



**THE HAUNTED  
TRAVELER**

**VOL. 1 ISSUE 2**

**WISH**



**The Haunted Traveler**  
**Vol. 1 Issue 2**

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## **Featured Travelers**

**Carolyn Adams**

**David E. Cowen**

**Jessica Curtis**

**John W. Dennehy**

**Angela Maracle**

**Stephen McQuiggan**

**Bryan Nickelberry**

**Logan Noble**

**Melissa Osburn**

**Neil S. Reddy**

**J.J. Steinfeld**

**Matthew Wilson**

“We’re too much ourselves. Afraid of letting go of what we are, in case we are nothing, and holding on so tight, we lose everything else.”

**-Clive Barker, *Imajica***



**David E. Cowen**

# Desperate Welcome

**John W. Dennehy**

Sarah didn't notice the interlopers until their ominous shadows cast upon the garden that she was tending. The dark outlines were immediately discernible as soldiers from the rifles with bayonets jutting above their heads.

As Sarah looked up, she had already begun to address them. "You startled me," she said, smiling. "I usually hear the sounds of your mess-plates clanging."

The soldiers were not the red coats that she was expecting. Instead, two staunch Hessians stared at her menacingly; the German mercenaries paid to help fight with the British were never hospitable and took what they wanted. A shudder of fear ran through her, but Sarah did her best to hide it. Their uniforms were tattered and smeared with soot; the grime was spread over their faces and hands. They were emaciated and stunk of the battlefield.

"I'm a loyalist," she said alarmed.

"We need food," the taller one said. His companion stood fast and mute, staring at her wantonly.

"There is little food but for myself and my daughter," Sarah said. "But I can spare you a little

bread and water.”

The taller soldier grunted while his comrade continued to stare.

Slowly rising, Sarah wiped her hands on her dress and began walking toward her small clapboard house situated in a valley beneath a steep hillside. The soldiers pivoted and followed after her.

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Upon reaching the door, Sarah turned back to them, her hand resting on the rough wood slightly below a tomahawk gouge. “It will only be a minute,” she said, hoping the comment would cause them to remain outside.

She started to close the door but met resistance. The tall soldier forced it open. Inside, the house was bare except for a table and a few cooking utensils, an assortment of owl feathers were hung from the beams. The soldiers looked around puzzled.

“What is this?” the tall one said. “The house is empty and there are few animals on the farm.”

“Times have been tough,” Sarah said, trying to respond ambiguously. But she knew from their eyes that her answer wasn’t convincing.

The tall one studied her closely. But it was his companion that really concerned her. His gaunt face seemed to follow her every movement. Sarah was afraid of what he might do if she were left alone with him. And her daughter Hannah was soon to return from playing at a nearby brook.

“Bread?” she said, attempting to divert their thoughts.

She moved to the far side of the kitchen but



the tall soldier stepped after her. Grabbing hold of her dress, he ripped the neckline. Her firm torso was exposed. And a few colonial notes fell to the plank-board floor. Although folded into squares, the familiar imprint of a codfish was apparent on a few of them. Even the Hessians could tell that the papers were Massachusetts colonial pound-notes.

“Just what I thought,” the tall soldier said. Sarah clenched her dress together and then bellowed hysterically, “You’re soldiers,” she said. “You can’t do this. We’re loyalists and my husband died in the fighting. I sold everything for fare back to England.”

“We’re just soldiers for hire,” the tall soldier grunted.

Then she heard the crack of a musket. The tall soldier fell to the floor and Sarah looked to see smoke coming from the barrel of the other soldier’s rifle. He was grinning malevolently. Dropping his weapon, he stepped toward Sarah, his creepy eyes honing in on her chest. She stepped back. Bending down to scoop up the money, he never diverted his eyes from her. Then he straightened up and pushed Sarah against the wall. She screamed.

Sarah heard him gasp and then his eyes bugged out. As he collapsed to the floorboards, she could see the end of a spiky bayonet protruding from his side. The tall soldier lay strewn beside him. A swath of blood showed his trail over the floorboards, the dying path of his vengeance.

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Dragging the corpses outside, Sarah pulled each of them around the side of the house, so her

daughter wouldn't come across the bodies. She stashed them by a woodpile and shoved the top rows of wood onto them. A hand and boot stuck out from the split logs. Sarah cinched up her dress with a piece of torn cloth. Then she filled a pail of water from the brook and returned to the kitchen.

Sarah grabbed a sponge and kneeled down, carefully washing the floorboards. She thought about the harsh life that they had lived in the New World. It was supposed to have been a new start, but bleak winters and continuous warring made the decision to leave easy. Her husband with his troubled past was dead over a year and their daughter needed the safety of family back in England.

Crimson water trickled through the gaps in the floor boards. Sarah had done this more than a few times since settling in the little valley. When they first came over from England, she had thought the native people as savages. But with time she grew to appreciate the customs of the Algonquians. After a few years of countless strife, she slowly began to adopt some of their customs. The owl feathers hanging from the beams above the kitchen table gave her comfort.

The ship would depart from Boston in a couple of weeks. Sarah planned to abandon the house and sell the last cow. They would spend the remaining few nights in the city before boarding the ship. As she scrubbed, the pools of spilt blood became less discernible, and what could not be cleansed away she knew would soon blend with claret stains of past intruders.

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Sarah went for another bucket of water and

found a patrol of several colonial soldiers approaching the house upon her return. She stopped in her tracks. Taking a moment to assess the threat, Sarah considered bolting to the brook and running off with Hannah.

They wore makeshift uniforms but were cleaner than the Hessians. A soldier stepped away from the rest of them, waving for the others to stand fast. Glancing up at the chimney, he stared at the white brick with black trim around the top layer. Sarah dropped the bucket and started to flee.

“Wait!” he called. “We’re not here to harm you.”

His voice wasn’t threatening. Sarah stopped and turned to look him over. The soldier’s rifle remained strapped to his back. She noticed that the others were lingering about carefree, seemingly waiting for him to finish some sort of inquiry.

“What is it that you want?”

“Just need to ask you a few questions, Ma’am.”

“Alright then.”

The lead soldier stepped a little closer while the others chatted on the path a ways from the house. They were going out of their way to not appear threatening, as if under some orders. Sarah walked toward their leader and stopped ten feet away.

“Have you seen two Hessian soldiers come through here lately?”

“There’s nobody that come through here.”

The soldier canted his head in disbelief. He looked into her eyes carefully, searching for the truth; his gaze was soft and kind. “What happened to your

dress?” he finally asked.

“Why I caught it on the iron swing-arm by the fireplace,” she said, slowly backing away. “That is all.”

The soldier shook his head. “Ma’am, we tracked them to the path leading toward your house.” He pointed at a short wiry soldier. “Jeb over there was a tracker during the French and Indian War. Learned how to trail people from the Mohawks.”

“Well, there’s nobody here,” she pled. “I’m sorry.”

“If they are not already here,” he said, shaking his head, “they’ll be on their way soon. These are very dangerous men.”

“Dangerous to you militia.” She admonished him. “You should get going now.”

“Mind if we take a look around?”

“I’ll not have colonial militia rummaging through my house.”

“We’ll be very careful,” he said softly. “My name is Thomas, and I’ll make sure that my men stay in line.”

She looked him over carefully. “Please make it quick,” she said after a moment. “And tell your men not to take any of my possessions. We do not have much.”

\*\*\*

Sarah watched him approach the other soldiers. They were whispering and scanning the property as she went to fetch her bucket. A couple of them seemed alarmed. Some of the militia unslung their rifles, while Thomas and Jeb removed a shiny Cutlass from a

bedroll. It shimmered in the afternoon light.

The soldiers spread out, circling the house and checking the property; Thomas and a couple others entered through the front door. All of them seemed ready for a conflict. She knew that he hadn't believed her. Sarah feared the death of the Hessians would be reported causing the British to detain them. Passage for the ship back to England had been paid. Any delay and she would miss the ship's departure and lose the cost of their fare.

As two soldiers meandered around the house, poking through potential hiding places, Sarah felt a tinge of panic as they approached the woodpile. She saw them stop and examine the wood. Something had caught their attention. Perhaps they discovered a boot sticking out of the split logs.

But they lingered only a moment. Neither one took the time to remove any logs, seeming content that the Hessians wouldn't spring from the woodpile to start a skirmish. They did seem more alert, heading around the back of the house with the butts of their long rifles shouldered. Sarah felt relieved and was hopeful that the Hessians would remain safely stashed away.

Then she heard the crack of musket fire. Smoke billowed from behind the house. More rifle fire and then she heard the cry of agony, followed by a heavy thud.

Sarah realized that there must be more Hessians in the area.

Thomas rushed out of the house with the Cutlass in his hand and Jeb a step behind him. Other

militia converged on the back corner of the house. There was more musket fire. Men screamed and she smelt the pleasant aroma of gun powder wafting in the warm afternoon air. A stark contrast to the melee erupting behind her house.

And then she thought of Hannah. The little girl would be returning from the brook, headed home down a trail toward the back of the homestead. Sarah ran to the corner of an outbuilding twenty feet from the fray. She scanned the woods for Hannah. The little girl was standing along the tree line, apparently frozen from the skirmish.

Sarah looked and saw militia scattered over the ground. There were two Hessians battling hand to hand with Thomas and a few others in the midst of the fallen bodies. Many of them hacked apart so badly portions of their limbs were dismembered. The Hessians were soiled and their uniforms soaked in the claret stains. Sarah recognized a couple of the wounds. A shudder of trepidation ran through her.

\*\*\*

All gunfire had ceased. The taller Hessian held his bayonet on one hand wielded the butt of his pistol in the other like a serendipitous hammer. Thomas assaulted him with the Cutlass, hacking at the Hessians limbs, legs and shoulders, whenever possible. Jeb and the only remaining soldier wrestled the gaunt faced Hessian to the ground.

She heard the sound of pistol fire and the soldier dropped to the ground.

Thomas drove the Cutlass into the chest of the tall Hessian. The glossy metallic tip punched through

the Hessian's back. Blood pumped out his chest and back, then the fluid turned clear, like melting ice running through the cleaved openings.

Withdrawing the sword, the Hessian's eyes rolled back in his head, and then he staggered and fell over.

The gaunt faced Hessian grinned madly. He picked up a bayonet and rammed it into Jeb's side before Thomas could come to his aid. As the tracker keeled over, Thomas slashed the hand holding the bayonet. Standing defenseless, the Hessian smirked at Thomas and didn't try to bolt. They stood eye to eye and everything around them was still. Sarah heard some moaning from the fallen militia but nothing moved. Thomas was poised, tense and erect, waiting for the opportune moment to drive home the death knell.

Sarah eased closer to the battle scene, trying to position herself to grab Hannah and flee. She was only ten feet away when Thomas made his move. As the Cutlass arched through the air, the Hessian stepped to evade the blow. The metallic blade hewed into the Hessian's arm, hacking off a portion of his arm.

Stumbling over, the Hessian fell into the carnage. The Cutlass came down again, cleaving into his thigh. Thomas raised his sword to deliver a killing blow, but the Hessian rolled away and then rose from the detritus with an axe in his hand.

He wielded the axe quickly and hacked off Thomas' arm; the sword lopped off with the appendage. The Hessian kicked Thomas to the ground and stood over him grinning. Another blow with the axe

fell into the gut, spurting blood everywhere.

Thomas looked upward seeking mercy in his eyes. But the Hessian flashed a sardonic smile from his emaciated face. Crooked yellow teeth showing from a mouth that could never be truly fed; a hunger that couldn't ever be satiated. The bloodthirsty mercenary was famished for more red meat. Lingering over Thomas, letting the soldier bleed out and suffer in agony, the Hessian glanced up at the wood line. A ravenous gleam focused on Hannah.

There was a dissevering sound as the Cutlass drove through his back and protruded from the Hessians' chest. He dropped to his knees and then toppled over beside Thomas. Sarah watched as the blood gushing from his wounds slowly became clearer until water leaked from the gashes, dripping off the tip of the sword.

Sarah called for Hannah then leaned over Thomas. She looked into his kind eyes feeling the tragedy. Watching his head tilt slightly, she followed the line of his vision to the sword. She knelt closer to him. "Take it," he muttered. "Melt down the blade and leave here with your daughter."

"What is it?" she said, perplexed.

"The blade is silver." He gurgled his last breath. "Take it and flee."

And with that Sarah understood that they had barely escaped the icy hearts of the Wendigo.



# Blood Brothers

Jessica Curtis

Benny let out a groan as he slid down the brick wall that his attacker had shoved him against. A foot rammed into his ribcage, sending his breath flying from of his lungs in a gasp. He could hear his attacker laughing as a hand ruffled his hair affectionately. “This is what you get, Benny. We made a promise, remember?” The man turned and walked away, leaving Benny with pain ricocheting through his body. Blood covered almost every inch of his face. His lips and one of his cheeks were split open, his nose was broken (and he had a fleeting suspicion that his jaw was as well...or at least dislocated), sending the liquid gushing down his chin and neck. There was also a bit trickling down from his hairline from where his attacker had slammed Benny’s head into the wall. Swallowing thickly and gagging on the blood in his mouth, he forced himself to stand. His vision swam with every movement as he made his way to the other end of the alley and onto the street. He stumbled for a few feet until someone caught his arm.

For one terrifying moment Benny thought his attacker had returned to finish the job, but to his relief

it was only a good Samaritan steadying him. “Easy there, Man.” Benny couldn’t see the man, as his eyes were beginning to swell shut from bruising, but the stranger eased him into a sitting position on the curb. “I’m gonna call 9-1-1, alright? You need some help.” Benny nodded once, but the movement sent the world spinning and he promptly blacked out.

When he came to, there was the steady sound of an EKG machine beeping steadily off to his left. The bruising around his eyes had worsened to the point that he could only squint at the bleak hospital room he was residing in and pain was still throbbing through his entire body. As he attempted to open his mouth, a nurse walked into the room. “Oh! You’re awake,” she sighed, sounding relieved. “Please don’t try to open your mouth wide, Dear. Your jaw was dislocated and in order to keep in the proper place we had to bandage you up pretty good.” Benny obeyed the command and stilled his jaw, wondering how severe the rest of his injuries were. “Are you in any pain? Just shake your head yes or no.” He groaned and nodded adamantly as the nurse began checking him over. “I’ll get something for you to take care of that. Dr. Lynch will be in shortly to explain your situation in more detail.”

The nurse left, but almost immediately a doctor made her way into the room. “Hello Mr. Majors,” she walked over to his bed. “My name is Dr. Lynch. Emily is getting you some pain medication, but bear with me for a moment. You are quite the lucky man... with the amount of blood you lost and the severity of your injuries, it’s amazing you made it out alive.”

weakly gestured with one arm for her to elaborate and grunted at the pain the simple movement caused. Dr. Lynch flinched in sympathy as Emily returned to the room and went about giving him his pain medication. “Now, as Emily told you, you have a dislocated jaw, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. You’ve also got a severe concussion, a broken nose, stiches in gashes in your lips and cheek, bruised ribs, and a sprained hand in addition to your black eyes.” The 22-year old allowed himself to drift as the pain medication took effect, trying to figure out how things had possibly gone so bad.

## §

Benny had considered Tom his best friend for as long as he could remember. They had lived in the same neighborhood, gone to the same schools, been in the same classes, and had the same interests. For many years they were inseparable, but Benny could still recall the day that comic books and trading cards had turned into something neither of them could have predicted.

