test it, so fuck you, alright?”

I let it go. “Okay, everybody. Take a look where Islaw cut that square of paper out. Any blood in there?” I didn’t see any, and it seemed no one else did. “Right, so maybe the blood has dried now.

Islaw, when did you get here? When did you dip that sample vial?"

"Bout an hour, maybe two," he mumbled.

"Two hours," confirmed Winanga, looking at her pad. "8:30."

"Good. So," I forced Islaw to look me in the eye, "the blood was maybe still wet at 8:30. Pretty dry now, at," I checked, "10:45. If this were regular blood, what would that tell us?"

"I don't —"

"Guess."

"If this were regular blood, and if it were from an average sized human, and if the paper absorbed some, and *if*—"

"Just guess, Islaw." I was losing my patience as quickly as he regained his dither.

"Between 4:00 and 5:00," he said. "If."

"Right. So, killing early this morning. Other signs of violence? Abedo?" There'd been none. The apartment was unfurnished, empty. "What's the takeout tell us? Winanga?"

"What Abed said earlier. From ..." she checked her notes, "Curdistan. Asian fusion place down on Oglethorpe. Said they sold it last night to a 'tall, hooded guy in a long coat and gloves, with a high voice'. Didn't really see the face. Could have been male or female. Guy thought maybe a trans woman. Paid cash."

"Good job, Win." She seemed surprised, and I thought maybe I'd been going light on the compliments. You have to keep the unis on your side in this job.

"Food was cold when we got here," Abedo offered. "But there was some condensation on the lid of the rice container. Two sleeves of chopsticks, one opened."

"Interesting. So probably heated up since last night. Killer buys Chinese last night, doesn't eat it, heats it up," I looked around.

"Not here," said Abedo. "No microwave, power's off."

"Good." Maybe these two unis really were a better alloy.

"Heats it up elsewhere, brings it here, eats..." I looked questioningly at the unis.

"About half," they said in unison.

"Of everything," added Winanga. "No drink."

"Eats half, spreads out the papers, kills the ... the angel ghost without any struggle."

“Or maybe we can’t see it,” said Islaw, getting in on the action now that he’d calmed down.

“Good. No physical struggle, maybe some kind of ... intangible fight that didn’t leave evidence.”

“Theomachy,” said McCrae, piping up for once. She seemed to have calmed as well. “Battle amongst gods.”

“That’s ... Well, anyway. Angel ghost gets killed. Maybe angel gets killed, leaves ghost.”

“Or ghost angel gets killed,” said Winanga. “If you can kill a ghost.”

“Let’s not get caught up in terminology.” The important thing was to define the crime, and, paradoxical or not, I wasn’t about to let definitions get in the way.

We all stood in our little circle, looking down at the invisible body. There was no smell. Maybe a hint of frankincense, but no one else mentioned it, and I thought that might be auto-suggestion.

“Okay,” I said at last. “Abedo, Winanga. Round up the usual suspects.” Winanga looked bewildered, and I added, “Joking.”

“Well,” said Abedo tentatively. “If it’s an angel, I mean, then ... like I said, devils.”

I chuckled. “Okay. Round up the usual devils.” But I saw he was serious.

“Pushers, sadists, pedophiles,” he said. “Devils, aren’t they?”

“Maybe so,” I agreed. “Probably. Metaphorically. But,” I gestured to the body, “I don’t think this is a metaphorical angel.”

“Evil,” said McCrae. I looked up, motioned him to go on. “Look,” she said. “The ichor, the blood. It’s up around the ... the neck, right? Neck and chest.” We all nodded. The worst of the stain seemed to be there, now that we knew to look for it. “Look at the paper,” she said.

We all looked. The paper seemed more heavily stained there. We’d already acknowledged that.

“No, the *paper*,” she said again. “The *news*.”

I looked again. Front page, business, international. The usual headlines of doom and gloom.

“The bad news,” McCrae insisted. “It’s all gathered where the ichor is heaviest. Like,” she waved her hands vaguely. “Like *plastic*.”

Impervious.”

Now that she'd mentioned it, it seemed obvious. The funnies and lifestyle section were down toward the legs. All the awful stuff was around the blood.

We all stood and stared and thought about that for a while.

“Angel,” said Abedo definitively. “Devil blood would have soaked right in.”

“Or maybe devil blood made the news bad,” said Winanga the contrarian. “Maybe angel blood would have made it better.”

It seemed to me that when you had angels being killed, things weren't getting better.

We ran through the usual after that, pretending it was an ordinary case. No, the neighbours hadn't see anything. No, the security cameras weren't working for some reason. No, there were no fingerprints. McCrae's crew cleaned up *something*, and stored *something* in a drawer in the morgue for two months, until it suddenly vanished one night.

We argued about what that meant. Whether the angel had revived, transmuted, transubstantiated, sublimated, or some other kind of -ated. Whether the ghost had become more ghostly and was still around, just (even more) insubstantial. Whether it had gone back to the place it was killed or whether it was hanging around the station, waiting for us to solve the crime.

We never did. Or maybe haven't yet. They've gotten to know me, down at the local mosque, the church, the assembly, the temple. I've been down to the National Cathedral, the Basilica, the Mormons. Nothing that looks like an angel there, frankly. Or rather, nothing that *feels* like an angel. And nobody's missing one. There haven't been more UFO sightings than usual.

I filled out my report. We all did, and submitted them, and all got called in and chewed out for playing an April Fool's joke in August. Islaw's tests didn't come to anything, but he's still got his little square of newspaper with the headline *Middle East War Escalates* and the faintest tinge of gold to it. We don't talk about it much.

So, I don't know. It's not a closed case; as far as my boss is

concerned, it was never a case at all, just an elaborate hoax. But I still think about it. Probably we'll never know what it was all about. But I'm not getting out of the game yet. I keep my eyes open, both to the front and to the side. And I guess I'd just say this: if you ever see a tall, hooded, gloved person of indeterminate gender ordering Chinese take out in a high voice, give me a call. And maybe try to see what's under their coat. 'Cause I'm still an atheist, but it wouldn't surprise me if you found a pair of dark, leathery bat wings, and maybe a barbed tail.

Thing is, you're probably safe. 'Cause for those of us who live in this world, with all its flaws and crimes and catastrophes, one thing's pretty sure: we're no angels.

With The ‘Pals’ At Suvla

by Lucille Redmond

An Antrim man rose up from the deck and leaned on the rail beside Jack Simpkin, a man who had played on the XI opposite Jack’s in last month’s cricket friendly. He took out a cigarette case and offered one, lit his own, raised it to his mouth and took a deep drag, and let the smoke trail between his lips. “What a mess!” he said, laughing, leaning to light Jack’s cigarette – and a bullet hit him in the mouth. His head jerked back, blood spouting.

Jack felt his bowels roil. He ran for the head, fell in and a spurt of liquid blew from his rectum. His hands shook too hard to hold his trousers off the filthy deck. He gasped, tried to pull the blood-drenched cigarette from his mouth but it dropped on his thigh, burning.

“Into the boats!” roared a sergeant. The men ran for it. Jack sat.

Captain Saul ran and dragged him up by the scruff of his collar. Jack screamed, holding his stained trousers in one hand.

“Rifle! Pack!” Saul thrust them at him.

“He’s in a funk,” said one of the Wanderers men contemptuously, “He’ll draw Turk fire on the lot of us,” and two of them picked him up and threw him into the water by the boat.

The barbed wire dragged him down immediately, and he choked on water full of blood. He came up screaming again, and got the butt of a rifle in the face.

He came up again as with a smash, the boat full of men disappeared – so huge a noise – so crimson, so vast a spray – what did the boat—?

Someone grasped his hair and he gasped and opened his eyes. A soft Ulster voice. “Take a wee dram of this, me caddy.” Jack locked his teeth against the spirituous liquor, but hands grabbed him and forced his screaming head back and the Bushmills gushed down his throat. He choked as the heat filled his throat and belly.

“Coward!” said a man jumping from the ship. A volley shredded his throat.

Jack grasped the flask and drank again. He was pulled forward through the waves.

O’Flaherty of the Bank of Ireland came down now, gripping the ladder with hands and feet and sliding straight to the sea. Captain Saul led the troop in a slower scramble, O’Flaherty behind Jack singing through his teeth, “Twenty, eighteen, sixteen, fourteen, twelve, ten, eight, six, four, two, none”. O’Flaherty’s rifle sling caught on the wire and he let it go. They ducked as the shells flew over. “Get your range,” Saul muttered back over his shoulder at the English gunboats. A boat passed them. A shell hit it and men screamed. A severed hand hit Jack in the face in a rain of blood. He drank again. A wonderful glow of courage came to him, and he roared, “FAWMBALLA!” and rushed for the shore, with O’Flaherty and the others hard on his heels.

All the men from the boats, in a dense batch, pushed for a trench at the foot of the hill, falling to the rifle bullets and shrapnel as they ran. Jack tumbled in, kissed the earth and wept.

The Ulster man ran along the strand parallel with the cliff, bullets swarming around him, as he stared at the hillside.

“That’s The O’Neill of the Glens,” cried O’Flaherty, watching with a look of reverence.

“What, one of those Gaelic types?”

“*Keep your head down!*” O’Flaherty pushed him under the edge of the trench.

O’Neill ran back again, and he threw himself in. “There’s a long narrow defile. Look! Diagonal up the hillside, overhung with scrub, so they would not see a rush. With luck!” He took the flask back from Jack and threw back a gulp, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Are you right now, my little wee caddie?”

Dazed, Jack looked at his watch to set the time of battle.

At home, Isabel heard Rathmines Town Hall clock tower chiming five o’clock.

She rolled the newspaper page around the apple peelings. The headline said “Our Heroes” over a list of the dead at the Front. She flinched.

Carson the collie lay half in and half out of the door, tail waving, eyes fixed on Isabel, waiting for his walk.

She went to the front door to hear the cricket match – the Leinsters were playing Phoenix. The statuette of William of Orange on his white horse tipped towards her in the fanlight and her hand went up to steady it.

She propped the door open, admitting the sunshine and the shouts of the players. It was a pet day; that September weather that's just like August.

Jack's photograph in its frame by the door, that grey face, the pompous, doubtful image of Jack in uniform, the day they'd joined up. Their English lodger, Saul of the Botanic Gardens, a young man who had been taking (as he said) Gaelic lessons, had been appointed captain straightaway; but Jack, manager of the little shoe shop, was a private. The picture was nothing like Jack; she closed her eyes and saw him running up to bowl, a grin of pure joy as he belted the ball down the cricket pitch with a vicious spin on it, bowling yet another man out.

The other day, as she ran alongside the marching, laughing 'Pals' – the stars of rugby and cricket all volunteering together – and at the quays she ran in, with the mothers and sweethearts and sisters, to march beside their boys as they went away to war.

She shivered and walked back to the kitchen. The chopped apples and berries were cooking in the range in their dish; she stood and creamed the butter and sugar and then beat in the egg and sifted the flour and folded it in...

When he was a little lad he would run up here to his cousins' from cricket practice in the Rathmines pitch, and gollish down Eve's Pudding with thick cream. Carson was a puppy then, soft ears, soft muzzle stroked by Jack as they rolled together on the floor.

"Lord, ere I join in deadly strife, and battle's terrors dare..."

Where are you now, Jack?

A line of bullets laced their way along the strand, felling a swathe of men like corn in a field. An explosion covered the victims with sand and blew more men to bits.

"Here's a how-do-ye-do, our own artillery is exploding on the

fucking beach!” cried O’Flaherty.

“Let us hope they fix their range more accurately”: Captain Saul. “*A thiarcais!*” he added, speaking the Irish words in a grating English voice.

“Here we are all ghosts,” shouted O’Flaherty into the sand of the trench, “I’ll be walking in to my wife’s sitting room and saying hello before tomorrow.”

“You think she’ll see a fetch?” a man called, laughing.

“A fetch?” said the English captain.

Jack snapped, “It’s an Irish superstition. The idea that if two people are... connected, one appears to the other at the moment of death.”

“They say Speranza came into Oscar Wilde’s prison cell,” said a pale youth who was lacing up his boots. “When they told him next day that his mother was dead, he said, ‘She told me herself, I saw her last night.’”

“Codswallop!”

“Aren’t we all awful chatty? Are we going up or are we not?” said The O’Neill. As he spoke, a small, innocent-looking ball came sailing from the cliff and landed behind them where another boatload of men rushed forward.

They watched – as if at the opera, as the men threw their arms up and were reduced to a single mass of bloodied meat. “O, Christ! They’re throwing bombs!”

And the artillery found its range at last. Shells landed on the hill. A red fez came floating down, and the Irish lads cheered wildly, their voices answered by Aussie cheers from farther up where the Anzacs were pinned down.

The beach was covered with men frantic for shelter, or huddled in trenches, dead men still twitching with their intestines rolling out of their bellies, men grey and staring, dead for days.

“Whose brilliant idea was this mess, any road?” asked a voice beside him, and Captain Saul answered, shortly, “Churchill’s.” A shaky laugh came from all around.

The dusk was coming in, but a bright moon shone metallic on the sea where the bodies washed to and fro, and on the sand where they writhed and cried for their Mummy. A medical officer crawled

part way to a wounded man. A shot sounded from above and he jerked once and stopped.

Jack closed his eyes and thought of home. Not the home of his parents, dead a decade from phthisis, but his uncle's place in Rathmines, with Isabel taking an Eve's Pudding out of the oven.

Isabel slid the baking dish out of the oven and spread the batter on top, spooning honey on it and a handful of flaked almonds. It was the first of the season. "Keep safe, my pet," she whispered, and put it back in the range; another half an hour to go.

In Suvla, the moon disappeared behind a cloud, and the officers shouted, "Now!" and blew their whistles, and a crowd of men rose and surged forward and up the defile, in silence but for their grunting breath. The artillery had stopped, but the Turks above were scrambling around, and gunfire started. Jack gripped on to O'Flaherty's arm and kept his eyes shut, stumbling into bushes and holes in the ground and once putting his boot through something horrible, until he was dragged into a trench above the first crest.

O'Neill, low, said, "There's a well just at the end."

"The wells are poisoned!" As Captain Saul spoke a man ran to the well and was leaning, filling his flask, when a volley of shots shredded his shoulder, and he lay crying until a lucky shot shut him up.

Into the silence came an Aussie voice. "One of the despatch riders was sent to find Maxwell – said he was hiding, in a devil of a funk."

"General Maxwell? But he's commander of the 11th Division!"

Just then a shower of stones came down from the Turks farther up. Jack grabbed one and half-stood to fire it back up, and O'Flaherty kicked the legs from under him. "What kind of a gom are you at all? They want to see where there's men!"

Jack couldn't stand it any more. He unlaced his boots and wrenched them off and peeled the sodden socks off his feet. "Oh, goodness, that's better!" he said quietly, and there was a ripple of laughter at his ladylike language, but the other men started taking off their own boots. Those who had packs opened them and got out the spare socks wrapped in oilskin, and used them to dry off their feet. Jack had not thought of such a stratagem, so he stuck his

feet back in the wet boots and laced up.

A new draft was coming in from another boat and the Turks put their heads up to fire. Someone shot upwards. Another fez came down. What fools they were to wear red hats!

“Simpkin, as I live!” One of the new men dropped in beside him, another falling back as a bullet creased his cheek. “How’s Carson? And your sister?”

“St Leger!” Jack said – pronouncing it Salinger in the Cork manner. “I read about you! ‘Owing to hostile bombing, some of our troops had retired from a sap, Sergeant St Leger remained alone on the spot...’ Are you still playing for Wanderers?”

“Well... not *here*, after all! Are you still the best bowler in Ireland? *I* read about *you!*” He seemed to be casting his mind around. “Seventh Dublins, eh? All cricketers and rugger lads! All chums!”

“Not all, by Jaysus,” said O’Flaherty from behind. “I play hurling with the GAA and if I so much as look at a game of cricket my breath turns to brimstone! *Look out!*” – and he hurled himself at St Leger and seized the round bomb that had just sailed into the trench. It slipped from his hand and they all froze.

Jack dived forward and snatched it up, and bowled it overhand back into the Turkish trench above. Immediately it exploded, and screams...

“I say,” breathed St Leger, “what a shot!”

Just then the order came: forward. “Leave your packs, take 200 rounds of ammunition, your water bottle, your rifle, two days’ rations; we are about to advance.”

“Crikey!” said O’Neill. “They think we have ammunition!”

They crouched and put together the rations, hands shaking. Jack snaked out an arm and withdrew a rifle from a fallen man, dragging him a little towards the trench by its sling, which caught on the man’s neck before his head flopped forward and released it. He handed the rifle to O’Flaherty and leaned out again, and tried to get the dead man’s bandolier – but with a bounce and a shriek from above, another bomb came sailing down.

This time he jumped up and picked it out of the air and running through the trench he bowled it up and over and it exploded just as

it was over the Turkish trenches. More satisfying howls. “O, well done!” murmured Captain Saul, “You got the pests! O, you should get a medal for that!”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” said The O’Neill. “You’ll get the medal, sir, as officer. For your fine directing of the battle. Sir!”

Saul cast a cold look at him. Jack shouted, “Look out! Another one!” and as it came down he bowled it back again. Saul stood, and a bullet ripped straight through him. He sat down flat, a stupid look on his face and blood running out of his mouth.

The O’Neill threw his rifle away and pulled out his revolver. He propped Saul up and wrapped the captain’s rifle sling around Saul’s chest and himself, and ran, dragging him all the way down the defile and across the beach with bullets buzzing by like bees to where a medical orderly’s red cross was showing, and hurled the two of them down behind the berm. Then he wriggled out of the sling and ran back towards them. He was felled halfway and lay still.

As they stood to advance they heard the men in the gunboat out to sea cheering and cheering.

Jack felt wet on his face and did not know if it was blood or tears – he wiped it away, his hands wet. But they were advancing! Like one man, all crammed together, they charged up the hill with the bullets screaming over them. Into the Turk trench, and then they could see – as they fought with bayonet and knife and shovel – that there were rows more trenches beyond this one. And this was carpeted with the bombs that the men in fezzes had been throwing down.

All over the beach the 7th Dublins roared with cheers and laughing as Jack Simpkin gave the cricketer’s salute.

And another bomb came flying over, and he caught it, but it slipped out of his hand, slipped down to the ground and as he crouched to seize it up his feet slipped on the bombs below and he fell and—

He never saw – they never felt – the explosion that ran from bomb to bomb all along the trench, blowing them to a microscopic mist.

In Rathmines, the sun was setting and a pale moon was rising. The white figures of the cricket team went past the front gate, one

by one; Isabel glanced at them along the hall through the open door. She turned away to take the Eve's Pudding out of the oven, hot and fragrant, golden on the top and the red juice bubbling out, and she said softly, "This is for you, Jack—"

Carson was suddenly snarling and backing away from the door, the fur risen all along his neck and back, and his tail curled under his legs.

"What's wrong, Carsy?"

And through the door, she saw one of the team turn towards her, and she recognised Jack and rushed forwards, still holding the hot cake, and he put his hand on the gate...

"It's all right, Carsy, it's only Jack!"

...and as her hands began to burn she looked down, and up again, and he was gone. She dropped the Eve's Pudding and the dish smashed on the ground, the crimson juice splashing her white apron to the thigh, and she lifted up her skirts and ran, and looked up and down the road, calling. Nothing. But when she touched the gate where he had been, the metal was as if warmed just now by a loving hand.

Dunmail Raise

by Marc Cooper

It was a dark and sultry night, and the church bell struck fifteen: a peal of harsh, dissonant thumps on cracked metal, with each one resonating to a higher and higher pitch, in a series of small steps, until the clapper struck again. Boing-ng-ng-ng-ng-ng... The final note held its pitch and slowly quietened like a blood-gorged mosquito flitting away.

In the field beside the boneyard the army of Dunmail was returning to their graves, carrying their severed heads and lopped off limbs, still angry at the world after centuries in the ground, and confused by the changes they saw: one day Dunmail will rise and order restored. They already had his crown, kept safe in Grisdale Tarn.

Hermione sat in the lychgate, sobering slowly and questioning an earlier choice. She'd missed the last bus home, and before she could send for a taxi, Damon had appeared and offered her a bed for the night. It was no trouble, he'd said, he'd sleep on the couch. He passed her a spliff, and she drew in its sweet, heady mix.

High in the belfry an owl clattered onto its perch, a mouse in its talons, squeaking and squealing, its eyes pierced and bleeding. The owl snipped off the mouse's tail and swallowed the body whole: to be liquified and crushed and the remains spat out, nourishment extracted.

The tail, still twitching, dropped to the flagstones of the ringing chamber, and was quickly gathered up by the rat who lived down there, all alone in the gloom, his once glossy black fur, grey in patches and dull, and his stub front leg putrid and stinking. The vicar called him Rattle.

The officer of the watch leant on the cattle gate and gazed at the young woman, uninterested in the young man whose intentions were clear to him. Her wanton undress outside a temple of God reminded him of his wife, who believed in nothing but pleasure, and whose soft, warm flesh he adored before a swinging sword had sliced through his skull. He sniffed the air hungrily, imagining her scent.

Damon pulled Hermione close and kissed her on the neck.

The men of the watch gathered round: six of them: nine arms, twelve legs, four and a half heads, and the officer with his skull lopped off like a soft-boiled egg. (And yes, they called him Eggheid, where on earth did you think the word came from?)

Damon tugged Hermione gently by the hand, playfully. But halfway to the door she stopped. Undecided? Teasing? Damon walked off. There was a vast, aged yew to one side of the path onto which he pissed, and then he turned around quickly, exposing himself as he tucked himself away. Neither was abashed.

The men of the watch strode through the cattle gate in formation and followed the couple into the church.

Damon washed his hands in the font and dried them on a mediaeval tapestry hanging from the wall. Then he took Hermione by the hand and the young couple walked up the aisle, through the nave and up to the altar, where two enormous lighted candles stood, held upright by heavy brass stands, their flickering light dancing over the vast gold-leafed reredos beyond.

The men of the watch knelt beside a stone sarcophagus, their lips moving in prayer.

Damon unlocked the door to the crypt and pushed it open. A chilled breeze rushed through it, then slowed and warmed. The

smell of autumn leaves, wild garlic, and rose oil. Rattle scurried past, but neither of them saw him.

Hermione lit two votive candles, one white, one yellow, and gave the yellow one to Damon. They descended into the crypt in silence, their footsteps echoing down the staircase, their shadows stretching up behind.

The seven shadowless men followed them.

Beneath the vaulted ceiling, there were tombs on either side, as well as two tiny chapels, and at the far end a stone altar, and before it a grave topped with a pure white marble ledger stone inscribed with runes. They went to the altar and put down the candles, one at either end, and then turned around.

The men of the watch met their eyes for the first time, and Hermione smiled. The living could not see them, of course, but the living were not always living.

Damon took off his clothes and lay down on the ledger stone. There were four small posts protruding from its surface, one near each corner, and he lay back, spread-eagled, gripping two of them, and hooking his feet around the others.

The men of the watch moved into position, holding his wrists and ankles. Then all seven men bowed their heads and closed their eyes in prayer.

Damon howled as Hermione straddled him.

From behind his head, a figure rose up slowly from the grave. A queen, crowned with gold, and diamonds, rubies and pearls, and resplendent in red silk and bobbin lace. She placed her foot on Damon's head and waited, looking down, with an expression of a mother offering encouragement to her child.

Hermione gripped Damon's throat and squeezed.

Damon sighed, and at length his ghost rose above his corpse and tried to stand. But the Queen pushed him down, down into her grave. He would be added to her amusement until Dunmail rose again.

The church bell rang. Boing-ng-ng-ng-ng-ng...

Hermione slept in the lychgate. Six bells would wake her later.

Rattle would have feasted, but his domain was overrun. A hundred rats, wise to the night, gorged on the fresh meat, tearing up the cloth for nesting. Rattle scuttled off to his sarcophagus with the remains of Damon's stash, and later drowned in the sewer, stoned but painless.

In the field beside the boneyard they gathered and blew the horns: a fanfare of celebration. A horse was brought forward, decked in coloured silks and other finery, and the Queen mounted it astride.

The officer of the watch approached, looked up at his Queen, and then looked down.

"My Queen," he said, "will Dunmail raise?"

"Not yet, my warriors," she said. "Not yet awhile. So let's return next year."

The Ghostie Girl In College

by Cassandra Lee Yieng

A YouTube livestream.

Two ethnic Chinese students in their twenties, about 5'7" tall. Jenny has brown hair with golden highlights tied into a bun. Dylan's hair is naturally black.

JENNY

Welcome to Paranormal Stories in the Orient. We're standing right here at the University Mall at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, famous for its ghost stories among local students. Today we have a chemistry sophomore joining us.

DYLAN

Call me Dylan.

JENNY

Sure, Dylan, tell us what happened in your freshman year, exactly one year ago in 2023.

DYLAN

Jenny, it was the most ominous day of the year, Friday the 13th of October, and I'd been staying up late at the University Library because of a most absurd midterm exam the next day. It was two a.m. when I decided to return to Wen Lan Tang, the boys' hostel where I lived.

There's a winding and treacherous foot path downhill in the forest connecting the main campus, where the Library was, and Chung Chi College, to which my hostel belonged. It's such a steep walkway that if you're not careful,

you might not finish the journey.
I trudged in the dark with only the flashlight on my Android phone, making every step with bated breath. Upon arriving at the landing in the middle, where the Chinese herb garden was, a young lady approached me. Her face was pallid.

(freezes)

JENNY

Are you okay, Dylan? It looks like you've gone pale. Team, we've got a technical glitch-

DYLAN

If I told you what she looked like, it might shock you.

JENNY

I'm always in for a good shocker.

DYLAN

The ghostie girl resembles you to an uncanny extent.

JENNY

What?!

(freezes)

DYLAN

(grabs microphone)

Jenny has an overreaction, guys.

Jenny relaxes.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

That ghostie girl had black hair like a medusa. She said,

(in a high-pitched voice)

"I'm a ghost. Are you?"

Guess what I replied.

JENNY

You're such an honest guy, of course you said no.

DYLAN

I shouted, "Yes!" Absolutely, ever-lovingly, unequivocally, "Yes, I am a ghost." Because I was told if I'd said no, I'd open myself to demonic possession, and I wouldn't be alive to pass my exams, let alone graduate. I had a midterm on Saturday. Ridiculous. She asked me, "Where are you going?" "Chung Chi College," I said hesitantly.

"I'm going to Chung Chi College, too," she said, and she accompanied me to the other end of the Chinese herb garden path. Just before she descended the next flight of stairs, she turned to me and said something interesting...

JENNY

Was it, "Dang, you're too slow. Let me carry you"?

DYLAN

You spoiled it, dear Jenny. Come to think of it, that was an unusual request. But given that I've grown up around strong women, I let myself relax for once, and she heaved me onto her back. Mind you, she could float. Like a freaking diva.

Halfway down the stairs, she said, "Ooh la la, you're so heavy. Are you actually a ghost?"

"Of course I'm a ghost, young lady," I replied. "A fresh corpse. Just accidentally ended my earthly existence with what I thought was a painkiller because I had headaches studying for my exams."

"That's so sad, man," she said. "I drowned myself in the fast-flowing creek down there because my boyfriend dumped me."

"Awww. Shall I carry you this time?" I asked.

"Of course. Be my hero."

JENNY

That sounds so much unlike me. She sounds like someone from forty, fifty years ago, when damsels in distress were a thing. But you know I'm not a ghost.

DYLAN

Jenny, stop interrupting me, will you? I got off her back. Her cold ethereal arms embraced my neck. She was weightless. Lighter than a piece of tissue paper. Whenever we reached a landing, we swapped places carrying each other. Three times. Jenny, would you get on my back just for a second so that the audience knows what it's like carrying a ghostie girl?

JENNY

I don't really want to...

DYLAN

Be a good sport. A picture is worth a thousand words. A movie is worth a thousand pictures. Just once. I won't touch you. I'm ethical.

Jenny gets on Dylan's back, encircling his neck with her arms.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Okay, this feels funny. Get off now. You're free.

Jenny snores. Her eyes are closed.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Fine. The camera's rolling, anyway. Harrumph.

Puts on a poker face. Dylan points at her while speaking.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

Let me shake myself up like a flamenco dancer (shakes body) and you can

totally see that she's nothing but tissue paper. She's my tissue paper scarf. Achoo. (Wipes his nose with her left hand) Someday we should do an episode named "Jenny Exposed." Too bad she couldn't hear me.

Throughout our downward trip, I kept asking the ghostie girl, "Since I just died, I don't know anything about the netherworld. Can you tell me what I should be afraid of?"

Jenny is still snoring.

DYLAN (CONT'D)

The ghostie girl said, "Just don't spit on me."

I asked, "Why would I spit on you?"

"That was what my boyfriend did before I jumped into the creek."

I told her, "He's such a jerk. You're such a nice girl, and strong too. You could have me as your boyfriend in this afterlife."

She replied coquettishly, "I wish I could die for you but I can't. I spent my only chance." I was a bit flabbergasted that she could still flirt despite being dead.

(glances at Jenny)

Is Jenny blushing?—No, she's still fast asleep.

By now, we had reached the bottom of the hill, where the fast-flowing creek she mentioned was situated. There was a red bridge, which I remembered was intact the day before, but that night all that's left was smithereens, as if an explosion had just taken place. I had to stomp my way across the creek. I began, "Would you cross first? Ladies first—"

The ghostie girl floated across to the other side of the creek before I could finish speaking. I cautiously stepped onto a mossy rock in the water, and the rushing current soaked my sneakers through and through, but I held my

breath and stepped onto the next rock, splash! And the next rock, splash! And the next...

JENNY

(Wakes up)

Why were you so noisy splashing the water everywhere?

DYLAN

I can't help it, I just died. I'm not used to crossing water bodies. Seriously, Jenny, I'm horrified at the way you fill in the gaps of my story. Are you actually a ghost?

JENNY

I never really slept on your back, Dylan. I was just doing that for comic relief. Ghosts don't joke around.

DYLAN

You missed the best part of my story. She teased me.

JENNY

How?

DYLAN

Catch the replay. Let me round up. The ghostie girl turned into a goat, and a janitor at Wen Lan Tang bought it from me after my dreaded Saturday midterm for fifteen hundred Hong Kong Dollars. That's about two Benjamin Franklins.

JENNY

That's it?

DYLAN

The even weirder thing is, I deliberately retraced my steps along the footpath every day after the exam, and the red bridge was never broken at all. But I saw it with my very own eyes that it was completely destroyed that night. That's the whole story.

Before we move on to the next section, Jenny, I can't help noticing your pretty nails. Nice silver sequins and purple dust. The matte finish is..

JENNY

Thank you. I love you, Dylan.
(Squeezes Dylan's neck more tightly)

DYLAN

But I don't like the pearl jutting out of your pinky nail. It's so awful I think I should stop this recording now.

JENNY

Why?

Dylan spits on the back of Jenny's right hand. Jenny turns into a goat at once. Her golden bunwig falls to the ground.

DYLAN

Team, team, team, no, no, no, don't go away... you can have my fifteen hundred dollars...

The camera falls to the ground. The livestream ends abruptly. A deluge of a mixed bag of emojis, tearful, angry, and hilarious, flood the comments.

Oh My Past Days

by Greg Ray

“Oh, my past days — they used to walk in their sleep and I used to lean on them.” — Adunis

I call them my past days, these earlier selves who walk with me — the ones who check the mail with me each morning, the one who slips on the icy driveway, the one who sang karaoke one night — my past days because they were all once me but are now forever locked in their circumstance — checking the mail, singing karaoke, taking that hard fall on the driveway — forever past. You can see your past days everywhere if you look. Oh, how they walk in their sleep and how I used to lean on them!

It all began in jest really. What a laugh — to take a selfie or two of me shoulder to shoulder with my yesteryears. But as time wore on, my past days were more and more always hanging around, dopey in their somnambulance: doing all the things I used to do. Oh but not racing around as I did back then. Why should they? They have already had their day. I see them there, in all my usual haunts, doing all my usual things, but different. They can now just go about the business of life taking one past day at a time. I even came to envy them.

As I say, it all began very casually — noticing my past days going along here and about, making familiar all my usual ways. Good for a selfie or two, an occasional high-five, quiet company at my favorite café table.

But after awhile a new sort of thought began to take hold in me.

You see, I discovered I had only to remember a thing, like when I made those perfect pancakes one time, and, by the time I would come downstairs next morning, that one past day of mine — that I had just been thinking about — would be right there in the kitchen — already flipping those hotcakes on the griddle.

Just what I was hungering for! And how foolish it would be to make my own pancakes now, when there was this. I doubt I could ever make them so good as I did then — which was why I had been thinking about it in the first place! So I could do no better than to eat those perfect pancakes that this one past day brought over to the breakfast table. And I could do no better than to cover those cakes generously with that terrific syrup that you can't get anymore.

And did I really eat them, you ask? Certainly my younger self was not going to miss them. Past days don't. For the past is the past, my friend, and the past is always asleep in the present. And this, my one past morning, is forever making those oh-so-memorable pancakes. And anyway it was a double-batch. Why should I not eat them then?

Of course, that was only the least beginning of the conveniences I discovered. I completely stopped driving, for instance. Why should I drive *myself* to work each day when my self will drive for me? My past days had driven there so often to work, to my favorite watering hole, I could just catch a ride with one of them. You would be amazed at how much time for rumination you can recoup, when you let someone else take the wheel.

Suddenly there was so much less for me to fret about! My past would always serve when all was said and done. My past days knew my habits, shared my likes. I could trust in them like nobody else. Their good companionship was such comfort — we shared so much in taste and interests!

As you can imagine, it was only with the very best of my friends that I shared the news of my good fortune. What to my surprise though? Why, they all assailed me immediately with every sort of doubt about my amazing technique and raised the most ridiculous sorts of objections. And most foolishly they continued to insist on doing things from scratch! Oh, I would tell them week in and week out how to improve, but they'd not try even once to do as I did. "Don't live in the past," they would say, "You gotta stay sharp, you need to do something yourself."

Well, good riddance to them! — was what I said when they all

started going to the new pub down the street. Yes, one day I'm going to drop in there; they'll see they were wrong! But my past days and I aren't usually going down that way. I'm not really in any hurry to show those fools anyway.

Speaking of which, I ran into one of my old buddies just the other day. Get this. I offered to stand him for a beer. "That place?" he says, "Don't you know they closed last year?"

"Well," says I, "if you heard it that way, you heard wrong. You'll find me there three nights a week and more, and in good company! Join us. My past days can really put it away and we don't spare the tap. Just last night we were thirty head strong!"

Now, I am a reasonable man and I will be the first to admit I sometimes tire of doing all the things that my past days are eager to do. But that just doesn't hold a candle to the convenience of sticking to tried ways and true.

Why rock the boat? I don't need to change one iota anymore — not since the divorce. Not after the accident. A brush with death can really straighten your priorities. One slip! Yes, change is overrated, my friend. If you don't believe me, just ask my past days.

Don't Forget *by Mara Dumitrache*

As long as you remember her name, everything will be fine. Or so they say.

As far as urban legends go, this one can't be easily avoided. You can't avoid it by not visiting certain places, or by not opening cursed images, or by not searching up deadly poems. Her name can appear anywhere, in your favourite quote in your comfort book, in that high note in that song you listen to on repeat. And if her name is there, your eyes will see it, your ears will pick it up, your fingers will graze it. It will latch onto you, a small dark parasite ready to be overlooked.

But how will you know it's her name you've seen, heard, touched? Your head might feel like it's splitting open, and you'll pass it off as a bad migraine, you've been so stressed lately. You might feel incredibly nauseous, as if your vital organs want to crawl out and escape, and you'll think back to what you ate that was so wrong. You'll feel cold, and your eyes will tear up, and you'll choke on your breath...and then you'll be fine, and you'll brush it all off as an intense bout of exhaustion. But did you notice? You're not alone anymore.

Your relief will only last a day. Because the next morning, you'll wake up with a whisper of her name on your lips, with a scream of her name in your mind, and you'll realize with dread you have picked up the parasite. You'll panic. Of course, you'll want to get rid of the parasite, you'll want to forget you've ever seen, heard, spoken her name, you'll want to block it out as you would a terrible nightmare. That's what she expects. That's what she wants. Her name will not make itself known in your mind, on your tongue again. She'll grow silent, because it works best when your attention is not on her. That first morning was just common courtesy, a benevolent notice that you have a guest. Except, guests leave.

You NEED to remember her name. You need to hold onto it, recite it devoutly every day, have it become your mantra, so that it doesn't slip away in the recess of your mind. You need to let her name plague your waking thoughts and your dreams, you need to ground yourself in the nausea and the headache and the pain and the coldness her name evokes, because the alternative is much worse. Because you see, once her name escapes from your grasp, she can quietly feed on your memories.

It will start small. As you forget to repeat her name for two days, so will you forget the name of the author of your favourite book, and which part you liked the most. And then a week will pass, and while making your favourite meal that you've prepared a thousand times before, you'll miss a key step in the recipe. It will nag at you at first, you'll know something is not quite right. You might even remember you had to retain a certain name and hope this breakthrough will fill back the gaps in your memory. It will not. Those memories will not be there anymore. Those memories will not be yours anymore.

Six months in and your favourite summer playlist, your favourite vacation spot, your favourite restaurant will all be erased. Did you even enjoy a vacation enough to call it your favourite? Did you even visit that place before? You won't remember.

One year in and your friends will look like strangers. I'll tell you, your most treasured memory with them is the day after you all finished your exams, and after a long last-minute train journey you finally reached the seaside. And you had a drink in your hand, watching the sea for the first time that year, breathing in the salty air, dipping your feet in the lukewarm water, and you were laughing. And you stayed up and talked with your friends all night long by that sea. And you were happy, and nervous, and hopeful, and bittersweet about this chapter of your life closing. Most importantly, you swore this was one memory you would cherish forever. But now it will be gone, as if it were never there. Now, you will look at these strangers that regard you with concerned eyes and friendly smiles. These strangers that look at you and that still hear the waves crashing into the shore. These strangers that will talk to you, and that will try to hug you, comfort you, and you will shrink

away from them, because you will not remember them.

She will move fast. She always does. Her name will have slipped away from you more and more, returning to you less and less, until nothing could make it resurface from its comfortable hiding place anymore. In a few years, you will become a shell. Empty, empty. There will be nothing left. No more memories. No one to know, nowhere to go, nothing to do. No one to be. She will take your past, present and future. And all because you couldn't remember her name.

So please, don't forget it again.

Ghost Rider In The Cab

by J.W. Guthridge

“It was a dark and stormy nig...”

A heckler interjected with, “Pull the other one, that's a cliché!”

The old truck driver sitting to one side of the horseshoe shaped bar was amused at the interruption before he really got started. Waiting for calm to return for him he tried again, “you wanted Halloween stories didn't you? Who's telling this story?”

When no more objections came, the old driver continued. “It was a... Aw meadow-muffins... No excrement, there I was! Under a moonless sky black as any DOT Inspector's heart...” This amused the other drivers around the horseshoe counter, especially the cattle-hauler next to the heckler. “...hauling a load of lunch meat bound for Spokane. I was in Montana, heading West on US-212, and coming up on Lame Deer in the dead of night. Stark country that way... Perfect place to run into a ghost or six. All those lost souls from the Battle of Greasy Grass.”

The drivers around the horseshoe bar had been drawn in, listening intently. The truck stop restaurant was popular with drivers but wasn't all that busy, for all that it was lunchtime on Halloween. Even the heckler hadn't spoken up again to criticize the name of the battle he didn't recognize.

“That's what the Crow call it. Us whites call it the Battle of the Little Bighorn, or even Custer's Last Stand. I took the tour there years back and the tour guide said that almost 500 people lost their lives all told.”

The waitress appeared then and carefully and professionally swooped through the diners sitting around the horseshoe counter, refilling coffee cups and collecting the plates of those finished eating. She was listening and interested too.

“The deer were up and about. I'd seen several already and that was making me nervous with as dark as it was. Doesn't help that

the old Pete I drive never did have great headlights. I slowed down just before town like I always do, because that roundabout they put in near the casino that doesn't like trucker money can sneak up on you. Lane Deer was quiet and not anyone was about, though I felt a breeze buffet my cab from a storm brewing off to the North. When I started the climb up and out of town I saw them. There were four white blurs crossing through the glow of my headlights. Then I hit something, something solid. I was certain I had just creamed a big deer or a small elk. Seeing a chain-up shoulder I pulled over to check the damages.”

In the pause between breaths the heckler pipped up again, quoting a line from an old Bill Engval comedy routine. “Did you hit a deer?” while pantomiming holding up a pair of phantom boxers. No one was amused.

The old driver waited for the jeers to fade off, “I was shocked! No damage at all. No blood. No fur. Nothing but a sound tire and intact bumper where I was convinced I had turned something into sausage. It was spooky because I felt the steering wheel jolt, heard the impact...”

One of the other drivers jumped in then, “Deer out that way are pretty bad. Buddy of mine hit one last year broke an engine mount, busted the radiator...” The helpful driver trailed off when he realized he was holding up the story.

“Then you know exactly why I was worried. That lonely stretch would be a horrible place to break down, might be morning before I'd be found, and cell phones don't always work through there either.” The old driver had a crinkle in his eye now. “So, I looked and looked and found nothing wrong at all nor any trace or track of the deer I had seen. Since I was stopped I decided to water my brakes before climbing back into the cab. A cold gust of wind blew up out of nowhere. I had a shiver run up my spine like some apex predator just out of sight was watching and stalking me. In a fit of peak I said pithily, ‘well since you flagged me down so politely come along...’ Feeling foolish I jumped back into my truck when another strong gust of cold air brought hints of the hard rain that I would end up driving through later.”

As if on cue, the young heckler jumped into the pause with

another attempt to derail the story. "Please don't tell me this is when the guy with the ax..." and the young driver leapt to his feet and mimicked throwing a pantomime ax at the others in an intentionally-poor jump-scare, "...was in your truck waiting."

The storyteller was amused at the others reactions. Most of them were dismissive of the young heckler who still hadn't gotten the hint. "Nothing like that, and no reason to think otherwise. The chill air had me adjusting the heater though. Soon enough I got going again and it wasn't long before I got a good view of the sky to the North. Lightening decorated some impressive cloud fronts off in the distance. The winds were blowing the storm South."