Tom had celebrated his 12th birthday and nearly all of the guests had gone home. He tugged his closest friend aside and whispered eagerly, “I’ve got something to show you. Meet me by the old oak tree at midnight.”

Benny had nodded in agreement and headed home, waiting for his mother to fall asleep before grabbing a flashlight and sneaking out of the house. A heavily wooded area that both Benny and Tom knew like the backs of their hands surrounded the neighborhood they called home. Benny made his way through

the trees towards the old oak that was at the center of the mini-forest. Tom was already waiting for him when he got there, flashlight in hand and a backpack slung over his shoulder. “So? What is it?” Benny was excited to see what his friend, who was notorious for getting his hands on things like cigarettes, had found.

Tom grinned and sat down, rummaging through his bag as Benny took a seat a few feet away. “I was going through the attic and found these,” he placed a folded up cloth on the ground between them. “Dad said they belonged to his great grandfather and they’ve been passed down from generation to generation.” Curious, Benny unfolded the cloth, revealing a set of daggers that glimmered in the dim light. “Supposedly his great grandfather practiced some weird religion and used these knives in ceremonies. They haven’t been used for anything since.”

“What are we supposed to do with them?” Benny picked one up and examined it closely. It was relatively small with a black handle painted with intricate designs.

“I thought we could make a blood oath.”

Benny frowned. “A blood oath?”

“Yeah,” Tom nodded. “We each cut our palms, put our hands together so the blood mixes and we make a promise.”

Although Benny was uncertain, he agreed. “Okay then...what kind of promise?”

“We should keep it simple. We never betray each other.”

*We never would anyway,* Benny thought,

saying instead, “Yeah, okay.” He watched as Tom picked up another of the daggers and drug the blade across his palm, hissing in pain, before Benny performed the motion on himself. Blood welled up from the wound, dripping down his wrist as he looked towards his friend.

Tom grabbed Benny’s bleeding hand with his own, pressing their palms together tightly. “I vow to never betray you, Benny.”

“I vow to never betray you, Tom,” Benny repeated.

§

As Tom grew older, his actions became erratic. Before he was 14, he had gotten into six fights in school, his attitude would turn on a dime, and he slapped his father across the face. Benny went with his friend’s family when they took him to a psychiatrist like he had suggested. As they sat in the waiting room, Tom was led away with a scowl on his face. Unable to handle the stifling tension in the room, Benny turned to Tom’s father. “Mr. Bowers?”

The weary man looked at the boy and tried to smile. “What’s up, Bud?”

Benny hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to say, before settling on something that he had been curious about for a while. “Tom showed me the daggers that he found in the attic a couple years ago...I was wondering if you could tell me where they were from.”

Mr. Bowers smiled and ruffled Benny’s hair. “Sure. Those daggers belonged to my great-grandfather. He was a part of a very unique religion called

Wicca.” Benny wriggled into a more comfortable position, eager to learn more. “It’s a peaceful practice and focuses on deities connected to nature.”

Benny’s brow furrowed. “So if it’s so peaceful, the daggers weren’t used for anything bad, right?”

Mr. Bowers nodded. “Exactly right. The daggers themselves are called athames. They’re used in rituals to represent fire. According to my pap, if an athame was used to draw blood in any situation, the person who wielded the dagger would be cursed.”

Panic surged through the boy’s body. It was a struggle to keep his voice from shaking as he spoke. “Cursed? How?”

“I’m not sure,” Mr. Bowers shrugged. “That’s all Pap would tell me about it.”

### §

It wasn’t until October 30 of their senior year of high school when the edges of the friendship between Tom and Benny started to fray. Not long after his 17th birthday, Tom had been diagnosed as having some sort of mental disorder, though he refused to tell Benny what it was called. All Benny knew was that his friend often refused to take his medication and was out getting wasted and/or high almost every weekend.

They were headed to an after hours trick-or-treating event for the school and Tom was sipping at a half-full flask as Benny parked the car. A Halloween event was set up every year at the school to entertain the younger kids and Benny had volunteered to help out. He didn’t know how Tom had gotten involved. “Why aren’t you drinking?” Tom asked as he got out of the car, slipping the flask into the pocket of his

costume.

“I’m not going to drink,” Benny answered as he led the way towards the school. “I have to make sure I can get you home without you killing yourself.” Tom huffed. “Yeah, okay.” He was silent for a few moments before grinning, shifting the bag he had brought with him from one hand to the other and ruffling Benny’s hair. “Oh, so apparently Jared is going to be at this thing.”

“Yeah, so?” Jared was a friend of Benny’s, but he didn’t understand Tom’s sudden excitement at the idea.

“You heard he’s queer, right? We need to fix that.”

“No, no, we really don’t,” Benny rolled his eyes.

Tom stopped and glared. “Don’t tell me you’re batting for his team.”

“No I’m not. But does it matter? I’m not going to beat someone up because of what genitals they prefer.” Benny continued walking, effectively ending the conversation. Tom jogged to catch up and followed in silence until they got inside. Students were already setting up decorations in the hallways and grouping up according to the type of outfits they had chosen. Benny caught sight of a group of hero and villain costumes and led the way over to them.

Jared was among them, and laughing with his friends. “Hey, Benny,” he waved. Benny left Tom’s side to chat with him.

It wasn’t long before the event was in full swing, small children eagerly traversing the halls

and collecting candy. Benny was placing a handful of treats into a little girl's bag when he noticed that both Tom and Jared were missing from the group. He handed his basket off to someone and excused himself to look for them.

Benny wandered out the back exit of the school, pausing to listen for any sign of his friends. After a few seconds of silence, a shout echoed out from the football field, followed by laughter. He hesitated for a moment before bolting back into the building and grabbing the nearest teacher. "I think something bad is happening on the football field." The teacher nodded and let him lead the way. They jogged out to the dark field, stopping at the edge of the bleachers. At first, there didn't seem to be anyone in the area, but Benny caught sight of a person-shaped lump at the center of the field.

Panic rose in his throat as he ran towards the shape. "Jared?" he called out. The person shifted, groaning in pain. Jared was curled up in the fetal position, crying. "Jesus, what happened?" The teacher caught up to him, already on his cell phone to call an ambulance. In the dim light, he could see blood trickling from Jared's nose. "Who did this to you?"

"Too many people," Jared explained. "I couldn't see all of their faces..."

Glancing over at the teacher, who was busy relaying information to the dispatcher, Benny leaned forward and whispered, "Was Tom involved?"

Jared frowned as he tried to think. "Yeah. I didn't see him, but I know I heard his voice."



Years later, after Tom had been released from his brief stint in jail for assaulting Jared, Benny had gone to a small get together with his girlfriend, Ivy, to celebrate the end of finals week. It was his last year of college and he was eager to start a life with Ivy. Tom, who somehow managed to get into every party that Benny was at, was already tossing back shots when Benny got there. “Geez, slow down,” Benny commented, sipping at his beer. “You’ll be trashed before everyone even shows up.”

Tom grudgingly slowed his pace, watching Ivy out of the corner of his eye. As the night progressed, Benny noticed Tom trying to sidle up to her and even though Ivy rejected his advances, Benny made sure to keep himself between the two of them, unsure of whether or not Tom was on his meds.

It was the early hours of the morning when the party started to die down and Benny went to fetch their jackets, leaving Ivy with a few of their friends in the living room. When he returned, Ivy was nowhere to be seen. “Where’s Ivy?” he asked, a hollow feeling settling in the pit of his stomach.

A frown tugged at his friend’s lips. “Um...I thought she was going to meet you at the door...that’s what she told me.”

“Shit!” Benny swore and ran towards the door, which was directly in front of the staircase. A thump and muffled shriek drew his attention to the middle of the stairs. Tom had Ivy in a tight grip, one hand clamped over her mouth and one wrapped around her waist and pinning her arms to her side. Growling, Benny darted up the steps and punched Tom in the

nose. There was a satisfying crunch as he released Ivy, who immediately ran down the steps and away from the fray. Benny had managed to pin Tom against the wall and was pressing his forearm against Tom's windpipe just hard enough to restrain him. "Ivy, call the police."

"You'll regret this," Tom rasped out. "I'll make you regret this." Benny refused to listen and didn't move until the police entered the house. He watched as the officer clapped handcuffs on Tom's wrists and pushed him into the cruiser. From inside the car, Tom continued to rant and swear, promising revenge on Benny. Both Benny and Ivy gave their statements to the man before walking away from the house without any intention of ever seeing his former friend again.

Tom apparently had other plans however, and jumped Benny in the alley a week after he made bail.

§

Benny frowned up at the ceiling as best as he could with the bandages around his head. His body was contentedly numb from the painkillers coursing through his body and Ivy had visited him earlier in the day, promising to make sure the police were on Tom's trail, but there was an uneasy feeling creeping up his spine that told him Tom wasn't done. He spent most of the day slipping in and out of consciousness. At one point his mother and father stopped by, but were gone by the next time he woke up.

The door opened again right as Benny was dozing off again. "Hey Benny," Tom grinned and watched Benny's body go rigid at the sound of his

voice. The brim of a baseball cap covered the majority of his face. “Thought I’d stop by and give you a little present. You don’t break a blood oath, Benny. You just don’t.” Tom reached into his backpack and pulled out a large knife. “You got me arrested. Twice! I know you told the police I was involved with Jared. You think I was going to let you get away with that?” He waited until Benny’s swollen eyes were focused on him before stepping closer.

“No, no,” Benny managed to groan out despite not being able to move his jaw. “You bro—” Tom hushed him, placing a hand over Benny’s mouth. *You broke the oath!* Benny shouted mentally, trying to move his head away from Tom’s hold. *You were going to rape my girlfriend!*

Tom was too focused on the knife in his free hand to notice the fierce glare being sent his way. “You know what I’m going to do, don’t you? I’m going to dig this into your throat and drag it all the way across. You’ll bleed out before anyone has the chance to come to your rescue. But just to make sure...” Tom smirked and pressed a button on the EKG, silencing the beeping. Benny jolted as the cold metal of the knife was pressed against his throat. He registered a sharp drag of pain even through the medication and blood started flowing freely down his neck. “And now we wait,” Tom smiled. The lines on the EKG spiked erratically as Benny’s heart sped up. He couldn’t do anything. He couldn’t scream, he couldn’t move, he couldn’t even bite the hand that covered his mouth. All he could do was wait, as time seemed to slow down, passing at an agonizing pace. “Almost

there, Benny,” Tom slipped the bloodied knife back into his bag. “Not much longer now.” Only a few moments after Tom finished speaking, Benny inhaled sharply before going limp, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. The EKG started to flat-line in the eerie silence. Tom chuckled and ruffled Benny’s hair before turning on his heel and walking out of the room.

# Shoe Collection

**Angela Maracle**

Now that a second ballerina had gone missing, Sophia didn't feel safe walking to the school and back alone.

Jeff pushed a twenty into her hand and kissed her. "If I'm not around to drive you, take a taxi."

After he left she tidied his apartment and got ready for rehearsal. Where were her damn pointe shoes? She turned her dance bag upside down, spilling the contents on his bed. Tights, bodysuit, hairpins, waterbottle....no shoes.

Being late for class was not acceptable. She dropped to her knees and peered under the bed. Three small boxes huddled in the darkness and she pulled one out, curious. Her pointe shoes nestled inside, carefully wrapped in their pink, satin ribbons.

Why would Jeff put them in a box? Maybe he thought she shouldn't toss them unprotected in her bag....found a box for them, and forgot to tell her. She slid the second box out and removed the lid.

Pointe shoes...not hers. They were signed. With uneven breath, she reached for the last box.

"Sophia?"

Jeff was back. She shoved the boxes under the bed and scrambled to her feet.

“I’m...I’m in here. Just getting ready to leave. Did you forget something?”

He appeared in the doorway, smiling. “I’ve decided not to go to work today.”

“Oh. I’ll come back after rehearsal then. We can...have a late lunch.” She fumbled for her bag, and he eyed her items on the bed.

“Looking for something?”

“Uh...no, just my shoes, but...”

He crossed the floor, gathered her things and placed them in her bag. “There you go honey.”

“Thanks.”

She brushed past him but he caught her arm. “Just a minute.”

He crouched down and fished under the comforter edge, then frowned. “I have your shoes Sophia, but it looks like you already know that. You shouldn’t have been snooping. But since you’re here, why don’t you sign them for me? I’m a bit of a collector.”

Her legs, normally so strong, trembled as she stepped backward.

Jeff stood up, gripping her shoes. “You know what I like the most about these? How wonderfully long the ribbons are.”

# I Am The Butcher

**Logan Noble**

By the time that the film finishes, my lust for them is almost painful. The lights in the theater come up slowly, and I watch as the sea of people before me slowly comes to life, like insects before a flame. But I don't care for the others. I'm focused on the couple now, zoned in as they bend to pick up their snacks, their garbage, and then they are moving. I follow closely, and I admire how good they look together, so young, so fresh, and high on life. The crowd is dense, but I glide through. I feel like a predator, so very strong, sleek. No one notices me. They never do.

The outside air is cold, thin, the night fully descended. The couple is moving slowly, drifting meekly out onto Main Street, and I stick close behind. The town is like an illustration on a Hallmark card, small shops and dark bistros. It is a town of tolerance, a town free of suspicion. *I am the Butcher*. I roam free here, untethered as I bring in my prey, one after the other, their fear fresh in the air. I inhale deeply. This night is to be different than the others. I've spent so much time, practicing and honing my skills, always such stress. But perhaps it's the stars above my head,

or the way the moon is smiling down on us, tonight feels special. Titanic. My heart is pounding, and it's akin to what may be stage fright. Nothing can stop me tonight. There is no better feeling than the one I have now. Euphoria. The high of the hunt.

I watch them as they giggle, stumbling as they flirt. They are like so many other couples, so many others I've stalked the same way, watched them go through these very same motions. This generation feels as if they are so safe, so entitled. To them, their life has been given to them, and not earned. It makes me sick. The town, like always, is deserted this time of night, so I linger further behind them, so silent, so skilled, watching.

The man, early twenties, is young, but not very athletic. I will dispatch of him first, striking hard. He is not much of a fighter, and, if he struggles, I will take his eyes. He is stocky, dense, an enormous girth shoved beneath his tight clothing. The woman, on the other hand, is tall, thin. She can run, built strong. She may be a danger, more so than her chubby boyfriend.

The stars are right tonight, and, as we enter into the park, I reach into my coat. It's there, a solid, comfortable weight. The steel is cold against my palm. With this, I have ended so many lives, smashed through bone, tore through flesh. I hear her laugh, head thrown back, tan, scrawny neck up turned to the sky. To squeeze and claw at it. How beautiful. They are slowing down now, and I began to close the gap, long strides carrying me closer.

My footfalls are much louder now, and, as my boots meet with ground, the man hears me. He is slow,



like so many other sheep. I watch as he turns, surprised at first, then his eyes fill with a strange recognition, because he has seen me before, in his dreams, in his nightmares. His eyes light up, all white, then the world turns red--

I swing the hammer in a wide arch, and his nose is nothing but pulp. I pull back again, and the man is reeling, his nose shattered, eyes dull, and I bring it down once again, this time striking his cheekbone, shattering bone, eviscerating flesh. His blood splatters me, hot, burning, and he is tensing as I bring the hammer down, again, and again, each time erasing his features and splattering them across the ground, my hand tight on his shirt, keeping him close. The woman is screaming now, but the pounding in my ears is earth shattering. I can smell the blood on the air, smell the fear, and I revel in it. I am the Butcher. The man lashes out with one hand weakly, his fingers aiming for my eyes, and I bite them, the flesh breaking like a rotten grape, the metallic taste erupting into my mouth as I tear a chunk of flesh away. I am the Butcher. I spit the flesh out, and look up to see the woman, stumbling away now, screaming.

The man is dead, so I leave him behind, sinking a boot into the remains of his face as I give chase. She is close still, so I lash out, the end of the hammer meeting with her lower leg as she gets up to run. I hear the *crack*, but she only falters, she is already running, a scream tearing from her lips.

She is fast, and fear is haunting me. I am running, wiping blood from my eyes, and, even with a broken leg, she is fast, so very fast, and I am trailing

behind. Her screams fill the world, fill the park, and, from somewhere, I hear sirens. I curse as she cuts around a tree, and I try to slow and cut her off, so close, an arm's length, but she is gone again, her rapid gait out-pacing me. *I am the Butcher*. As she turns, an idea strikes me then, and I pull back my arm, and throw my hammer as hard as I can. It hits her in the back, left of the shoulder, and she goes down. Triumph soars, and I run to her, just she peels herself off the ground.

With a knee to her side, she goes down, her breath stolen from her, and I have her pinned. She is struggling, and I allow her to roll over, and I catch the bare fear in her eyes, I can smell it, and I have my hands on her throat, squeezing, crushing, clutching. I look at her face, red, her eyes bulging, thin lips pursing, gagging as I crush her windpipe. *I am the Butcher*. This isn't how I work, this isn't what I do, but it will have to suffice. The sirens are nearing now; I can hear them, messengers of my demise. I squeeze harder, the pain in my forearms and shoulders erupting, on fire as I press her down into the dirt, grinding her hair into the gravel. She lifts her hand up, fluttering, weakly, like a bird, how quaint, how pathetic, how-

My world is pain. I fall backward, clutching at my eye, clutching as blood rolls. I can still feel her nail, though it was in my socket for only a second, it was a second of eternal pain. I hear her moving, gasping. *Getting away*. I reach out blindly, reaching, clawing, the hammer nearby, I know it. Nothing but grass and dirt greets me, and, through my good eye, I see

her stand, tall now, so very tall. I try to get up, rage building now. I AM THE BUTCHER. She will pay, like so many have before, pay with her life, pay with her blood, and pay with-

Deep dark. I am drifting now, and from the depths, I feel the throbbing of my empty eye socket. On the top of my head, I feel the hole in the skull. The pain is dull, so very dull, and as I drift, I imagine the hammer, in her hand, bringing it down on my head, and then-

My eyes open, and, through tears and blood, I watch as the woman brings the hammer down into my face.

# Various Versions Have Been Told...

**Bryan Nickelberry**

Much to my surprise, it turns out the story about my wife is one that's been told before. There seem to be two primary versions, although I've heard multiple minor variations on each. In the west they say that the man opened the door on some sort of half-serpent: fully serpent from the waist down, fully woman from the waist up, endowed with claws, wings, and fangs. The stories vary as to who ran: the husband or the wife. If my wife had been something that mundane, I doubt I would've run.

"In the east," an inmate told me, "the woman was a swan plucking out her own feathers." Had that been the horrible truth she was keeping from me, I would have gladly spent the rest of my life searching for her to apologize. I wondered after I heard the first story whether one of the neighbors had seen something and if this story was the "Weekly World Star" version. Then I heard the second one and found that these two stories go centuries farther back than my

wife and I.

It scares me to think that this kind of thing might have happened now and again through the ages. How many of us are sleeping next to monsters? Or could it be that I'm the one this keeps happening to? That I keep on being re-incarnated to suffer this horrible fate until I get it right? Neither thought really brings me comfort.

So why am I talking about this then, and especially in such detail? Because I do have to admit that, as far as I know, she never hurt me or our daughter. Because every day and every night that I stay here, I remember how safe I felt sleeping, blissfully unaware of the truth. And because I'd prefer to go back to that bed, and sleep next to that thing rather than spend another night in here. "No." I remind myself. "Not back to "that" bed; back to "my" bed. And "that thing" is... was, your wife. But either way it's too late. Here I am. And he'll keep me here. Because my plight amuses him.

My wife was beautiful, and smart as a whip. She looked exotic: like you couldn't tell quite what her ethnicity was; and that was alright with both of us. She only had a couple of close friends, but she loved to debate philosophy and she loved a well told story, be it from a book, a movie, a tv show or any other method of delivery. Honestly, she just had a lust for life in general. Like me, she lived a pretty clean life, preferred reading quietly at home to going out to party in a club, and couldn't stand country music. She had a great job that she loved, and she was doing fine all by herself.

I found it intriguing as casually hanging out became dating, that she was so knowledgeable about certain things, and yet so ignorant of others. She seemed to be around my age, and yet, if you brought up anything pop-cultural; especially about the 80's and early 90's, she usually had no idea what you were talking about. Whenever I asked about her childhood, she seemed to be, in a phrase: carefully evasive. Like she was trying not to offend me by not answering while making it perfectly clear that this was something she really didn't want to talk about. But I was 23, in love, and the luckiest man alive to have an incredible woman like her choosing to spend time with me.

I took her to her first concert, and in so doing introduced her to Prince. She took me to my first renaissance fair and introduced me to mutton. I took her to her first baseball game with my grandfather. She took me to her favorite comic book store on the way home. I took her to her first midnight movie premiere, she took me to my first play. I filled the living room with flowers for Valentine's Day. She gathered all of my family and our friends together for my first surprise birthday party. I showed her all that was good about family on Thanksgiving. She showed me all that was good about being by ourselves on Christmas eve. We'd both watched fireworks, but neither of us had ever actually set any off. So we bought some fireworks and set them off while drinking non-alcoholic cider on New Year's eve. We were hopelessly in love. We were married in the spring of the very next year.

I'd like to think that I was a good boyfriend, a better husband, and that I was well on my way toward

being a great father. When she had our daughter, we were both happy... Although I had thought it was strange that not long before the birth... It couldn't have been more than 3 months beforehand; she had asked for a closet that could be her own private space with a lock and had requested to feed our daughter privately. "It's not too weird..." I thought, and I recommended she take the guest room rather than just a closet.

I think I've figured out now, how it is that her weekend deliveries to Pike's Place market got started, though I'm still not sure why she started them at that time. I often wondered why it was that she requested only a closet of all things to herself. I wondered where the silk that she took to Pike's Place market came from. I wondered why it was that after she had our daughter, she requested me not to handle her breasts in any way, unless I had her permission. I still wonder what in the world she was feeding our girl in that guest room. But these are answers I'll never have; since the house burned down. I had myself put in here not only for protection; but also to get some peace, and quiet. To give myself time to think and sort all of this out.

The irony is that I haven't had a moment's peace of mind since I got here. The firefighters told me that no bodies were recovered from the fire. I heard that my relatives had some kind of funeral or service or something for my wife and daughter; but I don't know for certain that they're dead. I was in here. Waiting to hear hissing or scratching from the other side of my cell door, or worse... to hear the door

open, and see my wife standing there.

Was it so wrong of me to have been curious? We'd been so open and loving before she got pregnant, and most of the way through it. We'd talked about anything and everything. I still wonder if I only imagined how weird she seemed to be in her quiet moments after the seventh month, or if was I only noticing what had been there all along. And just as she really seemed to be getting back to her old self...

I'd brought home flowers to celebrate. I was going to sit down, and ask openly and gently what this strangeness between us had been. We were going to celebrate the fact that whatever this weird mood was, it had passed; and we were all fine as a family now.

I'd come home early. Most of me agrees that I didn't know she was... feeding our daughter. In the most literal of truth I didn't. But that little voice in the back of my head always points out that the only time that door was closed, is when she was feeding our daughter Isana. Was that really it? Was that the real reason I threw the door open? Because inside I was dying to know what she did in there when the door was shut? Because I wanted so badly to know what was in that locked room? Well I got my answer. One of them anyway. A handful of answers, and so many more questions. A swan would've been less than no problem; and at least a half serpent is still half human.

It looked like she'd been crossing the room. I'd caught her at the worst time; and from the worst angle. I could see everything, and it was all wrong. Gone was the pert, round butt which I'd seen so little of lately; replaced by... how to describe them? The



things at the end of her abdomen were huge, and they were moving like an extra pair of fingerless arms... no, like a cross between an arm and a finger. These things were generating the silk that her hind legs were gathering into a ball. And when the door opened, the thing turned it's "head"... it's whole body almost, to look at me. Because it's head is it's body.

Spiders have no true head. This ten foot tall monstrosity, looked at me not with the gentle, understanding eyes of my wife, but with eight eyes that were like individual lifeless voids. So many eyes reflecting back nothing but death. Silk still dripping from it's inhuman mouth parts. It was almost comical. She dropped the silk ball she'd been rolling in her front limbs, silk still trailing grotesquely from the... things where her beautiful mouth had been. Gone was her long black hair; replaced by dark stiff fur which covered her entire body. Gone, was her thin, supple form. Replaced by a nightmare of moving parts never meant to be combined on this or any other world. Gone was her perfectly proportioned stomach, and the rest of that gorgeous body which she'd only let me see so intermittently over the last few months. Replaced by hydraulic moving parts which could only have come from the wet dreams of H.R. Gieger himself. Look a spider in the face sometime and tell me that it looks like it belongs on God's earth.

The first thing that came to mind was a scene from Jaws. We'd watched the movie several times together, and we'd had more than a few discussions concerning the scene where Brody describes floating on the open ocean with the sharks. He says that the

is the absolute height of evolution for aquatic based hunting. And that's exactly what the spider is for land. It can trap prey in a number of different ways, chase prey down, and or fight with prey outright and have a fair chance of winning. And when you look into those eyes... Those cold... dead... eyes... Her eyes didn't reflect light. They didn't reflect anything. Even other predators have eyes that say... something. Sharks and spiders though... It's as if they've traded their souls to the Devil himself to become the masters of their domains. Now there is nothing inside them... so they eat to try and fill the void.

The flowers hit the floor. I'm not sure why the baby bottles were standing so near the door, all in a perfect line, but I could see in the ones which were empty... they were full of cob-webs... Full of spider's silk. I realized too late that I had taken my eyes off of the creature who was once my wife, and I fearfully looked back up; expecting to have just enough time to see her fangs heading for my shoulders, and to see those mouth parts, still dripping some sort of drool; or webbing or both, about to close around my head... but no. She was still there. In shock. On the other side of the room. That more than anything told me what I most feared. It told me that no matter how much I wanted to deny it... This creature was indeed my wife. I ran.

I flew out of the doorway, then around our bed and ran as fast as I could for the stairs: I had to get downstairs and out the door. And I could hear her right behind me. It... she was shrieking, and hissing, and spitting, and that only made me run faster.

One of the advantages I realized much later to dealing with a 10 foot tall spider is that they have to think about it before they go through a door. Oh they can fit just fine, but they have to scrunch up in order to do so. And in the time they spend condensing themselves down to fit, and actually going through the delicate process of fitting; a human gains a surprising amount of time. At the top of the stairs she caught up to me. I felt her claws go through my shirt and I heard ripping, which at the time could've been my clothes or my skin. I didn't care enough to find out though. I leaped to the bottom of the staircase, and landed on my feet in a crouch. If I hadn't been so scared, I would've been impressed. But there was no more conscious thought. There was only fear. I sprang up and out of the stairwell, positive that a massive spider was going to impact right behind me; I mean after all, If I could do it, she definitely could. Thankfully, the stairs are narrow. I thought I'd be opening the front door, and in so doing slamming it into the place where her face should have been... but there was no concussion. I vaguely remember thinking that was good; it meant she wasn't that close to me, and that I might not lose an arm in the door from her closing it on me.

I got out of the house and I ran. I forgot all about the car, there wasn't time to get it out of the garage. And I WAS NOT going into the garage, where she could so easily trap me. I thought for just a moment as I flew across the dividing line between our driveway and the gravel road that perhaps she wasn't coming out after me. A fresh screech killed that idea.

But I kept running. Hoping and praying that I

wouldn't feel what was obviously coming next. Hoping and praying that I wouldn't feel the crushing weight on top of me. That I wouldn't feel fangs as thick as my arms being jammed into my body by something truly inhuman...

I can't remember who I was crying for as I ran: her, our daughter, or myself. Even as something in the back of my mind registered that the screeches had shifted into something closer to human speech, I kept running. Even as I thought that I could make out what she was saying; I kept running. Even once it was my wife's voice again, begging me to stop, pleading for me to let her explain... I kept running. The thought that at any moment she could slide out of bed, and into that form in order to devour me, body and soul kept me running. For the first time since we moved out here I wished to every deity I could think of that our neighbors lived closer; that someone; anyone could hear me screaming; or that they could pass by and see me.

I lucked out when I hit the paved main road, in that a truck was coming. I stood in front of it, waving my arms, not looking at her as she must have been running toward me still; and waiting to see what would happen: Would she tackle me into the ditch, would the truck driver kill me; or maybe, just maybe, would he pull over and give me the chance to survive this? As luck turned out, it was the latter. Of course, he wanted to know what in the world I was thinking standing in front of his car; but he let me right in when I shouted at him that she was trying to kill me! He drove me straight to the police station. Isn't that

funny? It's less than 5 minutes from my house... by car that is.

I guess the officers knocked on the door and didn't find anything. Of course I didn't tell them what had really happened; just that my wife had lost it, and tried to kill me. That was when I requested the psychiatrist. He's the one I told everything to.

"Now Mr. Stevens," he began after I'd told him everything. "You and I both know that what you're describing is literally impossible."

"Yes Doctor, I know that; and yet it happened anyway. That's why I want you to put me into a facility with locked doors, and windows; rather than a facility with wide bars that you can stick an arm, a leg, or a pair of mandibles through."

"Mr. Stevens I... What are you looking at?" the Doctor asked.

I couldn't respond... the spider on the carpet was looking right at me.

Leaping up, and flipping the Doctor's desk onto the spider in order to kill it actually had the desired effect; it got me put into this insane asylum. The only problem is that some of the things I've found things inside this place are deeper and darker than I could have imagined.

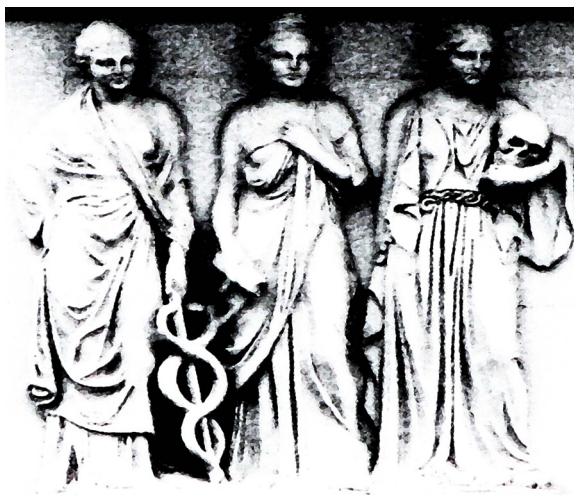
The patient who runs this place considers himself a vampire, and finds my story too fascinating to let me go. "Well, well," he said after reviewing my file. "You are an interesting one. Neither you, nor sadly I will ever know how truly fascinating of a creature your wife may have been. But it's ok," He said putting His hands on my shoulders and looking me in

the eyes. “Now that you’re in here with me, you’ve got new mysteries to consider solving, and I’ve got a brand new... hmm, “partner” as it were. Someone to talk to who isn’t crazy. Someone to check my work, and operate with on levels which differ from those accessed by my other guests. Because you’re all guests in my... chateau.”