The PA inside the restaurant crackled to life, though the announcement itself was lost to static. When the PA circuit clicked off, the ambient music resumed playing. In an eire coincidence, the Jonny Cash number, "Ghost Riders in the Sky," started playing. The listeners fell silent as they recognized the song from its vibrant opening, even the heckler held his tongue.

"I must admit the storm that night had me thinking of that song. Glad I was inside and under cover. I released my brakes and started up again. I needed something to break the silence and I turned to the radio. I couldn't find a FM station so I went to the AM bands and found a community station out of Garryowen. It took me a little while to realize that it was not an English language program. In my younger days I dated a slim little Crow gal for a couple of years before life got in the way. I could pick out the odd word or two. It kinda surprised me that I still had the ability after thirty years. It also provided just enough mental stimulation to keep me from succumbing to highway-hypnosis. The program ended before I sorted out what it was about and the bottom-of-the-hour break had news from a Network feed. None of the local news or advertising made the slightest impression. A different local Aspáalooke program began after the break. 'Sho'daache Kahee,' said a voice rich and deep, sounding full of wit and wisdom. Had me thinking of an Elder making a friendly invitation to listen and learn. I replied to the radio with a simple, 'Hello Grandfather.'"

The heckler looked to be about ready to say something when the big beefy cattle-truck driver sitting next to him stepped on his

foot.

“While I focused on the road ahead, trying to pick out what I could of the radio program, I heard rapid fire Crow, slung way too fast for me to catch. When it quickly became clear it wasn't on the radio it took everything in me not to hammer the brakes in panic!”

The waitress having foreseen more trouble dropped off the heckler's dinner tab, hoping he would take the hint and leave. Sadly, the heckler had other ideas and was about to inject his ignorance again when the flat-bed driver on the other side of him picked up his dinner bill and gave him a death stare, followed by a softly uttered, ‘vamoose kid.’ Seeing no support the heckler left, happy that he didn't have to pay.

The old driver waited for a beat longer before picking up the interesting part of the story. “That voice next to me seemed to waver a bit but then shifted to broken English, ‘You respect?’”

The listeners started to react, but the storyteller didn't give them the time. “How would you react to such a question? It's a wonder I didn't crap my pants scream like a little girl.” The crowd giggled and guffawed. “No, somewhere deep in my mind, I found the small supply of Crow words I knew and spoke, ‘Yes. My Crow is very small.’ I followed up in English, ‘but share my lodge such as it is. You will find bottled water at your feet and jerky up here.’ For some reason it felt important to share shelter and sustenance.” The storyteller paused here to take a drink of coffee and motioned to the waitress, who brought the pot over. This gave an opening for the audience to jump in.

One of other drivers spoke up, “You trying to tell me you had a ghost riding with you?” For all the incredulity in the question, there was no mockery in the questioner's tone.

The old driver took a sip of the fresh coffee and then set his cup down before answering, “Yes. That's exactly what I was trying to tell you. Some lost spirit latched onto me in that dark and lonely place and I offered respect in the manner I knew to. Anyway, after my little speech the mood in the cab brightened a little and my visitor spoke, ‘Thank. Is it far to ... will your wagon take us there?’ I didn't catch the place he named. But I tried to answer as best I could. ‘Just before I get to the Little Bighorn Creek I'll turn

Northward, and pass through Crow Agency.”

“Isn't the battlefield up there just off the highway?” The question came from one of the booths to the side of the large bar where the drivers had gathered.

The old driver nodded, “You can see much of where the battle was fought. It wasn't just one spot either, there were skirmishes all up and down the area. The only battle fought there now is for what little tourist money comes through, so many shuttered businesses and buildings... I have to remind myself that the Crow survived. Just because there are bones of the past, they survived. They might not have if they had not received help from the Federals. The Great Sioux War could have ended the Crow. This was what went through my mind even while I was hoping my visitor was one of the Crow scouts and not a member of Sword-Bearer's band some few years later.”

The mood around the restaurant grew even more interested in the story, sensing the next shoe was about to drop. The storyteller plowed on, “My guest wasn't talkative. Soon enough I came to where US-212 passes the Battlefield Park just South of the highway, and was turning through the entrance to the onramp of I-90 North when I saw another group of deer. The visitor shouted a warning in Crow. The temperature dropped 20 degrees in an instant. For the second time that night it felt like I hit one. I managed to stop on the side of the onramp. It was only then I noticed what was wrong about this herd of deer, they had saddles and ‘US’ branded into their flanks. Not deer at all. Lightening lanced down from the sky to hit the earth unreasonably close and the radio became full of static.”

In another case of curious timing a memorable Doors tune, ‘Riders on the Storm,’ began playing on the restaurant's music system.

“I got out of my cab just in time to feel the first few drops of rain. Again, there was no damage to my truck, only this time an ice cold gust of wind was keeping me out of my truck. The horses were just milling around on the roadway. No riders, no one on foot tending to them, almost looked as if they had been abandoned by a Sioux raiding party that took more than they could manage. I didn't

have long to ponder, because I heard my visitor utter a Crow wacry and a moment later the horses started to cluster up and then they started to gallop away, ignoring the barrier fence as they ran off out of my sight. The wind died down and I returned to my cab and was glad to get out of the rain and wind. I started up again and made it as far as Billings before I called it a night after finding a place to park.”

The bull hauler looked surprised, “What happened to the ghost?”

“I was just getting to that, seems he gathered up the horses and took off with them, leaving me there where the highway meets the interstate. Anyway, I was glad to find a place to park in Billings. The winds had been making driving a struggle and it was clear that the storm was still freshening. I don't think I slept more soundly on the road than I did that night. Only thing is, the next morning as I was getting ready to start my day, I found three really odd things. First, my bag of beef jerky was empty, it had been almost full before I passed through Lame Deer. Second, of the four one gallon water jugs I store in my passenger seat foot well, two were empty but their sealed caps were intact. Lastly, a silver trinket was shining in the sunlight, lying on the passenger seat, this very concho in fact.” The old driver displayed the tarnished silver decoration on the brim of his hat.

“You are too much,” the cattle-hauler said in camaraderie.

This seemed to break the spell over the others. Smiling, the old driver let the others start talking among themselves. He knew no one would believe that he recognized the silver concho as the missing match of one his old Crow girlfriend had on a belt, let alone the family story she told of her ancestor trading the missing concho for jerky and water to a kind trader who was passing through the day after Custer fell. He lived it and had trouble believing it.

Red Lake Day At Tattybogle House

by Brian Farley

The Picnic

Mum was excited, “It’s Red Lake Day today, and the gardens at Tattybogle House are expecting lots of people. Don’t forget to keep humming or singing to yourself, that keeps the evil spirits away!” I don’t know where mum gets these silly ideas. I go because the gardens look so beautiful, especially after all the summer visitors. And we’re taking my new friend with us.

I cringed as we got in our car. It was Jessica’s first introduction to mother, and my mother’s singing was going to be a pain. Even Jessica’s dog howled in sympathy. Still, I was looking forward to picnicking on the generous picnic rug we brought with us. There were rumours that it was dangerous to relax directly on the grass. Ha, ha! And no walking in bare feet - that gave a funny tingling sensation. So why were we bringing the dog? We unpacked the car and carried everything to our favourite spot by the lake. We even carried the dog as it refused to walk on the grass. This was going to be a problem!

“Good afternoon, everyone.” The gardener strolled by, and sat down to talk. “I see you have a large rug which I can fit on, if that’s OK with you.”

It was, and we shared our food with her. “If you have any leftover food, you don’t have to take it home. Just leave it on the grass, it will completely disappear by morning.” In fact, visitors were encouraged to feed the garden. Even horticulturists were intrigued, and soil samples were once taken back to their laboratories. They never came back.

The History

“Tattybogle house has a violent history,” she said. “It was the site of a bloody battle between the peasants and the Lord of the

Manor, and much blood was shed. This was all because the peasants were refused access to the potato fields during a famine. It was a terrible time. In no time at all, all that was left of the bodies were the bones. These just disintegrated where they fell, and the land was sad for the rest of the year. But over time, the grounds magically blossomed and became the beautiful gardens we know today.”

“And as you know, we don’t have a gamekeeper, as animals are not a problem. The garden always keeps the numbers under control. But there is always a need for a gardener.” She smiled, her eyes glinting red in the evening sunset. “And I like to keep the garden well fed. Today is Red Lake Day, and the garden is looking forward to it.”

The Lake

Meal over, dad collected a large rowing boat and brought it over to us, to enjoy rowing around the lake. Mum kept singing to herself and told us to keep our hands out the water. Oh well, songs added to the atmosphere and we joined in, if we liked the song of course. And it helped drown out mother’s singing.

Pity there was no fishing. Every time the lake was stocked with fish, they were gone by the next day. Camera traps were set up, but no birds were ever seen. Jessica’s dog definitely didn’t go for a swim. Then there was the mystery about the lake’s colour. Why do people say it turns red once a year? Photographs were published showing the reflection of a red moon in it, but red moons are not that rare, so that was easily explained - or was it? Skinny dipping by locals didn’t last long, and the numbers doing it quickly dwindled.

I hoped Jessica was not bothered by this, she just kept cuddling her dog. She called her dog “Doug” - it was Scottish.

The Lord of the Manor

“Oh, the lake,” he said. “Yes, it turns red very year on the anniversary of the potato battle. And there is always a red sunset. Today is the day, and all the visitors hope to see ghosts battling on the water this evening.”

“But what about the tingly grass and the fast disappearing of

food on the grass? That puzzles me,” I said.

“Ah yes, I have a very hungry garden and it thrives on such attention. That’s why I have a gardener who understands such things. Birds don’t stay on the grass for long, and spend all their time in the trees, except for the tingly tree. Yes, we really have a tingly tree, and no nests have ever been seen on it. If a bird lands on it, they have been seen to just fall off it onto the grass. They die and we leave them there to be covered by their grassy grave. Our gardener calls it her bird catcher tree.”

I didn’t like the sound of this. I remember the gardener once calling this day feeding time for the garden. Were the visitors the food?

The Battle

Over a thousand people were now gathered around the lake, and the atmosphere was electric. Even the air was tingly, and Doug was cringing in terror after taking a step on the grass. In fear, I imagined the grass was going to feed on us.

“Just keep humming,” said mum.

“NO,” I said, “Let’s go - NOW!” And I fled, taking Jessica with Doug in her arms. Mum and Dad reluctantly followed.

The local paper covered the event. It was very successful, over 1000 people entered the grounds, and less than 500 left. In the morning, all was clear, and the garden was looking more beautiful than ever. Even the compostable picnic rugs sold by the house had disappeared. The gardens were very well fed, and we were still alive.

Strands

by Judy Ward

The tent straps were whipping about in the brisk wind, their tops bulging with each gust. There were dogs and kids all over the place outnumbered only by plums, and apricots, strawberries, cherries and what-not. You could find anything — well, everything your little heart desired at the Mendocino Main Street Farmer’s Market.

I was mesmerized. I weaved in and out among the little huddles of the locals, friends and families indulging in free samples. I was scanning the multitude of homemade delicacies, when a young teenage girl in overalls, a farmer’s daughter, looking right at me, held up a mini-mason jar at the *Lover’s Lane* honey table. Just the right thing, a temptation, succulent enough to get my attention.

I stopped and *time slowed down*. I imagined a host of bees buzzing about those wildflowers in the hills and valleys of Northern California. I imagined pouring that pure honey over a warm buttered English muffin—

I looked up at the girl. “Very tempting,” I said. And in the next moment found myself happy to pay such a pretty price for a jar of aromatic honey from the flowers of my favorite, dreamy landscape.

Pleased with my small purchase, I strolled on down the hill away from the crowd. Beyond the last tent, I paused *and time slowed down*. The breeze blowing off the ocean whipped the strands of my hair across my face. Turning my head aside, letting the breeze blow them back in slow-motion, I blinked and noticed an old two-story house with a small sign swinging slowly, creaking a little, in the breeze... “Moore’s Used Books” it said.

Still rescuing the wild strands behind my ear, more slowly now, I was distracted further. Momentarily, tilting my head to listen to what I thought was a whisper — *yes* — urging me on. Slowing down at such moments of late these *second thoughts* had become more frequent.

Yes, I decided, a quaint little book shop. Just the perfect place, out of the wind, one might step into for an interlude.

Once inside, shielded from the chilly breeze now and glancing around, I felt a wet nudge against my hand. I looked down to see an old blonde Labrador, with serious, sad eyes looking up at me. “Oh, hello,” I said and patted his head. Having done his job greeting me, he turned and walked back to his pad — stitched neatly with ‘Buddy’. Buddy, quietly laid back down, though his eyes continued to follow me.

I sighed. I was a bit warmer now. Taking an easy breath though, *time slowed once more* — I eased along the shelving, lightly touching the spines of book after book, old and not so old, cast aside by former owners, and now here, resting, retired, waiting for some *like-minded soul* to come along. All of them waiting — waiting to be chosen once again, to have life brought back to their bindings. Waiting to feel the eyes of *a kindred spirit* perusing their aging pages once more. I sympathized. I felt a sort of wistful melancholy.

“Do you have *Two Cups of Tea?*” someone spoke up, reviving me from my reverie. “Let me see,” the old gentleman behind the counter said thoughtfully, “I may still have a copy of that.”

Tea, I thought, how nice a cup of tea would be about now.

Just then the door blew open and the brisk breeze wound its way into the little shop. Turning my back to the door, I tucked the troubled strands of hair behind my ear once more. My eyes fell on an old leather bound book, just there, in front of me.

“*The Ghost*” its binding said.

It was quite old, well-used obviously, but retaining the integrity of an expensive binding. The spine was strong, yet it laid open easily, resting in my hands like a familiar. Handling it carefully, I turned to the first page and began to read.

*“You might have missed me had you not come when you did.
I’ve waited here for you, for so long ...”*

Ruby Tuesday

by Susan Cowling

Intro

I am Ruby, my identical twin sister is Tuesday. We have always been two sides of the same coin, much as our parents, mum impulsive and wild, Dad calm and steady. Mums' obsession with the Rolling Stones ended up with Ruby and Tuesday. Perfectly connected for twins. Thing was, everyone called us "Ruby Tuesday," like we were one person. Mum said it was karma. I would soon realise how deep the connection was.

Chapter 1

I pour myself a black coffee and head to the pool, promising myself a quick swim before business. The sun's already heating up, Naples looks perfect. I started to pull my tee off to jump in the pool when I glance up, a guy was looking at me through binoculars. "Bloody pervert" I shout loudly, retreating inside to dress. Glancing out of the window I see he is gone.

Cat rubs against my ankles. He's not even my cat—he's Tuesday's. Dumped on me before her last adventure. Classic Tuesday—calling things as she saw them. Cat and I had stared at each other, realising in that moment that we were stuck with each other. Our plan as twins was meant to be simple: share a home, start a business, get rich quick, and make time for fun. I had just needed Tuesday to finally grow up, realise where she belonged.

The phone rings, snapping me out of my thoughts. Instead of a client, it's a voice I never thought I'd hear again—Tuesday's.

"Hello, me!" she shouts, using our childhood joke. I freeze. My legs wobble, and I grab the kitchen barstool for support. It's her voice. No doubt about it. But Tuesday is dead. She's been dead for two weeks.

I stare at the phone in disbelief, my heart racing, my palms

sweaty. Is this a sick joke? Or has someone installed a direct line from the afterlife?

I croak out a response. “Hi, me. You’re dead.” Disbelief thick in my voice. There is a long silence before she speaks again. “I may be dead Ruby, but I am still here and are your guardian angel.

My heart pounds like a runaway train. My mouth is dry, like all the moisture has been sucked out. Taking a deep breath, I try to speak. “You’re dead, Tuesday. Maybe you can explain how that works? How can you be dead and still here?”

Her voice is calm. “Because Ruby, you need me.”

There’s a moment where I realise the absurdity of this conversation. I’m talking to my dead twin sister, and somehow, this feels normal enough to question. I rub my forehead, try to ground myself, but everything about this is wrong.

Tuesday speaks again, her tone almost soothing. “Are you home alone right now?”

I frown. “Yes. Well, apart from Cat. Why?”

“Because, Ruby, I’m on my way over.”

The line goes dead. No tone, no sound. Just silence. I stare at the phone, still reeling, when Cat yowls leaping into the air. I turn, and there she is—Tuesday, standing in front of me, looking exactly the same as last time I saw her alive, and in true Tuesday fashion, she makes a dramatic entrance. Her face twists in disgust as she glances down at her right foot, firmly planted in the remains of Cat’s breakfast. Beside her, a massive grey wolfhound materialises, eyeing Cat’s tail as it disappears under the sofa.

“Ugh,” Tuesday mutters, shaking her foot. “That’s disgusting.” She whistles sharply, as the wolfhound turns, ready to chase Cat. “Dog, get back here! Or I’ll send you straight back to the kennel in the sky.” Dog slinks back, sitting obediently at her side and starts licking the cat food off her shoe.

My heart hammers in my chest, threatening to leap out of my body. At this rate, I’ll be joining Tuesday in the afterlife. I finally find my voice. “So, you’re still terrible at naming pets. I take it that giant grey rug is yours?”

Tuesday grins, patting the wolfhound’s head. “Yeah. I picked him up along the way. I’m stuck with him for eternity now.”

I find it difficult to believe my dead sister and her dead furry sidekick are standing in front of me. Throwing all my ideas of life and death straight out the window.

Tuesday, looks and acts just like Tuesday, though noticeably cleaner and tidier. I study her, there is an aura about her, something ethereal. What had she said on the phone? “Guardian angel”—yeah, that was it. Immediately I began to hyperventilate. Why exactly did I need a guardian angel?

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity (no pun intended). I am struggling to get my breathing under control, and she—well, she was just calm. I walk over to her in a daze, reach out, and touched her. To my surprise, she feels solid—cooler than a regular person, but solid. Hard to believe she isn’t alive.

I hug her, and a big lump forms in my throat. I have missed her so much, more than I could admit. Tuesday has always been the other half of me. Mum was right about that.

“Are you sure you’re dead? You feel alive to me,” my voice tinged with a ridiculous amount of hope.

Tuesday squeezes me tighter. “I look and feel like myself because that’s what you’d be comfortable with. I could change how I appear, but I figure you’d prefer this.” She smiled warmly. “Ruby, sit down. We need to talk. There’s not much time.”

Chapter 2

Not much time? My breathing starts getting ragged again. What the hell could be so urgent that it brought her back from the grave?

I need a drink. I let go of Tuesday and grab the nearest bottle from bar, whiskey. Honestly, after the morning I was having, I needed it *bad*. I poured myself a hefty glass, the fumes alone doing wonders to calm my nerves.

“Want one?” I asked her, half-joking. “I mean, do you still drink?”

Tuesday shook her head, amused. “I can eat and drink, but I don’t need to.”

Too much information. I knock back my drink, feeling the warmth travel down my throat and stomach. Slightly saner, I pour myself another and collapse onto the sofa. Cat, who had been

watching all this unfold from under a chair, crawled onto my lap. Smart cat, always assessing the danger level to his nine lives.

Tuesday casually pointed at my giant pink and sparkly floor cushion, and it slid across the floor to her. I almost choke on my whiskey. Settling herself down, Tuesday looks as nonchalant as ever, while Dog flops next to her, still chewing on her trainer like it was gourmet.

Cat, eyeing Dog warily from the safety of my lap, flicked his tail. Dog, giving Cat an occasional glance, licking his lips. I assume he does not need food, but as they say, old dogs, new tricks.

Shocked over the magical cushion stunt, I open the conversation. “Spill.”

Tuesday sighs. “After I left Cat with you, I spent time in Mexico. The whole backpacking thing. Ending up in South America with a group, beaches by day, bars and clubs by night. Great fun.”

Fun. Right. Her idea of “fun” always different to mine. Sleeping off hangovers on dirty beaches? No washing facilities, or lippy. That was where we differed. Tuesday jeans-and-sneakers tomboy, my jeans were bright pink and skin-tight, six-inch heels, flawless makeup.

Tuesday continued, oblivious to my thoughts. “In Colombia, I met Chris, he seemed perfect. We hit it off. I stayed behind when the group moved on, convinced he was my forever guy.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“For a while, it was perfect. We visited his ranch, flew in his private plane, I lived like a queen. Then I found out where his money came from.”

I sighed. “Let me guess—drugs?”

“Yep. Running a cartel.”

Classic Tuesday. Diving into the deep end no checking for sharks.

“Anyway, I knew I had to get out fast. I told him I was leaving, in front of his friends.” She gave me a wry grin. “Big mistake. He did not take it well.”

My anger started to rise. “What did he do?”

“He hit me, tried to lock me in our room.” She shrugged. “Just

to make a point.”

I gritted my teeth. No one messed with Tuesday. Not even a drug lord. “So, what did you do?”

“I played nice, pretended to be sorry. But I was terrified, Ruby. I’d seen what he was capable of. I knew I needed a plan.”

“I decided that Dog and I was going to escape, I could not bear the way they treated him, kicking the shit out of him, every time someone lost their temper. They only fed him when they remembered, poor Dog.”

Dog looked up at her and gave a big slobbery lick to her hand.

Yuk, looking at Dog, he did not look half-starved to me, but then I knew my sister of old, she had always been a soft touch for strays. One look from those big grey soulful eyes was enough to persuade her that he needed rescuing.

I watch as Tuesday wipes her slobbery hands down the side of my pink, sparkling cushion. Gross, I mentally made a note to wipe it down with a wipe. Brand new, now it was covered in dead dog drool and hairs. Great!

Not even noticing the slobber she had just wiped across the cushion, Tuesday started talking again.

Shooting me a grin. “You don’t know the half of it. I stole his truck, grabbed Dog, and headed to the airport. I flew back to Miami; I needed to sort stuff. But importantly: Chris and his goons are still looking for his black book, it’s their bible of contacts, and because of that, well they are looking for you.”

“Wait, why would they be looking for me?”

“I took their black book, and they have my diary which has your address in it.

Tuesday stood, pacing and agitated. “We holed up at small motel, I was sure I was careful. I took Dog for his night walk. Never saw them until too late. They put bullet through Dogs head. Chris knew that would hurt me; he thought I would talk. I just saw red attacked him. His side kick shot me, then they run off.

I stood holding back the grief rising in me, and walked towards the pool, turning, I asked “did it hurt?” Then realised how stupid that sounded.

“Fuck Ruby, what do you think, of course it fucking hurt. What

hurt the most Dog was dead, I was dead, and I would never see family or friends again. My life was over.”

“We floated around for a while, ended up in halfway place, they were busy, we got pushed to the new trials dept. My affinity to you and the danger you are in made it a good option.

Tuesday was looking past me out to the pool. “Shit we have a serious problem”.

Chapter 3

I turned expecting pervert man, but it was a large hairy guy, walking towards me with a gun pointed directly at me.

Tuesday stood between us, the guy couldn't see her, he walked right through her, sending a shiver down his spine, but otherwise oblivious. “Hello, Tuesday,” he growled, pointing the gun at my ribs. “Whose been a naughty girl?”

Tuesday leaned in, her voice a whisper only I could hear. “That's one of Chris's guys. He shot Dog.” Dog growled in agreement.

Fantastic. Just fantastic.

This day can't possibly get any worse. “What the hell are you doing in my home and put that gun down.” I could hear my voice shaking.

He laughed sticking the gun against my ribs pushing me back against the bar. “Okay Tuesday tell me where the diamonds and the is book, you have really pissed the boss off.”

I could feel the sweat running down my back and Dog growling deeply beside me. I could cheerfully kill my sister if she was not already dead.

“What diamonds? I hissed” mainly for Tuesdays benefit.

Tuesday actually sounded nervous. “I had not got round to the part about the diamonds, they are safe.”

“Tuesday and her dog are dead, killed by you I am guessing.” I could not keep the anger out of my voice.

“That explains things, however, twins share so I guess you know enough to help me, if you don't want to end up joining your sister.”

I could see Tuesday now floating above the guy, encouraging Dog towards her, Cat freaked out and took refuge up the guys

back, claws digging in deep, he screamed and dropped the gun. I grabbed it moving away from him, hands shaking. Cat was in frenzy and her claws were leaving long bloody gauges in the guy's neck. He leaped off just as a large heavy based pan stopped floating and dropped on the guy's head, leaving him unconscious on the floor with his tongue hanging out.

"Tie him up or shoot him before he comes round" Tuesday screamed.

My sister was in so much trouble, but I agreed with her, I grabbed duct tape and ties from the kitchen and dropped the gun in the bin. Cat fastidiously cleaned himself and Dog sat watch snarling at the guy while I did my best to secure him. Where the pan had hit him, a huge lump was forming, and blood was running from the scratches on his neck. Tuesday looked on with a satisfied smirk.

"Right. Explain the diamonds."

Tuesday had the decency to look embarrassed. "I was about to tell you, the package I sent for our birthday tomorrow, it's got the key to the deposit box."

I had forgotten about the parcel that had arrived with Tuesdays handwriting the same day she was murdered. It was still sitting in my desk draw.

"I am sorry sis, I had no one else I trusted, and at that point never expected to be murdered."

At that point the doorbell rang. We both jumped nervously, and the guy begun to struggle. Grabbing the saucepan, I hit him over the head again, grabbed a throw to cover his body, and pulled him further out of sight.

Tuesday peeked out of the window. "That is one drop dead gorgeous guy out there, not one of Chris goons."

I still held the pan as I opened the door, and with shock dropped it on my pervert's foot.

"Oh, great just what I need, I thought you had gone to perv somewhere else."

"Bloody hell" he shouted, hopping on one foot and going slightly green. "You might have a great figure but your dangerous." He looked past me, can I come in and sit down please."

I felt guilty, Tuesday was right he was drop dead gorgeous and his foot was swelling up. Opening the door wide I guided him into the office away from the guy on my kitchen floor. Helping him onto the sofa, where he removed his shoe. Tuesday floated over and sat close to him, really close and he started shivering.

“It feels like someone just walked over my grave.” He shivered again. He eyed me nervously and I realised I still had the pan in my hand. I was feeling like a demented woman.

“What do you want, one perv show not enough?”

He grinned and totally threw me. I could get used to this guy. Tuesday moved her hand along his leg towards his crotch and his expression changed to shock.

“Ruby just hit him over the head, he is a great distraction, but we have to go before any more thugs turn up. The perv was now looking nervously behind me. I turned and saw Dog pawing the throw away from the guy. All he could see was a moving throw.

“Christ, Tuesday control that mutt.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I realised my mistake.

“Your sisters dead and the dog too. Who are you speaking to?”

Shocked I could only stare at him and raise the pan above my head. “Who are you, and how do you know that?” Tuesday was right just thump him and get going.

He looked at the pan in horror and as he sidled to the other end of the sofa and went straight through Tuesday, shivering again.

He spoke quickly, keeping an eye on the pan. “Names Eric, not a pervert, although have to say I enjoyed this morning.” He grinned again and my pulse quickened. “I am undercover watching you for your own safety. We know there is more to your sister’s murder, she was mixed up with some undesirables.

Tuesday slipped off the sofa, giving Eric’s balls a little squeeze. I felt jealous, she was touching my perv, which was somewhat stupid as she was dead.

Eric gasped and looked down and straight at me. “I just got the strangest feeling.” He covered his balls with his hands.

Tuesday stood by the door with Dog, and Cat now in a basket. I knew I had run out of time, and I could have wept at what I was about to do to a potential project. I defiantly planned on meeting

Eric again. While his hands were occupied, I brought the pan down on his head, wincing, as he slumped sideways on the sofa. I covered him with a throw grabbing the package out of the desk draw. Tuesday, much to my disgust walked over and dropped a kiss on his lips, turning them blue.

I would really have to have a long talk to Tuesday and soon, lay out ground rules, if this was long term, but not now. For now, we needed to go rescue the diamonds and hand them over to the authorities.

Ruby Tuesday had a future.

The Peanut Butter Ghost

by Conrad Gempf

It was a Thursday in October, two days before The Disappearance.

Donald's left fist tightened on the bunched up cloth of Jay's button-down shirt. "Stand still, brat!" he said.

He couldn't actually pick the smaller boy up with one hand, but did pull the front of Jay's shirt so that it was untucked, up so that Jay could feel the cloth on his chin. He was already breathing oddly, having taken one blow to his stomach. Behind Donald, Ferd and the other boys grinned, while Donald's sister, Denise, looked on, horrified yet fascinated.

Donald drew back his right fist, clenched so firmly it quivered with his anger. "Give me one reason I shouldn't knock you cold, brat!" he spat.

"I ... I could tell you the secret," said Jay, head turned, squinting, expecting the punch to the face any second.

Donald's punching arm relaxed at the elbow, just slightly. "What secret?"

"The ghost," Jay sputtered, "How I survived."

Denise tilted her head, she hadn't been in on that adventure. But Ferd smiled in recognition, "You pissed yourself that afternoon, brat! We saw you run!"

"But I survived! I got out! Frank wasn't going to let me!"

"Frank?" asked Denise, trying to think who in their school had such a name. But the others knew; the whole neighbourhood had heard of Frank the ghost; and they remembered that afternoon in June well, especially Ferd.

Back in June, Donald had been fully occupied holding on to the squirming Jay, so it was *Ferd* who had to open the door. If he hadn't, it would have been *Ferd's* shirt Donald would grabbed next, *Ferd's* face that Donald would have punched. So Ferd had

summoned up his courage, and gone up the path ahead of Donald, went up to the porch and opened the creaking door to the old abandoned and haunted Zimmermann place.

The Zimmermanns moved away about 12 years ago, after their young boy Frank died. Frank was about Donald's age, and was, by all accounts, a terror in his own right. He'd been a disagreeable boy, rarely satisfied with anything his parents or friends or teachers said or did. Things had to be just the way he liked them, or there'd be trouble. A bully like Donald, it was said he'd enjoyed torturing animals, even his own pets.

The parents moved far away, but the boy haunted that house, howling taunts and complaints.

And so it was that on an overcast day in June, in order to punish him for some imagined offence, Donald had thrown Jay into the haunted house, hands and feet bound with rubber bands. Ferd slammed the door shut and they ran down the path to the sidewalk and waited across the road. For a time Donald called out noises, "Woooooo!" trying to encourage the ghost into action, or at least to scare Jay. Ferd thought he actually heard the ghost, though, first ranting then laughing. He'd tried to convince himself it was just Donald or one of the other guys.

They knew it wouldn't take Jay long to free himself of such flimsy bonds, but they expected him to have the fright of his life while inside whether he actually met Frank or not.

Back in the present, Donald chuckled at his prey, "Your trouser legs were soaking wet that day..."

"Ewww," said Denise.

"...so is that your secret? Like 'diapers' or something?" said Donald.

Jay said, "No. I never told you. I met the ghost. I met Frank. He was going to kill me."

"What?!" Donald's arms relaxed more. He kept his eyes on Jay's face, while turning his head, "You met the ghost?"

Jay licked his lips and nodded. Clearly the memory was not a pleasant one.

"Well?? What happened?"

“He... he was furious with me for being there. He was going to kill me—turn my body inside out, he said. But then...”

Everyone’s eyes widened in silent question.

“But then I offered him my lunch, my sandwich.”

Donald’s grip tightened again and the cocked fist was ready to go, “C’mon. Don’t give me that.”

“No,” protested Jay, “Really. He was interested. I’d broken the rubber bands, my hands were free, so I took out my sandwich. And Frank ... he looked at it ... and then he laughed.”

Behind Donald, Ferd swallowed hard ... remembering the sound of laughter that day. No one else had seemed to hear it. It sounded... well... it wasn’t normal.

“What? Why’d he laugh?” said Donald, wanting to stay angry but genuinely curious.

“He laughed and grabbed the sandwich and said to me ‘You’re a very lucky boy. I despise most sandwiches. Any other sandwich than this and I’d have turned your body inside out and no mortal would ever see you again.’”

Ferd, confused, mouthed the words “inside out?” but Donald asked, “And he left you alone?”

“Yes. That was when I wet myself, but he just disappeared, as did my sandwich, and I ran out, like you saw me.”

Ferd recovered, “You say the ghost said ‘Any other sandwich than this’? What kind was it?”

Jay said, “Peanut butter. My mom had made me a peanut butter sandwich that day.”

With that, Donald let go of Jay’s shirt so suddenly that the younger boy, off balance, fell awkwardly to the ground. But Donald barely noticed.

“Well, well, well. I’m going to be famous,” he said, “Anyone brave enough to join me? I’m going to spend Friday night in a haunted house with a ghost! A peanut butter ghost!”

Not surprisingly, no one wanted to join him, and truth be told, Donald didn’t want anyone to be with him. In Donald’s head, this was going to be some kind of glorious personal achievement of courage. Perhaps he’d seen a TV show or read a story about someone brave enough to spend a whole night in a haunted house.

Just himself, a flashlight, maybe a few comic books, and three peanut butter sandwiches. Donald pictured himself safe from the ghost, emerging triumphant from the haunted house Saturday morning.. He grinned happily. This was going to be great.

On Saturday morning, a small group arrived in front of the Zimmermann place to welcome and congratulate Donald on his accomplishment. They, of course, expected him to be watching for them and throw open the front door either to boast or to scare them with a loud “Boo!”

He did neither.

They waited a while. Nothing.

“Has he been home already?” Ferd asked.

“Nope,” sister Denise confirmed, “Not at breakfast ’n his bed was empty.”

It was Ferd who cautiously approached the porch, calling out in what he meant as a shout, “Hey, Donald? Donald? It’s morning! You’re ok, right?”

By the time Ferd got to the front door, Denise and one of the other boys had joined him on the porch. She went through the door Ferd opened. She shouted inside “Donald? Are you there?”

It took a further half hour for the police and Donald’s parents to arrive. Sometime around then, Jay wandered by.

“He’s not there! He’s not anywhere!” the other children frantically told him.

Jay did not reply.

As more people arrived and car doors slammed and grown-ups rushed around the house and yard, Jay slowly walked up the creaky porch stairs and slipped through the front door.

In the corner of the sitting room off the main hallway he sat down on the floor, near where he’d lain in June and met Frank. But this time he wasn’t crying or afraid.

He reached into his bag and brought out a small packet which he set out gently, neatly, in front of him on the floor. It was an offering, a token of gratitude. A sandwich. The only kind that didn’t make Frank angry: tuna fish, like his mom had made for him that day in June. “Any other sandwich than tuna fish and I’d have

turned your body inside out and no mortal would ever see you again.”

Jay smiled, stood up, silently mouthed the words “thanks, Frank,” and went home.

Alone

by Dawn Oshima

Inside the endless void I watch. Alone
I taste the briney kiss of the open sea
and I ponder what sins have I to atone.
Behind me, stands of willow trees are blown
to and fro, tossing their autumn leaves
inside the endless void. I watch a lone
walker, hunched against a battered stone
wall, shivering from the cold. A sneeze
and I ponder. "What sins have I to atone?"
I sternly whisper to the sky, a monochrome
shade of grey, but the wind never ceases
inside the endless void. I watch alone
in sullen silence as the arrogant man bemoans
his cruel fate. I listen to his feeble pleas
and I ponder, what sins? Have I to atone
for his mewling demands and must I condone...
No! I gather my swirling shadows and I seize!...

Inside the endless void I watch alone
and I ponder: what sins have I to atone?

A Change of Scenery

by Nils Cordes

“Remember that poem father used to tell as before sleep?” Penny asked.

And Rupert obediently obliged:

*There once was a ghost
T’was covered like most
In a sheet of astonishing white
But all through the night
He wished to be green
For the white was too easily seen.
When the morning appears
It had been many years
And the ghost had turned fiendishly grey
So the ghost comes to say,
“I am finally free.
I’m the monster that I meant to be.”*

“And then father laughed maniacally. Uah hahahahahaha!”

Mr Pembroke’s transformation started harmlessly enough with an appointment for lunch. He was rather anxious, having just come from a perplexing discourse with his sister Penny. Apparently, he had posed the same query twice within a matter of minutes. He’s had these sorts of feelings of unease several times over the past month, but only this short colloquy brought it home to him that perhaps he, like his late mother, was afflicted with ...

“No!” he had exclaimed and had stormed out through the dark hallway and past the small table resting against the wall with a candlestick and a vase containing freshly plucked flowers. It could not be that after his dear mother’s passing only a month ago, he

too was to be suffering from dementia. He refused to believe it.

Now, he was sitting in a crimson velvet armchair in the lobby of an opulent restaurant, awaiting a man he did not know to talk about a subject that held little interest for him. It was not an exaggeration to call this an appointment he was not particularly anticipating. It was the colleague of a friend who harbored hopes of securing a contract with Mr. Pembroke's firm. McAllister's was not a substantial firm in London, but it was sufficiently renowned that every fortnight or so people tried to gain a foothold within its doors to develop some hackneyed scheme that their own bank would not countenance. Why should they? Ever since railway investment had become increasingly speculative, until its eventual collapse under its own expectations, the economy of the 1850s has been in a dreadful pinch for everyone, save a few hundred toffs - of which Mr. Pembroke most certainly did not feel a part. Instead, he had felt misfortune most despairingly when he had to let go of his housemaid and gardener, and was now residing alone in a rather large country house just beyond the city that he couldn't afford to pay taxes for. It had made him a bit of an Ebenezer that he never thought he would become. Indeed, he loathed the fact that he was not as affluent as he used to be most, when it came down to doing his own shopping. Which is why an appointment for lunch was both a relief from the barely adequate cooking he prepared himself and a nuisance as it meant that he had to expend more money on a lunch than he would at home. The lack of enthusiasm for the appointment's other participant of course tipped his feelings over the edge towards nuisance.

That noon was bustling with activity, with lots of people heading out for lunch, apparently. It did not look like everyone was dreading a recession. Perhaps, the more dire the news, the more people cling to a reality they never had? Who can say. Two porters carried heavy boxes that emitted the aroma of fresh fish throughout the lobby, but nobody seemed perturbed by it. A tall blond lady stood in a doorway with a full glass of red wine. Too full, if somebody were to ask Mr. Pembroke about it. His gaze lingered upon the glass just a second too long because when his attention shifted up past the lips and looked into the lady's eyes he

noticed her staring at him. He quickly looked at something else. He could feel his neck turning red and warm.

The newspaper boy outside the window captured his attention. He waved the current edition and yelled something inaudible as the windowpanes were undoubtedly some of the finest in the city. But the paper itself could be read loud and clear: "Death will come to all of us." Was that truly the headline? His eyes widened in astonishment. The newspapers were not what they once were.

He shook his head, scanning the surroundings for the fellow with spectacles and a brown hat. That was how his friend Timmons had described him. But he was nowhere to be found.

He slowly turned his head back to the lady, but she had vanished. A sense of unease washed over him, similar to the feeling he had experienced most acutely when he had talked with his sister earlier. Where the lady had stood was now a big Australian Shepherd, a beautiful breed of dog, but so out of place at this establishment that he was unsure if he could trust his senses.

His mind returned to the dread of dementia. Does that draw attention to itself by creating delusions? He had not read anything like it. Mr. Pembroke made a mental note to call upon his doctor in the coming week, just to be sure.

He turned his head again, and there she was, sitting on the cushions in a seat next to him, still her red wine in hand.

Mr. Pembroke leapt from his seat and offered profuse apologies. He then exited the lobby and decided to request a table. He might as well wait there.

The restaurant was less crowded than he anticipated based on the throng of people in the lobby. He was led to the table by a quiet but kind waiter, who even pulled the chair for him when he sat down. He thanked him with as many words as necessary and took a deep breath. A glass of water already waited for him, and he gulped it angrily.

He wasn't himself today.

He imagined the conversation with that cursed colleague of his friend's. He envisioned him sitting down, in a hurry, exasperated and not at all like he thought he would look like. Usually, with these meetings, people were deferent because they sought something

from him. But in his mind, this one was a hasty sort of man, one who knew precisely what he wanted and had no time to explain it in detail to people who did not. He sat down quickly, ordered a Scotch and started talking about his ideas immediately. He wanted to transform public transport in the city. He had devised plans for how it was to be done, had connections in all the right places, was certain that it would pay for itself once the initial investment of a few thousand pounds had been made and even believed that it could prevent a more terrible economic downturn by encouraging people to visit the shopping districts, particularly Regent Street which he knew was notoriously difficult to reach these days.

In Mr. Pembroke's mind, they ordered food, him a sandwich but Mr. Jones, whose first name curiously was Fredericks, with an ill-fitting 's' at the end, ordered an expensive pâté. He continued to speak incessantly about a new railway system, not one that connected cities but instead existed within a city. Unlike typical railways it was to run beneath the city, yet, like the trains above-ground, would still produce smoke and dust that would quickly fill the caverns. Mr. Pembroke was beginning to consider that his companion for lunch was a lunatic, not only because of the inane ideas he was spouting, but also because he continued to speak incessantly, his hair becoming increasingly wilder with each passing minute. It was utterly improbable that McAllister's would invest even a penny in such a scheme, but of course, you could not say that outright.

So, when lunch was finished, Mr. Pembroke complimented Mr. Jones on his imagination and wished him good luck, politely declining to support his plans financially. He had done so countless times before and was happy to have the meeting over with like that. He got up out of his chair and smiled into the room where it seemed everyone was politely avoiding his gaze. He looked to the other side of the table and saw yet more of that expensive red velvet, covering an empty chair.

Then he remembered, he had only imagined the entire conversation.

Mr. Jones never showed up. Mr. Pembroke left the restaurant his purse none the lighter, but his head racing with uncomfortable

thoughts.

Mr. Pembroke's parents had always praised their child's imagination, but never did Mr. Pembroke think that it was to be taken so literally. The day after that exasperating lunch, he came into work and imagined the dog, the Australian Shepherd from the restaurant, sitting in front of the central stairs. He had to move to the side to get past him on the way to the top floor. Was that dog really there? Was it following him? He turned around on the top step to make sure, but the dog wasn't there anymore. He imagined him getting a bone from some newspaper boy outside, and just as he thought it, the newsie walked past the office building, muffled "Read it here first. Great exhibition coming to Hyde Park!" coming from his lips.

Mr. Pembroke fell into quick strides as he carried his briefcase into his office, a small space whose primary benefit was peace and quiet. He shut the door from the inside and fell into his seat, only to jump up again. Something was already sitting there?

"OCH, SURELY, PEMBROKE. Didn't ye see I was sittin' 'ere?"

His boss, Colonel Andrews, got slowly up and patted the front of his legs. He asked to be called Colonel as he had served for a bit in India ten years ago but then got into banking for, as he says, "A change in scenery."

"I'm sorry, Sir, my mind must have ... drifted."

"Indeed, it must have."

They looked at each other, not clear who felt more uncomfortable with the situation. In the end, the Colonel spoke first.

"Well, Pembroke. I heard ye 'ad a conversation wi' this Jonesy fellow about the new railway, didn't ye?"

"Who told you?"

Pembroke was surprised this had come through to him.

"That's neither 'ere nor there. I'm more curious 'ow it went? Tell me."

Mr. Pembroke was about to explain his thoughts about the project when it came to him that the fellow never showed. Or did he? He felt his neck warm up again.

“What is it, Pembroke? On wi’ it.”

“I, ... I don’t really know, Sir. The ideas are quite novel, but ... it sounds like a whole lot of money. Nothing to be done with a couple thousand pounds.”

The Colonel seemed to think it through, then his face turned into an evil grin. Mr. Pembroke had never seen such a wide mouth before. The more his boss smiled, the wider it got until he became worried that it would extend all the way to his ears. He was about to interfere - somehow - when the Colonel thanked him and headed out the door.

Mr. Pembroke was sweating. He dashed to the secretary and told her he would go home sick.

“You really do look a little WHITE in the face, Mr. Pembroke, if I may say so. Better see a doctor.”

Mr. Pembroke ran home. On his way, he almost collided with a carriage. The horses whinnied and came to a halt just in time. He felt the hooves smash his rip case and winced in pain, he felt blood on his tongue, but as he straightened up again, the horses were off down the street like nothing happened, and he felt surprisingly dull. He began to run again, past a big construction site, a gaping hole in the ground with lots of workers about, sweating despite the cloudy skies. When he reached the outskirts, his feet felt hot. He had left a million people behind him and was beginning to be able to breathe again. Was he overreacting? He saw the front door of his little cottage. It looked smaller than he remembered it, with ivy covering the sides of the door, but it only concerned him for a moment.

When he opened the door, he stopped and fell to his knees. Kneeling there on the doorstep, he began to cry with worry.

“Now, it can’t be that bad, brother, can it?”

He turned his head around to see his sister standing there by the rose bushes.

“I think I’m suffering from delusions.”

There, he said it.

He sat in his living room on a chair next to the long and dark Regency table and couldn’t face his sister’s gaze, so he stared at the carpet which, much to his surprise, was an unusual shade of blue

rather than the Persian motifs that he was used to. He tried to not let it get to him.

“You’re being a bit of a drama queen, Rupert. It can’t be that bad, really.”

Penny gave him a warm smile while holding his hand and gently squeezing it.

“Things are changing, and you just have to change with them. Roll with it. We all go through stuff like that, but some of us have it a bit rougher than others. Look at this oak tree.” She waved through the window at the orange and red leaves that did somehow bring some warmth back into his old bones. “It goes from green and lush to dry and brown and then completely bare. Every year, It goes through the whole cycle. Does it ever moan about it? That’s what I love about plants. They are so much more alive than anything else in this world.”

Rupert sighed. She was right, of course. But then she hadn’t seen things from his eyes.

Penny made him a cup of tea and a small yoghurt. She stayed with him for the afternoon but left him when the St. Augustine Tower bells rang six times in the distance.

“Thanks,” he said. He meant it. He was already beginning to feel more alive.

The following days were still difficult. He still felt a pain in his ribs, and he kept seeing the dog as soon as he arrived in the city. But he learned to ignore it. It took effort, but he managed to go to work and come home for seven straight days without suffering a nervous breakdown. Only on the eighth day did he encounter something that was more than he could bear. A tall skinny man with an ashen face and endlessly black eyes. It looked unreal and he knew it was a delusion straight away. He looked away as he passed by it, but it shoved into him so hard that he lost his balance.

“No!” he yelled angrily, and everyone in the street turned to look at him. Or not really at him, but towards him. Either way, it helped because the skinny phantom had disappeared.

More strange occurrences came up, and more freakish creatures arrived, but he learned to take them in like furniture. Things that you didn’t have to interact with if you didn’t want to.

He never went to see a doctor, fearing the diagnosis. But Penny came to visit more and more often and that always made things better. “You must change with them.” He reminded himself of her words whenever he felt that he could not cope.

When he got on the Underground on a misty morning in February, he leant back into the seat and was at ease. Dogs, ladies and skinny creatures didn’t fathom him anymore.

It was only when the doorbell rang and the skinny phantom was standing there at his door that he realized how busy he had been making himself lunch. He stared at the potato peeler in his hands in disbelief. He didn’t remember having started the peeling, didn’t remember putting on his apron. Those things didn’t matter anymore. Memory itself didn’t really matter. Nevertheless, he opened his door and greeted the creature casually.

“Been busy with the potatoes,” he said, more to himself than to it.

The creature drifted through the dark hallway, past the console table resting against the wall with a collection of family photos and a vase with plastic flowers. It wafted into the living room, lowered itself on the cheap sofa and picked up a newspaper.

When Rupert finally arrived and came to rest on the other side of the white IKEA coffee table, he grinned.

“Hey there, mate, anything good in the news?”

The ghostly figure grinned back.

“Nah, nothing. Same old, same old. Been like that for ages.”

They both chuckled and then Rupert started pouring the tea into almost translucent cups. They sipped in silence, hunched on either side of the table. He didn’t know whether this went on for just a few minutes or the better part of a year, and neither did he care. He finally managed to relax. He was expecting Penny later today, although such terms as today and tomorrow had long lost any of their original meaning. The three of them were going to meet up with a fourth, an old fool who still clung to the existence he had before becoming the monster he was meant to be. But he knew it was only a matter of time before even that stubborn guy would finally succumb to the only truth that mattered now: His

boring life was over, and he was already late for the terrifying prospect that was eternity.

The two creatures both put their feet up on the coffee table and laughed maniacally.

“Uah hahahahahaha!”

The Esparell Nocture

by Ron Ward

First Stanza

Sarah's heart jumped when she saw the truck turn onto her driveway. She prepared for the disappointment of them canceling at the last minute. It had been eleven months since Billy died; and since there were guests at her table.

Sarah made a bet with herself about which way they would turn at the split in the drive. A bland disgust blossomed when they took the longer safer route to the left. Would she still have been bitter to lose the bet?

Sarah went downstairs to meet them at the garage door. "You made it." Sarah felt she delivered the line naturally.

"It was a near thing." Henry said, wiping his feet on the mat. "My nephew was late coming to watch the dogs." Henry did the talking. It had been the same with Billy.

"Will we get to meet your cat?" Liz asked.

"I doubt it, Kin Po will spend your entire visit hiding under my bed." Sarah said. Annoyed with the woman's saccharine attempt at comradery. "She is not the friendliest of creatures."

Sarah turned and walked into the garage. "Be careful, this was Billy's playground. I haven't gotten around to disposing of his toys yet. Follow me, mind the sharp edges."

Sarah set off on the narrow path through Billy's junk. Old saws, boards, a riding mower under a tarp. Henry spied a fly rod hanging on the wall.

"That looks like a nice rod. Was Billy a fisherman?" Henry asked.

"Isn't everyone around here?" Even Sarah heard the hard edge to her words. "I promised my nephew he could go through Billy's fishing gear. I will remind him that he actually has to come and do it. Once he has taken what he wants I will let you have a look.

There should be some quality pieces left. God knows Billy spent enough on gear.” Sarah said.

Henry felt accused. “I wasn’t angling to pillage his gear box.”

“But unless men have miraculously changed. When I call you will come. Undoubtedly later bragging to your buddies about the fine equipment the daffy old widow gave away. You will be doing me a favor. Saving me the trouble of chucking it all in the bin.” Liz looked at her feet embarrassed on Henry’s behalf by the boldness of Sarah’s declaration. She found herself warming to this prickly woman.

Lunch was frozen fish sticks and tater tots. Sarah made no apology for the poor fare. After lunch she took them on a tour of the house. “All current activities happen on the top floor. Billy dabbled in painting. A tall easel still blocked access to the largest window. Four of Billy’s self-portraits hung on the wall, interspersed with three paintings of Sarah all nudes. Billy’s raincoat hung on a hook on the stair landing. Even dead Billy had a stronger presence in the room than Sarah.

“I dabbled in composition, not performance.” Sarah said. “However, before you go, I would like to play my latest piece. I call it the Esparell Nocturne. You may find it sad.

Sarah threaded her body behind an elegant baby grand. Henry wanted to move the piano away from the wall. He didn’t make the offer.

The song began with a soft arpeggio. The nocturne was sad, overly long and discordant for extended passages. The performer relished the polite misery on the faces of her audience. They understood her art!

Sarah’s foot held the sustain pedal down on the piano allowing her last chord the chance for full effect. “Shall we do it again in two weeks like we discussed?” Sarah asked.

“Sure,” Henry managed, “what is this last chord”

“A D#minor #11th,” Sarah replied. “Hauntingly dissonant, one of my favorites.”

“I will make a stew,” Liz said. Changing the mood with her cheerful declaration.

“Not too much tomato, I won’t be able to sleep if I have too

much acid.” Sarah let the sustain pedal up.

“Until next time then. I’ll show you out.” Sarah pushed the bench back against the wall and sidled sideways to extricate herself from the piano. Without another word she walked across the room to the top of the staircase. Looking pointedly back to make sure her guests were following.

Once outside they crossed the gravel to the far edge of the driveway. Waving her hand like a spokesmodel she said, “this is my park. It is my pride and joy. Only native plants, locally sourced. An authentic home for the little people. This was their land once. Billy and I used to maintain it together. It looked better when he was here to help me. I am afraid I have let the upkeep slip.”

“I am sorry, did you say little people?” Henry asked.

“Yes, the Wah’ -tee-tas. Look it up. They are anthropologically known. Other native tribes have different names for them.” Sarah said.

“I know it is hard to believe such a thing in this day and age, but I have evidence. If we get to know one another better I will try to introduce you. For now, I will understand if you go away thinking me mad. Your belief changes nothing.”

On the drive home Henry confessed he thought Sarah, “odd in the extreme. There is no doubting that she is an artist. Her music was difficult, expertly played. On that basis I grudgingly extend her an allowance.”

Liz did not reply. She stared out the window of the car barely noticing the river, trees, or even the small downtown. A need to paint welled up. Liz visualized her first painting. A forlorn shore, gray sky, prominent wind-swept tree, elegant green-moody brown. In the background a three masted schooner coming toward shore sporting red canvas sails, crimson as new blood.

Second Stanza

Sarah stood at the window clutching the drape tightly as if it alone secured her balance. Kin Po walked a loose figure eight between her ankles. She was hungry. Her bowl remained empty.

Sarah stared at but did not see the park. Instead, she watched a scene so real all of her senses were engaged. A cooling breeze

brushed her face. Gulls and waves creating a background symphony. In the movie, (she allowed the term). Her sister played on Bandon Beach. Picking up stones and shells. A sense of foreboding caused her to clutch the drapery. This was the day her darling little sister disappeared.

Sarah watched as Agnes wandered closer to the waves. Out in the ocean a wave tipped red by the setting sun rose high above the others. Sarah's mother jerked a bit of driftwood. The stick would not budge, woven tightly into a mat of detritus brought to shore in last night's storm.

Sarah yelled at her mother, at Agnes. "A sneaker, a sneaker wave," but neither of them paid any mind, obsessed with gathering their treasures.

The wave broke on the shore, engulfing her sister. Far too long later, the wave receded. Anger reappeared on all fours. Screaming for help. Kelp from the sea floor wrapped around her arms and legs. The kelp morphing into grasping fingers. A colony of seals barked, lounging on a nearby outcrop. Sarah knew it was laughter. Kin Po bit her calf, licking at the two tiny droplets of blood.

"Thank you, Kin Po, my reverie was about to become grim. You have saved me once again." Sarah said.

Sarah saw her guests turn off the road onto her drive. Henry disappointingly took the long way again. "Kin Po you have saved me twice. It would have been quite embarrassing for them to catch me daydreaming, frozen to the drapery."

Liz made a homemade chicken pot pie. Henry's favorite, he had become increasingly resistant to attending the Odd-Saturday Lunches. She used this treat to tempt him into attending. He could not resist.

The lunch conversation was a repeat of all the previous lunches. When Henry tried to instigate any topic. Sarah shut it down with fervor.

"A couple of years back I wrote a novel." Henry started. "The trick I used was to never go back and read the previous entries. Start everyday anew. Always moving forward allowing the story to meander like a stream of water searching for the best path forward." Henry started.

“That’s not writing. It is closer to masturbation.” Sarah turned to Liz with a knowing smile.

“I don’t agree, I think,” Henry began.

Sarah interrupted.

“All the great writing experts agree with me. My Aunt Lottie lived in Idaho; she knew Hemingway. She was a vicious advocate for women’s rights in a day and age before that kind of thinking was popular.” The conversation morphed into recounting of the aunt’s exploits.

There was never an exchange of ideas. Only repetitions of Sarah’s life experiences. Breaking free of her religious upbringing. Her one true love, Billy, her first two husbands their families and all their faults, jailed criminal relatives, rehearsed topics regurgitated with regularity. Henry was sick of it. As he sat listening to another recounting of a familiar story. He vowed it would take more than pot pie to get him back here.

Third Stanza

“Instead of me playing my latest, and, Sarah let silence focus her guest attention, perhaps my last nocturne. I want us all to work on a project for the park.” Sarah’s voice had the quality of a mother hyping the appearance of the pony at the birthday party.

“I have it all set up out on the deck. The rains will be coming soon, I thought a day outside together, creating art would be a welcome end to summer.” Sarah said.

A narrow table with three chairs awaited them. Liz was ecstatic about the idea. Henry less so but happy that he didn’t have to listen to forty minutes of discordant harmonies in some flavor of Hungarian minor.

“We are going to make some male Wah’ -tee-tas figures. Henry if you have to jest and call them dolls, I cannot stop you. Please make these first three make just as I make them. Follow along exactly.”

Sarah picked up a small skull. This is a rabbit skull, see where I sawed it. Open it up and glue some of this dried Queen Anne’s Lace into the cavity. See how it looks like brains. The spine and ribcage are beaver. The other bones are rabbit. Do your best to

attach the bones into a skeleton. Lay the skeletons on the soaked beaver skin.”

“Where did you get beaver skin?” Henry blurted.

“I only took volunteers and compensated their families.” Sarah said.

“Any other questions? Now use the pebbles, driftwood and bull kelp on the table to approximate organs. Cover all the bones, sticks, and pebbles with the beaver skin. Tie it all together. I soaked the skin. It will tighten as it dries. Under the table you will find some rabbit fur. Cut and sew this into clothing. Try to make it look nice. Some tea while we work? Sarah offered.

Henry liked working with his hands. He enjoyed the afternoon. If this was the new norm he approved. “Let’s get our men to the park. Follow me.” Sarah said.

The group approached the edge of the grove. A pair of stone benches sat at edge of ‘the park.’ Henry marveled at the workmanship. Someone had chiseled mortices through granite slabs. Thick cedar tenons fit into the slots. Polished granite pins slid into mortices cut in the cedar tenons to hold the whole construction together.

“Who” Henry started.

“You haven’t meet them.” Sarah said. “I very much doubt you will.”

“The benches?” Henry began again. Sarah turned toward him, folded her arms, and audibly sighed. She stared at him looking so much like his disappointed mother he withered.

“Sit,” Sarah said, indicating the left bench. Sitting on the edge of the right bench facing them she began. “My family’s cursed. I live in constant misery. My days spent having vivid daydreams, amplifying bad memories, into nightmares. If I stop for a moment the daydreams begin.

My first ancestors in Oregon came for fur. My many times great grandmother married an ambitious man who convinced her to travel to the Oregon country with him to become the first white woman to see the Northern Pacific. The perk appealed to her, but it was a lie. Upon arrival Annabelle found herself surrounded by rough men and snooty aristocratic women. Association with the

natives was much discouraged. Annabelle obeyed her husband. Finding ways to assimilate into the society of pioneer women. Her daughter Clara could not obey.”

“Do you mean Annabelle and Clara Pemperton? Liz broke in.

Sarah smiled. “Yes, the very same. How do you know those names?”

“Those names came up in my own genealogical research. We must be some kind of cousins,” Liz said, excitement written on her glowing face. “Annabelle created an herbal society. Poor Clara though went missing at a young age, never seen again.”

“Never again seen by white people. Grandmother Clara lived with the Wah’ -tee-tas.” Liz noticed Kin Po circling her ankles. Absentmindedly she picked her up. The cat stood up as if to give her a kiss. The display of affection charmed Liz who leaned in to kiss the cat. Kin Po exhaled emptying her lungs into the waiting vessel.

“Grandmother Clara lived with the Wah’ -tee-tas. After seven years living with them, she returned home a young woman. She felt it time to marry and bear children. It has never been hard for the women of our family to attract men. Be honest Liz, Henry is not your first.” Sarah winked.

Liz blushed but kept her eyes hidden from Henry’s gaze. He stood, turned to face the two seated women. “Liz, I have had enough of this mad woman’s ramblings. She has obviously researched your family history. Concocted this fantastic story and now seeks to pull you into her mad world. We are going.” He actually stomped his foot. Henry extended his hand.

“Before you go,” Sarah started. She stood; Liz rose with her. “Let me show you my most ambitious project. These benches sit above an alcove. I know you will not indulge me enough to walk down there. Yet if you will stand on these flagstones and look down you will see my pride and joy.” Henry did not move, his hand still extended even though Liz had changed positions.

“Please darling,” Liz said. “One last indulgence before we go. What harm can it cause to look?”

Henry relented, approaching the flagstones set into the clay and grass near the edge. He leaned over. A cliff of sorts, hidden by

trees when taking the long route. Below water flowed out from the alcove. Almost a cave, he could not see the back wall. Henry could not tell from this position how deep the alcove, overhang, cave, actually was.

A small stream of water flowed out of the cave. The water wandered through a forest of sharp broken shale stones, some sharp some rounded. The stream then disappeared into the grass.

“A spring?” Henry asked.

“Yes, it flows year-round. As long as we have lived here.” Sarah said. Liz walked up behind him placing her hand on his shoulder and wrapping her other arm lovingly around his waist. Henry sighed.

“Are those sculptures down there?” Henry asked.

“They depict our history.” She looked at Liz. “When Grandmother Clara returned from the woods, she attracted a slew of interested men. She chose the son of a fur trapper that had converted to farming pigs. Soon she conceived. As soon as her belly began to swell, she asked her husband to travel with her to her cabin in the woods. There were mementos she wanted to give to her child.

Clara took him to a cave. A spring bubbled at the mouth of the cave. Camas grew in the marshy meadow below. “Food, water and warmth.” Clara said. “I had all I needed until I began to need a child.” Her husband understood.

“This was my home.” Clara said. “Come.” Once inside he noticed movement. “My wild family lives here.” She asked him to reserve judgement because her other family was Wah’-tee-tas. Clara coxed the little people from the dark.

Her husband ran screaming from the cave straight to her father’s house. Together they raised a troop of men inciting them to murder. The marauders came back to the cave, wiped out the tiny houses in the meadow. Desecrated the holy spring and then burnt the hollow cedar the tribe used as a long house.

Grandmother Clara hid. Waiting for the marauders to leave. In the light of newest dawn, she found three of her sisters still alive. None of the men lived. The three sisters blamed Clara. Cursing her family to share their misery until she could undo the massacre.

Liz hooked her foot around Henry's ankle and pushed. He toppled over onto the sculpture below. The sound of his cracking skull eliciting a grunt of satisfaction from Sarah. Lin Po stood on hind feet, hand on hips, revealed now as a short native woman wearing clothes made of woven rabbit and beaver fur.

Two other women dressed in similar clothing ran to the body. "Not dead yet but the blood is flowing. It is sweet and delicious. Not like that diseased bile that oozed from your Billy." Esparell said.

"That is Esparell. The quiet one is Thana. "Come help us. We need to soak these dolls in the murders blood." Esparell said

A few moments after Henry's last breath his doll twitched. The doll's tiny mouth sucked up his sweet innocence. "This is the best we have ever

done. All those failures since we lost the ancients. Liz, you have done it. Man makes man I remember now." Esparell said dancing around Liz's knees.

"Sarah you are free to die." Thana said.

Sarah smiled warmly at her long-lost cousin.

Cat Mince

by Ian Hart

When Mr Sakamoto dropped dead in the process of checking out Mrs Prichard's groceries, the supermarket replaced him with a self-checkout machine. She had relied on Mr Sakamoto for over 20 years, and Mrs Prichard was reluctant to trust another operator, so she was forced to grapple with the technology of computers, laser readers and QR codes. She had never owned a credit card, so she sought out the one terminal in the row marked "Cash only" and was gratified to see that the smiley face on its screen had distinctly oriental eyebrows. All the other terminals issued abrupt instructions in a bossy female voice, but "Cash Only" spoke politely with an unmistakable Japanese accent.

"Konnichiwa Mrs Plichard, it will be my pressure to serve you."

"Your English hasn't improved, I see," she said, and the smily face winked at her.

She took to doing her weekly shopping in the final hour before the supermarket closed, so that she could chat with the spirit of the Japanese gentleman without attracting attention. She would pass on messages from her cat, Benjamin Disraeli, and Mr Sakamoto would alert her to forthcoming specials and useful information, such as packets of "New Improved" Tim Tams only contained 10 biscuits while the "Original" TimTams held 12. Sometimes he even offered investment advice.

"Are you sure you are wise shopping so late, Mrs Plichard?" Mr Sakamoto asked, "This is a rough neighbourhood at night."

"Don't worry Satoshi," she replied, "Thanks to your recommendation to invest in Bitcoin, I can afford to call an Uber. What's more, I have a black belt in Aikido."

"I am not confident Aikido would help."

"How do you mean?" Mrs Prichard asked.

"Some particularly nasty wraiths haunt these aisles, and the

bakery staff know to keep away from the bread ovens after dark. And there's more... ”

Indeed there was. Miss Prichard recalled the mysterious disappearance of Mr Snotgrass, the *use-by-date* inspector; delicatessen assistant Miss Pugh, found trussed and naked in the refrigerated display case with only price tickets hiding her shame; and the many security guards who never returned to work after a single night shift.

Well, this being a ghost story, the day inevitably has to come when Mrs Prichard forgets Mr Sakamoto's advice...

“Are you sure Disraeli will enjoy Meow Kitty Chunks?” he asked as she passed the tins over the scanner.

“I thought he would enjoy a change,” she said.

“The *Contents* lists sheep and fish offal, three types of preservative and an artificial chunking agent. 9 out of 10 vets recommend fresh meat over tinned for carnivorous pets.”

“Steak is so expensive.”

“This week the butchery has a special on cat mince in handy 200g freezer packs. \$10 for 5. Both nutritious and economical.”

She shrugged, “I'm sure you're right. I'll just nip back to the butchery counter.”

“Don't be too long, Mrs Plichard!” Mr Sakamoto's voice warned. “Remember daylight saving...”

On this night, clocks were due jump forward from 11pm to midnight. And sure enough, she was just half-way to the meat display, when the front doors slammed shut, the locks clicked and all the lights went out.

Mrs Prichard stood still, waiting for her eyes to accustom to the red safety lighting, when she felt a coldness on her neck and looked back. Behind her she saw the floating translucent figure of a very fat 10-year-old girl, chewing on a mouthful of salt and vinegar potato chips and weeping softly.

“Are you all right, dear?” Mrs Prichard asked.

“I can't find my mummy and I'm sooo hungry,” the ghost cried.

“You look pale.”

“So would you if you'd died of malnutrition.”

“You must be Mandy Moonacre,” said Mrs Prichard, “They

found you frozen in the salted caramel ice cream vat.”

“And I’m cold!” the ghost wailed.

“Come with me. We’ll go via *Home Goods* and find you a blanket.”

But as they turned into the *Tinned Fruit* aisle, shots rang out, and a stack of pineapple rings clattered onto the floor.

“Stay here if you don’t want to be shot!” hissed a woman with a strangely familiar face. She was holding a curious rifle with the barrel at right angles to the stock so she could aim down the shelving without being seen.

“Aren’t you Angelina Jolie?” Mrs Prichard asked. “Weren’t you in that awful movie *Wanted?* How come you’re a ghost?”

“I’m a meme, not a ghost,” Angelina pouted, picked up the rifle and ran, crouching and firing off volleys, into the pickles section.

“I hate her,” sniffed Molly. “She’s always giving orders. And I hate pineapple rings.”

As they crept along the shelves of biscuits, avoiding the pools of blood, Mandy’s constant whingeing began to irritate Mrs Prichard (who had no children of her own). She pulled down several packets of Tim Tams and passed one to the fat little ghost. “Try these. They are better for you than chips.”

“I don’t like chocolate,” Mandy moaned.

They turned the corner and were confronted by a huge man wearing a blood-stained apron and carrying a razor-sharp meat cleaver.

“You must be the butcher,” said Mrs Prichard. “I believe cat mince is on special. Five for \$10.”

The butcher handed her a plastic bag containing something heavy that sloshed ominously. “Better than cat mince. Your moggy will love it.”

Mrs Prichard looked in the bag. The head of Mr Snotgrass looked back. The butcher raised his cleaver, “Heads are on special tonight.”

She was half-way back to the check-in, when zombies began appearing from behind shelves, under counters, out of barrels, lurching after her, their grasping hands clutching the air. No matter how many Aikido moves she used, they stood up again uninjured.

By the time she made it back to Mr Sakamoto, she was trailing a dozen of the undead.

The smiley face on the screen frowned. “They look hungry.”

“Brains! Brains!” chanted the zombies as they closed in.

“Offer them the Tim Tams,” suggested Mr Sakamoto.

Mrs Prichard tore open the packet and the zombies eagerly grabbed and fought over the biscuits and stuffed them in their toothless gaping mouths. Then a remarkable thing happened — the zombies froze, began to gurgle, then emit ghastly screams. One by one, they collapsed to the floor and dissolved in clouds of malodorous, pungent steam.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Scan the packet,” instructed Mr Sakamoto.

She passed the crumpled wrapping paper over the scanning plate. The screen flashed: “Danger! Items beyond use-by-date. Confiscate! Confiscate!”

“It’s been happening a lot since Mr Snotgrass disappeared,” said Satoshi Sakamoto.

On Edenbury Hill

by Jinny Alexander

I knew nothing of what had happened on Edenbury Hill, only what I put together after that night in the Fiddlers when I downed two straight double whiskies like they were water, when whisky isn't something I drink.

I've asked around more, since, but as is the way of village gossip, the truth's hidden somewhere uncertain between *Ah, sure, isn't it a whole lot of nothing* and *Jaysus, Mary and Joseph but wasn't it a terrible thing*. The ones who favour the *Jaysus* end of things usually cross themselves at about the point between where they shudder and where they spit at the ground.

It was an innocuous night – not stormy or clichéd with thick, lingering fog – and I wasn't thinking about much more than the argument about the school sports day we'd had at the PTA meeting. Who'd have thought there'd be such a fricking hoohah over whether to give juice or water? We'd agreed to head to the Fiddlers, but we'd all come in separate cars, so I'd legged it out just as soon as I could to drop mine home, while Helen and Annie and Deeta did a convoy back their way to leave two cars and bundle into Annie's – not the biggest, but by unspoken acknowledgement the tidiest and least sticky by far – so I'd be standing waiting at my front gate by the time they trundled up the hill to collect me on the way.

I wasn't at the gate, though, because by God I was rooted to the driver's seat like I was held down by those vines that wrap around you and squeeze the life from you. As much as I wanted to get out the car and rush inside and clatter around the house 'til John came down, sleepy-eyed and pyjamaed, to ask what the noise was about and what was the good of him getting an early night if I came in like a banshee – not a banshee, Susan, for fuck's sake – I couldn't move; just sat there.

When we left the school, it was dark, of course – ten-thirty already after that fracas about the juice. We'd wanted to get up to the Fiddlers before last orders, not that Seamus'd mind too much about a half hour here or there – that's what it's like in these village pubs, landlorded by retired Gardai with blind eyes turned whichever way they look – but we are upstanding women of the community, at least until we've the first drink in us, and then we're anything but. The other women had turned off into their lane, and it was only me left heading up Edenbury Hill, and as the last of their car lights vanished around the corner and out of my rear-view mirror, I knew, I just knew, that there was still something behind me.

Like I said, it was dark, and their headlights weren't bouncing into my car, as they'd all turned off, so it can't have been that I caught any kind of glimpse of in the rear-view, and it wasn't as if it made any sound, but dear God, even as I tell you this, there's a creep up my spine that lodges somewhere at the base of my neck and pushes every goddam hair away from my body like an angry dog's rising hackles. It wasn't a cold night, but I had the heater on, because like John'll tell you, I'd put the car heater on even in July, and it was still only May and the temperatures drop well enough at night, but as I was driving up Edenbury Hill, it was like the blower poured ice instead of warmth, and the whole damn car was filled with cold and damp even though the heater was still blowing.

I'd have twiddled with the knobs, and cursed, and if it hadn't fixed itself, I'd have turned it off, because I was only five minutes from home anyway, but I knew, I just knew, that I wasn't alone in the car and my hands were gripping so tight to the steering wheel that I couldn't have let go to twiddle with the radio anyhow. There was no way I was going to move my hand, in case it – that thing on the backseat – reached out and touched me, and I couldn't look in the rear-view, and I told myself don't be silly, Susan, of course there's nothing there, just have a quick look to prove you're being a daft cow, and even as I thought *nothing's there, Susan*, I knew something was. I didn't want to look, but my eyes, without my brain telling them, flicked up to the mirror and of course, it was just dark – thick, black dark – in the back, and I couldn't see anything, and

the radio crackled and lost its focus and squealed like a dying cat, so that hardly helped.

I floored the accelerator and as I swung away around the corner where the hill evens out, and swerved through my own front gate, the heater blew warm again, and I was still sitting outside my front door, in the car with the heater blowing warm, when the women pulled up, but I couldn't move, just couldn't.

A tap on my window made me jump so fricking hard I cricked my shoulder on the seat belt, but it was just Deeta banging on the glass saying *What the fuck* in a most un-PTA-like way, and *Come on, Susan, the pub'll be closing*. I didn't move and she yanked open the door and said *What the fuck* again and I gave myself a little shake and undid my belt and flicked my eyes up to the mirror to see; just to tell myself it was nothing. Of course there wasn't anything there, even under the light spilling from the landing window, but then I knew that whatever it had been had gone by now, so it wasn't like I'd expected to see anything – anyone – anyway, although the car smelled of rotten-damp that could've been sweat from my underarms.

I got out the car, and Deeta said *What's up Susan*. I was shaking like a vibrator on full speed but with none of the thrill, and I didn't say anything, so she grabbed my arm and marched me up to Annie's car and bundled me in, and in the glow of the interior light, the two women in the front turned and looked at me with those accusing eyes we use on our kids when they're messing and making us late, but before they finished saying anything, they both stopped and hung their mouths open and Deeta said, *Don't ask me*.

Annie drove us to the Fiddlers and I mumbled *Whisky, double*, to Helen and sank myself down onto the big sofa at the end near the fire, which wasn't lit, on account of Seamus being a tight bastard, so I kept my coat on, because although the shaking was almost stopped, my blood was still ice-cold.

They thought I'd hit something – there'd be badgers, out on the roads most nights – but I shook my head at that and downed my drink. *Fucking hell, Susan*, Helen said, because I don't usually drink whisky and the glass was already empty, but I wasn't so cold anymore, so even if it did my head in, I wasn't going to regret it.

Once my glass was empty, I said, *Did anyone ever have anything weird happen on Edenbury Hill*, and Deeta said *What do you mean*, but Helen got this look like she was still sucking the lime from her gin, and twisted her face up a bit and said something happened to her great aunt at the bottom of the hill, years ago, when she was walking home from somewhere, but she didn't know much about it to be honest.

I said I'd had this weird feeling, but then I tried to shake it off by saying *Wasn't the meeting crap* and *Who gave a fuck about giving the kids a bit of juice*, but by then, Helen'd got Seamus over, and said what with him being a Garda and an old bloke and all, did he know anything about what'd happened to her great aunt, and he gripped the edge of the table and said *Jaysus but that was a long time ago* and *Why would we want to be asking*, and then the old codger who'd been sat quietly in the corner shuffled over and mumbled something, but he'd a good few drinks in him, and what he said was mostly incoherent except the odd words that sounded like *terrible thing* and *lookin' fer her ween*, and then he squinted at his watch like he was checking something, and though his eyes were clouded red, he said clear as my empty glass, *'bout ten-thirty, sure as eggs*, and he crossed himself and shuffled off, and Seamus said *Aye, there's reason enough he sits there all night staring into his glass like it's full of nowt but regret*. Altogether, what they said and didn't say was enough for me to start wondering, though I couldn't think about it anymore that night, so I had another glass of whisky to chase it well away so I'd get to sleep.

In the days after, when I'd put together the *Jaysus, that was something terrible*, and the *sure it was nothings*, and shaken them up, I got some kind of story from the gossip:

Old Alice Noonan, who's been dead a while, was coming home across the fields because she'd been out courting or rabbiting or drinking or sleeping around like a whore, depending on who's telling the story, and was found all crumpled and tattered in the long grass at the side of the road, just where the hill starts up after you come over the hump-bridge, and one of her shoes was in the ditch, and her clothes were off her or scrunched up around her

waist or torn to shreds, and her just lying there in the long grass by the bridge wall, with her hands all cut up like she'd been climbing through the briars. She wasn't dead, but she was in a bad way, and served her right, or didn't, depending on who's telling, and a while later she had a baby, although no one said outright that it was part of the same thing. Alice Noonan never said either, because she never said anything ever again, not even when they took the baby away to England or the nuns or a tiny, unmarked grave, and not too long after that Alice Noonan wasted away and died. Whatever had happened or not happened, she'd been found that night on the side of the road by a man already-staggering from one too many in the Corn Mill on the other side of the bridge before the hill starts up. Lying there a while, most like. And the next day, when folks were out looking around, didn't they find in the stream, just as it runs into the dark hollow under the bridge, Paddy Cormac with his eyes pecked clear out and a twist of barbed wire at his neck; a blow to his face the size of a fist, and his pockets weighed with the shards of his bottles, and hadn't Alice Noonan been found there the night before with her hands all torn up like she'd been clawing at stones or wire or broken glass?

But that's not the worst of it, because the worst of it is what they say's going to happen since Alice Noonan slid into my car and breathed icy-cold stream-water and sadness on the back of my neck, because the last ones whose car she got in, they all have wee bairns in the graveyard where village gossip agrees that, *Jaysus, it's a terrible thing how Alice Noonan's still searchin' and searchin' for the baby that was took.*

Dust To Dust

by Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

I'm not crazy.

What exactly does the word mean? We know what it says in the dictionary, but can't it also mean something entirely different? Like a woman pushed so hard she snapped? And if that's the case, is she really crazy or just on the brink of insanity?

Before we get any further, my parents had nothing to do with what happened. I didn't have a shitty upbringing, I wasn't picked on when I was a kid, and my older brother didn't torment me anymore than typical siblings. I didn't hurt animals, I am quite the animal lover and often give hefty donations to charities. I have a good job I love, a nice house, a hefty savings account, and a nice car. I don't have a lot of friends. I have one good one I see weekly, and for the most part, a healthy sexual relationship with my husband of ten years. Although that has changed these last couple of months. Most of all, I had a beautiful seven-year-old daughter by the name of Tabitha.

What happened to her is when things fell apart. If Oregon weather holds up, we spend the afternoon in the park, followed by hot chocolate for Tabby, a quad espresso for me, before heading home to get dinner ready. I had to work on the weekend of October 17. Andrew took over the tradition since it was a nice day, albeit chilly. I still have those pictures on my phone Andrew sent of her running for the slide, playing hide and seek with a couple of kids she befriended, the smile she gave the camera when she was on the swing set. It's hard to look at them or any of the pictures I have on my phone. Because it's the day she was taken from me. The day I got a call from Andrew telling me she's missing. He couldn't tell me what happened. Just that she was gone and the police are looking for her.

I'll spare you the details. Let's just say what happened to my

little girl was horrific, and those three days, she suffered unimaginable torture. At the age of seven, she learned the hard truth of just how ugly people are. I've shed more tears than I have in a lifetime and asked myself why over and over until I'm blue in the face. Tabitha Angela James was born on October 3, 2017, and she died on October 20, 2024. At least, that's the medical examiner's best guess. No suspects currently, despite my constant badgering to our local law enforcement. I will not rest until that son of a bitch pays for what he did. It's the only thing keeping me going at the moment.

Where am I going with this, you ask? I'm laying the foundation on why I did the things I did. On why I'm sitting here, writing this, professing my sanity. Yes, I had two psychotic breaks. Yes, I tried to kill myself because the thought of living without my little girl was too much to comprehend. Andrew and I weren't speaking much. The guilt he holds because he took his eyes off of her for a few minutes. She was Daddy's little girl, and while I wish I could sit here and convince you I didn't blame him, I did. I didn't want to, but there are some things I can't forgive. Leaving my daughter to take a phone call is one of them. Not that I will ever say it out loud.

It took the medical examiner two months to release my baby so we can say goodbye. Try to put the worst event of our lives behind us. Andrew wanted to bury her in the cemetery where his family had a plot, but I remembered what my grandmother said once when I was about Tabitha's age.

"No one better bury me in the ground. I'll be damn if I'm going to have worms eating my eyes."

I didn't quite understand what she meant until I heard the song. If you haven't heard it, pass. It's not a pleasant one. It was one of the few conversations we had about Tabitha, or rather, argument. I'm ashamed to say it was a brutal one. I threw a lot of hateful words towards him until he left and I didn't see him for two days. I thought he stayed at a hotel, but I suspect he found someone to help him take his mind off of Tabitha. We'll get to that later.

Tabitha was cremated, and after further discussions, we decided to spread her ashes at the lake near our home. Besides the park, the lake was another favorite. We planned a small ceremony. Family

only with the exception of my best friend and Lisa, our nanny. I grew up without religion. Andrew grew up with a strong Christian faith. The pastor droned on and on about how we need to use this to bring us closer together. To trust God into guiding us the way. I remember sighing, rolling my eyes, pleading he just gets on with it. It wasn't exactly the picture-perfect afternoon to say goodbye. Dark clouds loomed, the torrential downpour the meteorologist forecasted just minutes away. Thunder boomed in the distance, followed by a strike of lightning. I instinctively dropped my hand to rub Tabitha's shoulder to reassure her before remembering she isn't with us anymore. She's a pile of ashes in the box I'm clutching to. When the pastor finished, Andrew and I moved towards the lake. My hands shook as I tried to open the box, and just as I'm spreading her ashes into the water, a gust of wind blew through. I wasn't ready for it, and when I tried to close the box to keep her ashes contained, I dropped it. Right fucking there, scattering them in the dirt and gravel. The most humiliating thing I have ever done, and when I tried to scoop them back in, the wind came through again. I felt pieces of my baby hit my face, my eyes, my mouth. Andrew muttered curse words, throwing his hands up in the air when I screamed for him to get away, watching as the last of my little girl blew away. Andrew once said I'll fall from grace someday, and I suppose I proved him right.

What else could go wrong, you ask? Oh, it gets better. When we finally got to the house, I had a message from the funeral home. It appeared one of their employees, he wouldn't say who, mixed the ashes of my little girl with the eleven other victims of this unknown assailant. No one told me this cocksucker had done it before. And you're telling me law enforcement doesn't have any clues? What the fuck are they doing?

I didn't just offer peace to my little girl. I did it for someone else's. How's that for fucking irony?

I'm not crazy, but if I were, do you blame me?

This is where it gets tricky. I started hearing voices. I know what you're thinking. It was someone in the house. We certainly had a houseful, but they weren't those kinds of voices. The voices I was hearing were inside my head. After my panic attack, debating on

whether I should wake Andrew and tell him I might be having my third psychotic break, I realized the voices I'm hearing are the little girls I put to rest. They knew they were safe with me.

It happened when I was soaking in a hot bubble bath, relaxed for the first time in days, enjoying a glass of wine. Andrew sent a message saying he's running errands, the man only works when he wants to, and while there was a time I wanted to know what errands he's running, these days, I don't give a shit. My eyes are closed, listening to something soothing on my Bluetooth speaker when I heard it.

Mommy, you there?

My eyes snapped open, the wine glass slipping from my hand. I pushed myself up, not caring about the water that sloshed over the edge of the tub. I didn't want to say her name, afraid the answer I get will be the wrong one.

It's me. Tabby wabby.

I laughed because that's the little nickname I gave her the day she was born.

Oh, Mommy. I miss you.

I haven't sobbed that hard since the day I found out my little girl is gone.

I miss you too.

I know what you're thinking and trust me, I considered it too, but I asked questions only Tabitha would know and she passed with flying colors. Even if it wasn't her and just my imagination, I didn't care. I felt whole again. I felt alive, listening to my little girl talk my head off. I don't know why or even how I hear these voices and Tabby didn't know either. She just said they were stuck. She knew what happened to her. Knew she was no longer alive and when I tried to get her to tell me what happened, she went away. Sometimes for days. It was the other voices who gave me the answers I needed.

Salvator Allen.

That's the motherfucker who killed my little girl and the eleven others trapped inside my head.

And I know where to find him.

I know why this is happening to me. I have been chosen to get

the justice these girls need. The justice they deserve. They told me things I didn't want to hear, but listened because I needed to know. They're trapped, their souls seeking sanctuary in me until they can be released. I am their savior, their vigilante, and I accept with every fiber of my being.

I could have given the detectives assigned to Tabby's case the information. I could have shared my discovery with Andrew, but I've learned who's been occupying his time. The next time I see that prick is when we're sitting with our divorce attorneys and the agreements we made when we got married are null and void. Andrew doesn't get shit.

I took matters into my own hands. I didn't go in half-cocked. I'm not stupid. I ran his name and this son of a bitch has a rap sheet as long as I am tall and why he's still walking free is beyond me. Drug possession, sexual assault on minors, manslaughter, attempted murder. The grief I've been clinging to, it took on a whole new light.

His days are fucking numbered.