**On Coming**



**Carolyn Adams**



**Three Witnesses**

# The Brightness of an EXIT Sign That Leads to—

J.J. Steinfeld

The strapped-down male being who had been encased inside the spacecraft hurtling through the universe for a decade woke from suspended animation, painfully forcing his eyes to open and seeing the brightness of an EXIT sign above a portal that leads to—

*To what? To where?* He attempts to remember why he is traveling through space, memory stabbing like an indefinable torment caused by an unseen weapon. “Exit” is their language, he thinks. Exit, exit, exit... He recalls learning that word, and many other words, in secret, sitting inside their spacecraft unlike the one he finds himself in now. His teacher was lovely, lovelier than any woman on his planet, and he loved her. Loved her more than anything. He told her that in his language of high-pitched staccato sounds, a language she knew perfectly, as did many of her people, the courageous soldiers, she called them in her language, but the expression on her face told him



his words of affection did not mean anything to her. “Love, in our language, has lost most of its meaning,” she explained. “The brutal warfare has changed the meanings of so many words..”

Her blood was red, much different from his greenish-blue life-sustaining fluid. He was with her when she was wounded, but they escaped, he recalls that. When he first saw her bleed he was startled, frightened, but told her he did not love her any less. He cut the skin of his long arm like appendage to show her his blood, to somehow convey that he loved her. “We will discuss your emotions after we have succeeded in ending your planet’s despoiling of our planet.. Perhaps you will be able to visit my planet, after yours has been subdued, its aggression stopped.”

He deflects his eyes from the EXIT sign and sees innumerable others, unmoving and encased in separate compartments. Then he recalls leaving his planet, banished for life for supporting the alien incursions of 2087, those whose blood was red. The magical red blood, he thinks, and attempts to free himself from his restraints.

# We Be The Echo

Stephen McQuiggan

The dog laid on the kitchen table, its paws pointing to the ceiling, its body frozen stiff; only its eyes belied death, orbiting their sockets in a frantic swirl. A bootlace of saliva hung from its muzzle, snaking down its shiny black fur. Jeff formed his hands into a finger cage and, with a voice unused to speaking softly, tried his best to soothe the helpless animal.

‘It’s okay girl, I’ll hold your heart right in here. Nothing’s going to hurt you while I’ve got your heart.’

‘That’s not strictly true,’ said Rhonda, snapping one of the dog’s legs, the god-awful crunch shocking Jeff into momentarily letting the finger cage slip. The dog let out a heartbreaking whine.

‘Hold steady!’ yelled Rhonda. She moved to each leg in turn, breaking it at the paw and at the base, her big arms flapping with the violence of the twists. Jeff gagged a little, but the cage held firm and the dog stayed silent.

‘Has it worked?’ he asked

She went to the sink and returned with a bowl

and a large knife. She began heating the blade in the gas ring flames, humming some lullaby to herself.

‘Rhonda, did it -’

‘If you want to know if you can go now then the answer’s yes. I’ll finish up here.’ She sighed. ‘You never had the stomach for anything deep.’

‘I guess not.’ He knew better than to argue with his sister. ‘I just need to know if -’

‘You’ll see when you get there.’ She was standing with one hand on her hip, the glowing orange blade pointing at his eyes. ‘Go and get your suit on. Have you seen the time? The service will be over if you don’t get a move on.’

That was fine with Jeff. He had every intention of missing the service; funerals were bad enough without hymns and preachers. It was only the internment that interested him, and if Rhonda’s spell had worked, then -

- then Rhonda was approaching the hapless dog, and he hurried upstairs to get dressed before she plunged the blade into its shallow beating chest, pounding his feet on the risers to mask the crack of its ribcage. Did she really expect him to eat the heart? Or would she eat it herself? He couldn’t remember the details, but he trusted his sister to work it all out.

A niggling anxiety refused to stop biting as he did up his tie and polished his shoes with the bathroom towel: what if the dog wasn’t enough? What if they needed something bigger...what if they needed a person?

He drove the thought from his mind as he hurried downstairs and out the front door, grateful he

had left the car keys on the hall table and he would not have to witness the carnage in the kitchen. He did not want to vomit in front of Rhonda. She was right, he didn't have the stomach for this, though, if he had to, he would bring her back a little boy or girl if the dog proved insufficient.

Anything for Gemma.

*Gemma.* If he didn't hurry he would miss her burial. He checked his watch; barring traffic he would be at the cemetery in twenty minutes. He drove cautiously, all the windows open, yet he still felt like he was cooking slowly, squinting through the white glare of the day all the way to the churchyard.

It was a small funeral. Only her parents were there, augmented by a few gouty uncles and acidic aunts, a clutch of her more 'acceptable' friends. He wasn't welcome. He was an embarrassment. The backstreet boy who had bewitched their beautiful princess (and oh, if they only knew how true that was, what Rhonda had boiled up to seal the deal) only to lead her astray.

They blamed him for her illness. They never said as much but it was plain to see in their basilisk stares. They had no idea the lengths he had went to cure her - there wasn't a cat left alive for miles around his sister's house. If anyone was to blame, it was them; that shit in her blood that yellowed her skin and greyed her looks was genetic. Their corrupt genes were at fault, not his. Looking at this slack jawed rabble it was impossible to believe she had sprang from such a fetid pool.

Gemma was such a lovely girl, curvaceous and

loquacious, a breath of fresh air in the vacuum that made up his world. He still chanted her name over and over as he struggled to sleep, a mantra more powerful than any of his sister's dark magicks.

Her butter skeined hair, her velvet skin, *that* smile. Ah, when she smiled, when the world stopped spinning and the heavens gasped, he was always left with that one simple thought - How could such a thing exist?

They wouldn't let him see her at the end. He had begged and pleaded with her saintly mother, receiving nothing but silence from the other end of the phone. Somehow that silence galled him more than the self righteous lecture that barred his way to her hospital bed; Mrs Keys enjoyed making him grovel. That pious bitch lived to make him suffer - not that she would ever use such a vulgar word; she would call it 'atoning' but it meant suffering all the same.

*Well, my high and mighty one, today will be your chance at atonement and I will watch in silence, but I will not hide my enjoyment, no hypocrite I.*

He would bring Gemma back today, if only for a brief time, one anorexic moment in which to finally explain to her his absence and to say goodbye, and to visit all that pain she endured upon her family's holy, hateful souls.

*It feels like the whole planet is hurtling into the sun,* he thought as he walked toward the small gathering by the bank of rowan trees, *and I will catch fire any second.* It would not do to remove his jacket or take off his tie. Ritual decorum transcended comfort was its very antithesis, even if your neck was white

with sweat. He closed his eyes as the preacher droned on, an insolent bluebottle, his words full of disease and death, thanking Jesus for his generous gift of misery.

And how generous He had been to Gemma; cancer, strokes, diabetes, colostomy bags, and a pain in her eyes morphine could never reach. Yes, Gemma must have been one of God's favourites, for He had marked her out as His special project.

He could feel the perspiration spit and crackle on his frying scalp; the earth was plummeting into a flame-ringed abyss. In the instant he braced himself for impact, he heard the voice instead.

*Here is my victory*, it said in a rumbling baritone, its texture cold and smooth, a welcome arctic blast in his brain, *Here is my sting*.

Jeff opened his eyes, searching for its source, but the other mourners seemed oblivious, lost in grief or wondering how soon they could make their excuses and leave; to sunbathe in their gardens or spew platitudes in the nearest bar.

What did they know of Gemma, what of suffering?

*We were so close, wind and rain, a perfect storm, my love.*

He had even cut her palm and pressed it to the open wound in his own, commingling their blood in a hackneyed gesture dressed up as high romance. Even now, he felt a pang of shame at his fear, as the warm viscous fluid stuck their hands in a fleshy manacle, that her poisoned blood, awash with cancerous cells, (swirling black orbs ringed with razor teeth) would

contaminate his own. He had asked Rhonda to perform a purification spell on him, claiming he was coming down with flu, as soon as he got home. Above him a scorpion shaped cloud curled its heat envenomed tail like it meant to strike him down forever, amen.

*You shall be my vindication* - he felt both blessed and repulsed by its icy touch; was it the voice of the Sun, of God, of Death itself? Perhaps it was just his brain simmering in its own juices. Rhonda had not mentioned voices.

‘Who are you?’ he asked aloud, frowning faces turning toward him away from the dried husk of the preacher and the desiccated hole with the coffin by its edge.

Jeff stumbled away, heels bleeding in his uncomfortable new shoes. He could not suppress a wave; waving at the mercy circus by the grave, waving at the wilting wreaths, waving at the two men smoking by the digger at the cemetery gates.

*We be the echo*, says the voice, blowing him back out into the car park, the sun glaring down upon him brighter than the Devil’s eye.

It must be working. Surely the voice indicated that all was in motion. No time to waste. He stripped off his suit, standing naked in the cauterising heat, naked as the day he was born - no, more naked than that, for he was clean.

No caul enveloped his face, no placental rags tangled his limbs. Rhonda told him she had eaten that caul; it’s what big sisters encumbered by the sight were supposed to do. There would be blood and filth

soon enough, but not his, and not the pure blood of birth but the stale clotted blood of death.

It was the one part of the ritual he was not looking forward to, though the poor dog's tortured eyes ran it close. Taking a deep breath he walked back among the bleached mounds and hillocks, the voice a hook in his brain pulling him on, feeling like one of the black spirits he was about to summon forth.

He strode among the mourners, crackling with power, brushing aside a few of the braver pensioners who tried to bar his way; they were all so old and decrepit, what kind of a send off was that? They had tried to keep Gemma in a withered cage too. His eyes stayed fixed on Mrs Keys' pinched knuckle of a face, alabaster behind its veil, her cold eyes still judging, weighing, judging.

He stooped, barely breaking stride, to pluck a rock from the path, smiling at its heft. Above the sky moaned, the sun darkening to a bloodball, hanging like a viscous tumour.

*Time to atone, Mrs Keys.*

The voice echoed this sentiment, and at its touch his mouth soured and twitched, his tongue recoiling as if from a live battery. He was only slightly aware that he was fully aroused as he descended upon her.

With the first blow her skull cracked with eggy aplomb. She let out a kitten cry, nothing more, that was drowned out by the thunderous flap of the stone angels flanking the grave as they stretched their marble wings, rattling their sabres against the plinths.

He brought the rock down again and again,



pulping that hateful face, as her reedy arms clawed his back and the wind howled, sending her hat dancing among the headstones; snagged by its veil on a cross, dripping blood down its pristine divinity.

Amid the dogfood squalor of her head one eye still stared; *judging, judging, judging*. He drove his fingers into the mess and plucked it out, flinging it into the yawning pit they had dug for Gemma. Then he plastered his steaming flesh with her blood, her bone, her twisted brain, daubing himself with her vitals so that Death would pass him by when He arose to accept this gift.

The harsh perfume of pine knifed his nostrils as the world shot into focus with a clarity that stole his breath. He saw the money spiders on the headstones swarm in red hieroglyphs, heard the clicking of their tiny legs on the gilt lettering, heard the roar and pop of the sun, and felt the earth beneath him shake. His chest hair prickled with the coming storm yet the people around him screamed in silence; moving in slow motion, their fear like a fading echo, a badly dubbed film.

He grinned, tasting Gemma's mother on his lips, her drying blood stretching his skin as the debris of her corpse slid into his mouth.

'I bring the blight you visited on Gemma,' he said, but even his own voice was lost as the ground gave a volcanic burp, and the two angels, their eyes diseased and virulent red, took flight. From the freshly dug grave came a roar and Gemma's coffin began to rattle, the screws that held the lid ready to give way from the barrage within.

The voice returned; a maniacal babble somewhere between a shriek and laughter, or an echo of both. The mourners toppled around him, clinging to the earth with brittle hands. Jeff spread his arms out wide, standing tall as the crows fled their nests in a hail of winged coal. Death came, angered at His calling.

He crawled from the open grave, riding an abattoir stench that gagged with a toxic sweetness; a huge snake-like body propelled by green and rotting limbs, with screaming faces instead of scales and a gaping maw jammed with yellow tusks that dripped corruption on the steaming grass. He looked upon the sunburnt day with a panoptic glance; hundreds of eyes surveyed the scene, each one as malicious, as indifferent as eternity.

With a gleeful snap Death swallowed the fallen mourners one by one, barely chewing as the old and infirm sank down his gullet to be digested in hell. Jeff tried not to move, not to vomit, lest he draw attention to himself. He was in no hurry to test the efficacy of his sister's spell at such close quarters. The angels circled overhead, gurning like gargoyles, the beat of their wings fanning back his hair, their oily laughter cording his veins.

Beneath the feeble yelling, and the raucous gluttony of Death, he heard a scrape and a thud. The lid began to slide from Gemma's coffin, screws popping like burning oak knots, and he panicked in case he forgot the words he had rehearsed so often, the profound farewell he had been perfecting since Rhonda had first suggested this brief resurrection.

Gemma climbed from her casket, a wisp of a thing already robed in grave worms, clutching to its sides with bony claws as if to prevent her from floating away. The angels cawed at the smell of her mouldering bones. The carnage around him dimmed, the sound bleeding away; he felt like he was deflating, the very sight of her a sucker punch.

He had not seen her at the end. Now, his mind reeled, at a loss to explain how she went from bombshell to Belsen so quickly.

She wore an old fashioned blue dress, the one he hated, the one her mother bought her and the one he had mocked her for, calling her Goody Keys. The bastards had sent her into eternity dressed for antiquity. The dress hung awkwardly on her coat-hanger shoulders, billowing against her nonexistent breast.

She tottered toward him on spindly legs with a face like mouldy fruit. She smiled, revealing the pale grey remnants of gums, and an old familiar maggot thought burrowed into his brain – *How can such a thing exist?*

When Rhonda hatched this plan to alleviate his guilt revenge had been a secondary motive to him. His first thought had been of Gemma, of seeing her again, but in his heated delusions she had been healthy, vital, pure; not this soulless stumbling husk accusing him with its festering eyes. He hadn't realised she had awaited eternity's kiss with such an eager mouth.

All the words he had constructed, rejected, and rearranged in countless affirmations of worship decayed now in his heart, rang untrue in the sobering knell of her ragged breath. She touched his chest with

a sharp twig finger, letting it snail its way jerkily down through the sticky remains of her mother's mind.

'You think this blood will save you?' Her voice was not the endless music of lovelorn summer days but the fatal crack of ruthless winter. 'You forget, my love, my blood is mingled with yours. We are one, our blood mixed, an echo forever calling one to the other. Did you think it a gesture, a foolish notion?'

Seizing his hand she held it palm upwards revealing the scar, white and indecent, then showed him hers; an echo in red, the boldest scar on a body alphabetized by scars.

'An act of love reverberates through time. It can never be taken back, even when the heart disowns it, for God is love.' She put her dried and distant eyes closer to his. 'And Death is God.'