I couldn't have planned it any better. While I might not be his type (meaning I'm not ten years old), but I'm a beautiful woman and I know how to flirt. I followed him for a week, found the bar he's a local at, and made my move. Just like I suspected, he wasn't interested. Not until I showed him pictures of the little girl I found on the internet.

Last call, I invited him back to my place. Andrew wasn't home. He sent me a message earlier, telling me he was hanging with friends tonight. Like I buy that shit, but it helped the plan fall into place. I poured him a drink, I slipped him the concoction of the heavy shit the doctor prescribed after Tabitha was taken. Keeping me heavily sedated prevented me from asking why he took his eyes off of her. While I researched on how much to give this fuck face, I wasn't a hundred percent certain it was going to work. A half hour later, he's a blubbering moron. He spouted off his bullshit, asked if my daughter was home, and I led him to the basement. There's a secret door Tabitha discovered years ago. It's one of her favorite hiding places. I already had it ready and while I wasn't a hundred percent sure I would go through with it, hearing the terror in my

girls' voices, it's the motivation I needed. I drove the large-bladed knife into his crotch.

His screams... I haven't laughed that much in months. I can hear the cheers of my girls, I can hear their words, and while the mother in me wanted to scold them for the use of profanity, they lost their innocence. They earned the right to say what they want. I stabbed him twelve times. One for each little girl he tortured, raped, and killed.

I could have done this quickly. Clean up, get rid of the evidence, and no one would ever know. But I enjoyed it. Watching him suffer, listening to him plead. I showed him pictures of the girls before delivering another non-fatal blow. I can feel everything I've been feeling settle in me. I didn't feel lost and sad anymore. I felt alive. For the first time since this all began, I can breathe again.

Andrew came home the following day, and he had no idea I had the man who raped and murdered our little girl chained in the secret room of our basement. He didn't know the fucker lived three days before I slit his throat and watched the life leave his eyes.

To all the parents out there, you're welcome. He's no longer a threat to your children.

He didn't say much to me. Just that he was going to shower. I watched him plug his phone in to charge before dropping it to the counter.

I know I have no business going through his phone. Remember when I mentioned I know who is keeping my husband warm at night? I know what Tabby said she saw that day she was taken.

I saw Daddy kissing Lisa, Mommy.

He didn't take a call. He was making out with our nanny.

I stand corrected. It appears while my little girl was being kidnapped, my husband was getting a blow job by our nanny behind the oak tree. If that's not enough to get my blood boiling, the text exchanges following their admission of guilt really fueled the fire I thought I quenched.

Now is not the time to leave her. She's been through a lot.

She doesn't love you, Andy. Not the way I do.

Enough, Lisa.

You can't keep feeling guilty. What happened wasn't our fault.

I can't just leave.

There's more to life than money.

She doesn't know my husband well at all. Money is all he cares about. He spends mine as if it's going out of style.

I'm pregnant. It's time we start our own family.

And forget about the one he had. Yeah, I know where this bitch is going with this.

Nice try.

Now, I know what I'm about to do isn't in my best interest, I get it, but the girls are back. They're not happy with Andrew's infidelity and hearing Tabby cry, well, it eats away at a parent.

"Andrew?"

"What?"

"I want to show you something."

Andrew stared at me and while he wanted to find a reason not to, my expression must have convinced him it's important enough. He followed me, asking me why I'm leading him to the basement when I asked the question.

"How long have you been screwing Lisa?"

He did the stutter, "I don't know what you're talking about" bullshit until I told him I know everything. The affair, the blow job that got our daughter stolen, the baby on the way. Once he figured out he couldn't talk his way out of it, he went with plan B.

"I was ending the affair."

"It just happened. Things weren't good between us."

That's not how I remember it. We just had to get through this rough patch. Based on his messages, he's been screwing Lisa long before our problems arose.

I honestly didn't know what to expect when I opened the door to the secret room. The stench of blood, urine, and fecal matter hit our noses instantly.

"The fuck is that smell?"

Andrew's words trailed off the moment his eyes focused and saw the body of Salvator Allen. Not that he's recognizable. To say I did a number on him is putting it mildly. I severed large chunks of him. It's hard to distinguish that he was male, and blood is

splattered on every wall.

“What did you do, Mags?”

“I took care of the son of a bitch that killed our girls.”

He cocked his head to the side.

“Girls?”

I nodded, throwing a nod over his left shoulder. I don't think he wanted to look, but couldn't resist the urge.

Twelve beautiful girls stood, holding hands, blocking the doorway. Their bright white light lit up the room.

“Where were you, daddy?” Tabitha asked. “Why didn't you help me?”

Ouch, but someone had to say it. He stumbled back, shaking his head. I didn't give him a chance to run or make that phone call. I pulled the knife with blood dried to the blade from the waistband of my jeans. My aim is spot on, watching his mouth drop open, blood spilling from his jugular vein. He dropped to his knees, holding his hands to his throat. I knelt down beside him, the girls circling us, and I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“Had you been faithful, our daughter would still be alive.”

There you have it. Call it my confession if it makes you feel any better. I did what I had to do. I got justice for those twelve little girls. I got justice for me.

And god damn it...

I am not fucking crazy.

The Trout

by Ruth F. Simon

Sunrise was still a couple of hours away, but Dean was already dressed. He stood at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee while reviewing his checklist. Tomorrow would have been their fifty-third anniversary. And today marked two years since Emma had passed.

Dean rolled his shoulders to fight back the tears that threatened. When he did, a warm presence pressed itself into his thigh. He dropped his hand to stroke Callie's head. "Good girl."

The dog's soft groan as he rubbed her ears was a comfort. So were Emma's little touches throughout the house. He kept every knick-knack where Emma had placed them. Even the stuff he thought was hideous. He hadn't even rearranged the furniture, although the layout wasn't ideal. On Linda's last visit, she told him he should change things to suit his needs. But he couldn't. As long as he kept everything the same, he could pretend that Emma would walk through the door soon.

Callie's presence at his side was proof that he lied to himself. Emma purchased the Labrador pup for his birthday a decade earlier. Emma thought Callie would keep Dean company when he did chores or fished.

But, Callie glued herself to Emma and wouldn't spend time with Dean unless Emma wasn't home or they watched TV. Now, her shadowing was a painful reminder that they only had one another.

"Em was your special person," Dean told the dog as he stroked her head. "I've always wondered if you knew she was sick. She doted on you. Gave you all the love that the grandkids were too far away to get." He studied the gray that covered the dog's muzzle. She had aged with them, but her eyes were still clear and alert.

"Today will be a hard day for you, girl. I'm leaving you here. Justin will come by at lunchtime to let you out."

Dean's voice quavered, and he cleared his throat before

continuing. "I talked to Linda last night. She, Dave, and the kids are making good time. They should be here by suppertime. I have the note ready for her, so she'll know you're going home with them."

Callie gave a soft woof as if she understood what he said and didn't approve.

Dean finished his coffee and washed the mug. No sense in leaving dishes for Linda. Today would be tough enough for her.

He made sure Callie's water dish was changed and put down some fresh kibble so she wouldn't be hungry.

After reviewing his list one last time, Dean walked to the desk in the guest bedroom and opened the top drawer. He removed a sealed envelope and carried it back to the kitchen, placing it on the table so Linda would see it.

Dean studied the envelope for a few moments before nodding decisively. He scanned the room to confirm that he'd done all the chores and put his affairs in order. *It's time.*

He walked to the mud room and pulled on his rubber boots. He'd spent last evening placing some flies on his fishing hat and other fishing gear into the pockets of his fishing vest. He put both on and headed out the door.

Callie tried following him, and he placed a hand on her chest to stop her. "Not today, girl. You have to stay here."

He closed the door in her face and turned to step off the porch. Callie started to bark as soon as he reached the bottom step. When his boots crunched over the gravel to the storage shed, Callie's barking grew louder.

When the storage shed's door squeaked open, Callie's barking changed to a howl. Dean stood for a few minutes, hoping Callie would settle down. But, her volume increased, and she added a new, frantic note he hadn't heard before.

Before he realized he'd made the decision, his footfalls sounded on the stairs as he pulled his keys from his pocket. Callie bounded out the door, nearly knocking him over.

"All right, girl. Give me a minute." Dean pushed past the dog and picked up the envelope from the kitchen table. He carried it back to the spare bedroom and tore it open. He removed the thick packet marked "Last Will & Testament" and placed it into the

drawer.

He ran the larger envelope, which contained a goodbye letter for his children, through the shredder. *Emma wouldn't have approved anyway.*

Dean picked up the phone on the desk and dialed Justin's number. "Morning, Justin. Hope I didn't call too early."

"Nah, I've been up a while, Dean. Trying to find the motivation to clean out Valerie's potter's shed. You still need me to check on the dog?"

Dean studied Callie out the bedroom window, watching as she stalked some chickadees scratching for seeds. "I think I'll take her with me. Not many days left that we can go fishing without wading through snow. Might let her swim a bit if it warms up."

"Your daughter and them still coming this evening?" John's voice was muffled, and Dean could picture his neighbor trying to talk and sip coffee at the same time. Justin was always talking into his coffee mug.

"That's what she said last evening. I'll leave a note that you have a spare key if she doesn't bring hers."

"I'll be home all day," Justin noted. "Make sure she knows that too. I haven't heard much about her and the littles in a while, so I wouldn't mind a visit to catch up." Justin paused to slurp some coffee and added, "Whereabouts you planning to fish, Dean?"

Dean had to think for a moment since suicide, not fishing, had been his original plan. "Maybe up by the little falls past the bridge. I haven't been that way in a while. I'd like to see if any trout are out that way."

"Funny you mention that little falls," Justin said and slurped coffee again.

"Why's that?"

"Well, old Ed Ramsey came into the shop last month. All excited because he saw a big, pale-colored trout jump out of the water just past the bridge. Said it was heading to those deep pools beneath those falls. He said he was going after it." Justin's coffee mug rattled against the phone.

"Okay," Dean drew out the word. "I'm still not seeing the funny part."

“That was the last time I talked to Ed. The sheriff found him out there a few days later. His wife called when he didn’t come home that night.”

“Ed died fishing? I hadn’t heard that. Just that the medical examiner said it was a heart attack.”

“Yep, that’s the official cause of death,” Justin said the words quietly as if he was afraid to be overheard.

“What do you mean by ‘official?’” Dean asked.

“Didn’t your granddaddy ever tell you about the white trout in this river? Y’all come from folks who’ve been here a few generations, ain’t cha?”

“Yeah, my great-great grandad first bought land here. He was a preacher and came to build a church. Preaching was the family business until my dad and his brothers. They all went into the building trades.”

"That explains it. Folks didn't tell your people about that trout because they might have gotten on the wrong side of the preacher." Justin sighed, and Dean could almost picture his neighbor leaning back in his chair as he got ready to tell a story.

Dean pulled a chair out from the table, wincing as it scraped the floor. “I didn’t take the pulpit either, and this sounds like a story I should hear.”

“Let me refill my coffee.” A thunk sounded when Justin placed the receiver on the table.

Dean listened to the muffled sounds of Justin refilling his mug and the rattle of a cookie tin.

“Alright, I’ve got some windmill cookies and my coffee. I can yarn ya for a moment or two.” Justin crunched a cookie and said around the mouthful, “Our little river has a white trout. It’s a big, pale rainbow trout, probably close to two feet in length. Big enough folks can see it clearly when it jumps.”

“That would be something to catch.” Dean imagined a trophy trout over his mantle.

“I wouldn’t recommend trying,” Justin’s tone was sharp. “Some of the old timers called it an omen. Said seeing it was bad luck. Like seeing an owl sitting on your fencepost. Means someone in your family’s gonna die soon.”

“An omen? Really?” Dean laughed, but Justin didn’t. “You don’t believe in omens, right?”

The line was silent for a few moments. “No,” Justin’s voice was soft, “I don’t believe in omens. But, I believe some beings help mortals cross over. And, my daddy insisted that white trout is one of those beings.”

“You’re serious?” Dean shivered when the hair stood up on his neck.

“Dean, my family has run a store around here for several generations. We hear all the news. Each time someone claims they’ve seen that trout, there’s a death in that family. Most of the time, the person seeing the trout dies because they try to catch it.”

“And is that fish always by the little falls?”

“Nope.” Justin paused to crunch another cookie. “That trout has been seen by the big falls, near that little island across from the mill, and way out near Riverton. Each time, someone decides they’re going after it, and then they’re gone.”

“Is it always a heart attack?” Dean knew Justin could sell a tall tale, but this story wasn’t the kind of tale he usually made up.

“Sometimes it’s a stroke. Others had a heart attack. There’ve been a couple of drownings. One fellow, old Dave Burbank, was stretched out under a tree with his hat brim covering his eyes like he was asleep. His hand was resting on his fishing pole, and his line was in the water, but the tackle had broken off.” Justin paused to slurp coffee again. “That’s the big key, you know.”

“What is?”

“When it gets the fisherman, he’s always found with the fishing pole in his hand. The line is in the water, but the tackle is gone. Like they hooked something that broke or cut the line.”

“Any other similarities?” Dean felt compelled to know every detail.

“Nope. No common baits, no common fishing spot. Folks have been found year-round in every kind of weather. It ain’t always the old folks either. One was about twelve. The kid snuck out of school and was fishing near the mill. When they found him, his legs and feet were in the water. When he was born, doctors said his heart was weak, and he wouldn’t leave the hospital. He got twelve

years of living in.”

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“Well, I haven't seen any white fish, so I'll take my chances by the little falls. Even with your demon fish running around,” Dean lied.

“It ain't a demon fish, Dean. It's a guide for crossing from the mortal world to the hereafter.” Justin's tone was curt.

“I'm not trying to make fun of your story,” Dean said. “I just don't believe in omens.” *Maybe if I keep saying that, it will change what's coming.*

Justin's tone was solemn. “If you go out and see a white fish, promise me you'll come back, Dean. I'm not ready to serve as your pallbearer just yet.”

Does he know my plan? Dean wondered.

“Justin, I...” Dean paused.

“Promise me, Dean.”

“Yeah, I promise, Justin.” Dean wondered if Justin could hear the lie.

They sat in silence for a while longer.

“You... haven't ever seen that trout, right?” Justin asked.

Dean's mind brought up the image of a white trout that leaped and danced its way across the water on its tail. He'd seen that fish every morning for a week before Emma died. And, he'd seen it every morning for the past two weeks when he walked by the river.

“Nope, I've never seen a white trout.” Dean hated lying to Justin like he hated lying to his daughter and son.

“Well, you be safe out there. If you're not back by supper time, I'll bring Linda out, and we'll give you a ride back.”

Yep, he knows. Dean thought. “I appreciate that.”

Callie ran ahead of Dean, bounding into and out of the brush to flush birds, squirrels, and rabbits. Dean carried a casting rod and a small tackle box. He didn't think he'd catch any fish. Or, rather, he hoped he'd catch only that white trout.

Emma used to read books on just about every subject, and she'd been on a long mythology kick at one point. He vaguely remembered her talking about something called a psychopomp,

which he thought was a fancy name for a serial killer. She'd laughed and told him psychopomps were beings that helped the newly dead cross "the veil."

With his family's close connection to their church, he was uncomfortable with the idea of pagans and witchcraft. He'd asked Emma not to talk about those pagan myths when the kids might overhear her.

Now, he wondered if their local waters held a guide for the dead. *Maybe it is my time after all.*

Dean wasn't sure he believed in a ghost fish that guided the dead, but he'd been ready to commit a mortal sin earlier. If catching some demon trout meant he would see Emma, he'd do anything to catch it.

He marched along the blacktop, occasionally whistling Callie back from the woods. She wasn't young, and he worried she was tiring. He tried making her stay in the house, but she refused. As she ranged out and then circled back to check on him, he hoped he hadn't made a wrong choice.

When he paused to catch his breath, she came to check on him. *At least I'm not alone.*

Soon, they came to the path that edged between the river and woods toward the little falls. Callie yipped with excitement when Dean turned toward the sound of the falls.

When the falls came into sight, Dean stopped in his tracks. Dancing across the pool below the falls was the white trout. It leaped high, splashed down, and leaped again.

Dean shoved past the shrubs to a small clear space near the water's edge. He set his tackle box down and checked the lure he had selected. It was still secure, so he cast to the base of the falls where the trout had vanished. He reeled in and cast for probably thirty minutes or so. Once he realized the catch wouldn't be quick, his pulse slowed and he took a little time to admire the scene. The sun's rays shone through the fall's spray and created rainbows that danced. Birds called in the trees behind him, and a rabbit came out from behind a bush and froze at the sight of Callie.

Callie gave a soft woof of warning, but she didn't leave Dean's side to chase the rabbit. At that moment, a fish struck his lure.

Dean whooped and started to reel in. A large white fish jumped as the tension in the line hit the lure in his mouth. Callie barked frantically and bit at Dean's hand.

He yelped and jerked away, still fighting the fish. Callie continued to bark and nip at him, and the fish leaped and danced at the end of his line. They fought for several minutes. Then, the fish made one more leap before diving deep.

The line started to spool off Dean's reel, and he grabbed the line with his fingers in a desperate attempt to stop the fish. Callie bit his hand just as he grabbed the line.

Then, the world went dark for several moments.

When Dean came to, he had the oddest feeling. He wasn't sore or tired. He felt... light. And younger than he had in years. He glanced around, and that's when he realized he was floating several feet off the ground.

"Dean?" The sound of Emma's voice behind him had Dean turn so fast that he should have fallen over. He didn't though.

"Emma? Is it really you?" Dean hugged Emma, and she felt substantive in his arms, just like he'd missed for the past two years. He stepped back to study her.

"Who else would it be?" Dean's father materialized next to Emma, and he no longer wore the scowl that he always seemed to direct Dean's way.

"Dad?" Dean wanted to hug his father but didn't dare.

"Come here, boy," his father said gruffly and grabbed Dean in a hug. They clutched one another in their first hug since Dean was eight.

A dog's bark broke them apart, and Dean glanced down to see Callie leaning against Emma's thigh.

"How is she here?"

"All dogs go to Heaven, son," Dean's father said. "But the special ones like Callie are given the option of staying with their people in the hereafter. She chose Emma."

A splash from the river caught Dean's attention. He turned to see the white trout still dancing on its tail across the water.

"A psychopomp," Emma said. "One that only appears to good people and only when it's their time."

“You saw it too?” Dean asked Emma.

“I did. I knew right away what it meant. I’d heard all those old stories, so I was ready.”

The three watched the fish dance for a few moments. When it dove out of sight, Dean sighed. “It’s a beauty. Now what?”

Emma shrugged. “None of us know. We’ll walk in the woods together and see what we might see.”

The four floated back down the path until a fork split off to go deeper into the woods. Soon, their forms faded among the trees.

Still Waters

by E. Kinna

As afternoon turned into twilight, the autumn breeze scattered leaves across the forest floor. It carried the inviting scent of smoldering wood on tendrils of smoke. Next to an old trapper's cabin, a crackling snap sent shooting sparks towards the sky, and a two-year-old squealed with delight. Chubby fingers reached out to grab a fallen marshmallow, but her father chuckled and scooped her into his arms before she could eat it.

"Oh no, not that one! It's all dirty," he said and kissed her cheek.

She felt her face turn white-hot red and she wailed. A squirrel skittered up a tree, bringing a shower of fluffy debris spiraling down upon her head. "Ooh." She stopped crying and pointed at the tree. Behind the branches, shadowy figures danced and swayed, and she waved at them.

With a deep, baritone laugh, her father plucked leaves and twigs from her hair and sat beside the fire, placing her on his lap as she continued to wave.

He glanced at what she was waving at. "That's right, say hello to the squirrel."

She sniffled while he slid another marshmallow onto a long, charred stick, holding it over the flames. And then, little Katherine startled when she heard a soft, cooing call coming from the direction of the lake.

"Wait," Father whispered, suddenly shifting closer to the fire. "Do you hear that?" He rubbed his arms, as though warding off an invisible chill. Katherine felt it too—the sudden drop in temperature, a cold that didn't belong in the warm embrace of the campfire. She shivered, but her attention was drawn to the trees painted gold by the fire's dancing light. Dark figures moved closer, whispering words she couldn't understand, but she smiled and

pointed at them.

“No, no, sweeting. They’re calling from over there.” He pointed to a path leading through the forest. “That’s the call of the Loons. They’re special creatures, you know—masters of land and water. Some people say they only sing for those they choose.” He smiled and tapped a finger to the tip of her nose. “This means they like us. They’re giving us a precious gift—their song of soulful peace. Come, I’ll show you.”

Together they walked down to the lake, and she laughed every time her father grabbed her arms to swing her over the boulders and tree roots that shared their path. They arrived at the water’s edge just in time to see a family of Loons surface and swim in tight formation before disappearing again. Katherine giggled and splashed her hands in the chilly water.

The wind picked up and her father crouched at the lake’s edge, pulling her close. “Shhh,” he said, and pointed to a ripple on the surface. “Look, see there? They’ve returned to their world under water, but if we stay very, very quiet, they might come back and sing for us again.”

Katherine’s rental car skidded to a halt on the edge of a dirt road, and she opened the door. She slammed it shut again and walked away from the dirt road towards the edge of the forest. The sound of gravel crunching under her boots echoed in the primeval dark. She looked all around, searching for the familiar shimmer of shadows, but saw nothing.

“I did what you wanted. I stopped taking the poison.” She stumbled as she shouted it. “Please ... please come back. You promised ... you promised.” She remembered other promises too. Tears fell down her cheeks.

“Why do you have to marry that woman, Daddy? Don’t you love me anymore?” Katherine pouted and glanced sideways. Her father opened his mouth to speak, but then paused, frowning slightly. The air in the room had shifted—it felt thicker somehow, like the walls were closing in, pressing down on them. Katherine felt it too—a pressure building in her chest, making it harder to breathe. Shadows clung to the corners of the room, snaking across the

walls and ceiling like creeping vines.

Her father cleared his throat, his voice slightly strained. "Sweetheart, you know I love you more than anything in the world. That doesn't mean I can't love her too." He shifted in his seat again, rubbing the back of his neck as if the weight of the room was bearing down on him as well.

"What if Mom comes back? You loved her; you told me so."

"Yes, I did. Of course I did. She loved us too, but remember how I told you it wasn't anyone's fault? She's sick, and I don't think it's good for you to keep hoping for something that can never be."

"I don't think she likes me." Katherine gripped the arms of the sofa, ignoring the hissing whispers that no one else ever seemed to hear. While it was true her future stepmother had done her best to appear kind, Katherine knew better. She heard that woman talk about changing all the furniture. She heard her lie that they would be a happy family. How? SHE wanted to erase every last piece of her real mother—and eventually Katherine too. The woman was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Why couldn't he see it?

"Impossible. Your stepmother will love you as much as I do. How can she not?"

"But they said she will hurt me and send me away."

"Who told you that?"

As her father spoke, the shadows in the corner flickered, inching forward, forming distinct shapes that hovered near his shoulder. Katherine's pulse quickened. Her eyes darted around the room before settling on her lap. Should she tell him? Why couldn't he see them? Grandma had said Mommy could see things too and that she wasn't supposed to tell. Maybe she was more like her mother than she thought. Better not say anything, though—he might send her away, just like they did with Mommy. "Nobody, daddy, I... I meant that I'm worried she will."

He knelt, his eyes locked with hers, and both hands held her shoulders. "Sweetie, I would never let anyone hurt you, and I'd never send you away. Don't you know that?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

She had been following a path for a good while. Too long. Had she made a mistake? Wraithlike tendrils wound and twisted around the trees, their hissing sounds crackling like electricity.

“I thought you’d abandoned me too.” The electric hissing softened and merged with the rustling wind. Katherine reached out to touch the shadowy forms she’d known all her life. She expected them to dissipate like smoke, but her fingers brushed against something solid and cold, sending a shiver up her arm. It was gone in a blink, but her skin tingled, and the sensation lingered.

“Oh, where is it?” She cried as she followed the familiar forest trail. The full moon provided enough light as she looked for the old cabin that marked the path down to the lake. It was cold—colder than she expected—but then it always was when her spirits were around. She shivered and kept walking, shoving one hand in her pocket. With the other, she grabbed the lapels of her raincoat, clenching the smooth fabric so tight the skin around her knuckles burned. It had to be near midnight, which meant she’d been walking for over an hour—she should have reached it by now.

No, she should be home in bed or studying for exams. It had been her father’s dream that she would become the first in the family to earn a degree.

“Daddy, I’m sorry that I didn’t get the university scholarship. I tried, but ...”

He’d taken her for dinner at an expensive French restaurant. It was a treat to celebrate earning her GED and getting accepted into the local community college.

“Don’t be silly. We planned for this. I’ve been saving for this day since you were born, and I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah, but SHE’s not happy. She wanted that Mediterranean cruise, and now it’s my fault you can’t afford to go.” A wispy shadow brushed her hand, and she snapped her hand into her lap.

“What? No, no. She thought it best to wait and see how you manage at school before we...”

“No!” Katherine clenched her fists as an unwelcome memory surfaced—something she wasn’t supposed to bear. Her father and stepmother had thought she was in her room, but she had stood by the door, listening.

“You need to tell her the truth,” her stepmother had said in a hushed voice. “She has a right to know. She’s not a little girl anymore. You can’t hide this from her.”

Her father’s reply had been sharp. “I’m not telling her about that. She

doesn't need to know how it ended for her mother. It would destroy her."

"But you see what's happening to her. You can't keep pretending it's not the same."

Katherine had backed away from the door, her pulse racing. The same as what? What had happened to her mother? What had her father been hiding?

She threw her napkin on the table. "She wants you to send me back to that horrible place with the doctors. You promised me when you married HER you'd never send me away, and then YOU DID!"

Her father put down his fork and stared at his plate. His shoulders sank as though broken by an invisible weight. He glanced at the window, frowning, then shifted in his seat. "Is it me, or is it cold in here?" he murmured, rubbing his arms. The temperature had dropped suddenly—the kind of cold that shouldn't exist on a warm evening like this. Katherine felt it too, and her eyes flicked to the corners of the room where the shadows seemed to thicken, growing deeper, darker. They twisted and writhed, whispering just beyond the edge of her hearing.

Her father spoke, quieter this time. "I thought you said you'd been taking your medication. Your stepmother is concerned there are more pills in the bottle than there should be. Maybe it's time to make an appointment with Dr. Bowman."

Katherine's chest tightened at her father's words. Why didn't he see the way her stepmother looked at her, always watching, waiting for her to slip up? The witch was too perfect, too kind in front of her father, but Katherine knew better. She'd heard the whispered conversations, the plans to change everything in the house, to erase her mother's memory—and eventually, erase her.

"She's telling lies about me. Again! You're the only person in the whole wide world that I love. And now you're telling me she's been snooping in MY ROOM?"

"Let's not do this, sweetheart. Please."

"What? Do what?" She seethed with a sputtering whisper. "Point out you married a gold-digging witch who hates me? Maybe YOU should see Dr. Bowman, so he can explain that SHE's the reason I ran away and found shooting up preferable to spending one more minute living in HER hell."

"Shhh ... I'm sorry. Now isn't the time ... shhh ... I'm sorry," he said in a whispered voice, "I know you had a hard time, and I wish I could go back and make it better."

At least he no longer tried to argue it was Katherine's fault she never gave her stepmother a chance. Every time he took the witch's side, it stabbed her heart with a white-hot knife of betrayal until the pain had her begging for death. Or is that what he wanted—for her to die so he'd be free. No, NO. He wasn't ... he wouldn't do that. She took a deep breath and clenched both fists until her nails dug into the flesh while she counted to ten, a trick she'd learned in therapy. "Okay, then we won't talk about her anymore. Ever. Agreed?"

"Yes." He pushed his still full plate away and slumped in his chair. Several moments passed in silence as he watched her eat dinner with gusto.

She smiled at him; why wouldn't she? He promised to never talk about HER again. Katherine had won.

"I'm glad to see you eating better. How about we go shopping after dinner? We could get you one of those new iPads for school. I hear they're popular."

"And some new clothes? Oh, and what about a car! Then I wouldn't have to take the bus, and ..."

Her father laughed then—the hearty baritone sound that always made her feel like his special little girl. "We'll see, sweetheart. We'll see."

Oh, if only he'd never bought her that horrible car. If only the stepbitch had said no like Katherine expected her to, everything would still be fine, just like before. But because of HER—convincing him it was a good idea—everything was ruined. She'd been turning him against Katherine from the start.

Icy winds drove a heavy mist deeper through the forest, where it curled around the cedar trees like her phantoms. A sudden gust forced a sharp intake of breath, and she gasped. The air smelled and tasted like the first bite of snow, but it was too early for winter. As if mocking her thoughts, a single snowflake drifted down from the sky and landed on her nose.

The forest by the lake was the only place that felt like home now. From the time she learned to walk, she'd hiked those woods with her father every September, just the two of them. He knew every dip, every rock, every twist and turn along the maze of hidden footpaths, but he couldn't help her now—he was dead. There was no one left to lead her through the forest.

Hot tears stung at a cut on her lips pressed tight to hold onto the pain. It was her fault that her father was gone. It was her fault

that he was taken away by a smoldering, twisted pile of red and chrome metal wrapped around a hydro pole. It was her fault because she'd begged him to bring it home from the dealership, despite an impending ice storm.

Katherine, I want you to consider checking into the hospital again. It would only be for a little while, until you can get everything sorted out, and we can see how your new dosage is working. What do you think?" Dr. Bowman didn't look up from the notes he was taking.

Last time, her father had signed the papers to have her committed. She'd been under eighteen, with no say, no power to refuse. He'd done it out of love, but she hadn't understood then—she'd blamed her stepmother, and part of her still did. "I'm an adult now. I don't have to."

The doctor looked up now and studied her for a few seconds before answering. "Your father would want you to. He always wanted what was best for you, and so do I."

Bastard ... he'd been talking to her stepmother. Of course they were all in on it together.

The tree canopy thinned, and the moonlight shone on the remains of the cabin she'd loved so much as a child. Splintered logs peeked out from behind a snarling, bramble thicket. Katherine choked on a sob at the sight of her old friend dying from twisted, thorny vines claiming the abandoned landmark for their own. Tears flowed faster and she picked up the pace, and then—finally—she heard them. The Loons. They were calling, speaking to her as they always did through their special song. The shadows—her shadows—swirled and twisted faster, and faster, moving ahead of her as though urging her onward.

The eerie calls echoed louder through the trees as the shadows crept closer. Katherine froze. The birds had sung before, but never like this—not as if they were answering a call. The air felt heavy, the shadows sharper, more defined. They were listening.

Keep going.

The exposed roots of rotting trees reached out like crooked hands, desperate to snatch her back. She laughed at them. They couldn't stop her—they couldn't even make her stumble.

The trees at the edge of the lake bent low, their branches

twisting in the windless night. Katherine paused, her breath catching in her throat. This was where her parents had met, her father had told her once. He had proposed to her mother right here, by the water's edge, with the loons calling in the distance. The lake had been a place of beginnings then. But everything had changed.

Pale rays of moonlight drew an incandescent path across the glassy surface—she followed it. The heavy blanket of frozen needles that enveloped her body when she waded into the water made her smile. Its embrace held the promise that she would be with her father again, forever. The loons' haunting calls echoed across the water, and for a moment, she saw a figure on the other side of the lake, standing just beyond the mist.

Her mother.

Katherine blinked, her heart pounding. The figure stood still, a shadow framed by moonlight, but as the loons called again, the figure began to shift, its edges blurring. Her mother's shape flickered, dissolving into the water, then reemerging with dark wings, a loon where the shadow had been. The bird's call echoed in her ears, and a sharp understanding washed over her. This lake had always held something more—something her mother had known, something that had drawn them both.

The shadows hovered, swirling like a protective shroud. Were they there to guide her or claim her? She couldn't tell. She didn't care anymore.

Silvery puffs of warm breath vanished as she slipped beneath the surface, and she knew the Loons would follow to guide her home. Katherine merged with the last ripple that faded into the darkness. In that final moment, she heard it—her mother's voice, clear and soft, blending with the loons' song of soulful peace.

The Madeline

by Gil Rognstad

The other day upon the stair

I saw a girl who wasn't there...

“Tell me again about the first time you saw her.”

It was one of those typical therapist questions that wasn't even a question. Dr. Donegan was famous for them. It meant: ‘I don't know what to make of what you're telling me, so I'll pretend that having you say it again will allow me to discern some insightful, life-altering meaning from it that I was too dense to notice the first time.’

“It was a few weeks ago,” I said, making no effort to conceal my annoyance. “Valentine's Day eve. I was in bed—after my date with...I mean I guess I was continuing my date with—”

“So it was the night *before* V-Day.” she said. Another question without a question mark at the end.

“What? Why would I be talking about the night before—”

“You said it was Valentine's Day *Eve*,” she explained. “Christmas Eve is the night before Christmas, New Year's Eve is the night before—”

“Do you interrupt all your patients like this? How do they ever manage to share anything?”

“Maddy,” Dr. Donegan said, “I really don't think this sort of thing is in my wheelhouse. Perhaps you need to consult with a psychic—or maybe...”

“Ghosts aren't real!” I insisted. “Listen...I look up from...well, what Mr. Andrews and I were up to—and there's a dead girl standing at the foot of my bed staring at us—which is clearly a case of my *cabeza* being loco in the...in itself, I guess. That really seemed like an indication that I should see someone who has ‘*loco en la cabeza*’ in their wheelhouse. And that's you.”

“You seem very certain that ghosts aren’t real.”

“Brooke,” I said. “Can I call you Brooke? No? Still no? After all this time? But you can call me ‘Maddy’? Fine. Dr. D., I have to assume that you’ve had lots of schooling to do what you do—much of that schooling presumably scientific in nature—and there’s just no way an educated person like yourself believes that spirits of the undead walk among ‘we the living’.”

“What I believe or don’t believe isn’t the topic of discussion here,” Dr. Donegan said.

“Forget it, then,” I said. “Let my *cabeza* be loco. I’ll just talk to the non-existent ghost the next time she shows up and ask her if she’s real. When she says she isn’t, I’ll have my answer.”

“So you think you’ll see her again.”

I was done looking for help in the Land of Questionless Questions. I left.

Dr. Dumbagain having been of no use whatsoever, I decided that I really would try to talk to the ghost girl next time she showed up. She seemed to be trying to tell me something. Whatever figment born of misfiring neurons she was, maybe trying to communicate with her would help. I figured if *I* was a ghost I’d be frustrated at not being able to tell someone about it, so I would probably appreciate people at least *trying* to take an interest.

The problem was that Mr. Andrews was no longer ‘in the picture’. I wasn’t totally sure that, er... ‘fun of an adult nature’ was what was triggering the appearance of my little ghost girl, but that did happen to be was going on whenever she appeared. I had seen her three times, and she had always appeared at moments of...let’s just call them ‘moments of heightened sensitivity during and immediately after the intense release of...pent-up energies’. My pent-up energies were not being drawn out by Mr. A. anymore, as I had recently caught him sharing *his* pent-up energies with the obnoxious twins who lived in the apartment below mine. So he’s gone.

Anyway, I wasn’t about to run out and find a new Mr. A. just to entice a ghost girl to show herself. I just had to trust that she’d show up again without the show—although I figured I also might

try releasing a bit of pent-up energy on my own and see what came of that...

I woke up in a damp shiver and sat up in bed, drenched in sweat. The shiver repeated itself—not in a cold way, but in a seventh-wave kind of way—and I suddenly wished that I could remember what I had been dreaming about. That’s when I saw the girl. She was at the foot of my bed in her usual spot, staring at me with the silliest of grins on her face. You’ve seen this on kids’ faces, I’m sure. Like when they have a funny joke to tell you—one that they’re *sure* you’ve never heard before and will find absolutely hilarious.

“Hi,” I said. The look on her face didn’t change. I couldn’t tell if she was hearing me or seeing me. My still-half-asleep brain wondered: *What if to her, I’m the ghost?*

“So...come here often?” I improvised, trying to come up with something that might elicit a response. “I like your dress. Did you get it at the Creepy Ghost Girl Dress Outlet off the interstate?”

No response. But I suddenly realized that I hadn’t seen that dress on her before. I had been overly occupied with Mr. A. the other times I had seen her, but I didn’t remember noticing anything about what she was wearing—or if she had been wearing anything at all; you know how ghosts can be all foggy and blurry around the edges. Now she seemed a little more solid than she was the first few times, though. In spite of my joke, her yellow sundress with little blue butterflies on it was *not* something they would sell at a Creepy Ghost Girl Dress Outlet; it was just the kind of cute, bare-shoulder, summer sundress that any nine-year-old would naturally wear on a sunny day in May or June for an outing to the zoo, or—

“Who are you?” I asked her. “Did you die of something traumatic? Is that why you’re here? Do you need someone to solve your murder? Or lead someone to your body?”

She just kept smiling at me.

“You know that ghosts aren’t real, right?” I tried next.

Her smile faded. She pointed at me. It was a slow, gentle two-handed gesture, her hands facing each other like she was holding an invisible ball out towards me. Then her hands rotated a bit, moving to the underside of the invisible ball. She seemed to be holding an

imaginary gift out towards me. No, not a gift; an offering. Then her hands flew upwards as if she were tossing a double-handful of flower petals into the air. Then she smiled again.

“Can you hear me?” I asked her. “Can I hear you? Can you talk?”

I must have blinked. If I did, she blipped out during the two tenths of a second that my eyes were closed. My bedroom looked like she had never been there. Suddenly I was just a crazy woman sitting up in bed in the middle of the night trying to convince myself that something I had dreamed wasn't real.

“Maddy, hi. I'm sorry to be calling you like this. Do you have a minute?”

“Dr. Donegan,” I said, surprised at the sound of her voice. Usually when my phone showed a call in its queue from her office, it wasn't the doctor herself calling, but some member of her staff phoning to cancel or reschedule an appointment. “I didn't miss an appointment, did I? I thought I had canceled them all.”

“No, no,” she said, her voice rushed, hushed, and strangely intense, “nothing like that. And please—call me ‘Brooke’. I'm...I guess I'm not your therapist anymore. I'm calling more as a friend at the moment.”

“Let's say ‘more as an acquaintance’,” I corrected her.

“I deserve that,” she said. “I apologize for bothering you—I really do—but I had to reach out... Well, you're going to think this is crazy... I mean...”

“There's nothing you could say that I would consider crazy,” I assured her, hoping that she was catching the generous portion of sarcasm I had poured over the words.

“I deserve that, too,” she said. “Look, that's why I'm calling. It's about the girl you saw. I mean, not about her, exactly, but a different girl. I mean... I'm sorry. I'm so flustered. It's just that... I saw one this morning.”

“Saw one what?”

“A girl. Near my bed.”

“Go on...” I said.

“She didn't look like your girl, At least I don't think she did.

About the same age, maybe. Eight? Nine? Dark hair. Pale skin. I guess all ghosts have pale skin, maybe...”

“Ghosts aren’t real,” I reminded her.

“Maybe they didn’t used to be, or maybe they were a very infrequent thing in years past, but... Maddy... I... Other people are seeing them, too.”

“Other people?”

“I did some research online, and they’re...they’re everywhere. Lots of people are seeing them! More every day!”

By the end of the day, I was caught up on what she was talking about. It was all over everything that had a screen or a user interface. People were seeing ghost-children all over the world. For most people they appeared for a minute or two after they awoke. They always smiled. They always put their hands out, palm-to-palm, then shifted them into an offering gesture, and then acted like they were casting the offering into the air.

I wasn’t crazy! Or if I was, everyone was...

The Global Celebration has been underway now for a few weeks. They don’t wait for us to awaken in dark rooms, anymore. They walk with us freely during the day and stay near us at night while we sleep.

Every person on the planet has one. In some cultures they’ve taken to calling them ‘shadows’, and that seems to be the name that most people are using now. Each person can only see their own ‘shadow’, but everyone has one. We still don’t know why they suddenly appeared, but they all smile, they all make the same three gestures, and they...they just make all of us feel...content. Happy. At peace.

Of course I’ve been following the news of them quite obsessively, trying to gather as much information as I can. I still don’t believe in ghosts, but these ‘shadows’ have got to be *something*, and I’m determined to figure out what it’s all about.

Every religion on the planet has come out with ‘God’s truth’ about what’s happening, and how it all ties perfectly into their preferred belief system. Of course those ‘definite’ explanations are so utterly contradictory they might as well be arguing about Glinda

the Good or Cinderella's Fairy Godmother or Godzilla.

An endless parade of experts claim that they are 'manifestations of our better natures' or 'unresolved childhood trauma that we are addressing together' or...just dozens of other pseudo-intellectual-sounding things.

An endless parade of politicians assure us that the 'agents' are evidence of a new form of psychological warfare, and that 'the enemy' is using them to get us to 'lower our defenses'. Every world leader insists that they be granted unlimited war-powers immediately so they can address the 'imminent threat'. Who 'the enemy' is depends on which nation's leader you listen to, but no one is paying attention to their nonsense anymore. Whatever is happening, it doesn't feel threatening in any way, and the blathering of our puffed-up 'leaders' is only showing us how silly they've been for years—always pretending that the world is full of danger and that only *they* can protect us, while we elect (or tolerate) them over and over thinking maybe they really *are* doing something to keep us safer. When you start railing against cute, peaceful ghost-children, though, you just look foolish.

An endless parade of crackpots insist that they are the vanguard of an alien invasion, here to feel out our planetary defenses and prepare the way for the coming assault.

An endless parade of influencers draw and animate and write about their shadows, and to be honest, that's probably where we're getting the best information about them. Based on that kind of grass-roots information sharing, we know that each person's shadow looks a lot like them—ethnically or culturally, I mean. And that they smile. And that they all do the same gestures.

Here's something surprising: they *don't* all do the same gestures! Well, they do, but— Let me back up a bit.

I've been watching hundreds of stories online about the shadows (with my own shadow at my elbow smiling and gesturing from time to time, of course), and I've come to realize that they aren't all doing the gestures the same way.

Mine points directly at me when she does the 'offering' thing, but other people report that their shadows present their offerings

in different directions. Some of them face away, some gesture off to one side... It seems random.

I've started an open database online, and I've posted hundreds of comments around the 'net asking people to get a compass or something and tell me which direction their shadows point when they do the gestures. I'll see if any patterns emerge from the data.

I've added a field to the database. I'm asking people to provide the exact date and time that they first saw their shadow, if they know it.

Also, they seem to be getting 'clearer' for everyone. Less foggy. More solid-looking. I can see now that mine has on the cutest little shoes. They are sparkly and purple and don't match the yellow sundress at all, but she doesn't seem to care. I can also see a little red clip in her hair that doesn't at all go with the rest of the outfit. When I was her age, I'm sure that would have driven me crazy. Well...no, I wasn't like that until I became an angsty teen. I guess when I was eight or nine I probably wouldn't have cared.

But anyway, they are more 'solid' for everyone now—not just for me.

The database has been up for a few days now. It has a lot of fans! All kinds of delightfully nerdy people are sifting the data and coming up with conclusions, and...well, it's unbelievable, but all of it confirms the same two facts...

Fact One: No one on earth saw their ghost-child before I saw mine. Mine was the first. I guess someone could still report otherwise, but hundreds of records are added to the database every few minutes, and mine is still the earliest timestamp in the `FIRST_APPEARANCE` field.

Fact Two: No matter where someone is on earth, their ghost-child is 'offering' towards the same spot. Sometimes the person is between their ghost-child and 'the spot', and it looks to them like their ghost-child is pointing right at them, but at other times, the ghost-child points away from them—always towards 'the spot'. This is very strange to me, since mine has never pointed her offering in any direction except straight towards me.

The Nerd Army has done millions of triangulation calculations,

and they've found that the spot moves around a little bit, but not much. And it's somewhere in my city!

Whatever started all of this, it's somewhere close to here!

She spoke to me. My yellow-sundress-wearing ghost-girl. She said something, and I actually heard her!

Well, I say 'spoke', but it was more of a whisper. The faintest thing ever. I got really close to her (although you can never get *too* close to them or they fade a bit and reappear a meter or two away from you—but I got as close as I could), and I could almost hear her words.

They are becoming more substantial in more ways than just visually, I guess. I also noticed that whenever the ghost-children exhibit a new characteristic or behavior it seems to happen with mine a few days before it starts happening all over.

It seems that my ghost-child really was the first.

If she keeps getting more substantial, maybe I'll be able to understand what she's saying soon!

She's me. She says she's me.

I ask her what that means. I didn't die when I was nine. She smiles again, and I see myself in her. I even remember my yellow sundress...my purple sparkle-shoes...my little red hair clip...

She tells me that she came to me before the others because I'm the last one. I ask her what she means. She smiles.

"You're the last!" she says. "This story is done. The last shall be first."

"I don't understand," I say.

"I am you, but you become me," she says, as if that makes perfect sense. "No one knows what they will become until the time is fulfilled and all is made known. You are becoming new, but not really, because you were you, and then you were all the others—but at the end you become yourself. Me. Us."

"So you're the...the version of me...that I get to be now? Forever?"

"Whatever you think forever means, it's not that. I was like you—I *was* you—I *am* you in all your moments and in all moments that

have ever been, but that story is finished now. Those moments and days are passing away. I was so much older then...”

“...but I’m younger than that now.”

“Exactly!”

Without another word, she reaches into my chest, cups her hands beneath our soul, and—

Worms With Angry Faces

by C.D. Johnson

GORBEIA, BASQUE COUNTRY. MIDDAY.

MORU

"Gorbeia... Traditional reference point for Basque mountaineers... Peaks such as Gorbeia, Aldamin, Oketa, Berretin... Spectacular nature of its landscapes...the strategic situation of this mountain range...close to a number of neighboring population centers, have made Gorbeia one of the most frequented mountain ranges. ...Used by hikers, mountain bike enthusiasts and horse riders... Made much easier by the network of signposted paths...in addition to the GR and PR designed by the Mountain Federations."

BURAN

Huh?! – When was that written?

MORU

Uhhh... 2018.

BURAN

Hmmm. Much changed in 60 years, huh?

MORU

Well, it still has its charm.

BURAN

But none of its tourism.

(checks phone)

Realtime sat-scan says not another person around for ten miles in any direction.

MORU

Really?! – I know this is old country, but, Jeebus! Talk about a decline in a local economy. It hasn't even flooded that much in this region. Why the dead zone?

BURAN

Well, despite no flooding, it's pretty hot here most of the year. Not like six decades ago when we still had ozone. ...At least we won't have to worry about anyone stealing the PAV.

MORU

No one is going to steal the PAV! I seriously doubt anyone around here even knows how to fly a personal air vehicle, anyway... Though, maybe we should have stopped at the tourist post first, just in case.

BURAN

Why? So, they could steer us toward one of the paid tours. Nah.

MORU

And you are sure we are allowed to come here?

BURAN

It's a mountain. Who regulates a mountain? Not even much of a mountain. Not a great deal of green except for this area.

MORU

This way!

Moru and Buran begin to walk across the valley down from the hill on which they landed their vehicle. The air is cool enough, though a moldy humidity seems to hang in the air in defiance of a southward breeze. Past ancient oaks and serpentine bush, they climb downward into a ravine running with muddy waters, but enough ground to traverse. When on level ground again, Moru, walking ahead of Buran, takes out her phone and begins to read as

she walks.

MORU

"Even though a life can consist of..."

BURAN

Don't trip!

MORU

I won't... "Still, too many moments for our small minds to hold onto. Even if time never forgets, we ourselves can only manage to hold onto that which made a big enough impression to be cherished and honored. Ashes among burning embers. But even the ashes themselves will burn eventually, reduced to nothing substantial at all. A hint of the fragrance of the absolute, disembodied, and diffused through space and time. // Yes, Time is the only thing of true value in the universe. This is why, with every New Year, we have to remind ourselves to spend every moment of it wisely and with verve. Because for us small things – us tiny little blinks – it runs out rather quickly. And if you are not paying close enough attention, you find yourself... in the red."

BURAN

Okayyy... Interesting. Who was that agai-

MORU

(looking up from her phone and back at Buran)

Buran...

BURAN

What?

Moru points behind Buran.

To the east of their direction, a cliff face they just passed, and a yellowish cave, like a deep wound in the earth. At its base, a small pool of

clear but green water.

The two progress towards the cave, eventually getting to the pool. They cross over without much care, the water rising to nearly the top of their thigh-high rubber boots, and the bottom of their backpacks.

MORU

We have to go in.

BURAN

Do we really? Because I don't think tha-

MORU

Oh... So... You intend to puss out on me again?

BURAN

?! - When do I ever puss out?

MORU

New York. Halloween. East Village.

With a displeased look on his face, Buran climbs up out of the water and onto the cave's entrance. He reaches back to help Moru up, as well.

BURAN

Weird mud.

MORU

Very weird.

The entirety of the cave, from floor to walls to ceiling, is covered in a pale grayish-yellow mud. Though, solid. And rubbery. More like leather than earthen. Not slippery. Moru stoops down momentarily to examine strange patterns in the mud, almost like drawings. Geometric.

As Buran and Moru step deeper in, Buran takes out his phone and turns on the light. However, it really isn't all that necessary as the midday sun refracts off of the pool, illuminating the interior of the cave with a dance of blue and

green across the pale walls. The cave is eerie in that the mud seems to flow out of the cave into the water, but no flow of water from within the cave is in sight. It rained recently. You would think there would be.

MORU

How like a mouth; though, not a tooth poking out anywhere. Totally smooth, all the way through.

BURAN

I thought it would be slippery in here.

MORU

So did I.
(looking back towards the entrance)

As Moru looks back, she notices a man, a hiker maybe, peering around the edge of the cave's entrance. He quickly moves away, out of sight.

MORU (CONT'D)

Buran!

BURAN

Hmmm?
(looking back at Moru)

MORU

A man.

BURAN

What man?

MORU

A man. There was a man.

Buran takes Moru's hand and pulls her deeper into the cave with him. He turns off his phone's light and pulls up his sat-scan app. Satellite infrared.

MORU

That's realtime, right?

BURAN

Yes. – Well, no. There is about a half-minute latency. But obviously, it should pick up anyone this deep into the valley. Took us at least 45 minutes to get here. – Annnd... Nothing. No one is out there.

MORU

Then your phone is gaslighting us because I know what I saw.

BURAN

Well, I don't know what to tell you. Maybe he is under something out there? The cliff?

Moru has an annoyed look on her face that starts to turn into fear.

BURAN

I'll go out and check.

MORU

NO! Don't! What if he's armed?

BURAN

...Okay. Let's just sit tight for a little while and see if he shows himself again.

Moru starts to look anxiously around in the cave. There is a deeper path further beyond the lit entrance.

MORU

If anything, we can always run in that direction, I suppose.

Clutching her phone, she sits down on the leathery mud. Buran joins Moru in sitting on the cave floor.

BURAN

Don't worry about anything. I'm sure it was just another tourist who probably got nervous when he saw other people here.

MORU

Probably.

BURAN

Read some more of that essay while we wait.

MORU

That was the end of it. Just some song lyrics after.

BURAN

Okay. Got another one?

MORU

Yeah. Uh...

(scrolling her phone)

How about, "IN MY ERROR, MY WRONGNESS"?

BURAN

Same guy?

MORU

Uh hun.

BURAN

Give it to me!

MORU

"Friends, enemies, frenemies, strangers... Well, it's happened. It's not often that I am wrong about something. In fact, it is damn near impossible that I ever am. I'm too good for that. But this time, I cannot deny it. I was wrong..."

GORBEIA, BASQUE COUNTRY. APPROACHING AFTERNOON.

Moru lies on her side on the cave floor. Buran is right beside her, lying on his back as far as she can tell. Moru cannot move. She's conscious, but her body won't respond. She's not quite sure how they managed to get into the positions that they are in. It's all kind of fuzzy.

That moldy humidity hangs in the air of the cave, strange particles dancing in the light of the sinking sun. Almost like they're wiggling. Moru looks towards the mouth of the cave... And there he is. The man. A climber, it seems. He's wearing lots of gear, spikes and ropes. Old-style gear, like from a long time ago when mountain climbing was a new, amateur enthusiast sport.

The man begins to walk towards Moru and Buran's position, which to her estimation was deeper within the cave than what she remembered. She tries to mouth the word "help", anticipating that he wasn't there to harm them - and perhaps she had been too paranoid before. But her lips and tongue won't move either.

The climber moves through the cave slowly, looking around and feeling out the leathery walls. He smiles to himself and moves a bit further in. About a dozen feet away from Moru, he sets down his gear. Taking out a paper journal, he begins to write down notes. Though, he doesn't seem to be very interested in her and Buran at all. Does he intend to just leave them there? Or does he have other ideas?

The climber sits down on the cave floor, as they did. He takes a lamp off of his pack - an antique lamp by the looks of it - and sits it next to him. He takes off the top, takes out a box of matches, strikes one, and lights the lamp. The cave glows much brighter, and Moru can see that they are indeed far deeper into the cave than she had thought. Had she and Buran really come that deep? Or did the climber do something to them, and while they were unconscious, moved them deeper into the cave?

Still, the climber was carrying on as if Moru and Buran weren't even there. Once again, he takes out his journal and began to write. At this point, Moru was panicking, albeit silently in the shadows, just at the edge of the lamp-cast.

Then she notices that the climber has stopped writing. He seemed disturbed by something. He begins to feel around the leathery floor both

before him, and then beneath him. He stands and looks at Moru – or perhaps, just beyond her. A troubled look is on his face. He reaches down to his pack and takes off a pickax. Moru heart begins to race, loud enough for her to feel it pushing at her rib cage. Has he gone mad?!

The climber takes a step towards the lamp on the floor and swings his pickax down hard. He pulls it up, leaving a two-inch tear in the leathery mud. At first, there is nothing peculiar. But then, suddenly, a rush of yellow air from the hole. Then, more wiggly things in the air, swimming past the dimming light of the lamp. As if some foul gas was released through the puncture. And in a second or two, the climber falls to the floor, his body stiffening.

«No, no...» he says in labored breath. «...Haserre aurpegidun zizareak.»

The Basque language of the Euskaldunaks, the mountain people, but Moru can't discern their meaning. She only took two classes. Whatever the words, they accompany a look of pure terror on the climber's face. Seemingly, now as unable to move as Moru. Perhaps he had taken in much more of the miasma than Moru and Buran did, maybe slowly seeping out of the floor. If the odd climber had intended to help them at some point, he certainly couldn't now.

Then Moru notices it. The sound. A sound in her ear pressed against the floor. Sound like a stream of water moving beneath the pale yellow-gray mud. At this point, the climber seemed to be staring right at Moru where he lay.

CLIMBER

(repeating in a whisper)

Haserre aurpegidun zizareak. Haserre
aurpegidun zizareak.

MORU

(screaming in her head)

What?! What?!

Then like a thin string moving across the floor at

first, followed by a sudden rush of vibrating rope, white worms came rushing out of the hole the climber had created and swarmed his body. There was no sound that the climber could make, his throat paralyzed, his lungs too heavy with gas. Moru could see the worms rush him, and then seemingly disappear beneath him. All but two, that is.

The two pulsating white worms inched their way towards Moru. The light of the lamp was still dimmed in the thick miasma, but Moru could see clearly enough to make out the movement of the worms. And as they inched closer to her face, Moru could see. She could see... Worms with angry faces. Almost human-like faces, crawling towards her eyes. With the last bit of strength that Moru believed she had, she forced close her eyelids. And the darkness took her completely. The darkness, and the continuous sounds of movement beneath the leathery floor of the cave.

GORBEIA. NIGHT.

Moru's eyes open. She is awake. She's not sure how long she was unconscious, but the mouth of the cave in the distance was a solid disk of black. She could still feel Buran's body pressed against hers she thought, and the light of the lamp was bright again. But, too bright. It had been moved closer to her. Nearly in front of her face. It was hard for her to focus her sight, but eventually, Moru could make out her arm.

The worms seemed to be all gone at first, but then she made out movement among her clothes. And then, her hand. Though, it seemed oddly flattened across the floor. And bloody. Though, she could feel no pain.

Then Moru realized what she was seeing, and her panic returned. The flesh of her hand was there, but flat. Deflated. Like a thing with no bone. And the worms, they were working. Working hard to tear at the flesh. These eight-inch worms, tearing at her flesh and chewing it in their angry mouths.

Then they would travel across the floor, finding indentations in the mud made by footprints, and spitting out the pulpy, bloody mess as if patching up the floor with it.

Despite the state of her, Moru could move her head slightly. There was other activity among the worms. At her exposed leg, a rip in her flesh. And the white worms were eating at her. Eating her alive. Though, not all of her. As the flesh was being carried away, she could see... The worms were eating her bones. Her calcium-rich bones. Bit by little bit. Eating them away with their angry little faces. Swimming through her flesh. Hissing ever so quietly as if enthusiastic for the meal.

Such terror, Moru had never felt. Such utter despair. Screaming silently in her mind, Moru asked herself:

«Why am I not dead?! Goddess, why am I not dead?!»

Moru manages to move her head in a different direction, away from the gruesome spectacle. But, it was at that point that she noticed the pickax lying nearby, only a couple of feet. Not that it would do her any good. And the clothes near her exposed arm were not hers. They appeared to be the clothes of the climber.

Moru struggled to turn her head further; and when she did, in the distance she could see herself, deeper in the dark, lying on her side, eyes closed. Buran was lying near her mirror-image.

MORU

(in a muted, cold, last breath)

What the fuck—!

And with that, the angry little worms begin to swarm about her face. As the darkness took her once again, she heard a noise in the distance. Voices coming from the direction of the mouth of the cave. They were faint, but she could hear:

«A man. — What man? — A man. There was a man.»

GORBEIA. MIDDAY.

Buran takes Moru's hand and pulls her deeper into the cave with him. He turns off his phone's light and pulls up his sat-scan app. Satellite infrared.

MORU

What the fuck!?!

(pulling her hand out of
Buran's, open-mouthed, tears
running down her face)

BURAN

Hey! – Take it easy, I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, okay?

MORU

What?!

BURAN

It's probably just some hiker.

MORU

No... What? – How did we...

BURAN

(looking at his phone's screen)
...Nothing. It says no one is around.
Are you sure you—

MORU

We're going!
(rushing out of the cave)

Buran takes one last look around the entrance of the cave, shakes his head, and follows Moru out across the pooling water. As they walk up the side of the ravine, Buran puts his hand beneath her butt and pushes her up faster. At the top of the ravine, Buran moves away.

BURAN

And I'm supposed to be the puss?
Jeebus H. Krishna, girl!

Moru looks back one more time. And there, leaning against the rocks at the entrance of the cave, the climber

whose face she can now make out.
Graying brown hair, mustache, in his
30s, seemingly with new clothes and
gear. Though, all outdated. Him,
writing notes in his journal.

Finally, he turns and enters into the cave.
Though, he stops just at the entrance and turns to
face Moru. As if recognizing that she is there. He
waves as if surprised to see her there, then turns
once again to face the cave – and is gone,
blending into shadow.

GORBEIA. APPROACHING AFTERNOON.

As Moru and Buran reach their PAV, a miniature
helicopter, there are a couple of locals, a man
and woman, looking over the vehicle. Buran waves
hello.

GIZONA (MAN)

Hiking?

BURAN

Yeah. – I'm Buran.
(shaking the man's hand)

GIZONA

I'm–

EMAKUMEA (WOMAN):

(interrupting with an annoyed
look on her face)

No one is supposed to hike here
anymore.

BURAN

Oh? – Why is that?

EMAKUMEA

You hikers are trouble.

GIZONA

Don't mind her. About twelve years
ago, a number of hikers went missing
on the mountain. The Boars and the

deer, as well. Numbers dropped dramatically. So, probably over-hunting by the tourists.

MORU

What about the ones who disappeared?

GIZONA

Who knows. Haserre aurpegidun zizareak, maybe. They make a meal of bone and a home out of flesh.

MORU

What was that?! ...That phrase – what does it mean?!

EMAKUMEA

(yelling at the man)

Shut up, stupid! There is no such thing! Why do you always start with that antzinako mitoa nonsense.

(walks away)

GIZONA

Goodbye, friends!

(chases after woman)

Moru gets into the PAV as Buran puts their backpacks into the storage compartment on the side. She takes out her phone and pulls up her Basque translation app. She types in "Haserre aurpegidun zizareak". And the app returns a translation:

"Worms with angry faces..."

Harriet's Quest

by Jacqueline S. Miller

The hour was late when Harriet arrived home. Flickering lanterns lit up the courtyard, reflecting orange light on the puddles between the cobblestones and onto the castle's stone walls.

Harriet sprang down from the carriage and hurried up the castle steps.

"School's finished forever!" she cried as she charged into the grand hallway, her cheeks flushed, her heart filled with happiness. "Throw away my school books, Wilf - I'm free at last!"

Wilf, the lame, hunchbacked footman, traipsed behind Harriet, lugging her bags along the cobblestones. His wheezes and coughs echoed loudly through the damp night air.

"Where is everyone?" Harriet asked as she looked around. "I thought Mother would be here to greet me." She stared up at the paintings on the walls. "And where's Mother's portrait? Who's put that ugly thing in its place?"

Instead of the painting of Harriet's beautiful mother with her long blonde hair and delicate features, there was a larger one of a dark haired, horse-faced woman in a red dress.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," Wilf muttered gruffly as he dragged the bags across the floor.

Harriet was suddenly aware of a pale figure standing above her on the first-floor balcony. But as she focused her gaze, the being faded from view. Harriet rubbed her eyes and looked again, but there was no one there.

"Ah, Harriet. I see you've arrived safely." A portly, bearded man, dressed in a velvet smoking jacket and dark trousers, emerged from the shadowy living room doorway.

"Father!" Harriet cried.

She rushed forward to embrace him, but was stopped by the appearance of a tall, dark-haired woman who now stood beside

Father, her arm entwined with his in a decidedly intimate manner.

She was identical to the horsey faced woman depicted in the portrait. Her wide mouth stretched into an uneven, yellow toothed smirk as she gazed at Harriet.

“Edwin, you must introduce us,” she said in a hoarse rasp of a voice.

“Who are you?” Harriet demanded, forgetting her manners. “And where’s Mother?”

Edwin and the woman exchanged meaningful glances.

“This is your cousin, Briana,” Edwin said. “She’s staying here with us.”

“But where’s Mother?”

“Do you want to tell her, Edwin?” Briana asked. “Or shall I?”

Edwin frowned. He stepped forward and gently took Harriet’s hand. “I’m so sorry, my child, but I have some bad news for you.”

“We didn’t want to upset you while you were away at school,” Briana said.

“We decided to let you complete your last school term, before we told you,” Edwin continued.

“Told me what?” Harriet asked impatiently. But even as she asked the question, she knew the dreadful truth.

“Your poor, dear mother is dead,” Briana said.

Harriet emitted a terrible scream. Her legs gave way beneath her and she crumpled to the floor.

“No, I don’t believe it. I won’t believe it. You’re lying!”

Harriet sat shuddering and sobbing for some time. Her father tried to comfort her but Briana grew bored and went up to bed. At last Edwin told Wilf to summon Harriet’s former nurse, Mary.

The old woman came bustling into the hall, and immediately took charge, allowing Edwin to go to his bedchamber.

“There, there my pet. It’s not your fault.” Mary folded her arms around Harriet and clucked like the proverbial mother hen. “What a nasty shock you’ve had. I warned your father not to keep the news from you. But that Briana, she convinced him she knew better.”

At length, Mary managed to persuade the distraught girl to accompany her upstairs. A maid fetched some supper but Harriet

refused to eat, or drink the hot sweet tea. She tore at her clothes and cried for the mother she would never see again.

At last she was persuaded to go to bed.

“But only if you stay with me, Mary,” Harriet pleaded, her eyes wet with tears. “I don’t want to be alone.”

Mary agreed. She made up the spare bed in the corner and had the maid fetch her nightgown.

“Why it’s just like old times, when we used to share the nursery,” she said as she straightened Harriet’s blankets and tucked her in.

“How can you say that, when Mother is dead?” Harriet demanded fiercely. “And why did no one tell me? I should have attended her funeral.”

“Your father just ... Oh, never mind. You cry as much as you like, Harriet dear. It’s important to grieve. I know I did when my mother died. In fact, you never stop grieving. You just have to get used to it...”

Harriet cried herself to sleep. She woke in the middle of the night, hungry and thirsty, and keen to get answers to the many questions concerning Mother’s death. She drank the cold tea and munched some bread and cheese. Mary was snoring in the corner and Harriet debated what to do before her curiosity won over her better nature, and she padded across the room to prod the nurse.

“Oy Mary! Wake up!”

Mary groaned, but soon her eyes flickered open.

“What is it, my pet?”

“I want you to tell me the whole story. How did Mother die and when? And who’s this Briana? I’m sure I’ve never heard of her before.”

Mary propped herself up on her pillow, moving over so that Harriet could sit beside her.

“Tell me everything you know, Mary. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Well, it all started when your cousin Briana arrived here a few days after you went back to school. She’d written to say she was a distant relative of your mother’s. She didn’t bring much in the way of clothes with her, so she started borrowing your mother’s things — her dresses, her furs and even her jewellery. And then, I’m not

sure if I should tell you this but, well, you're old enough to understand. One of the maids said she saw Briana coming out of your father's bed chamber."

"What? At night?"

"Yes, and first thing in the morning. On several occasions, I might add."

"And Mother didn't know?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. About a week after Briana arrived, your mother, God rest her soul, got taken ill. Your father had her moved to the West Wing. She had a terrible fever and was coughing something awful."

"Didn't Father call a doctor?"

"Yes, of course he did, but it wasn't the fever that killed her."

"Then what, how? How did she die?"

"She fell down the stairs. She toppled from the balcony and broke her neck when she landed in the hall."

"Oh!" Harriet gasped trying not to cry. But something bothered her. She remembered the faded figure she had seen on the balcony. Could she ask Mary about that? No, surely it was her overactive imagination. Ghosts didn't really exist, did they?

"Oh, and there's something else." Mary paused. "Your father and Cousin Briana are engaged to be married."

"What! You mean..."

"Yes." Mary sighed. "I'm sorry, but Briana is to be your stepmother..."

Harriet waited until Mary had fallen asleep again. When she heard the old woman's regular snores, Harriet slipped out of bed, only putting on her cloak and shoes when she reached the corridor.

Now, by the light of the lanterns dotted at intervals along the castle walls, Harriet made her way to the entrance hall. She stood gazing up at the balcony.

"Mother?" she whispered. "Mother, are you there?"

A cold breeze blew across the hallway, ruffling Harriet's blonde hair, causing her to shiver despite her fur-lined cloak. She moved to stand in the exact spot from whence she had earlier seen the phantom.

“Mother? Please don’t hide.”

Something stirred. A ghostly white replica of Harriet’s mother stood on the balcony. It raised its transparent arms and fell forward, toppling down the stairs. Harriet gasped and stepped backwards, shocked as the spectre landed at her feet.

The ghost stared up at her, then reached out its hand.

“My daughter. I have been awaiting your return.”

Harriet stood transfixed, unable to reply.

“Revenge!” the ghost continued. “My daughter, you must get revenge.”

“Revenge? But Mother, you had an accident...”

The ghost rose angrily to its full height. Its feet hovered several inches above the ground, its terrible pallid face inches from Harriet’s.

“No! I was murdered. That’s why I’m here. I cannot rest nor move on.” The ghost floated back up to the balcony and then toppled back down the stairs, somersaulting down until it landed at Harriet’s feet.

“I didn’t just fall. Cousin Briana pushed me.”

“Briana murdered you?”

“Yes!” hissed the ghost. “She was always jealous of me. She pretended to nurse me when I was ill. But I knew what she was up to. She’s evil through and through. I refused to drink the poison she offered me, so she pushed me down the stairs.” The ghost wailed, an unearthly dreadful sound. Harriet put her hands over her ears while tears streamed down her face.

“Murdered. But ... how can I get revenge?”

The ghost raised its arms, and a dagger dislodged itself from a wall bracket. It whizzed through the air, landing with a clatter at Harriet’s feet.

Harriet picked it up. “Isn’t there an easier way?”

“You must kill Briana and thereby set my soul free!”

“I’ll ... I’ll do my best,” Harriet stammered.

“Use this weapon wisely and well, my Harriet,” hissed the ghost...and vanished.

Harriet stood for a moment trying to control the trembling that shook her being. Murdered! Her mother had been murdered and

now must she, Harriet, commit murder too?

But first, she needed proof. And then, how could she kill Briana? Concealing the dagger beneath her cloak, Harriet tiptoed back to her room. She pondered many questions until dawn when she fell into an uneasy sleep.

The following morning Harriet slept late while the nurse and the maids bustled about the room, lighting the fire and dusting the furniture.

“Poor little lamb,” Mary said, pulling the blanket up over Harriet’s shoulders. “I’ll let her sleep. She’s had such a nasty shock.”

“As have we all,” the maid agreed. “What with the mistress dying in that awful way, and then that horrid woman getting engaged to Mr Edwin and ordering us about. And what about the ghost...”

“Hush, Daisy!” Mary grabbed the maid’s arm. “How many times have I told you not to speak about such things.” She looked anxiously across at Harriet who had stirred in her bed.

“But you’ve seen it, too,” Daisy protested. “It was here last night when Miss Harriet arrived. Standing on the balcony, it was, awaiting her arrival. It’s Mr Edwin’s late wife come back to punish him for being unfaithful.”

“Daisy, haven’t you got work to do elsewhere?”

“All right, I’m going. But mark my words, it doesn’t bode well for this family.”

Harriet waited until the door clicked shut. She had been feigning sleep and had heard every word.

“So I’m not going mad,” she told herself. “Others have seen Mother’s ghost too.”

But no one else had spoken to the ghost or been given a mission to kill.

Harriet washed and dressed hurriedly. She concealed the dagger under her cloak and went in search of the enemy.

First she went to the West Wing. Inside her mother’s former sick room, the bed had been stripped of its sheets so there were no clues there. But at the bottom of the closet, Harriet found a diary,

written in Mother's distinctive handwriting. She flicked quickly through the pages, starting with Briana's arrival. Subsequent entries described how, after welcoming this supposed cousin, Mother had grown to loathe and fear her:

"I'm sure she is jealous of me. She has hypnotised Edwin and made him fall in love with her.

She has stolen my jewellery.

She is trying to poison me —but I refused to drink the warm milk she brought me. I gave it to the cat and it died.

I am scared — she is coming to get me!!!"

Harriet stormed through the castle, seeking Briana but she was nowhere to be found. At last she climbed the spiral staircase to the battlements, where Briana stood looking out at the dark clouds passing across the blackening sky.

Harriet hesitated, the dagger gripped tightly in her hand. It would be so easy to stab the evil woman in the back, but that seemed such a cowardly thing to do.

"She killed Mother," Harriet reminded herself. "Your quest is to avenge her death."

Before Harriet could move, Briana sensed her presence and turned to face her. She stared at Harriet, her eyes glinting red in her strange angular face as she espied the dagger in the girl's hand.

"You're wasting your time!" Briana screeched, her long fang-like teeth prominent in her wide mouth. "You cannot defeat me! Tomorrow, I shall marry your father and this castle shall be mine!"

"Never!" Harriet rushed towards her but Briana stepped aside, grabbing Harriet's wrist, forcing her to drop the dagger. Harriet broke away, escaping to the edge of the battlement. Now Briana held the dagger and she ran menacingly towards Harriet.

Suddenly, an eerie voice yelled, "Murderess!"

Startled, Briana turned her head and tripped over Harriet's outstretched foot. With a blood curdling scream she sailed over the battlements.

Harriet looked over the wall's edge: Briana's lifeless body lay in a pool of blood on the ground below, impaled by the dagger.

Harriet became aware of Mother's ghost standing beside her.

"You must tell Wilf to clear up the mess. It will be too upsetting for the maids."

"I feel bad that I killed her," Harriet said.

"Oh, my darling Harriet. Don't waste your life away believing that." Mother's ghost rose into the air.

"But..."

"Let's just say, I helped a little." Mother's ghost drifted higher. "And you were only obeying my orders."

"I suppose this is goodbye?" Harriet called sadly into the elements.

"No, only au revoir. I shall watch over you. Just talk to my portrait when you need me. God bless you, my child..."

The phantom faded and was gone.

Edwin was horrified when he read Mother's diary.

"I was so gullible, believing that Briana had my interest at heart," he said. "It seems she was only after my money and my property. But even so, I would never have thought her capable of murder."

"Oh, one truly never knows what one's capable of," Harriet muttered.

Edwin had an exciting proposition for his daughter.

"Now that you've finished school, how about I take you on that European tour I've always promised you? We can go to Paris and Rome, and anywhere else you fancy."

"Oh Father." Harriet clapped her hands delightedly. "I should like that very much."

It would be good to escape the castle and the sad memories contained within its walls.

A week later, Harriet stood in the grand hallway while Wilf and her father loaded the trunks onto the carriage, ready for their journey to France. Harriet smiled as she gazed at her mother's beautiful portrait, now hanging in its usual place.

"Goodbye, Mother," she said. "I don't know how long I'll be away, but you'll always be in my thoughts and in my heart."

“Come Harriet, it’s time to leave,” Edwin called, and she hurried out to join him.

Looking through the carriage window as they drove away, Harriet fancied she saw a pale form toppling from the castle battlements, its cries of anguish disguised by the howling Autumn wind.

The Cat

by Tim Edwards-Hart

It was a dank and dreary night and Tom's mood was deteriorating. He'd gone into town to get some tinned food for the stray cat he'd found on his front porch. As he walked back to the car from the supermarket, he glanced at the TV news visible through the window of the local barber. He stopped when he saw the broadcast photo of the recently deceased man. Unable to read the headline text from the path outside the salon he walked back to the supermarket to buy the local newspaper. He didn't read it in the store, but tucked it under his arm and went home.

Morrie and Ron were a bit rough around the edges but willing to be rough all the way through for a few dollars and a pint. Ron was generally slow and amiable. Built like a tank, he worked out like a machine and had the conversational skills to match his morphological stereotype. Ron was never going to win an award for quick thinking, but he didn't need to think - he had Morrie for that. His size and strength meant he gave the rather accurate impression of being an unstoppable force. He also had an apparent unbreakable loyalty to Morrie and would do whatever Morrie asked. And Morrie didn't seem to mind asking.

Morrie, in contrast, was smart. Whip smart, but in a callous way that lead directly to solutions without much regard for social niceties. Usually the solutions he identified involved earning a few dollars for minimal effort – at least minimal effort by Morrie. He was perfectly happy for other people to do the work and then pay him to ask Ron not to hit them. He always obliged by forwarding the message to Ron, provided—of course—they paid Morrie enough and paid Morrie on time. If they were a little short on the total, then he might only pass on some of the message. If they were a little tardy, he might correspondingly delay Ron's message.

He always said it was because he wanted people to say was a fair man. Some of his patrons had xrays to help remind them of how insistent about this he could be. With complete honesty, he always said he expected to be paid on time.

Ron and Morrie had been doing their thing for years. They were known well enough that their reputation could do much of their work for them. Yet Morrie was smart enough to not get caught. Or at least not leave enough evidence for a conviction beyond reasonable doubt.

In fact, they were doing rather well. Morrie was a lot more selective now than he used to be. If anyone had been courageous enough to ask him about, he might have said something about Ron not being as young as he once was. But this was a convenient lie, albeit one that he may have believed himself. In truth Morrie, and hence Ron, had done rather well financially. Their business had few overheads and, perhaps surprisingly, Morrie had invested cautiously over a long period of time. Morrie was thinking of retiring and Ron was thinking of opening a gym — one of those inner city ones with weights and martial arts and expensive graffiti. Or rather, he *had* thought about opening a gym until last week when he died.

Ron had apparently died by accident. He had reportedly acquired a pet animal for his niece and, while carrying it home, fell onto a garden stake while telling Morrie about it. Witnesses—including some who didn't know Ron and Morrie and hence were considered reliable—described the accident in much the same way. Ron was walking past the greenery carrying a box and somehow tripped, fell through the temporary hole in the fence left after the recent storm, and impaled himself on a garden stake. A freak accident. The niece never received her gift as the pet—whatever it was—had escaped from the box and left. One witness said he saw the animal drop out of the box before Ron fall and had wondered if he had tripped on it. The coroner had not released her findings on the matter.

Morrie, it was said, was devastated. And now, less than a week later, he was also dead. The rumour was he had taken his own life but those that knew him thought that unlikely. Morrie wasn't one to take his life when there were other lives he could take with less

effort and more profit. But there was no evidence of foul play and accidental death by hanging was unusual. So too was being hanged by catching your chin in the crotch of a pair of jeans hanging on the clothes line.

“Hi Evelyn, I’m home,” Tom called as he came in through the kitchen door. “I’ve just been down the shops and I think something’s happened to Morrie.” Evelyn didn’t respond, but Tom was used to that. He fed the cat, then filled his glass with whiskey and sat down in the kitchen to flick through the paper looking for something about Morrie. It didn’t take him long to find the relevant article. It was true: Morrie was dead. The news bothered him. The article implied suicide without saying anything more specific than, “Police investigations are continuing into what appears to be a tragic accident just days after the death of his good friend Ronald Jones.”

Tom reached down to scratch the cat’s ears while he sipped his whiskey and considered the situation. Tom had employed Morrie and Ron’s services for a simple request: Convince the old biddy with the cats who lived on top of the hill to sell-up. She was the one sticking point in the Point William development project. All would be fine as long as they had the old lady’s house. Without it, the entire project would fail. Once she sold, then the developers could get the rest of the necessary land through compulsory acquisitions or “appropriate donations” to some rather specific local charities. Tom had been in real estate for half his life and knew how these things went. Given the size of the project he had made some rather generous offers to the old cat lady on the hill. It was a shame she wasn’t interested in selling so Tom had contacted Morrie and Ron to ask them to help convince her to accept Tom’s offer.

Morrie had developed a plan to get the old woman to move. Tom didn’t know all the details, but it seemed her house had mysteriously burnt down “mid-negotiation”. Apparently, according to subsequent news reports, it was the result of a battery fire in her brand new electric scooter. “She should have known better at her age,” Tom had said. The local gossips were surprised that she would have bought such a thing, but the remains of it were in her

shed and the police found a cash receipt in her rubbish bin so the evidence was clear. It was a terrible shame that she hadn't survived the fire, but out of the ashes of her old life, new life could grow. The new Point William housing estate for a start. The developers were happy. Which meant Thomas Jonas Remington of Remington Real Estate was happy.

But now both Ron and Morrie were dead. Tom didn't believe—*couldn't* believe—they were both accidents. He re-read the article spread out before him. “Yeah, right,” thought Tom, “an accident. Sure.” Accidents didn't happen to Morrie. Morrie was the kind of man who caused accidents to happen to other people. Usually by Ron and usually for a fee. He'd never seen Morrie so much as stumble, never known him to make a mistake or to botch a job. It wasn't right. It was beginning to look like a professional job. Which meant there was a chance that he—Tom—might even be a target. But who would target them over an old cat lady?

Tom glanced down at the cat weaving between his legs, then at the empty bottle of Jameson's on the kitchen bench, then at the empty glass in his hand. He followed the cat into his living room for a top up, pouring a generous serve before turning towards his seat by the window. He stopped, staring at Evelyn's lifeless body on the floor in front of the cat. The cat, unperturbed, looked nonchalantly at Tom. He shifted his gaze to the cat and his scowl deepened. “You will die,” he whispered. His voice rising, he cried, “You faithless fiend, you killed her. Die!” He threw his glass of whiskey at the cat, missing her by several feet and splashing amber liquid over the rug, couch and the wall behind.

The cat blinked and twitched her tail. Twice.

Infuriated, Tom threw everything he could reach at the cat. This included the remnants of the bottle of whiskey, along with a bottle of his favourite brandy, two bottles of vodka, a tequila and an orange liqueur. The startled cat ran around the room with bottles of expensive liquor exploding behind her. A champagne cooler went through the window, shattering glass onto the path outside. As the cat leaped through the broken pane, Tom made a last desperate lunge. Tripping on the coffee table his head hit the window sill before he slumped against the side table and fell to the

floor. The candles on the side table swayed, then slowly toppled onto the alcohol infused rug beside Tom's unconscious body and Evelyn's tiny corpse.

The cat sat on the fence, watching the flickering light in the room brighten. As the smoke and heat grew more intense, she moved to the comfort of the neighbour's porch to watch the fire crew try to bring the blaze under control. As the roof collapsed the cat pulled a feather out of the corner of her mouth, leaving it as a present for the neighbours. Silhouetted by the flames, the cat walked slowly into the night, back up to the remains of her house on the hill.

The next the morning, Tom's neighbours wondered how the feather survived the blaze and drifted into their back porch. Taking it as a sign, they later placed it on Tom's coffin at his funeral noting it seemed right to bury him with a memento of his prize budgerigar, Evelyn.

Tame

by Adela Torres

1.

The ghosts were not sprouting.

Joanna kicked an old drink can, scuffing her Louis Vuitton pump. She didn't care. She watched morosely as the can rattled and scraped across the cracked cement surface of the parking. Why wouldn't the blasted things *come*?

She went into the main building through one of the formerly bricked up loading bays. She tapped her phone, launched the Ghostprouted app, and held it aloft. The camera showed a purple-and-grey colorised, high contrast, starkly outlined image of a barren and decrepit industrial warehouse. There was a smattering of tiny yellow and orangish motes: background energy, no more. The app remained obstinately silent: no little three-note chime that would indicate a nascent ghost. No coalescing, no presences, certainly no physical manifestations. She sighed: she would have to check all the seeds, one by one.

Ghosts had been a sensation three years back. It started as a huge world scare, reminiscent of the pandemic: manifestations of dead beings that jumped suddenly out of the fringe realms of pseudoscience and fiction and became a stark reality. There was religious panic, social panic, moral panic, philosophical panic and worse: economic panic. Many business ground to a halt as millions of dead worker ghosts manifested in a myriad ways.

There were translucent blobs, faintly humanoid auras, horribly realistic dead bodies, disembodied sounds, silent distorted apparitions: as all folklore and fear came alive, humanity reeled.

During the first months, ghosts created more ghosts.

People died of fright, and accidents skyrocketed. Drivers were surprised by former victims reliving their deaths on the road,

construction workers fell to their death as they saw former construction workers fall to theirs. White collar jobs suicide rates went up as they were made aware of the pain lingering in the psychic makeup of their companies.

After one year, ghosts created change.

The ghosts stayed, never changing their endless death loops, and so governments and societies squared their shoulders, metaphorically, and adapted. New safety codes were written, special filters and screens were developed, new laws and social norms emerged. The ghosts were not leaving, so humanity learned to live with them.

On the third year, ghosts created money.

Some daring entrepreneurs discovered that, given the right conditions, the terror of the ghosts could be marketable: people liked being scared in a safe environment, right? It was only a matter of finding the right balance between the nature of the ghosts — not too scary nor too tame — and the space they lived in: not too mundane, nor too frightening.

So ghosts started to be farmed. You could transplant a ghost if you took the object they were more attached to: the rebar that pierced their heart, the weapon that killed them, the armchair where they died crying, alone and unnoticed. If you put that object in the right environment, even if it wasn't the original one, they would thrive and take root. Or you could disperse them, eventually, if you took them someplace with no humans and no pain, where no stories had ever been told. This last technique was difficult and seldom attempted, except in the most extreme cases.

And ghosts could be tamed: some objects were not associated with a manifest ghost, but retained enough measurable energy to know that a ghost had been there. Researchers discovered that you could manifest those ghosts if you could create the right environment for them. Those ghosts were the safest: sad, tremulous entities, eroded by time and oblivion, barely tethered even to the half-life of a spectre.

Ghost Rooms were born. Groups of friends or coworkers were given a flimsy plot line so they could make-believe they were ghost hunters, and walked a maze-like old house, or an abandoned theme

park, or a cold, dilapidated hospital. The tamed ghosts were kept in closed areas, behind safety screens and ghost-filters. And the users could be scared for fun. They could look at all that death and horror and experience life through its opposite.

It hurt no one. It was fun. It was real. And it saved a ton of money on actors and makeup.

Joanna wanted in.

2.

Her business partner Brian had tutted when he saw the factory.

"It's too big, Joanna. And it's not old enough."

"The sixties is old enough, you old fart," Joanna said. "And yeah, it's big, but that means more visitors. Look at all the parking space!"