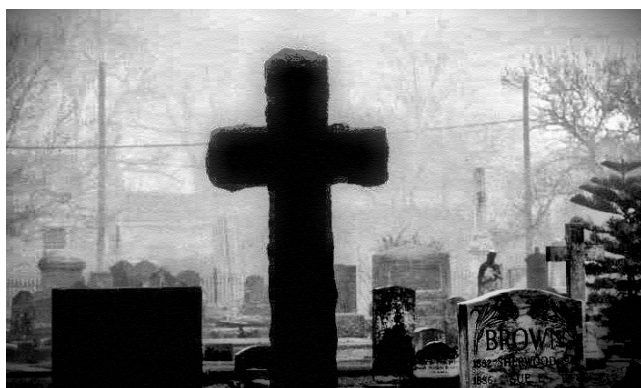
She licked at his lips with a black swollen tongue that scorched him with the memory of childhood fears.

'No need for words,' she said, her voice cracking in a desperate parody of affection, as a shadow blotted out the merciless sun. 'Our life together was our farewell. To be dead one minute is to be dead forever, everything else is mere repetition. You abandoned me but now I will teach you the meaning of absence my love.'

The final syllable droned on and on, hammering at his mind in a blunt rage. He heard the sibilant thud of many limbs snake up behind him. He closed his eyes and Death devoured him whole.



**David E. Cowen**



# Wait Till Your Father Comes Home

**Matthew Wilson**

“Wait till your father comes home,” Mother said when Andy accidentally broke a window.

He hadn’t meant to play rough, but it was a stormy night and he was bored. He tried to help, to make Mom happy and sweep up. She screamed when he bumped into a table and broke an expensive porcelain doll, too.

“Wait till your father comes home,” Mother said and headed to the kitchen, seething. Father had always been the strong one. The one who went to work, chopping trees in the forest. Andy thought of father’s strength, and he was scared.

Would father strike him with those huge hands? Hit him hard enough to take his head off his shoulders?

Shaking in fear, Andy sat on the sofa, too afraid to turn on the TV. He was determined not to move. If he stayed perfectly still... he couldn’t

possibly make more trouble for himself.

“Wait till your father comes home.” Mother said from the kitchen, laughing, and Andy thought he might scream or go mad.

Someone knocked on the door.

Bang - bang!

He was here. Father was here.

“Don’t let him in.” Andy pleaded.

Mother stormed to the door, shaking her wet hands dry from the dishes. “I told you to be good enough times.”

Mother opened the door to a bolt of lightning. The dead man stood and watched them. His rotten withered skin barely clung to his rib cage like a mouldy coat. The hangman’s rope clung still round his neck, his black tongue lagged in his open, wormy mouth.

“This is what happens to bad people.” Mother said. Ashamed to have married a murderer.

“I’ll be good!” Andy sobbed. “I will. I will.”

Father took no notice. He’d been away for a month now, alone in his tomb.

Smiling, he hobbled forward.

And came into the room to welcome his son in his cold, fleshless arm.

# Mr. Hedges

Neil S. Reddy

“Whatever is the matter dear?” Mrs Briggs, a woman with the figure of a badger and a widow’s eye for grief, asked as the wet eyed young woman that was standing on her doorstep.

“Toothache.” Evelyn croaked, holding her face. “I’ve been up all night. It hurts so much. It’s driving me mad and I can’t find a dentist.”

Mrs Briggs had only met the Evelyn once before, on the morning the removal van had deposited the young woman at the adjoining cottage. She’s introduced herself to Mrs Briggs as soon as the van had left. It was an act of old-fashioned politeness that wasn’t wasted on the village’s stout matriarch.

And so it was, with great enthusiasm that Mrs Briggs set about setting things in order.

“Come on in dear. Now don’t worry. We’ll get you in with Mr Hedges, a fine man, semi-retired you see, he still keeps his regulars but I’m sure I can get him to see you. He used to be one of my late husband’s customers.” The number was dialled.



“Hello Jane, it’s Iris here dear. Yes fine thank you, bearing up. Now look Jane, I’d like to make an appointment for a friend of mine...Evelyn. Yes my neighbour. Yes as soon as possible please. Marvellous, oh yes I can vouch for her. I’m sure she can keep a secret. Thank you Jane, see you soon.” The receiver was replaced.

“There you go, all sorted. We can pop round as soon as you’re ready.”

“Secret? You said I can keep a secret.” Evelyn asked with a furrowed brow.

“As I said dear, Mr Hedges is semi-retired. He likes to keep his business dealings quiet. We usually work on a barter system but if you have any money handy I’m sure that will be fine. Is that a problem?” Mrs Briggs asked, staring sternly over the silvered rim of her bifocals.

“No not at all. Thank you, thank you so...” A blast of pain shot through Evelyn’s head and ricocheted all the way down to her feet. “Jesus!”

“Have you taken anything for it?” Mrs Briggs asked peering into her handbag.

Evelyn nodded; she had in fact tried a wide and varied range of analgesics and alcohol, all to no effect.

“Well never mind, soon be over, it’s just round the corner. I’ll walk you there myself.” Mrs Briggs stood to go.

“I’m so sorry for being so stupid it’s just...” A fresh torrent of shame and tears welled up inside her. “...I’m so scared.”

Mrs Briggs calmly placed a hand on her arm

and smiled soothingly. “Don’t worry about that, my poor dear Evelyn. I have something here that will help with that.”

Two pink pills were removed from her handbag and placed in Evelyn’s tremulous hand.

“Take these now dear and by the time you get there you’ll feel as right as rain, without a care in the world.”

Evelyn hurried to her kitchen, filled a glass with what was left in the bottle of whiskey and swallowed the pills down; the whiskey so enraged her tooth her she almost screamed.

They walked briskly through the village, the elder leading the younger and talking brightly as she shared tiny snippets of village history with her charge. A king slept there. A witch was drowned there and the only bomb we saw in the whole of the war fell there. Evelyn was not the slightest bit interested, but was grateful for the distraction and tried her best to make as many encouraging noises as her mouth would allow.

“Here we are then.” Mrs Briggs announced cheerily as she came smartly to attention outside the last in a line of thin, shabby, Victorian houses.

Evelyn inspected the grey walled building closely; there was nothing about it to suggest it held a professional or successful dental practise. No brass name plate. No fresh paint and no new Mercedes in the drive. This did not help calm her nerves.

“You are coming in with me. Aren’t you?”

“Yes of course dear, if that’s what you want.”

Evelyn nodded firmly.

A tiny bow-backed woman dressed in a floral apron and a long sleeved black dress opened the door.

“Jane darling this is Evelyn.” Mrs Briggs sang out.

Jane silently bowed as much as her curved back would allow her and then led them through a panelled door into a tiny, airless room. Three heavy wooden chairs were crowded around a worn, faded rug and a mass of dead flies. Evelyn felt dizzy. She rushed to the room’s only window and peered through the cobweb-laden panes. Outside the twisted branches of an ancient Yew tree gloated over the worn headstones of the church cemetery. She was not greatly comforted.

Jane took hold of her arm and led across the crunching carpet of dead flies to another door. Evelyn waved a nervous goodbye to Mrs Briggs, who responded stout-heartedly with a show of crossed fingers.

Tottering on her tiny feet the rigid old woman led Evelyn into a room designed by her nightmares. Centre stage, was the chair, a black leather-tilting chair, with a wooden headrest and a worn wooden footboard. Above it loomed a freestanding disc light, as bent and buckled as Jane and just as dusty.

The room looked as if it doubled up as a junk room, the shelves were crowded with clocks and jars and glass cases; some of which were occupied by disintegrating stuffed birds and startled looking rodents.

Leaning against the chair was an old battered metal trolley on which held the remnants of an old bicycle or perhaps it was a long redundant sowing

machine. “Why have a bicycle in a dentists?” Evelyn asked grey Jane. Who smiled weakly as she moved her towards the chair.

Evelyn’s eye fixed upon a row of dully-coloured metal implements. The very instruments of torture themselves, they did not shine or glint but lay dull and heavy on their trolley like shards of dirty ice. Evelyn giggled and covered her face with her hands. The old woman patted her back gently.

Jane’s bony hand worked its way carefully down Evelyn’s back in slow, firm circles until it rested at the base of her spine and then, with a steady but firm pressure she pushed Evelyn’s hip sideways; and Evelyn fell into the sighing leather with a squeak.

The ceiling was filled with cobwebs. It occurred to Evelyn that this was not a good thing. Not a good thing at all but she couldn’t work out why? She tried to turn her head to question her aged guide but her head resisted her. She couldn’t move. A strange sensation was creeping up her legs, in fact she couldn’t feel her feet. She could see them, poking out of the bottom of her black slacks but they were utterly numb and totally unresponsive to her will, they would not move.

“I think I may have overdosed.” She smiled, as the warm, sodden duvet of dope, enfolded her. “I haven’t felt this relaxed in years.” It was a miracle. She was no longer afraid. “So...where’s the dentist? Bring it on.”

The floor at her side creaked. From the corner of her stupefied eye Evelyn could see a trap door slowly rise. Cautiously it rose to its highest point and

then fell open, landing with a thud against the base of the chair. A thin wooden ladder protruded from the newly born square of darkness. Evelyn was mesmerised.

The smell of sour fridges wafted into the room, as the sound of creaking leather shoes and rasping barber straps echoed beneath her. Gradually the scent of butcher shops and the stink of tinned corned beef intensified, saturating the air, as a corpse the colour of spoiled pork, crawled out of the pit.

It stood before her swaying on its emaciated heels. Its face was no more than a sagging mass of meat held in place by thick strands of pale knotted string. Evelyn's scream withered in her throat.

It's arm reached out across the room in a stiff wide arc, moving first over the metal trolley, then across her waist, over her breasts and towards her throat. It took hold of her jaw. Forcing it open with a sharp squeeze. The rank skinned fingers slid like sandpaper across her lips and slid into her mouth, grating like sandpaper as they moved along her gums.

His smell scoured Evelyn's throat and braised her eyes but she couldn't shut them. She couldn't move. She stared fixedly forward into the putrid face, as the milk-white balls slopped about in Mr Hedges ragged eye sockets.

The metal trolley suddenly rattled and a moment later an unseen metal probe clicked against her teeth. Evelyn wanted to scream. She really, really wanted to scream. To scream and run away and scream some more, but not one muscle would obey her. She was riveted to the chair, rendered helpless by

terror and dope, a wide-eyed witness to every rotting crease and crevice in Mr Hedges decaying face.

A huge dry flake of skin floated down from his mottled brow. She just knew it was going to land in her mouth; and then she felt it land. She tasted it. She wanted to be sick. She needed to vomit, her body was already in spasm but could she risk being sick? What if she choked? Somebody would have to help her if she were sick. Surely, he'd have to stop if she were sick! Mr Hedges snapped her mouth shut and squeezed her nose with a deft pinch.

Creaking like the decks of an old boat he turned away from her. He stiffly picked another instrument from the trolley and then swung laboriously back with the groan of aging ropes.

Evelyn squeezed her lips tight together but again the fingers forced her mouth open and crept inside. A large metal cylinder flashed before her, shifting in size and shape as it moved closer. Evelyn's weeping eyes managed to focus for a moment. It was a thick metal needle screwed into a syringe. The galvanised scorpion stung her pallet twice. At last the dead hands loosened their grip.

The corpse stood before her, fixed to the spot, its jaw open upon its withered chest, the hands pinned stiffly to its side, motionless, its dead eyes staring back into its own skull. The tiny grey crown of Jane's head bobbed into view above the corpse's right shoulder and then disappeared below it. Evelyn heard an odd mechanical whirr, as if a dry wheeled treadle were being forced into life and then Jane's head appeared again and the whirring grew louder and faster and then

her head appeared again and the whirring intensified. A gyrating drill trilled roughly in the corpse's hand. Mr Hedges drove his empty hand into Evelyn's mouth and wedged it open with his bony knuckles. The drill moved inside, clattering, clattering against her teeth.

Evelyn awoke, her head was full of the taste of cloves. For a moment Evelyn had the impression she was watching herself move, as if her senses were somehow lagging behind her body. She caught up with herself on the edge of the dentist's chair. Leaning forward, she eased herself up and out of the chair. She didn't topple over. Panic pricked her heels and she jumped across the room and fled through the door before she'd even taken another breath.

Mrs Briggs sat in the waiting room; an empty cup and saucer perched on her knee. "Hello dear, all done?"

Evelyn gasped for breath, her pounding heart intent on blocking her windpipe.

"Jane asked if you'd mind paying in kind. I told her that would be fine. She left a shopping list, just a few groceries really."

Evelyn stared at her, madly sucking in air.

"There's no hurry you could drop them off tomorrow."

"Dead." Evelyn panted.

Mrs Briggs nodded perfunctorily.

"Dead!" Evelyn screamed.

"Yes dear. For years now, just before I married Mr Briggs."

"You knew!"

"Of course."

“But how?”

Mrs Briggs placed the cup and saucer on the chair beside her. “Well, you see I went to school with Jane, Miss Hedges, we’ve been friends ever since and so we helped Jane out.”

“He touched me! My god the smell!”

“Yes I know...embalming was never Joseph’s - my late husband’s - strong point.” Mrs Briggs stood and straightened her skirt. “That’s why I gave you the pills darling. We all use them; we simply couldn’t bare the smell without them.” Mrs Briggs smiled as she handed Evelyn the shopping list. “Not a word to Jane now, she’s rather sensitive about it.”

“It was horrible.” She wept.

“Oh come on, it wasn’t as bad as all that was it?”

“Yes! Yes it was!” Evelyn shouted. “A dead man put his hand in my mouth!”

“Yes dear, but how is your tooth?”

Evelyn had forgotten the tooth, she felt for the thing with her tongue, it was still there, she bit down hard but nothing happened. She prodded the molar with her finger, no pain, no discomfort. Not even the slightest soreness remained. “It’s fine.”

“Well there you go.”

“But the dentist is dead!” Evelyn insisted.

Mrs Briggs took her arm and cradled the young girl’s hand in her own, as she led her out of the surgery. “Yes dear he is, but that’s our little secret. We wouldn’t want to lose him would we? After all, a good dentist is so hard to find these days.”



# **The Ex-Convict and the Theatre Director: The Last Audition**

**J.J. Steinfeld**

“This is my first real audition for a play, and I tell you, I’m jittery as hell.”

“It’s going to be the fiftieth play I will be directing, and I still get nervous, even during auditions.”

“That’s kinda comforting to know, I guess.”

“You certainly have an intriguing résumé, to say the least.”

“Yeah, well, no use being dishonest.”

“So, all your acting experience was in prison.”

“That’s where I found theatre. Some of the guys found religion and I found theatre.”

“Coincidentally, I know your acting teacher. Actually, I directed her in a couple of Shakespeare plays, years ago.”

“She was great. Taught me to act, to become the character—”

“Inhabit your role.”

“Yeah, that’s what she liked to say during

every acting class.”

“I taught her that.”

“Small world, in and out of the joint.”

“Indeed it is. I want you to read from the top of page ten, when the crazed murderer tells his parole officer he is going to kill again.”

“I can do that.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“I was a lousy thief, not a goddamn killer.”

“*Crazed murderer* wouldn’t look too inviting on an acting résumé, would it?”

“Probably not. Enough I put the exact dates of my incarceration.”