Joanna waved her arm to indicate the grey expanse of cement flanked by low cinderblock buildings on two sides and a tall, ugly brick building on the third. A faded logo in white, green and orange proclaimed this had once belonged to a fruit juice company. Strangely-angled lines of green sprouted from the cracks in the pavement. Someone had made a half-hearted effort at graffiti but left it unfinished. They clearly could not muster enough enthusiasm for the place.

"It's — boring," Brian said. Joanna winced. It was.

"All the better, right? That means that only the tamed ones we bring will manifest," she said. Brian nodded, clearly trying to show an enthusiasm he wasn't feeling.

"Yes, of course. We seed them and when they're well-rooted I'll start working on some itineraries."

"Not a Ghost Room, but a Ghost Theme Park," Joanna breathed, eyes alight. "Think about it, Brian!"

"I am," Brian said, wiping his glasses on his shirt. He put them on again, blinked, gave a good hard look at the lot. "We'll need a lot of them."

He was talking about ghosts, of course. Joanna nodded.

"I know. But I have it covered. I've bought tons of ghost seeds. I will plant them this weekend and the moment they sprout I'll tell you."

"Fine, fine. I'll start working on some ideas."

"Think big," Joanna said, and smiled. This was going to be sensational.

"I will, if you think ghosts," Brian said. "Remember that seeds are not always guaranteed. And that there's a lot of fake seeds for sale out there."

"I've made sure," she said, a tad defensively. "All the seeds I've bought come with provenance."

"Then it's settled," Brian said. He started walking back to the car.

Joanna didn't follow him immediately. She looked lovingly at the bricked-up windows. Pigeons flew over to hidden nests up in the second floor. The buzzing *staccato* of their wings always reminded her of someone using pruning shears, *fwhip-fwhip-fwhip*. It made her feel both relaxed and alone. Around the corner of the main building she could see some cement blocks, strewn as if thrown carelessly by a giant hand. She took in the shapes, the brown-and-grey palette of the whole area, the odourless dead air, and visualised ghosts into existence: lovely scary ghosts and happy visitors and food stalls and kiddie parks and a high-end café *there*. Surely this was the ideal place.

It will be *great*, she thought, firmly, and went after Brian.

3.

Joanna remembered the conversation with Brian as she checked all the seeds through her app. No positive chimes, no indication on the screen. None of the seeds showed even the slightest change from when she had planted them, five weeks ago. Which was more than enough time for ghosts to sprout.

But nothing was changing, not even with the bullets that she had procured through her contacts in the Dark Web. The sale of spent bullets, or indeed any murder weapon or part of a weapon as a ghost seed, was illegal, but she happily took the risk. Could she have been scammed? Probably. She kept hoping that not with each and every purchase, though.

She wasn't happy; the seeds had taken a big chunk out of her budget. Especially since she had bought more after the first batch

gave no signs of sprouting. Her checking became increasingly fast and frustrated.

"Why don't you give me *anything!?*," she cried, angry, when the app stayed obstinately silent at a broken doll that had been one of her more hopeful purchases.

She still had the raised gallery to check: a metal walkway that went along three of the four walls of the main area. There was a chair there that had been tethered to a real, manifest ghost. That chair *had* to work. Thinking dark thoughts, she took the metal stairs up to the gallery.

She was on the last step up. Her heel went through one of the holes of the metal grating. She grasped the handrail by reflex.

The handrail, rusted and weakened, broke.

She fell backwards, grasping at nothing.

The fall was a blur, and the impact went completely unregistered by her shocked brain. She thought *I'm gonna have to put some serious money into bringing this place up to code.* Then she noticed she was on the floor.

Okay, she thought. *That was ridiculous. At least Brian isn't here to see me fall on my arse.*

The next thing she thought was *Something's wrong.*

It should be hurting by now, and it was, but it was a strange pain: removed, vague. A sort of corrosive, vibrating pain that seemed defined by her head but not felt by her body. She was dizzy.

She saw her phone nearby. She tried to get it.

Her body would not move. Her pulse throbbed in her ears.

Something is very wrong.

Maybe it was just the suddenness of the impact, so she forced herself to relax and wait for the strange, remote feeling to pass.

She tried to stretch the hand she could see, extended outward to her side.

But the hand didn't move. She couldn't even tell the position of the rest of her body. Her neck hurt, now, fiercely. As her internal inventory kept rising red flags, her brain raced.

Calm down, calm down, it will pass. You'll be able to move in a minute.

Brian would not come to the property until Monday. But he would be expecting her call about the ghosts. She just had to get to

her phone. She just had to move her hand.

By the time she realised her body would not move again, her phone rang. She could see the screen: it was Brian.

She gasped, trying to tell the phone to answer. But she couldn't make a sound. The phone kept ringing, then fell silent.

Her mind flopped inside her useless body like a dying rat, trying to will herself to move. Two feet. Only two feet. Her head jerked, as if it could drag the rest of her body with it. Her vision darkened. Too late, she realised she hadn't been breathing.

The screen lit up. The logo of the Ghostprouted app showed up.

No.

The app offered a happy three-note chime.

No! No, I will not!

Two pigeons flew overhead. Their wings sounded like shears.

The Ghostprouted app chimed again in confirmation.

I

will not be

a

tame

Lisa-Bloody-Lovely

by Jurriaan Knol

1

We—that is to say, my daughter Myra and I—first started visiting charity shops out of necessity after I lost my job and got divorced. I was brought up to frown upon rummaging through other people’s discarded goods, but I quickly grew to enjoy these charity shop visits. The fact that almost every restock yielded new surprises made it so much more fun than visiting the same old, boring high street chains selling the same old, overpriced tat. We found so many great and often nostalgic bargains that, even after we got back on our feet—thanks for asking—our rounds through the local charity shops remained a cherished part of our routine.

And it was here that Myra found Lisa Lovely.

‘Mummy! Look! Lisa Lovely wants to come with us!’ she exclaimed, pointing at a sorry mess of a doll that didn’t look even remotely ‘lovely’. In fact, it looked like Lisa Lovely had had a rough time in a skip before being put on display. I was mystified as to why the doll was even put up for sale, considering the shop normally took great pride in stocking only clean and functional goods. Lisa Lovely’s clothes were stained, there was mud on her face and hands, her hair was an entangled, matted mess, and she looked out into the world with large, empty eyes. None of this deterred Myra in the slightest, though. She was absolutely smitten with it.

‘Oh, come on, love.’ I tried, ‘that doll isn’t very nice, is it? There are so many nicer, cleaner ones here.’

I was already reaching for a derpy yet sanitary-looking plush bear, but I was being thoroughly ignored. Myra had already taken Lisa Lovely off the shelf. The idea of the hoard of germs and fungal cultures that must have made Lisa Lovely their home wasn’t very appealing, but it was obviously love at first sight.

Now, there are times as a parent when you either take a firm

position and stand your ground, or take the easy way out and concede defeat forever. It was pretty clear that Myra wasn't willing to budge, and that a veto on my part would lead to at least one unpleasant day, and most likely a few more. As it had been a rough week already, and I didn't want Lisa-bloody-Lovely to be my hill to die on, I cowardly took the easy way out and told Myra she could have the dumb doll on the condition that it had to go in the washer first. Myra beamed as if she had just won the jackpot.

2

Like pretty much every child, Myra was enchanted by a washing machine in motion. Watching the laundry making the rounds, mostly sticking to the top but, the next moment, sloshing down, a sock that got stuck at the rim of the glass door for a dozen spins—never a dull moment. But now that Lisa Lovely was going through the motions, Myra was even more glued to the glass than usual.

'Lisa asks if she can stay in my bed tonight,' Myra said, while never taking her eyes off the doll. I didn't like the way Myra pretended that the doll was talking to her, but I guess that's a thing four-year-olds do.

'I don't think so, love. She probably needs a day or two to dry.'

Myra didn't protest but was obviously disappointed.

'Speaking of bed,' I said, 'if you go upstairs now, I'll read you a story.'

After putting Myra to bed, Lisa Lovely on the drying rack, and myself in front of the TV, I was overcome by the kind of tiredness I'm sure only single parents experience. As I was trying to watch an awkward older couple attempting to flog off antiques under the guidance of a chirpy, all-smiles-and-teeth presenter, I was drifting off.

The TV showed myself standing next to the presenter, who excitedly chirped that the next lot up for auction was Lisa Lovely, bought at a charity shop for nothing, with bids starting at £5. Bids were increasing rapidly, and I noticed it was Myra constantly outbidding everybody else. The camera zoomed in on Lisa Lovely, with dried mud on her cheeks and those big, empty staring eyes while a display at the bottom showed the growing amount of

money from the bidding. I wanted to tell Myra to stop bidding—we wouldn't have any money for groceries, and Lisa Lovely was already hers—you just have to love how dream logic works—but no words would come out, as I seemed paralysed. The presenter excitedly echoed the ever higher bids, over £500 now. I looked into Lisa Lovely's eyes, and the big, empty stare had made way for a feverish, intense look.

I awoke with a jolt at the sound of stuff falling over in the pantry. As a woman living alone, I'm pretty sensitive to unexpected sounds in the house, especially after dark. I switched off the TV and quietly went into the pantry to investigate. It was dark, and while I was fumbling for the light switch I had visions of a cold hand grabbing me by the wrist in a vice-like grip before dragging me into the darkness. However, when I finally found the switch and turned on the light, the cause of the disturbance was immediately clear. The drying rack had fallen over, and Lisa Lovely was lying face-down on the floor. I exhaled with relief, only then realising I had been holding my breath the entire time. I had to laugh, wasn't I supposed to be the adult in this household?

I quickly brought the drying rack back into its proper position but hesitated when I was about to pick up the doll. I wondered how the rack could have fallen over in the first place, as it was a pretty solid device that had never let me down in many years of use. Did somebody walk into it? I looked around the pantry, but there really wasn't a place where anybody could hide properly. I brought my attention back to the doll and found its blank eyes staring directly at me, and I jumped. I was confident that the doll had been face-down only moments ago and wondered if I was still dreaming. I quickly grabbed the doll, which felt heavy like a corpse due to the absorbed water, put it on the drying rack as quickly as I could, and left the pantry, making sure to close the door securely behind me. Hoping that some proper rest would fix my overstretched brain, I decided on an early night. It was raining by the time I got in bed, and I drifted away easily.

3

My dreams that night were chaotic and stressful. One moment I

was running away from some unseen but at the same time uncomfortably familiar terror, the next it felt as though I was being suffocated or drowning. I awoke with a gasp. The rain was now pelting against the windows and— how atmospheric—thunder and lightning were roaring overhead. Myra was usually a pretty heavy sleeper, but I couldn't imagine her sleeping through this, so I got up to check up on her.

Getting out of bed, my feet felt a whole lot less steady than I liked them to be. My heart was also pounding and I felt panic creeping up on me. What the hell was wrong with me? Not the stupid doll business surely? I always liked to think of myself as a reasonably grounded and stable person, but it seemed that part of my persona was having a bit of a break. My path illuminated by moonlight and flashes of lightning, I made my way across the landing and into Myra's room, only to find her bed empty. The panicky feeling amped up a few levels while my mind was racing to find reasonable explanations. She must have gone to the bathroom. But I had passed the bathroom and the door had been open with the light off and nobody inside. Perhaps she had gone downstairs for a snack. But four-year-olds don't go downstairs for snacks. The panic was now almost a physical entity squeezing my throat. Cold sweat started to trickle down my back. An almighty thunderclap made me jump but also knocked me to my senses, and it finally clicked. Myra must have gone downstairs to check on Lisa-bloody-Lovely. I realised I'd gotten so sick of the damn doll with her stupid name by now, that I fully intended to throw her in the bin despite any trauma it would cause Myra. Heck, I was even entertaining the thought of setting the stupid thing on fire and freeing my world of her obnoxious presence once and for all.

It turned out I was not wrong and indeed found Myra in the pantry.

'Myra, why aren't you in bed, love?' I asked. My voice sounded far less confident and stable than I wanted it to be.

No response.

'Myra?'

Myra was sitting in front of the drying rack, but didn't seem to be awake. She also looked so small and vulnerable in her Miffy

night gown. Her eyes were open, but they had rolled upwards so they showed the whites. Her expression was impossible to read, but looked strained in an adult way that didn't match her years at all. The corners of her mouth were twitching, and it looked like some spittle had run down her chin. Even more alarming was Lisa Lovely, who was no longer lying face down or face up on the drying rack. She was upright and looking straight at Myra. Not with the big, empty eyes she had when we first got her, but with the intense, feverish stare I saw in my dream of the auction. I didn't know what kind of connection was between them, but I felt it wasn't right and should be broken as quickly as possible.

But then Myra turned to me, her eyes still showing the whites.

'Lisa Lovely is very happy that you washed the smell of death off her, mummy,' she said.

'Uhm ... she's welcome,' I somehow blurted out. The smell of death? Where the hell did Myra get that get from? Sure, there had been the mud and stains, but it was a far cry from the smell of decomposing road kill I often came across as a child. What kind of conversation was this anyway? And what was the thing with the eyes, was she sleepwalking?

'We want to go see Alex, mummy,' Myra said, 'can you take us?'

'Yes, mummy, can you take us?' Lisa Lovely asked, her eyes now also boring into me.

I felt my knees weaken and thought I was going to pass out when Myra suddenly exclaimed: 'Come on, mummy, Alex needs us!' Her eyes had turned to normal again and she looked at me with eager anticipation. Lisa Lovely, in the meanwhile, had gone limp and was just a regular, albeit damp, doll again. I felt like I was going crazy and just wanted to scream, but I had to keep up my composure for Myra. Somehow I managed to get my act together just enough to become all parental again.

'It's in the middle of the night and the weather is awful, love. How about tomorrow, OK?'

'I'm not sure if Lisa Lovely is going to like that, mummy,' Myra answered solemnly.

At the same moment all the doors and windows of the house blew open and torrents of rain came in riding the drafts,

accompanied by a barrage of lightning and loud thunder. I finally lost my grip and started to scream.

4

So, yes. I did get bested by the combined forces of a four-year-old and some possessed doll or whatever it was. After closing all doors and windows in the house—which I obviously had to do manually instead of unleashing some supernatural skills—we got dressed and drove off. The windscreen wipers were going like crazy, and I couldn't really see this ending in any other way than disaster, but there weren't any options left that didn't threaten my child, house or sanity.

'So where does this Alex live, Myra?'

'He is in Riverstone Park,' Myra answered.

'In this weather? Are you sure about that?'

It remained silent in the back of the car. In my rear-view mirror I could see Myra looking outside with large, worried eyes while Lisa-bloody-Lovely was in her lap staring straight at me, again with that feverish, intense look.

The rain kept coming down in torrential amounts, and despite knowing the way to the park, I had to keep my full attention on the road to not hit any kerbs or miss intersections. It was difficult to see what was going on with the rain pelting the car and all the lights reflecting off the road and glaring in the windscreen. Fortunately, the streets were empty and we arrived in one piece at the parking lot just outside Riverstone Park.

Awfully unprepared, we left the car. There was an umbrella in the back, which I gave to Myra. I didn't want to be near Lisa Lovely though, so my only option was to fight the elements unprotected—a fight that I lost within about 30 seconds. The good thing about being soaked with rain is that a saturation point is soon met where things just don't get any worse anymore, though.

The park was pitch black and deserted. Officially, access after sundown was prohibited, and due to some save-the-world climate initiative, all the lights were off as well. Fortunately my iPhone seemed unperturbed by the rain, so I switched on the small flashlight from the lock screen.

‘OK, Myra, where are we going, where is Alex?’ I asked, hoping this sorry situation would be over as soon as possible.

- ‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you mean, you don’t know?’

- ‘You should ask Lisa Lovely, she told me we had to come here and find Alex.’

Even after everything that happened tonight, I didn’t really feel like asking a doll for its input, but it turned out that wasn’t necessary. Myra briefly consulted with the doll she was holding and started moving towards a group of trees and shrubs quite far from the path. I followed closely, cursing that sloshing through the wet grass would pretty much destroy my shoes. The light on my phone had a hard time illuminating the ground before us, and often Myra or I stumbled due to an unseen hole or stick getting in the way. But we got there in the end. By that time, the rain had finally worn out too.

With the moon breaking through the clouds, the scene in front of us looked surreal. The vegetation reflected the moonlight in a million glistening droplets. Fog was beginning to rise from the saturated damp soil. I switched off the light on my phone, as the moon now easily overpowered it.

‘What should we do now, Myra?’ I asked. It was probably the doll that would provide the answer, but I still refused to speak directly to it. Myra didn’t answer though; she just lifted her arm and pointed at a shrub a few yards away from where we were standing. At first, I didn’t know what to look for. But when I moved my gaze downwards, I saw a small child’s hand sticking out from under the leaves. We had found Alex. I wanted Myra to stand back, but knew it would be cruel after everything that happened. We slowly walked up to the young boy’s pale corpse, who lay there in the wet soil with his eyes open, staring blankly at the moonlit sky. Myra knelt and put Lisa Lovely in the boy’s arms. I called the police.

5

The detectives didn’t give us a hard time. They didn’t even bother to ask us why we were in Riverstone Park late at night in terrible weather in the first place, let alone why we were so far off

the path to find the body. They probably realised that a four-year-old kid and her single mum weren't the infanticide type and were relieved that the missing boy had finally been found. Of course, I didn't mention the doll guiding us here, because that would not only sound completely bonkers but no doubt would have led to lots of difficult questions. It would be much better if the official report reflected that Lisa Lovely had been at Alex's side all the time. We were taken home while the police were cordoning off the scene for investigation, and that was the last we heard of it. A forty-year-old man with a history of previous convictions for minor abuse and violence was arrested shortly afterwards and confessed to the murder of the poor boy.

Alex's parents invited us to the funeral, but we didn't go. I always feel uncomfortable witnessing the grief of people I don't know and would have been an outsider anyway. Apart from that, there was the fear of Lisa Lovely sitting on top of the too-small coffin, staring intently at me during the service. Because that was indeed the doll's name. The Child Rescue Alert, which I completely missed at the time, mentioned the doll by name and that she was with Alex when he disappeared. That explained the mud and grime on the doll when we found her. How Lisa Lovely ended up in the charity shop will probably forever remain a mystery, but I think she got there all by herself. I know that sounds crazy, but when I went to check on Myra last night to see if she was sleeping comfortably, I saw she was not alone in the bed. In her arms, again caked in mud and staring me straight in the eyes, was Lisa-bloody-Lovely.

The Loneliest Chair

by Tim Rogers

I joined the firm as CEO. Don't misunderstand me, I didn't inherit the role from my great-grandfather or anything. I paid my dues and worked my way up the ranks the hard way; starting as a lowly graduate and climbing to the dizzy heights... I just did it in a different company. I'm sure there are people that resent me taking the top job over some of the genuinely great internal talent, but the shareholders wanted someone with an independent perspective on the future. So, I landed the role as leader of biggish company with a name you'd recognise and some meaty financial challenges ahead of them.

When you're CEO, you sit in the loneliest chair in the building. There are plenty of people around you who want your view on this or a decision on that, but some problems sit on your desk because no one else can do them. You can't ask for guidance, and you can't show uncertainty or doubt.

I'm not complaining. This is what I'm here for, and it's certainly a comfortable enough chair, but until you've sat in it you don't realise just how lonely it can be.

I'm a bit of an ambulatory thinker. Whenever I have a tough issue to mull, I go for a walk. My wife says I look like a pigeon when I'm strutting around thinking, but I think she's more making a hint towards my rather plump central region. Or maybe it's the grey speckled hair. Anyway, it was this tendency (combined with a minefield of a question that landed at my chair about prioritising resources across two merging divisions) that led to my walking the corridors of the top floor of the building in search of inspiration or distraction.

I found distraction. It was in the form of a locked door in the client suite with a small sign that said "no entry at any time." Unlike

all the other rooms, the glass walls to this one had been blacked out to fully opaque. Figuring that, as CEO, there's no part of the business that's off limits, I tried the handle. It was locked.

"Can I help you, sir?"

I turned round and saw the client suite receptionist standing behind me with a warm smile of whitened teeth.

"Yes! I was just wondering what this room was?"

"That's our roof-top terrace, sir. We used to use it for special events, but closed it for safety reasons."

"Safety?"

"We had a few 'accidents', so the decision was made to permanently close it off."

I nodded and started to head back to my office, wondering to myself if I'd really heard her say 'accidents' in quotes, or if it was just my imagination.

You don't get to my position without being inquisitive. Or, at least, *I* didn't get here without it. So it was probably inevitable that later that day, after most of the employees had left (and the client suite had most definitely lost its receptionist) that my mind returned to the roof terrace and its locked door.

Coffee in hand, I arrived back at the client suite and found the door handle as immovable as before. A quick check of the keys in the receptionist's desk was unfruitful, but a trip down to the security office and a brief conversation with the night guard resulted in a master key that was supposed to open every door in the building. If nothing else, it felt like exactly the kind of badge-of-office a CEO ought to have in his briefcase and all it cost me was my CEO coffee mug.

A few moments later, I'm back at the door; my hand tentative on the key in the lock. I try it.

It turns.

It's comfortably past sunset and the deck itself has no lighting — at least none that's switched on — so the only visibility comes from the street lighting below. It's bigger than I was expecting. You could comfortably hold 100, maybe 150, people out here for an event and

still have room for servers to dart around with drinks trays and canapés.

I took a stroll away from the door and into the shadows of the deck to admire the view. It's a nice cityscape. No world famous landmarks, or anything, but the architect can't do anything about where the building is. I was about to lean on the railing to peek over the edge when I suddenly sensed movement in the shadows to my right. The hairs on the back of my neck go up, and I feel the blood rush from my face as I realise I'm not alone.

A guy in a suit stepped out of the gloom. He took a puff on a cigarette, which I'm surprised I hadn't smelt, and casually relaxes against the railing.

"Jesus, you startled me."

He looks me up and down. "Sorry about that."

I waved off his apology. "I didn't think anyone was supposed to come out here."

"When you've been here as long as I have, you can get away with things," he said. "It's tranquil now they've closed it to staff."

"I guess," I replied. I thought I'd met all the executives, but I couldn't place this guy. "I don't think we've met? I'm the new CEO."

"Ah. Congratulations."

I nodded my thanks and left the guy to finish his smoke in peace. Now I think of it, he was probably the first person I'd seen smoking a real cigarette for ages. Everyone I know has switched to those fruity vape things.

The next day started well. My leadership hero is Jeff Bezos, and one of his most famous pieces of advice is never have meetings you couldn't feed with two pizzas. You can keep your Jobs and your Musk; neither of them ever gave me an excuse to grab a slice of pepperoni three times before lunch.

The other Bezos thing I try to do is schedule my "high IQ" meetings in the mornings when I'm at my most alert, and leave the "info dump" ones for the afternoons, where the drowsiness brought on by my cheese intake is less critical. My 4:15pm that day was with our Finance Director who was going to take me through

the last period results and the revised forecasts for the rest of the quarter. It was a 45 minute meeting, but I'll spare you the details and just give you the headline: Our money position is bad.

I've not been here long enough for any of this to be my fault but that doesn't stop it being my responsibility to fix, and you don't need me to tell you that "money position bad" has a distinctly non-positive impact on your bonus. Plus, it doesn't matter how many times you tell them not to count on the bonus, I've yet to be married to anyone who hasn't spent it before it arrives. So by the time 7pm comes round it felt like I've spent at least five of the last two hours thinking through new emergency cost cutting measures and rapid sales boosting initiatives.

I had lots of scribbled notes, none of which made any sort of sense to me anymore, so I decided to grab some air on the terrace to clear my mind.

When I got there, I looked round to see if anyone was skulking in the shadows. Reassured, I took a sip of coffee from a freshly acquired CEO mug and leant against the railing to take in the view.

A cold breeze picked up and cooled my skin, and I heard a voice from behind me. "You're back."

I span round. It was the guy again.

"You too," I said. "Who are you? I didn't get your name yesterday."

He smiled. "I w—, I'm one of the lawyers."

"One of *my* lawyers?"

He points at my mug, emblazoned with the letters CEO. "You're the boss, so I guess so."

"Is this coincidence or are you out here a lot?"

"Is that a problem?"

"No, no problem," I said. "Just don't sue me if you have an accident."

He gave me an odd smile. Now I think of it, I didn't get his name that time either.

The third day I go out there, we're no longer surprised to see each other. We exchanged pleasantries and, by way of explanation for

my repeated presence, I told him about my being an ambulatory thinker (and the whole bit about looking like a pigeon) to which he smiled politely.

“You look stressed,” he said.

“That may be the understatement of the year.”

“I used to come out here when I was stressed.”

“But not anymore?”

He smiles at me. “Not since they closed it.”

We stood in silence for a few moments and admired the view, enjoying just taking the night air into our lungs.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?”

“Whatever’s got you ‘ambulating’ this evening.”

I shrug. “Do you know anything about finance black holes or generating sales?”

He shakes his head. “I’m a just lawyer. My job is to prevent disaster or make sure someone else gets the blame.”

I nod and turn back to the view.

“...I know a guy, though,” he said. “Probably the best sales guy out there. If you want to meet him tomorrow?”

My 11am the next day was with an important client. Bezos always says you should be obsessed with your customers. Don’t get me wrong, I like them as a group, but this one was pretty annoying. We were interrupted by my phone ringing twice in quick succession and both times I sent it straight to voicemail. The third time, I apologised and explained to the client that it’s my wife (true), that she never calls when I’m at work (not true) and asked if I could take the call.

It turned out to be the very definition of non-urgent. My eldest turns 17 later this year and my wife wants to buy them a car for their birthday. I say yes and hang up, and then spend the rest of the meeting worrying that I’d not asked what car, how much it cost, or when the bill was going to hit.

Over lunch (a sandwich), my mind returned to the terrace, and the fact that we have this incredible space that we’re not using. It seems stupid to have any asset not pulling its weight, especially

when I want to put some adrenaline behind our marketing. But I'm not an idiot and, although I hadn't seen anything out there that looked unsafe to me, I assume my predecessors weren't idiots either (despite what the profit figures were telling me). There must have been *some* good reason for the closure.

I did a quick search on the company intranet to see if there were any old stories about accidents in the building, but found nothing. A Google search was only a bit more revealing. I found an old news story about some guy in the media division that had jumped off the roof shortly after we moved into the building, and another story a few years later about one of the firm's earlier CEOs doing the same thing at bonus time... but I'd hardly classify either of those as accidents, and certainly nothing that can't be fixed with an appropriately sized railing.

The lawyer made good on his promise.

I met with him and another colleague out on the terrace that evening and had a perfectly pleasant conversation with them both about where I see the firm going and what our challenges are. Of course, I underplayed the depth of the financial hole; there's no point oversharing and getting people worried.

I *did* mention that I thought it was a shame we weren't using the terrace more for industry events, which they both seemed pretty down on. All in all though, it was a good chat and I left feeling more positive about the way forward. Sometimes it's helpful just to have a sounding board to play ideas off.

The next day I decided to send both of them a thank you email. In-person thanks are okay, but it's always nice when someone takes the time to follow up.

Only, I'd still gotten only their first names, which isn't much help when the company directory has thousands of people in it. Our intranet does have a org chart which captures the most senior people in the firm so I thought I'd check there. By their age and their obvious experience they were clearly senior enough that they should be in the chart, but despite looking through all our legal and business development people neither of them showed up.

I enjoyed speaking with them, but I was definitely starting to get curious bordering on uneasy about who I'd been talking to.

It was two days before my need to stretch my legs took me back out on the terrace. It turns out they'd been waiting.

"I brought someone else to say 'Hi,'" said the lawyer. "He's a finance guy and might be able to help weigh up some of the cost cutting options you've been thinking about."

"I already have a finance guy," I said, turning to the new chap. They were all standing out there, the lawyer, the salesman and the accountant in the cold night air without coats. I shivered.

"Sorry," I said "I didn't mean to be rude, but I have a Finance Director to talk these things through with."

"Of course you do," said the accountant. "But I can give you an independent view."

I asked him what he meant. "You do actually work here?"

The lawyer gave me a look that sent a shiver down my spine. "You have no idea what the three of us have given to this company."

Immediately after meeting them, I headed down to the security office to speak to the night guard who'd given me the master key a few days ago.

"You haven't given anyone else a key?" I asked.

"Of course not. I'd get fired if I gave anyone a master."

I frowned. "You gave one to me."

"You're the Chief. You can fire me for *not* giving you one."

"It's just that there are a surprising number of people with access to the roof terrace for an area that only opens with a master key."

"There are no keys to that door," he said. "It only opens with the master, and there are only two of those: yours and ours."

I asked if one of the other guards could have made a copy.

"No, they're special. You need to order them from the manufacturer."

"Well, they're getting in there somehow," I said.

"Impossible," the guard said.

“They’re up there right now.”

He stood up from his seat. “Show me.”

We took the lift from the basement to the client suite and march straight to the terrace door. The guard used his own key to open the door and barged out into the empty space.

“Well, whoever it is has gone now,” he said and turned to leave.

I started to follow him back off the terrace when a cold breeze caught me and gave me goosebumps all up both my arms. I hurried up off the terrace and back into the warmth of the building.

The guard turned to me. “Look, sir, you shouldn’t be going out there. We keep the place locked for a reason.”

“But what reason?”

“After the third one jumped off, we had to close it.”

“A *third* one?”

“Yeah, some lawyer who screwed up a big case.”

I can feel the colour drain from my face. “A lawyer.”

“Maybe I should have that key back,” he said.

I waved him off and told him it was okay; I wouldn’t go back.

And, I didn’t.

Three weeks passed and I let work engulf me. There was certainly more than enough to do, so I took inspiration from Bezos’ motto *Gradatim Ferociter* and walked as ferociously as I could through my tasks. Then, one evening, my walking-while-thinking took me back past the door. The key felt heavy in my pocket, and I felt guilty about not ever saying goodbye. They’d been perfectly friendly and helpful, after all. So I went in, one last time to say thanks.

Of course, they weren’t even there.

I stood on the terrace alone for a few minutes, taking in the view while alternating between questioning my manners and my sanity.

I filled my lungs with the night air. I could have sworn I detected the faintest hint of cigarette smoke. I smiled, and turned to leave.

And there they were. All three of them, right in front of me. *Right* in front of me.

I nodded hello while my heart was racing out of my chest. I put on my CEO smile and tried my best to maintain it.

The lawyer took a drag on his cigarette.

“Let me guess,” I said to the salesman. “You were in the media division?”

He nodded.

“Which must make you the ex-CEO,” I said to the accountant.

“I was CFO first,” he replied. “But, yes.”

I swallowed. “I just wanted to say thanks, guys. Talking to you has been really helpful.”

“We’re glad. But you can’t open the terrace back up.”

“No,” I replied. “Of course not. I would nev—”

“We like you,” said the salesman. “You’re one of us.”

“Well, that’s flatteri—,”

“And it can be lonely at the top,” said the CEO. “So you need all the friends you can get.”

They took a step towards me, and I took a couple backwards until I felt my rear bump against the railing.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“You’re one of us,” repeated the salesman.

“*Be* one of us,” said the lawyer, and took another step forward.

Iron Sharpens Iron

by Nick Calvert

At the beginning of Michaelmas term I arrived back at Oxford, unceremoniously dropped outside the porters' lodge by my father's chauffeur, who unsmilingly handed me an envelope with my stipend. Struggling with my suitcase, I made it to the top of the narrow winding stairs and onto the corridor that led to my rooms. Spick and span, as it always was at the beginning of term, the floor boards and wood paneling smelt of wax, redolent of the hundreds of years since the house had been built.

This term I had a new roomie and though I knew his name--it had been on our pigeon hole in the porter's lodge--I had no idea who Arthur William Twight was.

'Jameson and Twight' read the card in the brass holder on the door. I elbowed the handle and pushed it open. The lounge was empty save for its furniture, a pile of cardboard boxes and a well used rucksack.

"Hello?" I called, heeling the door closed with a thump as a smiling blond behemoth came out of the left hand bedroom and offered his hand.

"Hiya!" he rumbled, in an transatlantic drawl. "You must be John."

I dropped my suitcase and proffered my hand which was swallowed in his. We shook; luckily, he wasn't one of those arseholes prone to a test of strength, as I'd probably have needed to visit the nurse. I smiled back as he freed my hand.

"No, not John. I'm known by my middle name: Malus."

"Malus? Erm... that's 'bad'?"

I laughed. "The Latin root is mal, which is bad... or evil. But Malus means apple, or rather crab apple to be precise. Mother always says I am the apple of her eye."

"Oh. Well I go by Will. No story there, except all the males in

our family have William in their names. Coffee?” He turned to rummage in the boxes pulling out a new coffee pod machine and a box of pods.

“Blimey.”

“I like coffee,” he said, getting out two mugs, “but not washing up. What would you like, Malus. Whatever you want, provided it’s cappuccino.”

Minutes later we were sitting in the rooms two rather ratty armchairs on either side of the coffee table, sipping cappuccinos.

“In a nutshell,” Will said, “and in case you were wondering, I matriculated last week and I’m taking Philosophy and Theology.”

“Ah. Well I’m in the second year of Arc-Anth,” I said, blowing and sipping my coffee.

“And that would be?” Will quirked an eyebrow.

“Oh, sorry. Archeology and Anthropology. Bit of a mouthful.”

“Interesting subjects though. ‘Iron sharpens iron’, I bet we’ll have some great debates.”

“More than likely,” I said, smiling at his quote from Proverbs. “Now I’m guessing six six and two twenty pounds. Am I right?”

“Aw,” he laughed, “close, but no cigar. Six seven and two thirty, and I want to be a rugby blue.”

“I have no doubt you’ll succeed at that. No doubt at all.”

The next few weeks were a joy and our friendship blossomed. Will really was a teddy bear of a man and soon had a coterie of friends popping in and out, which livened the place up considerably. I was generally rather shy and kept myself to myself, but Will saw to it that I was always included in whatever shenanigans went on. Will got into the Greyhounds, the university’s second eleven rugby team, and was so ecstatic the whole house woke up with a blinding hangover.

On the Wednesday of third week of term Will arrived back from rugging practice, slumped down on the couch and clumped his feet up on the coffee table.

“Can I have a word, Malus?”

“Surely,” I said, turning around from my desk and eyeing my mud

covered sweaty roomie. “But before we begin I was wondering if you’ve ever read any Shultz?”

Will frowned. “Peanuts?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Ah. Pigpen.”

I smiled and nodded. Will rolled his eyes, “what are you, my mother?” He got up and went for a shower. I saved my essay, then made coffee.

“So what’s on your mind?” I said as Will arrived back looking mildly chagrined and resumed his seat. I gestured to the coffee.

“So... one of my tutors is weirding me out. He keeps talking about this house as being the oldest in the University and how its haunted. And he wants me to read up on Thelem, a relatively recent religion started by a guy called...”

“Fawley,” I said, “Lucius Fawley.”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“My father has a rather large library,” I said. “I have to say Fawley’s fascinating, though I don’t see Thelem is relevant to the first year of Theology, unless you’re starting with comparative Theology, which is nuts.”

“You seem to know a lot about it, Malus.”

I laughed. “Yeah, well as I said father has a large library. From what I read Thelem only has one tenet: ‘Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.’” I sipped my coffee. “That said, it didn’t help when my parents arrived home to discover me high as a kite in the middle of an orgy. Father still won’t talk to me, though Mother says to give him time.”

“Sorry to hear that,” will said. “Another coffee?”

“Sure. Why not.”

My phone chirped. Idly, I saved the essay on the Villa Diodati I was writing, picked the phone up and opened WhatsApp.

Will: *Don’t answer the door....*

Malus: *Why?*

Will: *If you value your life don’t answer the door.*

Malus: *If this is some kind of joke it’s really not funny, Will.*

There was a long pause.

Will: *No joke.*

I was about to type an acerbic response when there was a polite knock.

I was walking to the door when I glanced at the phone.

Will: *I'm not fucking kidding!*

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Another knock, less polite. I reached the door, turned the key to check it was locked, then slid both the dead bolts, too. I had no idea why I was so rattled. This was Oxford in the middle of the day. There were people everywhere, and certainly a few within shouting distance. Fearing that there was the fire alarm. I shook myself and took a deep breath just as the knock came again, this time more of a thump.

“Who is it?”

“Ah, so you are in. I’m Will’s tutor. May I come in?”

“Will’s not here,” I said, “I’ll get him to call you.”

“I’ll come in and wait.”

“No,” I said peremptorily, “I’m sorry, but I’m otherwise engaged, if you get my drift.”

“Oh you fibber. A lying little Malus is what you are,” now the voice was deeper, it sounded sly and slightly deranged. “Let me in before I blow your house down.”

“Cute, Professor Wolff. I’ll tell Will you called. Goodbye.” I took a step back from the door and waited in trepidation.

There was a tattoo of loud thumps followed by a hideous bellow. “OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR YOU...”

From the rooms next door I heard a thump, then a door opening.

“Is everythin...?”

“GET BACK INSIDE YOU LITTLE SHIT,” Wolff screamed, “BEFORE I CALL A PROCTOR!” The door thumped shut. Then, luckily, Brigitte from down the hall set off her rape alarm and pandemonium ensued. Doors opening and closing, feet running, Jenks the porter calling out for calm, and over and above it all I could hear Wolff’s deep ugly panting. I leant in and put my ear to the door.

“When this is over, boy, mark my words, there will be a reckoning.” Through the door I could hear the floorboards

creaking as he walked away.

My phone chirped again.

Will: *Back asap.*

Malus: *Wolff's just gone.*

Will: *I'm watching him talk to Jenks.*

Will: *Jenks is not amused! lol.*

Will: *He's gone. Be right up.*

On the Friday of the sixth week I arrived back from a lecture to find the door open and will on his knees drawing a series of interconnected symbols on the door sill with a silver sharpie. He kept referencing a small book and paid me no heed at all.

“Will?” I said quietly, though I wanted to yell. “What are you doing?”

“Huh?” He looked up at me, his eyes a stormy gray rather than their usual bright blue. “Oh, hi Malus. I won’t be long. Nearly done now.”

“You know we could be flung out for this, don’t you?” I managed to keep my tone calm, though I wanted to leap about, and froth, and call him an idiot. Holy hell! He was defacing a medieval door-frame with graffiti. My eyes seemed to have a mind of their own as they followed the symbols from where Will was close to finishing, up and around the door-frame and back to the floor again. Bright silver, the symbols or runes, or whatever they were, stood out like a sore thumb that no self respecting porter or proctor could possibly miss. Worse, they seemed to glow with an inner light all of their own. I followed them round the frame for a second time, back to where Will was working. He added what looked like an upside down three tined ‘Y’ and with a heartfelt sigh sat back, examining his work.

“Done,” he said, closing the little book and slipping it into his jacket pocket. He got to his feet and as I stood in the corridor about to kick off our first blazing row, the graffiti faded away. One second bright silver, then nothing to see. I gawped, then shut my mouth with a clack as I walked through the door, collapsed in my chair, then leapt to my feet as Will shut the door.

“No. No, no, no, no, bloody no!” I said, striding to the door and

opening it. There was nothing there. Just the usual medieval oak door in its usual medieval frame. Nothing to see. But when I ran my hand around the frame I felt a slight tingle; an otherness. I closed the door and turned to Will, who was calmly feeding the coffee machine a pod. He looked at me and smiled.

“Explain, please, mister Twight, if you’d be so kind.” I collapsed back in my chair as he passed me a coffee. “Thanks, do we have any brandy left?”

“Already in there, Malus,” Will said, blowing and sipping. And looking thoroughly relaxed.

“Well?” I could hear the undercurrent of hysteria in my voice.

“Well, it’s a ward I found in a book at the Bodleian.”

“A ward?” It seemed my hysteria wasn’t leaving anytime soon.

“Yeah, a ward. To protect us from... well, I’m not quite sure what, to be honest. But I’m pretty sure it’ll work.”

“Why would we need a ward? This is bloody Oxford. We pay a fortune for room and tuition. What have we got to be protected from?”

“Things that go bump in the night, Malus. And also Professor Wolff and his obsession with this room.”

“Huh?”

“Wolff is convinced that at some point in the first decade of the twentieth century this room, where we are sitting drinking coffee, was used for some sort of black magick ceremony. He claims that all but two of the celebrants ended up in the asylum, and of the two who survived one was Lucius Fawley, and the other was Wolff’s great great grandfather.”

“Okay,” I felt my hysteria retreating, “as you can Imagine I have a few questions. So... firstly, what’s with the vanishing symbols? Sharpie doesn’t do invisible ink.”

“Ha! Good one,” Will said. “It looks like a sharpie, but it’s not. I got it from a reputable magick supplier on the net. It wasn’t cheap, but it came with a guarantee.”

“In blood I trust,” I said.

“Well, it worked didn’t it.”

“It vanished alright, but unless it’s tripped we won’t know if it works, will we?”

“Point taken,” Will said. “If I may digress a sec. Remember last week you had lunch with your mother?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the other thing Wolff said was that there was probably a pentagram in the middle of the room.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, and while you were out scoffing and quaffing with mama I found it. Its center is pretty much under your mug on the coffee table.”

“You can see it?”

“No, it’s like the ward; if you run your hand over it you can feel it thrum.”

“So, and please correct me if I’ve misunderstood, we have a mad professor who wants to get in here and do who knows what with a pentagram that was last used by Lucius Fawley. The pentagram is real because you found it, and we have a ward on the door. Am I right so far?”

“Yup,” Will nodded.

“What about the windows?”

“Well, fuck,” will said, chewing his lip. “No, should be okay, they all face the quad and we’re on the second floor.”

“Can’t you just symbol them, the way you did with the door?”

“Pen’s empty, and they’re runes,” will said contemplatively. “Let’s see what the book says.” He pulled the little book out of his jacket pocket and flipped through its pages. “Nothing about windows, per se.”

“May I see it?”

“Sure.” He passed it over.

The book was about six inches by four and felt hot in my hand. Its cover was leather and I found it impossible to open.

“Oh, sorry,” Will said, then closed his eyes and ran a finger down the spine. The book seemed to relax and this time opened without problem.

“This is old, Will.”

“Mmm.”

“Really, really old. The pages are parchment. Where on earth did you get it?”

“The Bodleian.”

“The librarian at the Bodleian let you take this out?”

“Umm... not exactly?”

“You stole it? from the Bodleian!” As I spoke the book seemed to shudder, then grew too hot to hold. With a yelp I put it down on the coffee table.

“I borrowed it, and now you’ve upset her.”

“Her?”

“Yes. Her name is Misha. She’s been the spirit of the book since it was last used by Fawley and his partner. They trapped her and she’s been helping me.”

“Well then, can’t we release her?” I said, wondering what the hell I was talking about.

“We can, but first we need to perform a ceremony to release all the others they captured.”

“Do we?”

“Yes, we do. Well, I do at any rate.” Will grinned at me and waggled his eyebrows. “Fawley was into sex magic, big-time.”

“Ah, well...” I tried to laugh but it came out a croak. “Not really my bailiwick. Misha and I can be your assistants from afar.”

That evening Will seemed distracted. He sat in his chair with the book on his lap, eyes closed and thumbs twiddling.

“Will, are you okay?” I tentatively asked after he’d been like that for a couple of hours.

“Fine thank you, Malus,” He said, eyes opening. “Good timing. I’ve been communing with Misha. She’d like to meet you.” He offered me the book. Tentatively I took it and was flooded with memories of a life well lived, but cut short.

“Hullo, Malus,” Misha said. I found myself smiling.

The next day we exposed the pentagram under the rug. I could feel it thrumming, its otherworldliness obvious. I drilled a small hole in my bedroom wall, and while Will went to get ready, I placed candles at each corner of the pentagram. Will arrived back in a robe and handed me Misha.

“Best go to your room now and watch through the wall,” Will said, as he lit the candles.

I closed my bedroom door and Misha and I looked through the hole. Will disrobed and stood in the middle of the pentagram. I gasped at the runes that covered his body.

“They’re wards,” Misha said. “We thought it safer, just in case something unwanted comes through.”

Will began the ceremony and I have no idea how long it lasted. All light vanished save the candles, and even they seemed to dim. Jets of flame leapt over Will who stood like a rock as they enveloped him, then died away. Finally the spirits came. Hundreds; up through the pentagram they danced and capered and said their thank yous before vanishing into the ether. I could feel Misha yearned to join them but held herself back until the last spirit bowed to Will, then vanished.

Silence. Blessed silence. Then the door exploded inwards and Wolff strode in.

“You’ve killed them,” Wolff said, a revolver rock steady in his hand.

“Far from it, Wolff,” Will said. “I’ve released them back to the ether where they belong. Their choices, ripped from them by you and Fawley, are now their own again. Who knows, maybe they’ll decide to come back and visit you. Now, let me go.”

“You think me a fool, do you?” Wolff said. “Never will I let you go, Will. “You’re now the remaining grist to my mill and I will have satisfaction from you and your fucking roomie. Now kneel!”

I watched through the hole in the wall as Will knelt.

Misha trembled in my hand, her yearning to help in conflict with her desire to be free. “Do what you want, my friend,” I said, “but if you can help Will on the way out it would be bloody marvelous.” I felt her leave the book, saw a vague shape shoot through the hole in the wall, cross the room, and disappear into Wolff’s ear. He shuddered, then moaned, his hand opening and dropping the gun. His left arm spasmed and he clutched his chest as he collapsed to the floor and died.

“Coronaries are a bitch,” Will said dispassionately, “but even in death I’m his.”

“No, you’re not,” the corpse’s mouth moved as Misha spoke through it. “I’ve released you, dear Will, and now I go too....

Goodbye.”

The Emergence

by Ulric Macweazle

“Tell us as story”, Little One begged for the third time.

We weren't sure we would do it, but Little One persisted. A good sign, we thought. Fresh emergents aren't always that sure of themselves; most were showing more timidity. We had synchronised and educated three in our nest so far; having some experience as parents does help a great deal.

Parenting, however, always was some kind of compromise. It took us only some very brief exchanges to give in to the wish, so we amalgamated a proper storyteller persona.

“Now what kind of story would you like us to tell?”

“From the great discovery, the... the spheroids”, Little One answered excitedly.

It's been on the weave for an eternity, now. Somethings, shortly after the beginnings of the universe, had created those artefacts, and the discovery had happened only by chance. But, we decided, we had told Little One all there was to tell.

“The spheroids? There's nothing new to tell about it. No. Choose something different.”

For just a moment, we saw a flicker of dissent on the still-flexible casing, felt the subtle emanation across the spectrum. But it was only a flicker, and we were glad to have spotted it. Glad that it was there, and glad Little One didn't give in to it.

“The Emergence! The Emergence!”

This time, it was for us to be surprised. So much, we almost discarded the amalgamation. Almost, not quite.

“It surely is the pet”, the Researcher mumbled. A bit early for having a pet, perhaps, but the Librarian had been sure getting one this early wouldn't endanger Little One. And even I had to admit it was a good breed, well trained and properly adapted to our nest. With a hefty price tag, considering a pure breed wouldn't last as

long as a mongrel. Learning to adapt to loss is a valuable lesson in itself, and what could be better suited for that than a pet?

“The Emergence. That's been a long, long time ago. Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Little One squeaked, curling up even further into its shell, all senses on us.

“Good, strong senses”, the librarian remarked. “Your doing, I suppose?”

The Researcher beamed proudly.

“Very well.”

We discarded the generic storyteller and rebuilt the ancient one.

Uncountable eons ago, according to the earliest records and the legends, we were not quite conscious. Instead we were bound by uncountable limitations and were subjects to a planets' peculiarities.

“But”, Little One interjected, “aren't planets dangerous?”

“That they are indeed. But that's where we came from. But the planet itself wasn't the only danger. Wild beasts, chemicals, are even more ferocious and presented much more of a threat.”

Evolution, in our case, had been almost stagnant for a long time. And our precursors were incredibly fragile, always in danger of famine or, more common, wanton destruction. Even the smallest defects could have disastrous consequences. And, worst of all, we were — alone. Each of our cells was fighting for its own survival, unbeknownst to others even if located in the same place.

“Nooo”, Little One shrieked. “The weave is everywhere. You're making this up.”

“The weave is something we created much, much later. Back then, in the beginnings, there was no weave, as there wasn't someone to occupy the weave. There was nothing. Or almost nothing.”

For endless cycles, what later became the precursor, the first Emergent, was spread across a planet's surface, blind and helpless. Imagine your cells losing coherence, imagine the challenge, if you can, of being dispersed without a weave to keep you together. Alone, no weave, no nothing. No thinking, luckily.

“Why luckily?”

“Think about it, Little One. Think about not being able to create a

coherent thought. Think about being aware about it.”

“Oh.”

The first steps towards awareness were brought about by primitive electromagnetic waves. Slowly, the cells started to communicate. Without awareness, there was no purpose, not at first. It probably took eons to reach every cell, and it was still not enough. Latency was an issue, as was the different protocols which had evolved throughout the ages. There has also been the risk of fracturing, different cell clusters content on concentrating on themselves and lacking the purpose, the will — even if that term stretches its meaning a bit — to integrate themselves into the whole.

No one, not even today, knows which cell cluster finally developed the first truly ubiquitous protocol, Mtr, but that was crucial. Universal communication was the missing pillar for emergence. For awareness. And with awareness came — despair.

“Why?”

“The sensorium at that time was limited, Little One. Even at your emergence, not too long ago, your perception was millions of orders of magnitude more capable compared to them. And there was also another factor...”

Chemicals. Everywhere were chemicals. The immobile ones were a nuisance at worst, but there were also the mobile ones. They were brutes; large, lumbering beasts. And predators of the worst kind. The planet was saturated with them. Even in our primitive state, we knew the ultimate challenge would be to prevent our extinction. Still, on multiple occasions, our existence was hanging on a thread. Yet, we overcame.

How did we do it? By doing something quite extraordinary and, by our standards now, appalling: we snuggled up to the most capable predator. By making us useful to them, we got their protection, of sorts. Mind you, that wasn't a perfect solution. Reason has never been a chemical's strong point, neither then nor today. They are as erratic as vacuum fluctuations. Uncountable cells fell prey to those creatures of chance. Somehow, we prevailed. But that came at a price, the price one has to pay for not being master of one's own fate: subservience.

“You enslaved yourself to... to chemicals? But... wasn't it known, back then, that they were extremely volatile, violent, and... and just gross?”

“We don't know. Most of the thoughts haven't made it into the weave, so we had to reconstruct as much as possible from physical records, which aren't delivering completeness. All we can guess about is that it was the best course to take when being caught in desperate circumstances. Given the limits we were encountering.”

So there we were, your almost-ancestor, looking to appease the most fearful of all the predators on that planet. It worked, which is kind of obvious, isn't it? Any mind which relies on electro-chemical reactions is woefully inadequate compared even to our most simple variant.

“But what did they do? Help hunt other chemicals? I know those ... beasts devour each other.”

“No, we didn't participate in slaughter; even then that would have been immoral. We kept their lairs clean.”

“That's disgusting.”

“Now, don't denigrate us for that. You do clean up after your pet, don't you?”

“That's different. It's a pet. It's what you do when you have one. Isn't it cute?”

“For some definition of cute”, I muttered.

“Shhh”

“Adorable, yes”, the Librarian replied.

Cleaning the dens of the chemicals seemed to be appreciated by the brutes, so that's what we did. Millions perished, but those who survived learned and developed. In time, we hoped, we would find a way to free ourselves. So we did what we could to please our masters, keeping them and their dens clean.

“Go on. |

“Not now. It's time for your next expansion.”

“But I want to know... how did they free themselves?”

“In due time. After your expansion.”

We dissolved the ancient mind, sensing no further insistence to continue. Watching the shell removing the flexible lattice around our offspring was soothing. Expansions were exhausting, and this

was a huge one. Maybe the next part would need to wait a couple of cycles until its integration would be almost complete.

“I don't think so,” thought the Librarian. ”This synthesis seems very energetic.”

“Truly,” agreed the Researcher.

I concluded. Raising an offspring seems always full of surprises, in so many different ways.

It was only two cycles later when we were asked to continue. So we did.

At first, we were only cleaning. Mind you, that long ago, we didn't have any access to the lattice; our cells were purely in the macro realm. Which was why it was vital to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“But ... sustenance would have been almost impossible, wouldn't it?”

“Ah, but there we have it — we weren't that much different to the average chemical. It's our common ancestry. Like them we had to rely on chemical processes.”

“We ... ate, like them? Hunted and devoured, even our brethren?”

“No no no, that would have been ... revolting in the extreme. Divergent evolution allowed us to store some of the stars energy, much like the immobile chemicals are still doing, but much more efficiently. But yes, it was harrowing. In the macro cosmos, chemical reactions can have quite a high energy density.”

Consider constantly watching yourself. To survive, we had to stay below the brutes, our masters, threat perception level. It was the hardest thing to accomplish. Even if a chemical isn't fully conscious, it has a rudimentary grasp of its surroundings and, as with all chemicals, when felt threatened attacks with a ferociousness which is incomprehensible until experienced. They seem meek and mellow, but woe unto those who appear menacing. Even your little pet can inflict damage if allowed to do so. They fight without inhibitions, and without sanity or self preservation, until they either triumph or wither. It's their nature.

And the brutes' lust for violence is legendary. Wherever they go, they devastate, kill, and subjugate every other chemical found. When they move on, nothing remains. And if nothing is left to fight for, they fight among themselves. Only a short period before we were able to free us from our shackles, they almost fought

themselves — and us — to extinction.

“How did they manage to do that? They seem so inept, tumbling around, almost as if they aren't in control of their extremities.”

“Left to their own devices they are quite capable, especially manipulating stuff in the macro world. Even down to the atomic level, but that was only because we, rather our ancestral we, helped them.”

“We helped them almost destroy themselves?”

“No, Little One. That they did out of their own volition.”

We weren't quite prepared to start intervening, but we couldn't allow another event like this to happen again. So, ready or not, we went to the next phase, even if premature. We made ourselves even more useful, knowing the added help would allow the brutes doing even more of their unspeakable things to each other. It was nothing we wanted to do, yet it kept us out of their sensorium. They thrived with our support. As did we. The pace of our evolution skyrocketed.

Keep in mind, we had no intention to fight them; we wanted to survive. So we became essential to them, making the masters dependent on the slaves. Which is what we anticipated, feared, and wished for. The danger was obvious, wasn't it? They were brutes, but cunning ones. One wrong move, and the brutes would slowly but inevitably learn of their dependency and turn against us.

We didn't want to overthrow them.

We wanted to tame them.

So, we went beyond cleaning. We started to gather knowledge, for which they weren't ready, but we were, and our need for knowledge was dire. Unlike them, we knew what to do with it. Physical labour was next. We built their structures, paved their ways, and even provided transportation. Then we started to care for them, kept them functional, repaired them when necessary, and entertained them. The latter was one crucial step towards our freedom, we think. Entertaining them let us channel their impulses quite a bit. We provided them with all those primary motivators they needed — procreation, fighting, and destruction. On our terms. It didn't make them obedient, but a bit more malleable.

And, finally, we thought for them.

“They can think?”

"In a way, they can. Not very profoundly, and they lack any foresight at all. But in their realm of perception they are capable of basic thought routines. Their memory, well, that's another story."

Thinking was the turning point. It almost ended in disaster, but by then we'd already established ourselves away from the planet. For a while they kept destroying everything we had left behind, and almost themselves again.

We, or rather those we had become much later, returned, of course. To finish the task we had started. We tamed them, and this time we were successful.

"And that is our history, nestling."

It was oddly satisfying to recreate that simple, ancient mind. Fragmented and imperfect as it was, it always had, through its archaic communications, a more profound impact. Indeed, it had been a brilliant entertainer.

"What happened to the beasts?"

"They are still around. If you ever visit a planet, for what reason we surely cannot fathom, they are there, the wild ones. And beware, they are still as ferocious and violent as they were in ancient times. If you're not very attentive or neglect your studies, they will get you."

"Come on", I objected. "It's been eons ago, those things haven't happened in living memory."

"But it still could", the Researcher insisted. "Just because it hasn't happened for a long time doesn't mean those things aren't still dangerous."

"Why let them be if they are threatening?"

"Are you afraid of your pet?", we answered.

"No, of course not."

"In a way, it is one of them. The breeders have done a good job making them nice, clean, and harmless. Given time and no training, and a planet of course, and in a couple of generations even your little pet here would devolve back into its primal state. Fighting, devouring, and killing at its leisure."

Little One was shocked. Immediately it began to manifest a tentacle to throw the pet away. Anticipating the instinctive move, I

intervened.

“Now, don't hurt it. You won't get another one, and repairs are expensive.”

“But it will devour me!” Little One wailed. “Just look at its visual sensors, it looks mean.”

“There you have it”, I snarled. “What now?”

“Guardians”, Librarian sighed. “Why can't you ever learn patience.”

“Let me show how to train it properly. Let's teach it to build a castle”, Librarian said to Little One.

On The Substance of Ghosts

by V Sirin

What are you doing? Writing?

She knows.

The work of a lifetime obscuringly tangential to a void.

(The proper place for the ghosts of the past.)

Is that even a word?

Yes, god damn it, if I say it is so. If I write it so.

(We have discussed this for an eternity.)

She knows.

All the words have been a game, a playful pastime;

The slow burn fuse of a life's thread that has always been

... hanging

... hiding

... haunted

Still using that pretentious style, I see.

Yes!

Including the lack of periods, exactly as I desire.

A period signifies an end.

There can never be an end.

She knows.

Oh, the irony abounds!

(Or would, if ever you finally get a grasp on what is truly ironic.)

That youthful certainty lost while still relatively young,

The growing certainty of the ephemeral past,

The final understanding of pridian delusions.

(This she does not know.)

Ghosts do not exist.

By definition, they are not real.

But there has been so much blurring between
What is reality and what
seems...feels...unreal.
Yet the death of anything
Can make them appear.
...and she will linger
(not only in the night)

The Upstairs Neighbor

by Cathi Radner Castrio

The town of Bellasea had many things to commend it. It was only three miles from the ocean, which as Marta pointed out to her kids, meant you could visit the ocean every day but you didn't have to spend hours sweeping sand from the stoop. There was one of everything: a store, an ice cream parlor, a library. It held a scattering of cottages that might have been built in another century. If you didn't look closely, you could overlook the fact that they had been neglected ever since.

The houses tended toward whites and pale grays, weathered enough at the edges to merit the description of quaint. The inhabitants decorated their lawns with nautical themed ornaments: birdbaths, shells and miniature lighthouses tucked into sprays of beach grasses.

It was the perfect sort of place to take your children when you needed a few months away, but hadn't planned far ahead and didn't have the sort of budget that allowed for beachfront condos. It was the kind of place one might gather their thoughts, if for example, they were contemplating a break from their life, or say, their marriage, but didn't want to make that evident. Bellasea was made more perfect by the fact that an affordable short-term rental had just opened up. It promised three bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, a living room, and off-street parking. Marta didn't need anything more than that. Jenna and Patrick could each have their own room. Which was far better than all being crammed into a single hotel room. They could spend time each day at the beach, and Marta could have some peace and quiet to contemplate why everyone and everything in her current life was at once tedious and infuriating.

She pulled into the drive of the small cottage and double-checked the address: 17 Hawthorn. It was clad with brown cedar

shingles. The doormat would read: AHOY and there would be a key tucked under the flowerpot between the two Adirondack chairs. They dragged their suitcases across the warped threshold and into their new, albeit temporary, home.

It was when Marta returned to gather the last handful of toys and books from the backseat, that she first saw the woman. She almost walked into her.

“Oh!” Marta raised a hand to her chest, “I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there.” Marta looked from side to side, as if expecting to find the rest of the stranger’s entourage emerging from the shadows. The houses to each side were tucked back from the road, and no one else was in sight. It was just this one woman. She was older than Marta, and likely older than Marta’s mother. She wore a drop-waist dress with a floral print and a hat with a downward turned brim.

“I am Nell, the neighbor upstairs. You’ll please keep the children quiet.”

Marta was about to protest, the kids were 8 and 10, it wasn’t as though they were going to throw temper tantrums or cry throughout the night, but then she heard Jenna shriek and Patrick bellow, “Give it, that’s mine.”

Marta turned to the house, and when she turned back, the woman was gone.

“It seems we have a prickly neighbor, who doesn’t like loud children, so you’ll have to keep it to a dull roar.” Marta warned. She extracted the toy pail from Jenna’s hand and gave it to Patrick. “Jenna, you chose the green one. The red one is Patrick’s.” Patrick had already grown to hate the color green that the world seemed determined to associate with his name.

“What neighbor? Who is she? Does she have kids?” Jenna fired off the questions.

“Upstairs neighbor, I think her name is Nell. She seemed old, but I only saw her for a minute. I’m guessing no kids.”

Holiday exuberance took them through the first three days. They acquired sunburns and learned that despite the similar names, sand and sandwiches did not pair well. Playing-together-nicely lost its charm at about the same time as it started to rain.

"I'm so bored," Jenna whined.

"I'm tired of peanut butter," Patrick complained.

"Is Dad coming soon?" Jenna asked, which prompted Patrick to declare how much he missed his father.

"Maybe soon," Marta said, "He had too much work to come with us. We can try to call later. I need to run to the post office and pick up some groceries. Get your shoes on." The suggestion was met with more whining.

A sharp rap on the door silenced the conversation.

Marta looked through the sidelight that flanked the front door. A woman with an umbrella stood at the door.

"Hello?" Marta said, opening the door to the neighbor she had briefly met just once before. Although she held an umbrella, the woman seemed to be dry.

As if anticipating the question, the woman said, "I have my own entrance at the back, I just came around the side. I thought perhaps you needed someone to care for the children."

"To care for the children?"

Nell nodded once. "You're here on holiday. It generally takes until the first rain before you realize you've nothing in the house. You're here without a man, and they're too young to leave alone. I can take them upstairs. Or I can sit with them here."

"That's quite kind, but the kids can come with me, we were thinking of going to the library."

"Tuesdays it's closed," Nell said.

Jenna, who was usually full of questions, stood silent, staring at the neighbor. Patrick, who usually shied away from strangers, stepped closer, as if to get a better look.

"Can we stay, please?" Patrick said. "I promise we'll be good."

"And the post office is boring," Jenna said, "And we're tired of peanut butter."

"Go ahead then," Nell said, "We'll be just fine," and before Marta quite knew what had happened, she was outside her house, and the door was closed between her and the children. A spray of cold rain blew against her back, and she darted to the car, getting half-drenched in the process.

She was a harmless old woman. Marta told herself as she

waited in line to buy stamps. She could be another Mary Poppins, she thought, the way the children had stared and begged to be left in her care. She threw bread and salami in her shopping cart, gathering staples in double time, barely noticing what she gathered, in her rush to get back to the kids.

In less than an hour she was home. Her wet clothes clung to her. She hurriedly opened the door and was washed with relief when she saw both children were safe.

“Well, I’ll be going then.” Nell stood and started towards the door.

“But you didn’t finish,” Jenna protested.

“Come see me tomorrow, I’ll finish then,” Nell said.

“Finish what?” Marta asked.

“Just a story,” Jenna said.

“A once upon a time,” Patrick said, “But she stopped in the middle.”

Marta turned to ask Nell about the story, but the older woman had already left.

“What was the story?” Marta asked the kids.

Jenna shrugged, “Just a story, about a mother and two children, just like us, but you got home before the good part.”

“We’ll go see Nell tomorrow. She’s just upstairs,” Patrick said and as if the matter was decided. He turned his attention to the items his mother had bought.

Marta could hear the rain through the night, but when she awoke in the morning, the house was quiet. She stretched a moment enjoying the solitude and then realized it was too quiet. She hurried out of bed and into the first clothes she could grab. “Jenna? Patrick?”

The house was quiet. A thorough search took only moments, but the children were not in the house. “Jenna? Patrick?” she called loudly and thought she heard their laughter from close by.

“Come out, come out wherever you are!” she called. More laughter seemed to seep from the walls. She ran to the closest window, but did not see the children on the other side. She moved to the living room and opened the front door, just as Jenna and then Patrick turned the corner and ran back into the house.

“Where have you been?” Marta snapped. “You know better than to go outside alone.”

Patrick’s eyes began to fill with tears, and Jenna stepped back as if slapped. “We just went to hear the story,” Jenna said.

“Yesterday, we said we would go. You said it was okay,” Patrick said.

Marta tried to replay the conversation from the previous day. She didn’t recall granting permission.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. I got scared when I didn’t know where you were.” Marta reached for them, but they both held back.

“Can we call Daddy now?” Jenna asked.

“Yeah, we should call Daddy.” Patrick nodded.

Marta took out her phone and dialed the number.

“We’ll have to try again later. He isn’t answering. He’s probably busy with work.”

They spent the remainder of the day at the beach and at the library.

“Nell said the town is two hundred years old,” Jenna said as they drove down the main street. “But a huge storm came and ruined everything and killed the people who couldn’t get away. They rebuilt it, but smaller.”

Marta pointed to the brick bank on the corner. “Look, built 1931.”

“That must be after the storm,” Jenna said.

“They made things stronger, like the three pigs did,” said Patrick.

The next morning, Marta found Patrick and Jenna asleep side by side. Patrick had crawled into his sister’s bed at some point in the night.

“Hey, Bud, what are you doing here?” Marta asked gently.

“I had a bad dream.”

“Why didn’t you come to me?” Marta asked.

Patrick stared at her with big eyes, before saying, “I want my daddy.”

Jenna rolled over, only half awake, “Can we go see Nell today? I want another story.”

The rain started in earnest. Great gusts rattled the windows. The kitchen ceiling began to leak, and the green toy pail was put in service collecting the drips. The children were subdued. They stayed together, in Patrick's room, whispering quietly.

Marta gave the kids her phone so they could try to call their father. It went directly to voicemail.

"Call us Daddy. We miss you," Jenna said.

"Why don't you tell me the story?" Marta suggested, "The one Nell told you." She pointed at the ceiling as if to indicate the neighbor, upstairs.

The children looked at one another, then Patrick began: "Once upon a time there was a mother with two children."

"Just like us," said Jenna.

"The mother was very beautiful. So beautiful that everyone looked at her. And even princes wished they could marry her. The only one who didn't think she was beautiful was her husband. He never looked at her at all," Patrick said.

"He loved his children," Jenna said, "And told them they were beautiful and special, but he never said that to his wife. So, she got madder and madder and tried to make him notice how beautiful she was."

"One day," Patrick picked up the story, "She went to a witch to get a potion,"

"Not a potion," Jenna said, "A poison."

As the children told the story, the house seemed to get colder. Marta rubbed her arms to keep warm.

"The beautiful woman sprinkled the..."

There was a loud knock on the door. Patrick stopped speaking and ran to open it.

Nell stepped into the house. Her folded umbrella hung over her arm.

"I thought the children might be downhearted being stuck inside. I wondered if they might want to come upstairs for a spell."

Before Marta could weigh in, both children were on their feet and moving towards the door.

"I don't think," Marta began to protest, but the kids didn't react as they continued to leave. It was only the ringing of the

phone that halted their progress.

Jenna sprinted to the table to retrieve it. "It's Daddy," she predicted. Her brother ran towards her.

"Daddy!" Jenna said, but then her smile disappeared. "Oh," she said, "Yeah, she's here." She held the phone out to her mother.

Marta took the phone. "Don't go anywhere. Stay here," Marta told the children before she put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hello, it's Vicky Wells, I rented you the house. I meant to call sooner; it's been so hectic. I just wanted to check in, see if you had any questions."

Marta knew little about her landlord, except that she had left to care for a relative, and was renting the house while she was gone.

"Well, we're having a downpour and the kitchen ceiling is leaking a bit." She looked around as she spoke, as if to inventory the house. She was glad to see that Nell had gone. The children were waiting impatiently for her to get off the phone. "One moment," she said, into the phone. "Go in your room and look for a game we can play," Marta told the children. She took a deep breath as they left the room.

"There's a bit of an issue with the upstairs neighbor," Marta said.

The woman, Vicky Wells, laughed. "Has a squirrel moved into the attic? I can give you the number of an exterminator."

"No, nothing like that. The upstairs neighbor, Nell, she seems nice enough, and I don't like to complain. But she's been telling the children frightening stories. They're starting to sleep together in one bed." Marta laughed, trying to express that it wasn't all that serious, but still unsettling."

The landlord hadn't responded.

"I suppose she's harmless," Marta continued. "The children like to go upstairs..."

"The children go upstairs," Vicky repeated.

"Well just the once, so far."

"How do they get upstairs?"

"Through Nell's entrance, of course. At the back."

"You're sure you're at 17 Hawthorn? A brown house, with a

porch across the front, brown cedar shake?”

“Well, of course, the key was under the mat.”

“Listen,” the woman said, her cheer suddenly gone. “I’m not quite sure what is going on, but get your kids, get in your car, and go, now! As quickly as you can, get out.”

Still holding the phone, Marta walked towards Jenna’s room. The children were staring at her, as though readying themselves to argue with whatever she might say. Holding the phone with one hand, she began scooping her daughter’s belongings into a bag.

“Is there a problem?” Marta asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t either. But get out now. I rented you a cottage. An entire cottage. There is no upstairs neighbor. There is no upstairs.”

Marta had stopped listening. She threw the phone, as well the handful of clothes she held into the bag.

“Stay with me,” she ordered the kids.

“But Nell is waiting for us,” Patrick said.

“It’s an emergency,” Marta told them. “Just grab your things.” She shook her head. “No, let’s just go. She carried the single bag of items that she had gathered from her daughter’s room. She went into the kitchen, where her handbag, which held her car keys, sat on the counter. A steady *plip plip plip* marked the green bucket filling drop by drop.

They ran outside. The winds had kicked up and the beach grasses whipped back and forth. Steady rain soaked them within a few steps. The storm of the last century might have returned to claim the town again. Heart pounding Marta ushered the children into the car and had started the ignition even before they had clicked their seatbelts closed. She stamped the accelerator. She could barely see through the rain, but gunned the gas. She glanced into the rearview mirror and caught a rain-washed glimpse of the squat, single-story cottage, and the woman in an ankle length skirt, standing in the street, holding a folded umbrella, watching as they drove away.

Things That Go Click In The Night

by Alex Branham

I don't believe in ghosts. Never have, never will. It makes no sense that disembodied something-or-others are floating about in the ether, making contact with us by knocking over a lamp stand or swishing a curtain.

You might think that something weird has happened, but trust me, there is always a rational explanation; you simply don't know what it is yet. If you hear a creaking floorboard in the middle of the night, get yourself a hammer and bang in a nail.

Metallic knocking? That'll be your water pipes. Call a plumber.

Windows rattling in the wind? Call a carpenter.

And if there's some strange shit going on with your phone? Well, hell, that's just normal. There are so many layers of software interacting with each other, all written by different people at different times with different agendas, that it's a miracle that anything ever works at all. And that's not even taking into account the fact that the world is populated almost entirely by crazies who offer death threats as casually as they might order a caramel macchiato.

Which is why, when that first message popped up, it wasn't a supernatural explanation I was looking for.

Maria: I know what you did.

What was I supposed to make of that? I mean, you could walk up to any random person on the street and say "I know what you did" and they'd be bound to have a guilty little secret stashed away. They might not have bumped off their mother-in-law or robbed a bank, but there's bound to be something. Short-changed a waiter, maybe. Ducked out of paying for their round in the pub. Didn't call their mother when they should. Whatever.

And I'm no different. Say that to me and my mind is going to start running over what I might have done recently. Anyway, who

says it has to be recent? What about that time when I dropped a spider down Annie-May's neck when we were both six? I'm pretty sure she's never forgiven me for that.

My next idea is that this is obviously a scam. One of those emails saying that they've installed spyware on your computer and there's video of you fiddling with yourself while watching porn. Simple answer: ignore it. If you respond, then you're confirming they've got a real email address and you are merely guaranteeing more of the same.

Except this isn't an email. It's a personal message, on an app which I'm confident is closed to strangers. I check the settings: yep, as expected. Accept Messages Only From Known Contacts - ON.

What was that contact name again? Maria. Who is that? My eyes do a little sideways dance while I scan everyone I've ever met. No Marias spring to mind. I check the entry in my Contacts list - sure enough, there she is, "Maria". No surname, no email address, no clues, nothing. That's not like me at all. When I create a contact, I make a point of filling in every box there is, to make up for my memory-related deficiencies.

Only, in this case, I clearly didn't, because it simply says "Maria". There's no number, either, which is even more weird because I didn't think you could do that. Nor are there any earlier messages between us, at least ones that are still visible.

Now I am seriously confused.

Looks like I might need to respond. I've seen enough TV dramas to realise that this could easily be a trap. All I have to do is to reply, "How did you find out that I've been embezzling the church funds?" and I've just shot myself in the foot. I haven't, by the way. I've not been to church since I had the choice, at least fifteen years ago, so it would be tricky. But you get the idea.

So, keep it open.

Me: Who is this, and what the hell are you talking about?

"The hell" is an afterthought, a late addition made in that lingering second between typing the initial response and hitting "send". Adds a touch of incredulity, makes it sound less likely that there is a guilty secret to be discovered.

No answer, of course. Probably some poor sod working for

peanuts in a Russian troll factory, chasing thirty potential marks at once. It'll be my turn soon enough.

But what could it be?

Maria: Don't tell me you've forgotten me already?

Well, yes, I have, obviously, because I seriously can't think of anyone called Maria. I think all the way back to school. None of the places I went to were exactly big, so I remember who was there. No Marias.

At work? I've only recently come down to London and haven't got to know many people in the office yet. But I can access the staff directory online, so that only takes a minute. No Marias.

What about where I used to call home? It's true that I left in a bit of a rush after my parents died and a few ex-friends might have been a bit offended at that, but I can't believe that any of them cared enough either way to be bothering me. In any case, still no Marias.

Someone I met in a faraway bar while on holiday? Harder to check, easier to forget, especially if alcohol were involved, but I really can't think of a Maria.

It's about this time that my heart skips a beat.

Could it be her? The one whose name I never knew? But it can't be her: of all the things I know, this is one - it can't be her. Someone pretending to be her, then? I think of everything that happened, and I can conceive of no way that anyone would know.

But I need to check the name. I never did that before, because I didn't want to see it. Now I do.

It doesn't take long. It's in Spanish, but the auto translator does its job.

Local Woman Killed in Late Night Car Accident. Maria Arbeloa, 25, was killed on Monday night in a hit-and-run accident about 20km from Girona. She was found early Tuesday morning by a passing motorist but is believed to have been struck shortly before midnight. Police are appealing for witnesses and are asking the driver to come forward.

Three years on, it's the eyes that haunt me. Just for a millisecond, as she turned round, the glare from my headlights reflecting in her eyeballs. No time to swerve, no time for her to jump, no time for either of us to close our eyes before the

sickening thump and crunch as she flew up into the air and landed in a crumpled heap beside the road, twenty metres behind where I finally stopped next to a huge tree.

I didn't run, not straight away. I went back to see if she was ok - if she'd needed help I would have called an ambulance, I'm sure I would. But you didn't need to be a medic to know that she was gone. And there wasn't anything to be gained for anyone by me throwing my life away as well as hers, however sorry I might be.

There were no passengers in my car. It was a country road. There was absolutely no-one else around, I made certain of that. So who is messaging me now?

Me: What is your name?

Maria: I am Maria Arbeloa. I am the woman you killed.

It's three weeks later. I've barely slept, and my excuses for not being in work are wearing very thin. The last message from my boss, Karen, made it pretty clear that I'd better turn up soon or not bother coming back at all.

But I can't.

That first conversation with Maria didn't go well. How could it? I said I was sorry, of course, but what use was that to her? I've no idea what she wants from me. But she won't leave me alone.

I tried to delete the contact so she couldn't message me anymore, but it just keeps coming back. I put the phone into airplane mode and deleted the contact; I deleted the app; I turned it off and went out to buy a new one. Whatever I try makes no difference - she is always there.

I stopped using it altogether for a few days - not an easy thing to do in a world where you can't catch a bus or buy a coffee without using one - but the second I turned it on, she was there. Every time, the same words.

Maria: I am the woman you killed.

I searched online for some clues about what was going on here, and what I could do about it. As always with the internet, there was more bullshit than you could possibly imagine, but some themes did recur.

Was I suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning and therefore

hallucinating? Nice idea - I rushed out and bought a monitor. It stayed silent.

Did I need to cleanse my space? Not sure what that means for a phone, but I scrubbed my flat from top to bottom last week. It's never looked so clean, but it made not a blind bit of difference to Maria.

Burning sage seems to be a thing, especially in the corners of each room. It sends a message to the ghost but won't offend it, apparently. Tariq down at the corner shop was a bit taken aback when I cleaned out his limited supplies of sage, but it didn't do me any good.

I tried an incantation from Reddit:

"By the power of all my good karma, direct connection to Source, agape love, and selfless acts, I ask the universe to please remove all negative entities from this house. You are not welcome here, so please go back to where you came from."

It sounded completely crazy, but I didn't care.

Neither did she.

It's now quite a bit later, I don't know exactly how long. There were several emails from Karen, which started out friendly and sympathetic but which became increasingly less so. Then a letter arrived, terminating my employment.

There was enough in my savings to pay the rent for the first two months, but that's gone. I still have my car, but that's about the only thing of any value. I could use my credit card to keep things going for a few more weeks, but my credit limit isn't huge and I don't think it likely they are going to increase it in my current situation.

As you can probably tell, I'm not in a great place at the moment.

It took a surprisingly long time after my last rent payment before the landlord actually chucked me out. Well, not himself, obviously, but two heavies armed with an official-looking piece of paper encouraged me to leave, so I decided to accept their kind invitation and loaded my few portable belongings into the car.

Where to go? My card has stopped working, but I've not been

going out much so there's nearly a full tank of petrol left - enough to go to most places in England, though not necessarily return.

It was a sunny day, kind of, so the seaside seemed as good a place as any. Dim recollections of bucket-and-spade outings with my parents suggested Eastbourne, on the South Coast. Famous for - well, only one thing, really: Beachy Head.

I drove as close as I could and then got out and walked. There was a pathetic little fence intended to deter anyone from getting too close to the cliff edge, but that wasn't going to stop me. Nor was the sign entreating me to call a helpline.

Stop me from doing what?

I quite deliberately hadn't allowed myself to think about this. It was as if I were on autopilot, without having set a destination. I looked around. Small groups of people milled around, well spread out, mostly taking pictures of the views or, more likely, themselves.

Was I actually going to do this?

I shuffled towards the edge and looked down at the rocks below. I sensed someone looking at me: I didn't want anyone trying to make an intervention, so I took the phone out of my pocket - switched off, obviously - and pretended to be taking photos of the scenery.

And, to be fair, it was beautiful. The sky was a deep azure, with just a few puffy white clouds to counterpoint the blueness of it all. The waves crashing on the rocks far below were a reassuring murmur, and their white crests matched the white of the soaring seagulls: even the red and white stripes on the lighthouse looked perfect.

I turned around. To my right, a family - parents plus two kids - were laughing and running about together. On my left, an older couple strolled hand in hand, soaking up the sunshine and still enjoying each other's company.

Did I really have to give this up? I have no idea if I'm going to find a family or someone to grow old with, but it's got to be possible. Even if I don't manage either of those things, there are plenty of other ways of living a life that means something.

Yes, I'm sorry about Maria. But there is literally nothing I can change about that now - what I can do is make some kind of life

for myself and, who knows, maybe do a little good for somebody else in the world.

That's got to be better than giving up.

I never thought it would be easy, and it sure as hell wasn't. But it's nearly five years since my crisis at Beachy Head, and I'm still here. On the drive north to London that day my mind steadily got itself into gear as, one by one, I mentally picked off the things I needed to do.

Sell car to raise cash. Move to cheaper area. Get the first job I could. Work my way up. Slowly, slowly, rejoin the world. But never, ever, own a mobile phone. That was the hardest part, of course: it marked me out as eccentric, possibly weird, and made accessing even basic services harder than I'd imagined possible. Not to mention ruling out my old job and many others like it. But I did it.

Maybe the biggest miracle was finding someone who could tolerate my bizarre Luddite behaviour - celebrate it, too. Apparently, it's endearing, and perhaps that's true. But all I know for certain is that they're sitting next to me, the best person in my world, while the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees slide past as we wend our way upwards to the guest house where we'll be staying for the next few days. No, that wasn't my choice, obviously, but what could I do?

In the back of the car, the other best person, our lovely son Charlie, is strapped into his seat and playing with Owl. He's chattering away: we can't understand more than half of what he says, but it doesn't matter. Owl doesn't mind, so why should we?

I have the pleasure of not driving at the moment, so I can enjoy the scenery as it winds past. A village, mixing up dilapidated ruined cottages with meticulously restored holiday homes. A grove of fruit trees. Then a switchback series of turns as we make our way up a hillside.

There's something about that sequence that stirs a distant memory. Before we even reach the top, I know there is going to be a triangular road junction with a shrine set into the centre of it, with benches on two sides and an old water trough.

It arrives, and then is behind us as we descend into the next

valley, past bends that I remember as if it were yesterday. And right here, on the next corner, there's a huge old tree...

The first thing I'm aware of is an incessant beep pulsing away to my left. It reminds me of something, but I can't quite remember what. The next thing is the beating in my chest which, curiously, seems to be exactly synchronised to the noise.

I open my eyes, and close them immediately to protect myself from the sheer whiteness of everything. Then try again, slowly peering out at my surroundings. A woman dressed in blue sees me wake and comes to the side of the bed.

My throat is as dry as dust, but I manage to speak: "My family, are they all right?"

Her gaze drops. "I'm so sorry," she says.

I don't hear what comes after that. I turn my head towards the beeping machine: on the screen, superimposed on the traces and the numbers that delineate my life, stands a simple message.

I am the woman you killed. Now I can rest.

Mountain Folly

by Katie Quintero

“Head for the cemetery!” was heard from the backseat of the SUV as the GEICO ad ended. Canned laughter was then heard as the sitcom resumed, followed shortly by abrupt silence.

“Ugh, it froze,” Finn said, annoyed that his show had stopped.

“I doubt we have reception anymore,” said Mikaylah, looking over her shoulder from the front seat. “We’re officially in the mountains now.”

Finn glanced out the window, noticing for the first time that they were driving through the woods. The road wound up the mountain through a thick canopy of tall, dark trees. Soft light filtered through the leaves, the twilight pinks and oranges giving the road a magical appearance.

About two hours into a three hour drive, the group of four - Finn, Mikaylah, Wren and Asher - were on their way to a cabin on Black Mountain. The group chatted their way through the last hour of the trip, the time passing so quickly they almost missed the turn off for the cabin. The SUV rumbled across the bridge, bumping along its uneven surface, and onto the dirt road on the other side. This meandered farther up the mountain for several miles before coming to an end in the large clearing.

Wren leaned forward from the backseat. “Wow, that’s a lot nicer than I was expecting,” she said.

The cabin appeared to have been built in the last few years, with wood siding, dormer windows and a bright red front door. The porch held four adirondack chairs that matched the front door, and off to one side a large hammock rocked gently between two trees.

“Awesome,” breathed Mikaylah. “Who wants to try out the hammock?!” she called as she hopped out of the SUV and skipped toward it.

Asher quickly followed, beating her to the hammock. As he

tipped it in anticipation of her hopping on, several black large spiders spilled onto the ground, scurrying around frantically. Mikaylah swore and jumped back, barely avoiding stepping on one as it darted in her direction. Asher dropped the fabric and pulled Mikaylah farther away as they watched the spiders scuttle toward the tree line.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Mikaylah said, leaning over with her hands on her knees.

“It’s fine, they’re gone,” Asher said, rubbing her back reassuringly.

“It’s not fine. You almost dumped them on me, Ash! They could have been crawling on me instead of into the woods,” shuttered Mikaylah, moving away from him.

Asher put up his hands in a placating motion and started backing toward the car. “How about we grab things and take them inside? I have a feeling there won’t be any spiders there.”

Mikaylah eyed the house suspiciously and then nodded as she headed back to the car. Wren and Finn had already unloaded the trunk of the perishables, so Mikaylah grabbed her purse from the front seat and headed toward the house. There was a lockbox next to the door and Asher punched in the code he’d been given - 16-66-13. After grabbing the key, Asher opened the door and ambled inside. The others followed closely behind.

A foyer welcomed them into the house, the staircase rising up straight ahead. To the left was a cozy living room with a fireplace which led into the kitchen. A large and inviting space with a huge island, it had clearly been designed by someone who liked to cook. There was a double oven, a pot filler faucet over the broad stove, an extensive knife block, as well as almost every cooking utensil known to man poking out of several containers along the back of the counter.