“Lovely phrase: the exact dates of my incarceration. Could be a line in a Beckett play.”

“Waiting for Godot was put on in San Quentin for the inmates in 1957. My acting teacher told us that.”

“For inspiration, no doubt.”

“Her class and acting transformed me top to bottom, inside and out.”

“Read, read...please.”

“Here is goes...”

“Somewhat deficient, I’m sorry to say.”

“That was exhausting...and scary.”

“Unfortunately, not very convincing.”

“I was trying to inhabit the role.”

“A crazed murderer you didn’t inhabit. Not even close.”

“I can do another speech..”

“I have a dozen others to audition this afternoon.”

“I want this role.”

“You were not convincing as a psychopath.”

“Let me do another speech.”

“Leave the stage, please.”

“I can play psychopathic, believe me.”

“Just leave, please. Get your hands off me.”

“I can be convincing.”

“Stop...stop...my throat...”

“How much more convincing do you want?”

# Beneath Her Skin

**Logan Noble**

As the recorder clicked on, Doctor Ryans leaned back in his chair. Jen, sitting across from him, smiled. He was a truly handsome man, and during their sessions together, she always felt like she was about to blush.

“Alright Jennifer,” Doctor Ryans said, his speak measured, his voice strong, “I have my trusty tape recorder here. It’s here to simply record some facts of your continuing care here at the hospital. We’re going to start from the beginning, and although I realize you’ve told me this story, many, many times, but, due to court restrictions, I would like to hear it one last time, so we can record it.” Jen looked down at the recorder, the tape revolving just under the plastic cover, around and around. She felt slightly nervous, but just like the doctor said, she’s told her story before. It wasn’t always easy. She looked up at Ryans, who gave her a slight nod. “Whenever you’d like, please begin.” She nodded and shifted in her chair. These plastic chairs always felt so hard, so unforgiving. She felt

cold in her scrubs, and as the thoughts began to form, she looked down at her hands, her nails bitten down to the thick. She remembered the events of the night, when her fingers began claws-

“It was the fall of 1954, and it always felt dark, always felt cold. On Daddy’s farm, life always carried on the same, always slow, with grand hesitation. Winter was coming, inevitable. My sisters and my Daddy worked hard, making sure we had the crops and that the livestock survived the brutal cold. Stephanie and Susan, Stephanie 16, Susan 8, did their best to keep up with the work. I was the oldest, so when it came time for Daddy to drive to town for the night, like he often did, I was in charge. He always went to buy various foods, and every once in a great while, he would bring presents. Dresses wrapped in ribbon, candies, all so pretty, so well wrapped. I love him so much.

On this day, when he went, he sat me down and gave me the same speech. Daddy always said that people in the world were bad, would hurt people, even little girls like my sisters. Daddy was very smart, he taught us everything, and I never forget anything I learned. The lessons were always the same. Keep the doors and windows locked. If anyone shows up, nice or not, stay inside. When taking care of the chickens, go with Stephanie, and take his gun. The gun was a shotgun, two barrels, and it always scared me. The metal was always cold, and Daddy always said that a gun is a viper, always waiting to bit you. I nodded, and like that, he hopped in the car and he drove off. Town was a good ways away. After Mommy died, he always spent the night there. Not sure why.

We got all the chores done early, when dawn broke. I wanted to keep us inside once the day really started. I locked the door, and the windows remained shut. It keeps the cold out. Susan played with her dolls until nightfall, and I ushered her off to bed. Stephanie stayed up with me a little longer, but as the moon rose high, we both went off to bed as well.

It happened when I was sleeping. I heard the noises first, the sound of glass breaking, and then the footsteps. They were heavy boots, like Daddy's, and for a moment, I thought that he might be home. In that couple minutes after I woke up, I thought that maybe he decided to go through the window. But as I woke up some more, I realized that it wasn't him. I heard Stephanie scream, and when I jumped out of bed, to run and see, my bedroom door opened, and one of the men was waiting."

Jen stopped, and took her fingers from her lips. She'd been chewing her nails again; accept she didn't have any left. They were bloody, and when she looked up, blinking, Doctor Ryans sat across from her, cigarette dangling from his lips. "It's okay Jennifer. If you need to pause, please feel free." He took a drag from it, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. It danced underneath the light. "This may be rough, but this type of sessions, where you talk through what you think transpired, helps to dismantle some illusions you may have created." The doctor often used words like that. Illusions. Delusions. But she remembered what happened, remembered what she became. She may not ever forget it.

"I think I'm ready to keep talking." She said,

and Doctor Ryans nodded.

“Please. Whenever you feel like you are ready.” Jen took in a deep breath, and the words, thick, heavy, came pouring out.

“The man that grabbed me was strong, but I couldn’t get away. I hadn’t transformed yet. I couldn’t see how many men there was. I was too scared, the panic too real. They had Susan, so little, tied up in the corner, gagged, and they had Stephanie on the ground. They were doing things to her, sick things, and they laughed. So much laughter. I screamed for a while, but they threatened to hurt Susan, cut her up, so I cried in silence. They talked about killing Stephanie, in between their perversions, and when she stopped fighting them, stopped moving, I think they got bored. They cut out Stephanie’s eyes first, made me watch. They used one of Daddy’s steak knives, one he bought from a traveling salesman out of Nashville. I’ve never seen so much blood, and I threw up once, on one of the men, and he beat me. That was the last real painful thing I suffered. I could feel it then, beneath my skin. It was a strange feeling. You ever had sunburn Doctor Ryans? Sunburn so bad it feels like your skin is pulled tight, stretched thin. That’s what it felt like, like my muscles were gone and replaced with the shell. I could feel the wings, between my shoulder blades, and as the men took turns sawing at her neck, I felt them moving, almost fluttering, like I’ve seen dragonflies do.

They stopped paying attention to me while they hurt Stephanie, but at that point, after all the sick things they’d done, I think she was ready to die. While they watched away, I began to shed off my skin. It

came off in thick, hot layers, peeling, and I helped it, digging my fingers into it and pulling. It didn't hurt, not much, when my wings came out of my back, erupting, smacking off waves of blood as I straightened them out, and flapping them around. My claws and teeth came in quickly, inches long, sharp, and jagged. I think one of the men realized what I was doing, transforming, and he turned to stop me, but by then it was too late.

I flew on top of him, and my teeth did their work. His nose came off with ease, and I shredded his throat with my talons, digging in, spreading his thin flesh with ease, ripping and tearing. The others came, one with the knife, and he may have cut me, but my exo-skeleton was so thick at this point, they didn't stand a chance. I got another down, going for his eyes, just like they had done with Stephanie, and they popped when my talons struck them. I was coated with blood, my own, theirs, so hot, so sticky. They were screaming now, and one managed to run away. If there was more than the two, they must have run.

By the time my Daddy got home, it all seemed a blur. Susan was scared of me, but I don't blame her. What I began that night, a thing of claws, wings and fangs, wasn't natural. She screamed after I untied her, and refused to come near to me. That night, I ran into the dark, and slept in the fields, the dirt sticking to the blood. The transformation reversed that night as I slept, and I awoke the next morning, once again a girl, once again a human. He came in, and I met him in the drive. He seemed confused, but once I showed him the inside, what had happened, what I had done to



protect Susan, he tried to talk me out of the thing I had become, said I was telling stories. Lots of policemen that day, and no one seemed to believe me. And, since I was eighteen, Daddy sent me here. Said I was sick. Said men like you needed to help me.”

Jen swallowed, and her throat felt dry. She wanted some water, but she knew this session was nearly over. Doctor Ryans had finished his cigarette, and now he only sat back and watched me, his face impassive. “I think that’s it Doctor. I came here and I met you.”

Doctor Ryans remained motionless, and, after a moment, slowly leaned forward. He adjusted the glasses on his face. “So that night, you transformed into a creature?” Jen nodded. “Have you done it since?”

“I have Doctor. I’ve gotten better with it. I can transform at will now.” She said, and she saw the doubt in the doctor’s eyes. He had a right to not believe her. It sounded crazy, but the transformation, the tearing of her skin, the claws, it felt natural. It felt like her, what true self, the thing beneath her skin. Maybe if she changed. In this room. Then he would see, and maybe they would send her home, out of this hospital, and she could see Daddy, and see Susan, and they wouldn’t be scared of her. It was nature, and as Jen closed her eyes, she focused. The doctor was speaking, saying something, but she tuned him out. He needed to see. She wasn’t insane, not like the others in the hospital called her; she knew exactly what she was meant to be. She thought of the farm, thought of her sister, screaming even as her eyes were ripped from

her head. Lastly, she thought about the dark dirt she'd laid in after, the sound of crickets, buzzing, drawing her in, and entering her head. That was home. Then she began to change.

# Hush Little Baby

Melissa Osburn

Sunlight streamed through the window, striping the floor in golden bars. Anna rocked, her feet sliding first into light then into shadows. Humming, she gazed into the face of her baby. The infant slept soundly, rosebud mouth pursed in sweet dreams.

*There had been sun that day too. Golden eye caught in crystal blue skin. It watched us as we played in the water at the lake's edge. That's when I knew that creature wasn't Serena.*

Frowning, Anna ceased her rocking, caught in the fog of her memories. She stared at the floor, the white linoleum flecked with blue and green.

*No, it hadn't been Serena. It had been a changeling, weak and sickly. The faeries had stolen my daughter.*

"How are you doing today, sweetie?"

Anna glanced up as the door opened and she smiled.

"We're sleeping," Anna said, putting a finger to her lips.

She unfolded from the chair and strode to a bassinette tucked into the corner. Serena's eyes fluttered as Anna settled her down to sleep.

"She kept me up half the night. So fussy," Anna said, pulling the blanket over her daughter. She caressed the rosy, plump cheeks.

"That'll pass," Deidre said.

Anna sighed, and chuckled.

"It's worth every sleepless moment to hold her in my arms." Tears burned her eyes and Anna's smile melted. *Why am I crying?* Shaking her head, Anna wiped at her eyes and laughed.

"It sure is," Deidre said. "You seem to be feeling better."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Anna slid into the rocking chair and leaned back, basking in the sunshine.

"No reason."

"When will Henry be coming home?" She started rocking, the rhythm soothing.

"Tuesday, I think," Deirdre said. "Are you hungry?"

"I think I'll nap first, if you don't mind," Anna said.

Voices sounded in the distance, a muffled roar of anger before silence swallowed them once more.

"I think you should eat a little something, sweetie, before Serena wakes and you forget. We don't want you starving," Deidre said.

"Hmm...okay," Anna said, her eyelids drooping.

The wooden chair creaked softly as Anna rocked. She heard Deidre leave, her eyes closed.

Something nagged at her, a gnawing little mouse crawling through the coils of her brain. Passing through light and shadow, the world behind her closed eyelids alternated between pinkish-red and maroon. It reminded her of firelight playing on the walls.

*You have to trick a changeling. There is only one way, by brewing eggshells. I had lit a roaring fire in the fireplace, lined up the eggshells before the hearth. Still the creature would not stop crying.*

“Here we are,” Deidre said.

Anna jerked, her eyes springing open. She stared at the bassinette, heart thundering in her throat.

“Something’s wrong,” Anna said.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Deidre said, setting the tray on the card table near the bed.

“There is!” Anna trembled, a cold, slick sickness roiling in her belly. There just beyond the wall of memories, the truth lurked. It itched.

“Hush, everything’s okay,” Deidre said, smoothing Anna’s wispy hair from her clammy brow.

“I have to check Serena,” Anna said, trying to rise.

Deidre pushed on her shoulders, lowering into her the chair.

“I’ll check on her. You rest,” Deidre said.

Anna relaxed, sinking back. She giggled, wiping at her burning eyes.

“God,” she said. “I’m sorry; I guess I’m just overtired.”

“Yes, you are.” Deidre leaned over the bassinette, readjusting the blanket. “She’s just fine.”

“I think I was dreaming,” Anna said.

“Dreams are funny creatures,” Deidre said, returning to the table. “Breakfast time.”

Anna stood, stretched and padded to the card table. Deidre cleared away the magazines, sketch pad and box of crayons, stacking them neatly to one side. Sitting, Anna eyed the meal. Oatmeal congealed in a bowl, swimming in a pool of melted butter and brown sugar. Dry, dark toast flanked the bowl; cut into precise triangles and in the upper corner sat a plastic cup of orange juice, a smaller paper cup by its side.

“I don’t want it,” Anna said, pushing the tray across the table.

“Nonsense. Eat,” Deidre said, inching the tray toward Anna. Crossing her arms over her chest, Deidre loomed tall and authoritative.

Anna grimaced, lifting the spoon of oatmeal to her mouth. It stuck cold and thick to her tongue. Swallowing, Anna repeated until the cereal disappeared, her belly leaden. Unbidden tears seeped from her eyes, and glancing upwards, a spike of fear rattled through her. Deidre smiled, her teeth flashing sharply.

“You’re a demon sent to torment me, aren’t you?”

“Oh, no, honey. I’m here to take care of you,” Deidre said.

Anna sobbed, cradling her head in her palms.

“I think it’s time for a nap.”

Deidre removed Anna’s hands from her face and wiped her cheeks with a soft, scented handkerchief, humming a lullaby. Anna gazed into Deidre’s eyes, searching for answers, searching for hope.

“Come on. You’ll feel much better soon,”

Deidre said, slipping the contents of the paper cup into Anna's palm. The pills jostled together, rolling to a stop. Sunlight caught several of them and they glowed like jewels.

"I don't want the vitamins," Anna said.

"You need them."

Anna popped them into her mouth and swallowed, scowling at the bitterness seeping into her mouth. Deidre handed her the juice. Grateful, Anna drained the cup.

"Let's get you settled, then." Deidre lifted Anna to her feet, cupping her elbows and guided her to the bed.

Deidre tossed aside the covers and Anna sank onto the mattress, reveling in the comfort greeting her. She yawned and giggled as Deidre removed her slippers, her cool fingers tickling her skin. Anna sighed, feeling small and cared for, as if she were a child again. Caring for Serena had not been what she'd expected and it was nice to be pampered for a change.

Anna turned onto her side, facing the window as Deidre tucked the blankets around her. Her eyes closed and she inhaled, smelling the aroma of freshly laundered sheets and sunshine.

"Sweet dreams," Deidre said. "Maybe when you wake up, we can take Serena to the park. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

"Hmm," Anna said, nodding.

She heard the door close. The ensuing silence lulled her into slumber.

*I know the folklore. Healthy, happy children replaced with sickly imitations. Faeries steal them,*

*wanting to replenish their dying stock or simply to behold the beauty of the child. Serena was beautiful. My wispy blond hair and Henry's green eyes, like emeralds they sparkled and danced.*

Anna awoke, uneasiness spiking through her body. The sun had fled, leaving the room cold and dismal without its presence. Anna shivered. Sitting upright, she threw the blankets from her and stood. Serena gurgled, the sound reedy and thin.

*Fire. That cleanses everything. The creature squirmed in my arms, its eyes screwed shut as it wailed. The sound, piercing, nestled into my head. It never shut up. Not my daughter. The fire was the answer. Its flesh reminded me of barbeque as it burned.* Anna retched, spewing the remnants of breakfast. Rushing toward the bassinette, she slid in the pool of vomit. She screamed, bracing her fall against the card table. Anna righted herself and dashed to the baby.

“Not my DAUGHTER!”