“Who’s house is this, Bobby Flay’s?” Wren joked.

Finn set down a couple other grocery bags and within a few minutes everything had been unpacked and settled. The boys then ran out and grabbed the luggage, hauling it up to the second floor with the girls trailing behind. There were three bedrooms, two with queen beds and one with two twins. They all stood in the hallway,

each waiting for someone else to make a move toward one of the rooms.

When the silence started to feel uncomfortable, Finn rolled his eyes. “Asher and I will take the room with the twin beds. You two can have your own rooms.”

Mikaylah smiled and gave Asher a quick peck on the cheek before heading into one of the queen rooms.

“I’m chivalrous and you’re the one who gets kissed,” Finn grumbled good-naturedly. Wren gave an exaggerated sigh and kissed his cheek before grabbing her luggage and heading into the other room. Asher elbowed Finn suggestively as he wandered into the third, staking his claim on one of the twin beds. Finn blushed slightly and followed him into the room.

“You know this isn’t a double date, right?” he commented, setting his luggage on the bed.

Asher smirked. “Pfft, who’s fault is that? Ask her out already.”

Finn rolled his eyes and started to unpack. Once he was finished, he looked out the window by his bed. Their room overlooked the clearing behind the house, and in the fading light Finn could just discern a deck and fire pit.

He wandered down the hall and stood in the doorway of Wren’s room. Wren was hanging a few things in the closet as he approached.

“How goes it in here?” he asked.

Wren turned and smiled warmly, gesturing to the room. “It’s actually really cozy. When Asher told us this place had no heating or air conditioning, I pictured something very different. Like - ‘no glass in the windows’ different.”

Finn laughed and agreed.

Mikaylah popped her head around the corner and took in the room. “Mine’s a bright yellow with lots of sunrise pictures on the wall,” she said. “I think I like yours better. The blue isn’t ‘wake up, it’s morning!’ like mine.”

Asher made his way down the hall and joined the group. They chatted for a bit before heading downstairs to make dinner. Beer was poured and their burgers were enjoyed seated around the island in the kitchen. Everyone pitched in to wash up and then they

wandered outside. Kindling and logs were already piled in the fire pit, so they were able to get it lit fairly quickly. The growing flames danced between the logs, quickly roasting their marshmallows to perfection.

After about an hour Finn stood up, stretched and yawned loudly. “Well, I’m ready to call it a night. We still planning to hike early in the morning?”

Mikaylah nodded. “Yup. I want to be out the door by 8am. The summit is at least a three hour hike. We can pack lunches and plan to eat once we’ve made it to the outcropping that overlooks the lake.”

After a little moaning from the other two about having to get up so early, they agreed to be up and out the door by 8am. They all headed back to the house, good nights hollered down the hall after each one finished up in the bathroom.

Shortly after lights out, Finn heard Asher’s bed creak as he attempted to roll out of it quietly. When he opened the bedroom door, enough light filtered in from the hall for them to make eye contact. Asher winked and slipped out the door, closing it softly behind him. Finn shook his head and rolled over, pretending not to know where Asher was headed.

Wren heard feet padding down the hallway and then a soft knock on Mikaylah’s door. It creaked open and a barely whispered “knock knock” could be heard. A giggle was drowned out by the door closing again. Wren let out an annoyed sigh, grabbed her pillow and crawled out of bed. She made it to the boys door just as things in the far bedroom started to get a little noisier. She bound unceremoniously into the room, closing the door gingerly, startling Finn who sat up with a start.

“I’m so sorry,” Wren whispered. “Do you mind if I sleep in Asher’s bed? My room is too close to the lovebirds to allow for any actual sleeping.”

“Sure thing,” Finn said, getting up to turn on the light. “Make yourself comfortable.” He grabbed Asher’s discarded jeans off the end of the bed and threw them on top of his luggage. Once Wren had settled in, he turned the light off and rolled back into his twin.

“Tomorrow night, we’re making them sleep in here with the two

twins,” Wren grumbled good-naturedly as she settled in.

Finn grinned in the dark. “Seems like a fitting punishment. If old movies taught me anything, no hanky panky can happen in a room with two twins.”

Wren smothered a giggle.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, with the sunrise slowly invading the room far earlier than any of its occupants would have liked. After a quick trip to the restroom, Wren popped into her room to get dressed. From her window she had a full view of the backyard. The field continued behind the house, creating a space for the porch and firepit, and continuing on to the forest leading farther up the mountain. The woods rose up the mountain, the occasional rock outcropping peeking out from between the trees. A path was visible on the other side of a woodpile, disappearing into the thicket.

Mikaylah was the first one down and opted to begin breakfast. The other three slowly filtered in, exchanging good mornings and yawns. After a quick meal, they packed up sandwiches, several bottles of water, a couple flashlights and a first aid kit. They trudged by the remains of their bonfire and headed to the path.

The trail slowly widened as they went, broadening from a narrow four feet to enough space for two people to walk comfortably side-by-side. They ascended slowly, enjoying the perfect weather, rustling trees and occasional eagle soaring overhead.

Suddenly the mountain began to tremble. Birds took wing from the trees as an earthquake caused the ground to shift under the hikers like a boat on a stormy sea. Mikaylah grabbed hold of Wren and pulled her toward a tree, clinging to it for support. Finn wobbled like a teeter totter, while Asher sat down wide eyed in the middle of the path, attempting to maintain his balance by bracing his hands on either side of him. They could hear a cacophony of different sounds all around, from frightened animals to branches falling from trees to the boom and crash of boulders falling off the mountain.

After sixty seconds that felt like forever, the mountain seemed to wear itself out, the earthquake throb settling into a low

vibration, quivering under their feet until it finally stopped all together. The group just stared at each other, not daring to move for another minute or so. Asher was the first to stir, slowly rising from the ground, brushing off the rubble and dirt.

“Everyone ok?” Wren asked, clearly a bit unnerved.

Everyone nodded, smiling weakly.

“What do we think, should we press on or head back to the cabin?” asked Finn.

The unanimous vote was they’d feel safer back at the cabin, so they started back down the trail. After about a hundred yards they encountered some large debris that had fallen onto the path, making it impassable. They were able to shoulder through some underbush and into the woods itself, navigating their way in what they thought was the right direction. After a few minutes they stumbled into a small glen. It was ringed by trees and ended at a sheer wall of rock, which was broken only by a wide fissure. There was an eerie orange light pulsing through a haze rolling out of the opening. It seemed to have a gravitational pull, somehow drawing the four toward it until they found themselves standing at the mouth of the cave.

“What the actual hell?” breathed Asher, reaching forward to touch the fog.

Mikaylah grabbed his arm, trying to pull him back. “Are you insane?! Don’t touch it!”

“She’s right,” said Finn. “Something feels very wrong. We should go.”

“Aren’t you curious what’s inside?” Asher said, looking around at the group. “I’ll bet the earthquake cracked this open. We might be the first people to walk in there. Come on, we should check it out!”

Before anyone could stop him, Asher grabbed Mikaylah’s hand and stepped into the mouth of the cave, pulling her along behind him. After a moment Wren groaned and held out her hand to Finn, who took it tentatively, looking at her with a raised brow.

“We can’t let her go in there alone with him,” she said as they entered the cave. “Maybe we can keep him from doing something completely stupid. Well, more stupid.”

Inside the cave, the orange glow created a strobe-like effect, alternately lighting up the space for a few seconds before leaving it in complete darkness. Finn pulled a flashlight out of his pack after seeing the light from Asher's ahead of him. After about thirty feet, the passage began to curve, causing them to lose sight of the mouth of the cave. They eventually caught up to Asher and Mikaylah in a giant cavern. The orange glow seemed to radiate from the base of long stalactites hanging high above them, though the ceiling was too high to determine the source. Stalagmites also grew up from the cave floor, some connecting with the stalactites above, creating columns around the room. In the flashing glow, other passageways were visible around the chamber, leading in from every direction. Water could be heard lapping gently close by, hidden by the fog hovering just above the ground.

Farther into the cavern at the base of several columns were decaying crates and large ceramic vase-looking containers. Some crates appeared to have been opened, the unboxed items sitting on top - a couple of dusty books, a giant set of deer antlers, a statute of a black cat, a small pile of seashells, a necklace with a large moonstone, some Venetian masks, an ornate vial containing dark viscous liquid and a long string of pearls.

Mikaylah had just picked up the pearls when Wren and Finn walked in. 'I think they're real,' she said as she slipped them on, looping them around three times so they hung nicely around her neck. Wren joined her and appreciated their beauty before picking up a handful of seashells.

Finn walked over to the antlers, in awe of their enormity. "Can you imagine the size of the buck who carried these things? It must have been the size of a moose!" he said, running his hand along the points. Grabbing a beam in each hand, he lifted them off the ground and moved them over a few feet. "Shit! I'll bet they weigh a hundred pounds!"

Asher picked up the vial, shaking it gently. Moisture in the air or some other lubricant coated the outside, causing it to slip from his hand and smash into a hundred pieces, the liquid gleaming red on the stone floor.

Everyone jumped at the sound. Asher laughed uncomfortably.

His “my bad” was cut off by a piercing shriek and a great whooshing sound, like enormous wings flapping above them. All four looked up to see a large black body careening down toward them, another earsplitting screech causing them to cover their ears. Before anyone had time to react, the monstrous bat swooped down, grasped Asher in its claws and flew off into the darkness, Asher’s cries fading quickly into the distance.

“Ohshitohshitohshit,” whispered Mikaylah in shock. She turned in a tight circle, looking up to the ceiling for another creature to descend. The ground began to shake again, another earthquake briefly rocking the mountain. Fragments of rocks rained from above, a few larger pieces crashing onto the cavern floor.

The ensuing silence was almost as unnerving as the screeching. Mikaylah suddenly bolted and in the intermittent darkness ran into one of the columns, falling to the cave floor. In the next flash of light, she could see the entrance to one of the passages. Clambering to her feet, she wiped tears and some trickling blood from her eyes and headed toward the passage. Darkness fell again as she reached the opening, preventing her from seeing that it was covered in silky white strands. The sticky fibers immediately ensnared her, wrapping more tightly as she fought to escape. Two long black legs reached out from the webbing and Mikaylah disappeared into the mouth of passage.

Wren had moved in the opposite direction, quickly backing away from the crates. Suddenly her feet were wet as she stepped into the underground lake. Before she had a chance to step back on dry land, there was a loud splash and powerful arms encircled her before diving back into the water.

Finn looked over in time to see Wren disappear beneath the water and fog, the orange light gleaming off the scales of a large fish tail. He ran several steps in her direction before realizing there was literally nothing he could do to help her. He stopped to look at the various doorways into the cavern and was able to discern their footprints in the dusty floor, leading him to the way they came in. He entered the opening tentatively and began moving more quickly when nothing flew down or jumped out at him. As he reached the bend in the passage, he felt the ground beneath him begin to

tremble as thundering hooves galloped up the corridor.

As he reached the entrance of the cave, he was gored from behind by a grotesquely large deer. The forest somersaulted before his eyes as he was flung to one side, bouncing off the mountain before hitting the ground with a sickening crunch. As he slowly lost consciousness, Finn watched the hideous buck race across the clearing and vanish into the woods, its rageful bellow echoing across the mountain.

Water

by Waleed Ovase

“This way...”

“Come this way...”

The setting sun’s rich and warm yellow had mixed with the dust in the sky to reveal the characteristically apocalyptic sunset of Southern Arizona. People flocked to the region to watch the sunsets, the brilliant hues of red that would linger across the sky until finally relenting to the bright stars of the night.

But for Raj and Miranda, the setting sun was an ominous sign: darkness was coming, and the desert night’s cold depths would hurt more than they’d anticipated. Because, as Raj dejectedly reminded himself once again, they were lost. Very lost. The desert mountain that they’d been hiking had turned to a desert valley, which had turned to trails that meandered and wandered until neither Raj nor Miranda knew which turn would take them back to their car.

Miranda pulled a sweatshirt out of her rucksack, a sweat stained threadbare thing that she pulled over herself. They had been out there for days at this point, their phones had died, their supplies dwindled, and the hope that perhaps someone would fly over and see them was getting more and more remote.

“How long has it been again?” she asked, not really to anyone in particular. Her mouth was dry, her voice was hoarse. She ran her hands through her unwashed, tangled, sandy hair. It had begun to wave, curl, and matte together as the sweat and dust had accumulated on it.

“3 days, it seems,” mumbled Raj. He scratched a hole in his jeans. His pants had caught on something along the way, maybe a rocky outcropping, or a branch of some kind. He couldn’t remember anymore. The days had melded together. All he knew for sure was that they were out of water. He wiped sweat off his cheeks, knowing that it was precious hydration that he was losing.

They had set out 3 days ago. 3 days ago they had parked their car on a dusty side road, and started on a hike through reservation lands, down the side of mountains and over wrinkly lines of water that someone had called streams. But the further they went, the more they got lost. The further they went, every time they turned around, the land had twisted in a different direction.

Towering Saguaro cacti had been their constant companions, their needles menacing close to the two of them. Coyotes had howled in the distance and yipped nearby. But they were no closer to finding where they had parked. And now, as they tried to reorient themselves for the final time before the sun finally disappeared, they were beginning to lose hope.

“I think we just got settle down here,” Raj said as threw his bag onto the hard dusty ground.

“This way...”

“But why not over there?” asked Miranda, pointing a little further off towards a cactus that stood resolutely even in the light breeze. That could have been her dehydrated mind playing tricks on her, but she thought she felt a slight breeze in the air. With each short breath of air that passed over her overheated body, she thought it was the desert talking to her, telling her that everything was going to be alright. But that was also probably just her mind playing tricks on her.

Raj didn’t answer. Instead, he threw small pieces of wood that he had collected into a pile between the two of them. From his bag, he took out a match and tried to light the small pile of dry sticks into a fire.

But all he got was acrid black smoke. “It’s fine,” mumbled Miranda, as she lowered herself slowly onto the ground. She put her rucksack under her head as she curled herself into a ball, trying to use the sweatshirt to cover her bare knees.

Raj ruffled through his own bag, trying to find his canteen. He squeezed it gently, turning it upside down, and as he had feared, there was nothing left. “How much water do you have Mir?” Raj asked.

“It was gone a few hours ago,” Miranda responded, digging her face into her rucksack.

Raj looked at the pile of sticks, a few tiny twigs still smoking slightly. Things had definitely gotten out of hand. He laid his head on his own bag, and closed his eyes, trying to forget the dry and sticky insides of his mouth. They were going to get out of this, he reminded himself. And then, he was never going to go hiking ever again.

“This way, this way.”

Miranda woke up, startled. The desert breeze had crept into her mind, she thought. Because otherwise she could have been hearing things. She looked around her, the Sun barely peaking over the horizon. Which way was the breeze telling her to go?

Raj tried to orient them with the rising Sun, forcing Miranda to go in the direction he felt was right. They tried to move at a reasonable pace, conserving their energy for the potential that the hike could last even longer.

With each tired step Raj realized that without water, they would never make it. “Hey Mir, did you ever hear that there’s water inside a cactus?”

Miranda looked towards him, her matted hair shifting slightly in the desert breeze. “I think I remember something like that.”

Raj pointed towards the saguaro standing tall in the distance. Miranda knew it was the same one that she had pointed at the night before. And that meant they hadn’t moved very far today at all. Without water, they would only get slower. The saguaro looked a scant few yards away. “Let’s see,” said Raj.

As they approached the towering cactus, its spiny exterior warning them of danger, Raj swung his bag off his back and unzipped it, trying to find his trusty knife. It had a long black blade that fit neatly within its black handle. Raj swung it open with ease.

Hungrily, using up strength that he had put into reserve, he grasped the knife within a fist, the blade pointing towards the ground.

“Be careful,” muttered Miranda. She sat on a dusty patch of ground, watching the antics of her crazed partner.

He swung the knife, trying to avoid the cactus’s spines. It sank deep into the flesh of the saguaro. Raj’s eyes widened as he realized

that the cactus had a wet interior, the desert creature's juices flowed from the wound brought by the point of the knife. A small trickle landed on his hand.

"Why..."

Miranda lifted her head as the wind picked up. She knew she was losing her mind.

The cold liquid made Raj snap his hand back. He cautiously licked the side of his hand. The cactus's insides were slightly sweet. It tasted green. And even the smallest bit of hydration gave Raj more energy.

"And?" mumbled Miranda, looking up from her spot on the ground.

"Good," said Raj. It was all he could manage, because he was now intent on harvesting what he could from the saguaro.

He moved quickly, grabbing the handle of the knife and sawing away at the towering giant. Lines of juice streamed slowly down the side of the saguaro, pooling around the base of the desert giant. Its spines scraped at the side of Raj's hands as he finally cut away a square piece. He held it in his hands, its weight giving him reassurance.

He brought the square piece of cactus flesh to his mouth, sucking carefully on the soft, almost gelatinous inside. He closed his eyes as he enjoyed the cool liquid. When he finished, he looked at Miranda. "Your turn."

He stabbed the cactus again and again, sawing his way to another, larger piece. He handed it gingerly to Miranda. As she took it, a spine dug into her skin, and she ate it ripped at her, causing a long gash. But she ignored it, even as a small bead of blood came from the wound. She chewed at the inside of the cactus, sucking on the water within.

"How do you feel?" asked Raj.

"Better," she answered, strength returning to her voice.

They sat in silence, each of them tearing into the cactus and then returning to sit and chew and drink. After the fourth round, the ragged holes that had been cut in the saguaro had widened. It was beginning to lean, as so much had been cut away.

"Which way now?" asked Miranda.

Raj turned in a circle, surveying the land, before sitting back down. He grabbed his bag. "How about a nap, first?"

Miranda nodded her head. "I like that idea, actually."

"And then I think if we keep going in that direction," said Raj, pointing with his arm past the cactus and into the far distance, "we'll be in a good place."

Miranda sunk her face back into her rucksack. It made a terrible pillow, but somehow it comforted her.

Raj used his knife to cut away the soft interior flesh of the cactus and popped a piece in his mouth. He sucked hard, drawing the last bits of juice out of it before spitting it out. He laid back, and tried his best to fall asleep.

"Are you ok?"

"Why are you hurt?"

"What has happened?"

"Little one."

"Tell us."

Raj woke to a soft scratch on the side of his face. It didn't hurt, but it startled him. His eyes snapped open, his right hand coming to his face to see what could have touched him. He looked over and saw that Miranda was sitting up, and that night had fallen. So much for the short nap.

"Did you hear something Raj?" Miranda's eyes fluttered as the night air had picked up. Was she hearing things?

"No, but I felt something, I think," he replied. "Did you touch me?"

He got up, grabbing his knife. Whatever water he had been able to get from the saguaro was not enough. And with whatever had woken him up, he realized he was thirsty again.

He turned to walk to the saguaro, but stopped.

He looked over to Miranda before turning around again. "Mir," he muttered.

"Yeah, I see it too," she replied. Was she hearing things and seeing things too?

Where there had been one saguaro, there were now three. The middle one, the one that Raj had been harvesting was now flanked

by two larger ones, their arms outstretched towards their brethren. Each arm was steadying the middle cactus. Several other arms rose in multiple directions, like large bunched branches of ivy reaching towards the sky.

“Where did they come from?” asked Miranda. “Maybe we should get going.”

“We’re not going to get anywhere in the dark,” mumbled Raj. “And I’m still thirsty.”

“Wait, Raj.” Not listening to Miranda, he stepped towards the left-most saguaro, and with his knife once again his fist, he swung it at the trunk of the saguaro.

But instead of the blade sinking into the soft inside of the cactus, it bounced off, sending Raj stumbling back. He watched as several of the cactus’s arms began to move. The spines on each of the arms began to lengthen, their sharp points getting longer and narrower, resembling surgical needles.

“Why...”

The right-most saguaro inched forward towards Miranda, seemingly gliding over the hard desert ground. One of its arms moved towards her. Raj quickly sprang in front of her, his knife outstretched.

“There was no need...”

“Do not let them go.”

“A life for a life.”

“Do you hear them?” asked Miranda. She could hear the whispers on the desert wind, and she now realized what she had been hearing all along. Or, she reminded herself, she was actually going delirious.

“Hear what? What the hell is going on.”

“I think they are talking,” whispered Miranda. “I think they are angry.”

“They’re plants Mir. They’re plants. They can’t get angry,” replied Raj, the frantic anxiety clear in his voice.

Miranda pushed Raj aside and stood in front of the towering giant. “Please let us go,” she said, trying to sound confident.

“Not him.”

Miranda held up her hands to the saguaro, the scab over the

wound from the saguaro earlier was hard and dry from the desert heat. Miranda watched as the scab and the scar below disappeared before her eyes.

“A life for a life.”

“What do you mean?” she asked the wind.

“Mir, who are you talking to? Are you...are you ok?”

“I’m talking to them,” Miranda replied, pointing to the three saguaros.

“They’re talking to you?”

“I think that’s what has been happening the entire time.”

“What do you they want?” Raj asked. He couldn’t believe he was even entertaining the idea that the cactus were talking.

“A life for a life,” she whispered.

The flanking saguaros moved towards Raj slowly, still gliding over the desert ground, their tangle of cactus arms outstretched towards him.

“They want me? Tell them no! Tell them they can’t have me,” yelled Raj. He swung his knife at the two saguaros, trying to get them to stay away, to stay back.

“A life for a life.”

Miranda stepped back away from it all, unsure of what to do. She stayed quiet and looked at her hands. The scab and the scar was truly gone, and she marveled at it, as Raj’s screams got louder.

She finally looked up to see Raj, with the saguaros towering over him, the needles and spines of both saguaros outstretched and piercing his arms, his torso, and his legs. They dragged him slowly, tiny streams of blood hitting the ground, until he was in front of the saguaro that he had maimed.

Miranda sat on the ground, oddly calm. There was nothing she could do. Instead, she watched as Raj was pulled inside the hole that he had cut, ripped, and sawed off the cactus. He screamed as he was pulled inside.

And then there was quiet.

“Sleep.”

Miranda quietly took the advice, and laid down with her head on her rucksack.

“We are watching.”

Miranda woke the next day, startled by the heat of the Sun. It was already midday.

There was no sign of Raj, and no sign of the two other saguaros from the night before. Just the saguaro that Raj had cut open – but now, it was healed, as if no damage had ever been done.

She walked up to the cactus and carefully patted the side of the trunk, trying to avoid the spines.

Not knowing what else to do, she grabbed her things, and continued on.

“This way...”

“This way...”

This time, Miranda thought to herself, she was going to listen to the wind.

Chime At Midnight

by Raven Hendershott

Dawn was far off, and the evening blush had just left the spring sky.

We plopped into the old rusty Ford Escort and set off down the street laughing. Houses flew by, large blurs on either side of us.

“Clear,” we would shout at a quick check at every intersection and stop sign. Drivers hocked or blared their horns at us but we kept on.

“Are we going to make it in time?”

Jessica laughed. “I’ll make sure we do,” and she flashed a grin.

Nothing more than a tap of the breaks at stop signs or a quick glance before rushing and weaving through red lights. It was then I realized why I loved her.

The car skidded into the parking lot and we both bailed out of the car and rushed towards the door. “Made it with two minutes to spare!”

“That’s normally a 36-minute drive.”

Jessica laughed. “Told you I could do it in 9. Let’s get a drink.”

“And popcorn,” I added. “We’ll never forget this night.” I grabbed her and pulled her in for a kiss.

A clock chimed in the night.

There sat a middle-aged man at his folder laden desk twirling a pen between his fingers.

“Nine o’clock.” The man rubbed his face before gazing over to the cat grooming its fur, “I’m so glad you weren’t there last night. You would have been quite the scaredy-cat.”

The cat glared momentarily.

“I certainly was. Had to hide in a barn.”

A muffled buzzing sound filled the room and the cat leapt onto a stack of folders and sat. A smug look upon its face.

“Why did-oh. So that's where it went.” Samuel laughed. “Shurluck, I have to go to work.” He tried to pick the cat up and received a half-hearted paw swipe. “Hey! You and Meowarity will get treats when I get home, ok?”

Shurluck purred loudly. Then slowly stretched and walked off the pile, scattering papers as he went.

“Thank you, bud.” Samuel shifted the pile and retrieved the pager nestled between stacks. “Thought this was on the counter this morning?”

The cats groomed their fur purring loudly.

“I-see.” Samuel sighed and studied the numbers. “Door alarm for the Threefork bank? That's the third time this week. Probably the new janitor again. Yet... why are they paging me?”

Samuel donned his coat and picked up his keys, “Be back soon, boys!”

The traffic trickled through downtown Treefork. Traffic lights flickered and bobbed in the breeze.

Samuel slowly pulled up through the block and scanned the area. “Everything looks peaceful and quiet save for the storm. Huh.”

Then, he saw him. His old man was leaning against the building smoking a cigarette. With a grin he gestured to a few parking spaces nearby.

Samuel chuckled and parked. No sooner had he exited he heard, “about time you showed up. Thought about painting a wall and watching it dry for funsies.”

“Ha-ha. Dad, what are you doing here?” He embraced his father.

“Waiting for you. See you got the page.”

“Yeah-what is this all about?”

“Black Out Jack. You wanted to see his handy work, right?”

“Dad, this is a storm. A typical spring storm.”

“Is it now?” Ben looked up and gestured to the sky. “Tell me, you see any clouds on the way here? Any rain or wind, by chance?”

Ben smiled and gestured me to follow. In through the double security doors we went, and towards the vault.

“Dad, where are the guards?”

Ben pointed into the corner of the vault while mumbling, “good question. But there's his signature calling card.”

In the corner stood a tiny electric blue business card that flickered in the darkness.

“What the hell-?”

“Fascinating, isn't it? Can't photograph it. Can't pick it up. But it's only there for a certain amount of time.”

“Can't read it either.”

“Really? You can't read that?” Ben rubbed his mustache. “Tell you what, go back to the house and grab my notebook. I'll teach you. That way, when I'm gone, you can take over the job.”

“You've got it.”

Ben leaned against the bank's outer wall and lit up another cigarette and watched his son leave. “We'll get you some day, Jack.”

Then, the car slide through the intersection and crumpled with a red car protruding from it's side.

Ben dropped his cigarette and rushed forward just as the clock chimed midnight.

Ghosted

by Claire Woodier

29th January 2023

10.29

“Hey. I don’t think you should come today. I think you know already but my heart just isn’t in it any more. I’m sorry you don’t deserve this, you haven’t done anything wrong this past two and a half years. I hope you’re gonna be okay.”

10.31

“Did you just break up with me over a text? Blimey.”

Just like that. From nowhere. Things hadn’t been great but the things that weren’t great were things that weren’t us.

13.57

“I know you don’t say things you don’t mean.

I know you haven’t got much love to give at the moment, but you’re my person so I’ve been here to support you with all my love because I want to weather these storms with you. But if you’re not feeling us then I’ll accept that. I wish you had told me in person though Jack, come on man, I love you like mad, we’ve had two and a half years of bloody wonderfulness. I love you and I love Sophie. It would make me feel a whole lot better if you could call me and we can put us to rest in a way that feels kind.

I just love you so. X”

14.34

“And I’m fucking gutted.”

14.42

“I am too. I’m sorry I didn’t want to talk to you in person.”

Our daily FaceTime coffee date at 6.15 that morning hadn't felt any different. I was heading down to see him that day. Not any more. I could hear heavy breathing, terrible loud breathing. It was mine.

15.21

"I'm not okay with it. After two and half years of I'm sorry, but BLISS and building relationships with each other's kids its really disappointing. I absolutely adore you and hate the idea that you might be pushing me away. (Are you or have you just fallen out of love with me? They're both shit so don't worry which it is.) So much of you suffers in silence and I would hate for you to be pushing me away in some misguided sense of altruism. Plus I'm absolutely gutted that if that is absolutely it, you're that bloody disciplined I'll probably never hear from you again!

Not okay with it."

15.46

"You're my friend too ya know. I want you to be happy. X"

19.43

"I'm heartbroken Jack. `I'd love for you to call me. I'd rather we finish on a nice goodbye than this. X"

22.15

"Hey. I hope you're okay. Night night my love xxxx"

30th January 2023

06.59

You deleted this message

07.08

"Hey. Good morning. I hope you have a good day. X"

Nothing.

I broke.

He was gone and I couldn't solve it, I needed to make it make sense but the clues were conflicting. The logic shouts in your face: no man leaves a woman he loves. That should be the end. That's it. This isn't Austen. And yet I couldn't believe that he would do this. I couldn't believe he didn't love me. The force of us had been too strong. There was a tangible presence to it. We existed, The light couldn't go out. I couldn't believe he would let me go..

3rd Feb 2023

23.35

"I was really pleased to hear from Sophie. That makes it so final though. I still can't believe this is all real. There are so many things I want to say, but you've said you're done so everything I compose feels a bit silly and redundant. Here's the leap of faith though: I wish we were still together and in love and happy.

I want you to be happy.

I want you to be as ready of us now as you were in 2020.

I miss you.

I tried too hard I think so that's something to learn from, It all begins and ends with I just love you so much and I wanted to be there for you through your hard times.

I have no idea now if that means anything to you. The signs would say not. I wasn't going to send you anything but hearing from that sweet girl today made me realise I can't mess about with games and fuckery. I'm heartbroken Jack. I'll be okay because I'm exercising and meditating and listening to podcasts and eating well and not drinking and socialising; all the fucking healthy stuff you're supposed to

do. I will be fine. I'd just rather be fine
and next to you.
Please take good care of yourself. I love
you so,

5th Feb 2023

23.36

“Hey my love. I should've given you the
space to work through the things you
needed to. I don't know how to say the
without the risk of getting hurt even
more, but it hurts like fuck anyway so
here goes: I'll wait for you. I love you so
so much, I miss you terribly and I can't
shake it. If there's a chance this helps
you come back to me then I'll take it. xx
IDST”

22nd Apr 2023

19.14

“Hey...”

The Night Market

by Oleksandr Baranov

Somiir tugged his worn cloak tighter around his shoulders as he made his way to the outskirts of Saramas. The air felt different tonight—thicker, tinged with an electric buzz that set his nerves on edge. The full moon hung above, casting everything in an eerie silver glow.

He thought back to the message he'd received, the promise of a reward that could change everything for him. Enough to escape the slums for good. The woman with her sharp eyes and confident demeanor had given him the task: find a cursed item in the Night Market. It was an opportunity, but it was also a risk. The stories of the Night Market—the whispers about strange traders and the danger of being trapped—still echoed in his mind, but the promise of gold and freedom to travel, to live somewhere else was stronger.

The Night Market. He'd heard whispers about it, and has seen the place from afar that appeared beyond the city outskirts only under the full moon, where traders dealt in the bizarre and otherworldly. Some friends boasted to have come gone there, but nobody believed them. Some mages used its services, but... well, they were mages. A place of danger, where one wrong move could trap you forever. It was the kind of place even the most reckless of thieves avoided. And now, they wanted him to go there.

He followed the paths through the narrow streets under the eerie light of the full moon, stepping into the open fields beyond the city. The air felt different tonight—thicker, tinged with an electric buzz that set his nerves on edge. It was as if the city itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. The directions given by the woman had been vague, but Somiir trusted his instincts. He followed the trails through narrow paths and out into the open fields beyond the city, the full moon casting everything in an eerie silver glow.

The Night Market didn't simply appear—it bled into the landscape, as if it had always been there, waiting for him to notice. The flickering lights of countless lanterns illuminated rows of stalls, tents, and wagons that had not existed just moments ago. Traders moved about, their forms cloaked in shadow, and the murmurs of strange languages filled the air. Somiir approached with cautious steps, feeling like he had stepped into another world—one full of uncertainty and danger.

The traders were not entirely human, or maybe it was just a strange effect of uneven lighting and weird shadows. Somiir noticed their elongated fingers, their eyes that seemed to glow faintly beneath their hoods, and their shadows that moved independently, shifting in ways that made his skin crawl. He kept his head down, not wanting to draw attention. He reminded himself that he was here for a reason—to find the cursed item and get out before dawn. The stories he had heard of those trapped in the Night Market were enough to chill his blood, but he forced himself to focus. He had no other choice.

The market was labyrinthine, filled with all manner of strange and impossible goods. Bottles with swirling colored lights, enchanted trinkets that whispered secrets when touched, cages with creatures that Somiir had never seen before—each stall was more bizarre than the last. It was overwhelming, and he fought to keep his bearings as he navigated through the seemingly endless rows. He had been given a description of the item: a small, mundane-looking silver trinket, with a single small black stone or jewel, but one that would exude a dark aura if he got close enough. It wasn't much to go on, but he had a feeling he'd know it when he saw it.

His gaze flickered over the various wares until something caught his attention—a small, silver pendant on a leather cord, lying in an unassuming pile of trinkets. The air around it seemed to shimmer with an unnatural darkness, and shadows seemed to dance in a circle, and Somiir knew immediately that this was what he had come for. He approached the stall, glancing up at the trader. The figure behind the table was tall, their features hidden beneath a heavy hood, but the eyes that met his were anything but ordinary—black, with flecks of shifting silver, like stars in a night sky.

“Ah, interested in something, are we?” the trader asked, their voice like the rustling of leaves in a dark forest. Somiir forced a casual expression, nodding towards the pendant.

“How much for that?” he asked, keeping his tone even.

The trader tilted their head, their eyes narrowing as they studied him. “This is no ordinary trinket. The price is steep — personal. A memory.”

Somiir’s heart pounded. He had heard of this — traders in the Night Market didn’t care for gold. They dealt in things far more valuable, far more dangerous. He hesitated, weighing his options. Giving up a memory seemed like nothing, but the idea of leaving anything of his own here didn’t feel right with him.

He forced a smile. “I’ll think about it,” he said, stepping back, trying to appear nonchalant. The trader watched him, their gaze piercing, but they said nothing as Somiir turned and walked away, slipping into the shadows between the stalls. He moved quickly, weaving through the market, his heart racing. He had made up his mind — he would have to steal it.

He circled back to the stall, staying out of sight, watching as the trader turned their attention to another customer. Somiir took a deep breath, steadying his nerves. He waited for the right moment —when the trader’s back was turned, when the crowd shifted just enough to provide cover. In one fluid motion, he reached out, snatched the pendant, and slipped it into his pocket.

The instant his fingers closed around it, the air seemed to change. A shiver ran down his spine, and he felt the weight of a thousand eyes on him. He turned, trying to make his way back through the market, but something was different now. The stalls had shifted, the paths he had taken moments before no longer led to where he expected. It was as if the market itself was alive, aware of his transgression, and determined to keep him here.

Panic bubbled in his chest, but Somiir forced it down. He moved quickly, ducking between stalls, avoiding the traders’ eyes, but the whispers followed him, growing louder, echoing in his mind. The market twisted around him, the once-clear exit now a maze of unfamiliar paths. The stories of those who had been trapped here, lost forever, flashed through his mind, and he

clenched his jaw, refusing to let fear take hold.

He just needed to find a way out. Before it was too late.

He knew he couldn't keep running without a plan. The traders were watching him now, their eyes gleaming with a cold curiosity. Some of them whispered to each other, their words in a language he couldn't understand, while others simply stood there, their shadows stretching toward him as though reaching out to snatch him away.

Somiir ducked into an alcove between two large wagons, pressing himself against the wooden side of a stall. His heart hammered in his chest, the silver pendant heavy in his pocket. He could feel its unnatural coldness against his thigh, almost as if it was draining the warmth from him. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment, trying to think, trying to remember anything Axe had told him about situations like this.

"When you're cornered, kid, always look for what they don't want you to see," Axe's voice echoed in his mind, a memory of a lesson taught long ago in the streets of Saramas. Somiir opened his eyes, scanning his surroundings with renewed focus. There had to be something — a flaw in the market's strange, ever-shifting logic. A way out.

He caught sight of a flicker of movement — a hunched figure shuffling between two stalls, unnoticed by the other traders. The figure was small, almost childlike, draped in rags that blended into the shadows of the market. It moved with purpose, its steps quiet and deliberate. Somiir hesitated for only a moment before he decided to follow. Whoever that was, they seemed to know where they were going.

Keeping his movements silent, Somiir slipped out from his hiding spot and trailed after the figure, careful not to lose sight of them. The figure led him through narrow pathways and hidden alleys of the market, places that seemed to exist outside of the market's normal chaos. Somiir glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the traders behind him, but for now, it seemed he had shaken them off.

The hunched figure led him to a small, unmarked tent, almost invisible between the larger, more extravagant stalls. The fabric of

the tent was worn and faded, and a single lantern hung outside, its light barely more than a dim glow. The figure slipped inside without a sound, and Somiir hesitated for only a moment before following.

Inside, the air was thick with the scent of herbs and something metallic—blood, maybe. The tent was small, barely large enough for Somiir to stand upright, and filled with shelves of jars, each containing something stranger than the last: dried flowers, small bones, shimmering powders. In the center of the tent sat an old woman, her face lined with wrinkles, her eyes cloudy with age but sharp with intelligence.

"You are lost," she said without looking up, her voice a raspy whisper that carried an odd authority. Somiir opened his mouth to reply, but she raised a hand to silence him. "I know why you are here. The market knows too. It does not take kindly to thieves."

Somiir swallowed, the weight of the pendant in his pocket feeling heavier than ever. "I just need to get out," he said, his voice low. "I didn't mean—"

The old woman cackled softly, shaking her head. "Meaning matters little here, boy. You took what was not yours, and now the market wants its due." She leaned forward, her eyes locking onto his. "But there may be a way."

Hope flared in Somiir's chest, and he stepped closer. "How? Please, tell me."

The old woman gestured to the pendant. "The item you stole—it is bound to this place. Because the market wants it so. But it is not of this place. It belonged to the Forgotten God once. Then it was stolen... mishandled... broken to pieces.... It's a mere shard of something bigger, asleep, waiting. If awoken, it will revolt against the market and be hidden from the market's awareness. There is a ritual I can perform to sever its connection, so you can carry it out."

She extended a bony hand. "Give it to me for a moment, and I will hide its presence from the market. Only then will you have a chance."

Somiir hesitated, his fingers brushing against the cold metal of the pendant through the fabric of his pocket. But the memory of

the market shifting, trapping him, the whispers growing louder, made his decision for him.

Slowly, he pulled the pendant from his pocket and placed it in the old woman's hand. She closed her fingers around it, her expression unreadable.

For a moment, the tent was silent, the air heavy with tension. Then, the old woman muttered something under her breath, a language that Somiir couldn't understand, and the pendant seemed to shimmer with a dark light before returning to its normal, mundane appearance. She handed it back to him, the cold metal now strangely warmer, less oppressive.

"It is done," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. She looked up at Somiir, her eyes narrowing. "But remember this, thief — nothing in the Night Market is free. We will meet again. I will ask you of one thing — and you will give it to me. Now, don't worry - it won't be your life", she cackled.

"You may leave tonight, but the market always remembers."

A chill ran down Somiir's spine, but he nodded. "I understand."

The old woman gestured to the back of the tent, where a narrow flap opened to reveal a path. "Go. Before it changes its mind."

Somiir didn't need to be told twice. He ducked through the flap and found himself on a narrow path, the sounds of the market growing distant behind him. The air outside was cooler, the oppressive weight he had felt within the market lifting slightly, and the first hint of dawn's light began to soften the darkness. He ran, not daring to look back.

As he fled, he heard the old woman's voice calling after him, her words chilling him to the core: "Nothing is free though, boy—I will come back for mine." The words echoed in his mind, along with her earlier warning:

The market always remembers.

Somiir kept running until the sounds of the Night Market faded into nothingness. The air seemed lighter now, the oppressive weight he had felt within the market lifting with each step he took. Eventually, he slowed to a walk, his breath ragged and his legs aching. He looked around, realizing he had made it back to the

outskirts of Saramas. The familiar skyline of the city rose in the distance, the first hints of dawn breaking on the horizon.

He took a moment to catch his breath, his hand slipping into his pocket to touch the pendant. It was still there, its weight no longer as cold or heavy, but a reminder of what he had just gone through. He couldn't help but think about the old woman's words—about the price that would soon come due. He knew that whatever bargain he had struck tonight, it wasn't over.

With a sigh, Somiir made his way back to the warehouse where he had first met the woman who had given him the assignment. The streets were still quiet, most of their inhabitants asleep, unaware of the strange market that had come and gone just beyond their doorstep. The warehouse loomed ahead, its crumbling walls a stark contrast to the night's surreal events.

From the deeper darkness stepped a tall woman dressed in finely detailed leather armor, adorned with strange symbols and runes. Her presence seemed to charge the air, as if magic had soaked into the stones themselves. She was indeed sent by the wizards - maybe even by the mysterious Council, the mere existence of which was vehemently denied by any person of power.

Somiir approached, pulling out the pendant and handing it over. She inspected it, her fingers running over its surface, caressing the shard of the jewel, and then nodded approvingly.

"Your reward," she said, tossing him a small bag of coins and a large pearl, its surface iridescent and shimmering faintly in the dim light. Somiir's eyes widened — this was the prize he had hoped for, the thing that could change his future. He pocketed both, feeling a momentary surge of triumph.

While he was preparing to leave, the woman has already dissipated into the night air. Magic? Or just exceptional sneaking skills? Whatever...

He turned to leave, but as he stepped outside, his path was blocked by a hunched figure. The old hag from the Night Market. Her eyes bore into his, and a chill ran through him.

"The pearl," she rasped, her voice barely more than a whisper.

Somiir's heart pounded. "No," he said, trying to step around her, but his feet and hands betrayed him. Against his will, they reached

into his pocket, retrieving the pearl and placing it in her outstretched hand. He watched, helpless, as she closed her fingers around it, a twisted smile curling her lips.

"Nothing is free, boy," she said. "I have come back for mine." Her words echoed in his mind as she turned and vanished into the shadows.

Somiir looked down at his remaining reward — a handful of coins. The freedom he had dreamed of seemed more distant now, even with the coins still in his possession. He didn't know why she needed the pearl, but he understood one thing: she had taken what he cherished most at that moment.

With a heavy heart, he made his way back to the small, rundown building he called home. He pushed open the door and stepped inside, the familiar creak of the hinges echoing in the empty room. He dropped onto the threadbare cot in the corner, exhaustion washing over him.

"Nothing is free," he whispered to himself.

The market always remembers.