Anna's hands crawled to her mouth as she stared down at the thing lying where Serena should have slept. Its plastic skin shone in the waning light, smooth and dead. Glass eyes, blue and not green, regarded her dully.

The door opened behind her. Anna lifted the doll and turned, facing Deidre.

“What's wrong, sweetie?” Deidre's eyes flashed from Anna to the object she held. It dangled from her hand, the eyes fluttering as it swung back and forth.

“Liars and cheats!” Anna grasped the doll by its arms and yanked. The torso fell to the floor with a



hollow thud.

Deidre approached, caution evident in every step. Anna scowled at the doll and kicked it across the floor.

“Where is Serena?”

“Easy, now,” Deidre said, her tone honey-sweet. “She’s just fine.”

“You’re hiding her. You took her while I was sleeping. A changeling wouldn’t do this time. No, not after I outsmarted you all before. You may be dying but you don’t want your kind to be murdered.” Anna grinned, panting.

Anna hurled the arms, aiming for Deidre’s head. The nurse dodged them and tackled Anna, pinning her against the bassinette.

“Evil faerie bitch!” Anna struggled, turning in Deidre’s grasp, grappling for leverage.

“Take her,” Deidre said, sounding winded.

Anna bucked as stronger arms bound her, her hair falling across her eyes. She slammed her head against the brick wall holding her fast, her teeth rattled together and stars flashed before her eyes.

“Hold her,” Deidre said.

“Hurry up. God, she’s stronger than she looks,” a man said.

A sharp pain pierced Anna’s arm, brief and stinging. She thrashed, her blood thundering through her body.

*Henry. He didn’t understand. No one did. No one believed me. Not even when they found the little corpse among the ashes.*

Anna sobbed, tiring. A warm haze washed her,

each wave seducing her into the depths of oblivion. She relaxed, the room wavered, blurring around the edges. Something swept her into the air and her eyes landed on a chiseled, clean-shaven face.

“Serena,” Anna said and curled into the warmth of the orderly holding her.

“Hush now, sweetie. It’s going to be okay,” Deidre said as the man lowered Anna into the bed.

“I killed my baby,” Anna said. Her heart burned within her chest, guilt and fear colliding with anger and sorrow. She gasped, unable to breathe.

“How can you say that?” Deidre stood behind the orderly, holding a bundle in her arms. “I have her right here.”

Deidre placed the object in Anna’s arms. Serena gazed up at her, emerald eyes shining. Anna laughed, stroking her daughter’s head.

“What happened?” Anna blinked, everything in the room blurred.

“A nightmare, that’s all,” Deidre said. “It’s all over now.”

# Terms of Service

David E. Cowen

*SpiderGod2379 <is online>*

A soft, fat uncalloused hand moved the black mouse with the lightning bolt decals on a small pad embossed with a green and red gorgon's head. His pointer finger pressed on left button of the mouse repeatedly. He looked at the three LCD screens on his desk as the arrow jumped from one screen to another. His browser had 12 open tabs, split between the screens. Brandt Achermann leaned back on his reclining chair, left hand on a beer set in a sticky cup holder in arm. The hacking software he was testing was doing well. Before 11 a.m. earlier that day, he had already hacked 36 accounts in less than an hour; loaded 42 forms of malware on 6 servers and began the data dump.

He was most interested in the new social media site he had discovered called Hellzone. It called itself a "post-Gothic interface for followers of Satan and other deities of the darker realms." Members could enter chat rooms with virtual avatars and torture each

other or self-mutilate themselves in front of a gallery. Typical fare for under 15-year old boys and over 20 loser geeks. Brandt, being 32, did not consider himself in their class. He was a predator. He was no loser.

Brandt had tried to get as many people as he could, using all 16 of his fake accounts and identities to encourage his “friends” to set up accounts on the site. The results so far were very exciting, he thought, as he opened a styrofoam carton with another cheeseburger. This one had honey barbeque sauce which dripped on his yellowing T-shirt.

*So easy, he thought, they won't even know what hit them when I'm done.*

Achermann laughed at the stupidity of the web masters running the new site. He easily broke several major pages of code and was running wild through their system. He had hijacked 8 of the accounts sending fake emails with lewd photos and then was able to swipe 120 email addresses with passwords. He was close to getting the credit card data and then he could go to town on it. He needed a new video card and this too easy.

A loud ping rang out making him jump.  
*ElvenLord4589 <Dude!>*

The clicking stopped and the large man looked at the IM box that opened on the bottom of the computer screen. He rubbed the creases of the folds of his splotchy unshaven chin that seemed to ripple as if his face were partially covered by a swarm of black, hairy caterpillars. His complexion was a pasty shade of pale white. Brandt did not leave his basement very often. He looked at the IM prompt on his screen. It took him

a moment to remember which Elven Lord this was. Some stupid freak from Topeka that had joined his Warworks tribe. Achermann responded.

*SpiderGod2379 < ? >*

*ElvenLord4589 <Dude! WTF?>*

The heavy-set man leaned back and shook his head. He reached down to the floor and pulled up a large open bag of potato chips. *Crumbs*. He smoothed the top flaps of the bag and then creased one side, then tilted the creased edge to his lips. He poured the crumbs into his mouth, eating as the broken chips poured into his mouth. Small shards of chips spilled out of his mouth and trickled down his shirt. He put the bag down on the floor and brushed the crumbs off of himself, then resumed typing.

“Mom,” he yelled out, “I need more chips.”

He heard a muffled response and waited. His mother would probably not get them for him, but sometimes she lost her nerve and did. *All the bitch was good for* he thought. Mainly, she stayed away from his man cave in the basement and let him alone. Achermann liked it best that way. No distractions from his work. He looked over at the subroutines now running through the 16 accounts he had open. Sweet, he thought. I can sell these codes on Ebay. He typed a response to the IM note.

*SpiderGod2379 <What?>*

*ElvenLord4589 <That link you sent me, dude, it's freaking wicked.>*

*SpiderGod2379 <GOWI>*

*ElvenLord4589 <I mean it dude. It's FUBB. Real FUBB>*

The man laughed. Moron newbie, he thought to himself. He clicked from one tab to the other watching his hacking software at work. It was running algorithms. He had high hopes.

*SpiderGod2379 <STFU>*

He laughed and looked over the three screens. Something weird was taking shape. His program was not only cutting through the accounts, but appeared to be opening up the mainframe of the site's server. Sweet, Achermann thought, *I'll run the whole freaking place before they even know what hit them. I may be able to take over the entire site and then access all the user's systems.*

*ElvenLord4589 <You need to read the TOS Dude. It's seriously wicked. I mean wicked. There's some really bad shit going on with that place.>*

*SpiderGod2379 <STFU>*

*ElvenLord4589 <I mean it, dude. Did you read the TOS? Who the fuck would ever join this thing.>*

*SpiderGod2379 <Newb. Who gives a fuck about the TOS? I mean, like who cares?>*

Achermann watched with interest as each screen simultaneously appeared to have changed at the same time. A new web page appeared on each screen; each with a picture of a heavy metal door. Achermann hit *ctl* and ran the scroll up on his mouse to enlarge the picture. In small print at the top of each door was a red scrawl. *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.* Achermann shrugged and continued to let the routines

run on his program.

*ElvenLord4589 <Look at Article MCXXIX of Section 92 of the TOS dude. Look at it. These guys want your freaking soul to sign up for this thing. Have you read it? WITFITS>*  
*SpiderGod2379 <WGAFF, WGAFF>*

Achermann smiled. The doors began to open. His program had done it. He was actually now in the mainframe database of the site. From there he would have access to everyone. All the data; all the codes; all the names and passwords. He could sell the parts he didn't need and who knew how many people he could screw up with their own data.

*ElvenLord4589 <You aren't stupid enough to run that hacking program on it are you? I'm not totally stupid. I know you hacked my account with it twice. I had to change all my shit just to keep you out of it. These guys are going to be seriously pissed if you are eFFing with them.>*

Achermann closed the IM and watched in fascination as the screens displayed a long corridor into darkness. The dark approached on the screen. Achermann began to open his program and added three new firewall killer protocols just in case the darkness was really a firewall luring him into a trap. The screens went dark.

"Crap," Achermann said to himself. He jumped when his system pinged again and the IM balloon popped up.

*ElvenLord4589 <You listening dude? This place is like literal hell or something. There's even a warning to hackers. It's on page 106 of the EULA man. Something about unleashing a hell hound or some crazy crap. Get off that place. It's too weird, dude. Just get off of it. Stay away from this shit!>*

Achermann ignored the IM, closing it out again. He opened his program again and added code to try to break through. No pissant newbie webmaster was going to keep him out.

He stared at the blank screen as the algorithms began to run. A small red dot appeared at the center of each screen.

*ElvenLord4589 <Your freaking funeral dude. >*

The dot grew larger; like a red hole in a hole of blackness. A faint rumble began to rise from the speakers. He was getting in. *MFers, I got your ass*, he thought. *I got your ass.*

Achermann sat back when the hole in the darkness seemed to burn away revealing an emerging head of a dog on each screen. A fire-eyed, pointy-eared, spike-toothed dog's head growing on the screens. *Crap*, he thought. *That's cool.*

*ElvenLord4589 <WTF dude, why are there these warning boxes on my screen. What the hell did you do? I can't turn them off. I'm unplugging my cable dude. Then I'm wiping my machine. You are seriously fucked A-*



*Hole.>*

As the heads began to grow, they appeared to be three-dimensional. *3D, cool, he thought, this is great software.* They grew to the size of the screen and then appeared to begin to bulge outward. *Damn, Achermann thought, that's really cool 3D; I gotta crack this.* Achermann tried to reach for his mouse but discovered that his hands and arms would not move. He tried to stand up but his legs would not move. He tried to cry out, but his head and lips would not move. He watched as the 3D dogs' heads extended out from each of the screens. The heads seemed to be right in front of his nose. Achermann smelled phosphorus. *My board's burning, he thought; I have to turn this thing off.* But he could not move as the dark red nostrils of the dogs' faces sniffed him. He could not move or speak as the three mouths opened in unison; wider and wider.

Molly Achermann entered her son's self-styled man cave with his chips. She hated the basement. It smelled of sweat and grime and other things and she did not like it. \$80,000 for a college degree and the boy sits in the dark in the basement and surfs for porn, she thought disgustedly.

She looked around the room. He wasn't there. *Bastard, she thought. Spoiled bastard. Yelling at me for chips and then leaving. At least he's out of the house hopefully* she thought. She looked at the three screens on his desk and cringed. *What is that boy getting into now.* The background on each screen was a human, flayed skinless and nailed to an upside down cross in a burning circle. He appeared to be screaming.

A faint whine was coming from the speakers. *Disgusting* she thought but smiled to herself when she imagined it looked like Brandt.

She looked around to see how to turn off the computer. *I am tired of this waste of my money* she thought. Finally, she pulled the plug from the wall, sparking; walked out, locking the door behind her. *I hope I fried that thing* she smile to herself.

*SpiderGod2379 <is offline>*

# Mouth and Trousers

Stephen McQuiggan

Boyle held his breath as yet another leviathan waddled by.

The Clinic was full to bursting today, just like the patients; was it his imagination or were they actually getting fatter by the session? Christ, he thought, scanning his white overalls for the slightest hint of contamination, how could you let yourself go like that? He clenched his buttocks uncomfortably and did a sneaky little shuffle, but the itch refused to go away. His ass felt like it was cutting a tooth. He couldn't wait to get to the toilets and get a finger up there, have a good rummage around.

He hurried toward the exit, overhearing that obnoxious tub of lard, Debbie, wobbling her dewlaps about her latest trip, each word flopping out grease laden and sizzling. At least she wasn't on about diets again; she would eat a recipe book that one, always eyeing up the pictures the way the new temp eyed up his butt.

'We went to the Tower, the Palace,' she

slapped proudly, the smile on her face like an eyelash on a balloon, 'and I even went on the London Eye!' Bet it fucking squinted, thought Boyle, pushing through the double doors and the clean air of the corridor, away from the vinegary sweat and toxic farts of the human puddings behind.

The itch was nigh on unbearable now, his sphincter felt like it was glowing; *the sun really does shine out of my arse*. He made it to the door of the Gents, pondering as usual the ironic little stick man above its handle, when Jameson came out.

'Ah, Boyle, just the man,' he smiled. 'I see on the roster you're on toilet duties today. Cubicles Four to Eight are completely blocked again. The one in Five is a doozy. You'll need the Stick.' A sarcastic pat on the shoulder then Jameson was gone, leaving Boyle shuddering at what awaited him beyond the door.

Fuck it, he decided, no point in even trying to unblock them until the Fatties had left. Let them crap on top of it. There was little point in doing the job twice. He gave his ass a surreptitious scratch, jamming a bony digit as far as he could through the crease of his heavy trousers.

'I didn't know you were getting married.' The voice was as svelte and sexy as its owner; Sandra the secretary.

He turned too quickly, hoping he wasn't blushing. 'What? I'm not... What do you mean?'

She smiled a crotch tightening smile. 'I saw you picking your ring.'

Boyle felt his face burn. 'It's all those blimps in there... They make my skin crawl.'

‘It’s not just the fat who are greedy,’ said Sandra, pushing out her chest until it brushed against his immaculate whites. ‘We’re all obese in our desires.’ She watched his face burn ever brighter. ‘You talk the talk, Sonny Boyle, but I reckon you’re all mouth and trousers.’ She sauntered off giggling, leaving him feeling vulgar, disgusting, inept, leaving him feeling like one of the corpulent clientele.

It was the Fatties fault, those obese Orcas, those bilious blimps; just being near them made him break out. He must be allergic to the foulness that lived in their sweaty folds. He stormed back into the Day Room to take out his humiliation on their flabby hides. It was the one saving grace of this god awful job, and the anticipation of retribution almost made him forget the itch that now inflamed his spine.

He entered the Day Room like a gunfighter - a gutfighter, he chuckled to himself - quickly identifying his target; Bob; Bob the Blob. Yeah, plenty to chew on there.

‘Hey, Blobby!’ said Boyle, slapping the hapless lump somewhere on the rippled dunes of his back then recoiling; it was like sinking your hand into a vat of warm wet dough. ‘Been to the toilet lately?’

Bob looked up at him warily, shaking his head, the energy needed for such a manoeuvre causing a cascade of perspiration to stream down the plateau of his forehead and momentarily blind him. Boyle winced - Bob had been at the sweeties again, his mouth ringed with a chocolate goatee; he appeared to be wearing the rest. His unique odour, a heady blend of B.O. and pickled onions, was stifling this close.

Boyle could not see the chair under his massive bulk - it looked as though Bob had sprouted, like some monstrous cancerous mushroom, from the tiled floor overnight.

Boyle flexed his muscles, tightened his washboard abs; he had to admit he felt good in the midst of these fat fucks. The juxtaposition was ridiculous; he was a harpoon in a sea of whales.

‘Think I’ll go for a run after,’ mused Boyle. ‘Running? You ever hear of that? You’ve probably seen it on the telly.’ Bob stared at him, his frightened eyes lost in the pasty expanse of his face. ‘Then later, sex. Ditto.’

Bob turned away, picking at some errant morsels on his jumper, licking his sausage fingers with his hideous pink duvet of a tongue.

‘Hey, I’m talking to you, Blobby.’ Boyle kicked out at the tree root of his leg. ‘You ignoring me? I’m only telling you some home truths, y’know. I’m only trying to help, it’s my job see.’

Bob emitted a pathetic mewl, a high pitched drone whose frequency aggravated the prickle in Boyle’s crease to a dancing frenzy. Boyle pushed his face down into Bob’s, unleashing his anger in an attempt to ease his suffering.

‘You think by growing a beard no one will notice your collection of chins, Fat Boy? I bet your blood cells are like dinghies, ringed by a halo of grease, I bet your liver’s like a torpedoed gunship, I bet your -’

Bob was crying, and when Bob cried his colon tended to applaud; the stench rose in a stinging cloud comparable to sulphur and napalm.

‘Jesus, you’re *disgusting!*’

‘I’m s-s-sorry,’ spluttered Bob. His breath was the final straw; when he opened his mouth he released a tomb full of fetid air. Boyle took decisive action. Reaching into his pocket he produced half a pack of mints (extra strong, XXX, Man Mints) and placed his knee on Bob’s quicksand chest.

‘Open up you fucking piece of lard,’ he said, trying to squeeze a chalky tablet through Bob’s mud-flap lips. ‘I’m doing you a favour, you hog, you’ll kill someone with that hell breath.’

Bob tried to wiggle free but to no avail; perhaps his skeleton ricocheted inside its fleshy prison, but on the outside the most he could manage was a desultory quivering. His mouth, however, remained resolutely shut. This, coupled with his burning buttocks, drew the red curtains in Boyle’s mind.

‘You bulbous piece of shit!’ he yelled. ‘Your mouth’s never closed. I didn’t even know there was a hinge on it, you fucking Heffalump!’

He began ramming the mints, one by one, up Bob’s flared and foliage strewn nostrils. ‘There you go, Jelly Belly! You could fit a manhole cover up those babies. And best of all,’ he panted, jamming the last mint so far up Bob’s snout that when he pulled his finger back out it was coated in blood and mucus to the knuckle, ‘they’re only one fucking calorie!’

‘*Boyle!*’ The red curtains parted. Boyle found himself squinting at the sudden light, his audience regarding him with horror. He lifted his head to see Flynn, his rotund boss, face apoplectic, centre stage before him. ‘My office, now!’

Boyle was about to explain how it was all Bob's fault, pointing at the yapping mess as evidence, but the sight of one of Bob's wiry nasal hairs, curled like a question mark and glued to his fingernail, stopped him in his tracks. The whole world shrunk down until that pubic cable resembled a lifeline or a noose. Puffing out his chest, he followed Flynn out of the Day Room, glaring at any leviathan brave enough to meet his eye.

'What the hell are you playing at!' demanded Flynn, slamming the office door, instantly rendering the cramped little room even more claustrophobic. Boyle's head began to swim. He sat down quickly, hoping to rub his butt along the chair and get some relief. He barely heard the wrath spewing undigested from his boss.

'Have you any idea what another lawsuit would do to this institution? What if he calls the police?'

'It looked a lot worse than -'

'Are you serious? It looked like you were trying to bloody kill him! What the hell's wrong with you? Stop fidgeting man.'

But Boyle couldn't.

Something was happening down below, something terrible; This must be what giving birth feels like, he thought. Something in his anus seemed to clench and yawn; there was a loud ripping noise followed by an alligator snap.

'What the -' Flynn was saying, coming round the desk to investigate. Boyle was standing now, staring at the large chunk missing from the cushion on



which he had been sitting, at the vicious, ragged teeth marks there.

‘I think we’ve got trouble, Boss,’ he said, groping at his backside, at the nest of foam wedged in the gaping tear in his trousers. It was at this moment, fuelled by righteous anger and clutching a towel to his smarting nose, Bob oozed into the office.

‘This is an outrage,’ he was saying, ‘an absolute outrage. I demand -’

Boyle never heard his demands, so intent was he on removing the remains of the seat from between his cheeks; nor did he notice Sandra emerge from Bob’s orbit, her pretty face knuckled up and glaring in his direction.

‘I can assure you this will be dealt with in house,’ Flynn was squeaking nervously. ‘Mr Boyle will feel the full, ah...weight, of my sanctions. There is really no need to involve the law.’

‘We’ll have to bring Mr Harris to the hospital,’ butted in Sandra. ‘He’s going to need a few stitches at least.’

‘Nonsense,’ fluttered Flynn. ‘A bit of salve will do the trick. It’s not so bad, a scratch, nothing more. He’s made of sterner stuff than you give him credit for, Sandra. Isn’t that right, Bob?’

Meanwhile, Boyle’s probing fingers had made a shocking discovery during their retrieval exercise; they had landed upon a set of razor sharp teeth, behind which flicked a dry snakelike tongue. A mouth. An entrance where only an exit should be.

As if prompted by Flynn’s allusion to what Bob was made of, the mouth opened and gnashed,

mauling the tip of Boyle's pinky finger. Boyle shoved the mangled digit between his lips, sucking away the blood, finding as he did so that the maddening itch in his nether regions abated.

'Are you...' Sandra was grimacing. 'Did you just pick your...then put it in ...' She trailed off, making a gesture that there was something on his mouth. Flynn and Bob were staring at him in slack jawed disgust. The itch was returning with a higher intensity. He rubbed at his lips and found some cushion fluff and faecal matter there. A crocodile snap emanated from his hind as a large rope of saliva dangled down between his legs to puddle on the floor.

'I'm...hungry,' he said apologetically.

'That's it, I insist you call the police this instant,' blurted Bob. 'It's clear this man's unhinged. He assaulted me and now he's -'

'Let's all calm down, shall we?' Flynn's unctuous voice was anything but the panacea he believed it to be. 'Assault? That's stretching things a little, isn't it?'

'But he -'

'You were choking, Robert. Mr Boyle was merely trying to remove the obstruction.'

'What!'

'You fell asleep, had a nasty dream no doubt, nodded off mid biscuit and awoke to find Mr Boyle trying to clear your airways. Naturally, you panicked.'

'How dare you, I -'

'You should be thanking Mr Boyle who, like all our conscientious staff, is well equipped to handle such emergencies. It's highly probable he saved your

life.'

'You can't be serious !'

'If only you shared Mr Boyle's concern for your own welfare. I see by your chart you have gained sixteen pounds since your last sojourn here.'

Even through the gnawing in his derriere Boyle couldn't help but admire Flynn's slick reversal of blame. Bob on the other hand was less bowled over, visibly so. Speechless with rage, his complexion a diseased scarlet, lips flapping like gills transposed on his cantaloupe of a head. His very skull seemed to be swelling with indignation; *any moment now*, thought Boyle, *it will burst open like a giant piñata, showering us all in a storm of Oreos and Snickers, cooking oil and pork rinds.*

Bob wagged a ham sized fist at Flynn, wheezing like he was deflating, then dropped to the floor, sending out a shock wave that toppled the photo of Mrs Flynn and her pet Pug (or was it just a hairy baby? Boyle could never bring himself to look at it long enough to draw a conclusion) from the desk.

'Don't just stand there!' yelled Flynn, turning the sleep deprived gravel pits of his eyes onto Boyle. 'Do something!'

'Like what?'

'I don't know. You're the one trained in First Aid.'

'If you think I'm putting my mouth anywhere near his...' began Boyle, remembering Bob's sewer breath, then faltering when he realised what was currently smeared around his own lips. 'Besides, you were about to fire me. You kiss him.'

‘If you can get that Blubberbucket’s bellows blowing again I’ll reconsider,’ wheedled Flynn. ‘Just pump his chest or something.’

‘Would somebody phone a fucking ambulance!’ Pale as tap water, Sandra had finally found her voice, and it sounded disconcertingly like a chainsaw. The itch in Boyle’s butt sprang up in sympathetic harmony.

‘How will I explain this?’ Flynn was asking the ceiling, the walls. ‘Third time this bloody quarter.’ He pointed to the prone and pallid Bob. ‘Fix this, Boyle, or I swear by the Seven Holy Bastards I’ll fix you.’ Sandra trailed out in his wake, reluctant to be left alone with either Boyle or Bob.

*What now?*

Boyle’s knowledge of CPR had deserted him as soon as he had finished the class; he recalled nothing save the little redhead sat two rows in front, the one he had tackled in the car park and - and the itch burned fiercely once more as Bob turned a worrying shade of blue.

Boyle straddled the big man’s belly, feeling like Mowgli astride an elephant, and starting pumping on Bob’s chest, then pounding with his fists; there was no danger of breaking this fat fuck’s breastbone, armoured as it was by an igneous layer of flesh.

He ceased abruptly as his sphincter drew in a long cool breath that momentarily froze his heart. There was a door slam clench and the itch was replaced by an orgasmic rush as hot blood seeped around his buttocks.

Boyle closed his eyes as Bob’s innards were

chewed and sucked, devoured by the gaping maw residing in his fundament. Bubbles and burbles, gurgles and gagging, Boyle rode atop them all, jarred only by the occasional scrape of anal incisor on bone.

His mind soared in an ecstasy of satiated bliss that no drug could ever hope to replicate, his pleasure swelling, filling his head, the office, the world until Sandra's screams popped its burgeoning splendour and he returned to skinny reality with a sickening thud, no longer the hedonistic astronaut floating on the boundary of a tactile nirvana but a thin man sitting on a charnel mound of half digested offal.

Bitch, he thought as the itch returned. She fainted as he rose, bending over to show her his new feral smile. He contemplated squatting on her face, eating that indignant pout, those judging eyes, but why settle for such meagre fare when a banquet awaited him in the Day Room.

He shuffled out into the corridor leaving a bloody slime trail as he went. He was so hungry; he felt he would never be full.

*I will eat until I explode*, he thought, pushing open the Day Room doors, staring greedily at the corpulent bounty laid on before him; *I get it now, I really do*.

In the heavy silence the sound of one of Bob's eyes, and half his lower intestine, slapping out onto the floor as it was regurgitated by Boyle's anal mouth set his stomach rumbling. 'That's right my dear,' he said, shivering a little in anticipation. 'Make a little room for dessert.'



**Carolyn Adams**

# Our Travelers

**Carolyn Adams** - Carolyn Adams' poetry and art have appeared in *Caveat Lector*, *Trajectory*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Clare Literary Journal*, and *Common Ground Review*, among others. She has edited and co-edited the poetry publications *Curbside Review*, *Lily Literary Review*, *Ardent*, and *Mad Hatter's Review*. Her chapbooks are *Beautiful Strangers* (Lily Press, 2006), *What Do You See?* (Right Hand Pointing, 2007), and *An Ocean of Names* (Red Shoe Press, 2011). She has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and was a finalist for the post of 2013 Houston Poet Laureate.

**David E. Cowen** - D.E. Cowen. A trial attorney by trade and author of a volume of poetry entitled *Sixth and Adams* (PW Press 2001). David lives in Houston, Texas with his wife Susan and his two sons. He practices law in the historical city of Galveston, Texas which has inspired much of his poetry and photography. His poems have been published in various online journals (such as *Eclectica*, *The Bridge*, *Gumball Poetry*, *The Cynic*, *Cosmic Debris*, *Wired Hearts* and others), as well as hard copy journals published by George Mason University, University of Texas at Edinburg (formerly Pan American University), Stephen F. Austin University, Sam Houston State University and many privately published journals, in the U.S. and abroad, as well. His poetry was featured in the

Canadian Broadcasting Company's radio program "Outfront" in a 2005 tribute on 9/11. His most recent poetry publications include poems placed in "Dark Portal" (UH Downtown), Harbinger Asylum and the Austin International Poetry Festival Anthology (2014).

**Jessica Curtis** - I'm an avid reader and writer with a love of darker fiction. I have been writing stories since I learned how to write. I enjoy writing stories that will send a shiver up your spine and have you looking over your shoulder.

**John W. Dennehy** - My story Into the Darkness recently appeared in a special dreams edition of Voluted Tales Magazine, Finders Keepers appeared in SQ Mag, Cast Out appeared in Sanitarium Magazine, and my story The Gift has been accepted by The Stray Branch. There are a number of other stories currently under review, and I am in the process of finishing up a Novella and a Novel. After graduating from Pinkerton Academy, I enlisted in the U.S. Marines and then attended UNC Wilmington where I studied English/Creative Writing.

**Angela Maracle** - I recently had two pieces published in Microfiction Monday, and won second place in the flash fiction Chest Writing Contest sponsored by author Mike C. Paulus. I am currently one of five finalists in the 2014 short story contest at defenestrationism.net.



**Stephen McQuiggan** - Stephen McQuiggan is the pen name of a ghost who communicates his stories through a sightless orphan using a series of demonic threats, raps, and shrill whistles. Any mistakes in punctuation, grammar etc., blame the blind kid.

**Bryan Nickelberry** - Bryan Nickelberry is a life-long resident of the greater Puget Sound area, and has been collecting stories in one format or another for as long as he can remember. He recently began writing stories of his own, and submitting them for publication; with his first publications coming via the online magazine, "Were-Traveler" and the online Magic: The Gathering resource, "Planeswalker's Library.

**Logan Noble** - Logan Noble spends his day hiding from the sun in New Mexico. He's active duty military, and spends his free time reading with his wife Elizabeth, and playing with his two dogs. His stories have been featured in the anthologies *Spooklights*, *Creature Stew*, and several upcoming collections through Horrified Press. You can see more of his views and boring life at his Twitter, @logan.noble.

**Melissa Osburn** - Melissa Osburn is a writer of speculative fiction. Her work includes several stories that can be found in the anthologies: *We Walk Invisible*, *Growing Concerns: An Eco-Horror Anthology* and *Romantic Ruckus*. You can read some of her fiction at her blog, *Dreaming Blithely*, at <https://melissasosburn.wordpress.com> . Melissa lives in Michigan with her family and cats.

**Neil S. Reddy** - Neil S. Reddy has been slumped over a typewriter for so long that he has been recategorised as an angle-poised lamp and is often assailed by strangers trying to turn him off. Do not pity him. He is a foul mouthed man and is well able to defend himself - he once reduced a giraffe to tears with a lingering sneer. He should never be approached during the hours of darkness without a beverage. He is an outspoken opponent of everything ignorant, ugly, stupid or overpriced. He lives quietly with his family in the U.K but only because they keep him heavily sedated in a cupboard with a lock; that will be forever England... until it sinks into the sea. He has a beard that is older than many people and contains more wildlife than many zoos. He has an irrational fear of soup. He feels nothing but contempt for hamsters. He is not to be trusted. He is troubled, testy and weird to the bone. He also writes stories.

**J.J. Steinfeld** - J. J. Steinfeld is a Canadian fiction writer, poet, and playwright who lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published fourteen books, including *Disturbing Identities* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions), *Should the Word Hell Be Capitalized?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *Would You Hide Me?* (Stories, Gaspereau Press), *An Affection for Precipices* (Poetry, Serengeti Press), *Misshapenness* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions), *Word Burials* (Novel and Stories, Crossing Chaos Enigmatic Ink), and *A Glass Shard and Memory* (Stories, Recliner Books). His short stories and poems have appeared in

numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over forty of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

**Matthew Wilson** - Matthew Wilson, 31, has had over 150 appearances in such places as *Horror Zine*, *Star\*Line*, *Spellbound*, *Illumen*, *Apokrupha Press*, *Hazardous Press*, *Gaslight Press*, *Sorcerers Signal* and many more. He is currently editing his first novel and can be contacted on twitter @matthew94544267.



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