

THE HAUNTED TRAVELER

A Roaming Anthology



May 2017 Edition

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TRAVELER

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Featuring stories from:

Gordon Brown

Kristine Brown

Steve Carr

Ryan Dodge

Leigh Fisher

Chris Glanzer

Amiel Rossin

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Bryce Simmons

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BELOVED

Leigh Fisher

The chambers containing his projects were illuminated from lights lining the inside of the column shaped cylinders. The fluid that filled them was tinged blue, causing the vast room to share the cerulean glow. At the bottom of each of the three chambers, he had blue glow stones set up so that his experiments were always clearly visible. Torches along the walls cast a contrasting warm light around his lab. At the moment, one of the cylinders was completely empty, another had what was just a fledgling of one of his projects, and the last was where his prized creation resided.

He traced his finger over the console, savoring the moment before he pressed the button. The controls were rudimentary, mostly just buttons and levers so that the device could manage any of the things that incantations could not. Even with enchanting one of the

bones, the device was still necessary to support his creation over the required weeks of development. It took more than just spells; there was a limit to what could be accomplished without science and technology.

“It’ll be successful this time,” he murmured.

His project was complete; he had been celebrating his success but trying not to act too suddenly by letting her free before her body was truly ready. Too many of his previous attempts barely even looked human, never mind the image he crafted them after. The grounds around his residence were slowly filling with bodies of failed attempts.

“It will work now,” he said, passing over to the other side of his lab.

A glass case housing an incomplete skeleton rested against the far wall. Around the bones, he had it decorated with crimson and pink roses lining the edges of the rectangular table beneath the glass cover. Upon closer inspection, several bones were missing, including a triquetrum bone, a lateral cuneiform, a thoracic vertebra, a palatine bone, and a temporal bone. With each attempt to successfully make a homunculus, he took one bone to begin the spell to create the new being in her image.

The latest missing bone was a rib. He smiled as he walked back over to the controls and waved his hand above them. It only took the slightest focus of his will to get them all to flip in the right direction to initiate the process. He waited eagerly as the fluid in the chamber started to drain out. Her hair fanned out around her like a halo, drifting down to surround her as her body lowered in the chamber. By the time it was half

empty, she was resting on her knees. As the rest of the liquid drained out, she slumped against the side of the cylinder. His heartbeat accelerated with anticipation; it had taken months of work to reach this moment.

At last, he pressed the button to open the glass and stepped up onto the side of the capsule just in time to catch her before she fell to the floor. She tipped into his arms, her long hair dripping water on his clothes and the floor, but he couldn't care any less for such trifles. He pulled off his glove and pressed two fingers to her neck to find her pulse, relishing in how soft and natural her skin felt to the touch. There were so many things he had to replicate perfectly which were not simple to recreate – the look of her face, her supple body, and painstaking details like the softness of her hair and the smoothness of her skin.

Everything in him seized with fear and hope as he looked down at her, silently praying for her chest to rise as she took a breath, her eyes to flutter open. A few painful minutes passed and his own lungs began to burn when he realized he was holding his breath. Even so, he remained completely still until her head tilted back, eyelids twitching.

His pensive expression broke into a grin as soon as he saw her chest rise with her first breath. Only one thought crossed his mind as he watched her start to move.

“I've done it,” he murmured, hardly daring to believe it.

She awoke with hands on her body. This wouldn't have been too terribly distressing, but the grip was just

tight enough to hurt. The fact that her skin was bare made her feel horribly vulnerable. She felt that sensation before anything else, but when she looked up into the eyes of the man who was above her, his expression was so desperate that he looked ready to devour her. He seemed ready to pounce, and the way he was gripping her just reinforced that lurid feeling. She wasn't sure if it was the frigid water that still drenched her hair or the sight of the person that made her start to shiver.

"My dear," he said, his voice something between gentle and amazed.

She couldn't make sense of the sounds that he was making. There were too few of them for her to be certain if he was trying to communicate with her or not. She could only focus on the inflection of the way he spoke and hope that the contrast between his voice and the way he handled her would mean something good.

Her body felt heavy and moved sluggishly as she tried to sit up and move away from him. Despite how delayed her movements were from how much effort it took for her to move her limbs, she still moved quickly enough to make him look distressed. He lessened his grip on her when she first started to move, but when she tried to scoot away and put some distance in between them, his hand clamped back down on her arm.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

The sound of concern was still in his voice, but she was far more focused on the fingers that were restricting the circulation of blood to her fingers. She tried to make a quick movement to pull away, but he respond-

ed by wrapping both of his arms around her and pulling her against him. He kept one arm wrapped around her and reached up to touch her hair with his free hand. The arm he used to hold her in place was unpleasantly tight and made it harder to breathe, while he stroked her hair with contrasting gentleness that didn't make any sense to her.

She used these moments to take in her surroundings. The walls around her were lined countless metal devices with ominously sharp edges, and test tubes and beakers containing oddly colored fluids. There were also at least half a dozen mirrors and probably two dozen faded photographs on the walls. She couldn't explain the presence of either of those things; however, when her gaze landed upon human bones, her mind was made up. Even with how tenderly he was stroking her hair, she couldn't remain there with him in such a place. Her horrified gaze was locked on the skeleton for a long time before she managed to think logically and look for an exit. She only saw one door built into the brick walls, but fortunately, it wasn't too far away. Her body felt fatigued, even exhausted, but she was certain she could manage that much distance.

She stayed still for a moment, hoping that his grip would ease up and afford her the chance to pull away. Sure enough, after a few moments of holding her too tight, he placed both of his hands on her shoulders and leaned back to hold her at arm's length. He looked at her quizzically; there was definitely some concern there, but there was also an analytical edge to the way he tracked her movements, like a scientist observing his lab rat.

She tried to stand, but it was hard for her to balance. Her knees buckled and he held his arms out to catch her, but she managed to steady herself before falling against him. Even these simple movements winded her with how much exertion they took. She felt like she was walking across a tightrope rather than simply standing on the cool stone floor with how challenging it was for her to stay balanced.

“Don’t overdo it, darling,” he said as he stood up.

He didn’t stand far from her side, but his hands were finally off of her. If she could stay on her feet, this would be her chance to get away.

He was keeping his tone gentle, but she didn’t trust him. His reactions were too inconsistent.

“It’s probably best if you don’t stand for too long,” he said, reaching out to place his hand on her shoulder.

Before those fingers could clamp down on her again, she took off.

She took her first step with more ease than she expected, but started to stumble as she hastened her pace. Her sights were set on the door, but she chanced a glance over her shoulder to look back at him. He looked so stunned that she was trying to flee that he seemed unable to respond for a moment. It worked to her advantage, for despite the way she stumbled, she was still able to reach the door before he did.

He snapped to attention when her hands reached the doorknob. The metal was cold under her fingers and she struggled to grasp it. She fumbled with it, trying to turn it, figuring there was little chance that it was locked from the inside. It just wouldn’t make sense.

Regardless, she just couldn't make her hands obey her. The muscles weren't letting her hold on tight enough to turn it. She heard footsteps behind her, but it didn't even sound like he was approaching quickly. The steps she heard were slow but heavy, which was somehow even worse than if he was running toward her. She grabbed the doorknob with both hands and wrenched it over to the side.

She leaned her weight against it and the last pull was just enough. The door burst open and she landed upon her knees in the doorway. She winced at the collision between the rough stone in the corridor and her knees, but she looked up and saw a short staircase leading to another door at the end of the hallway. The hall wasn't as well-lit as the lab, yet still, it felt like escape was in sight. She struggled to get back to her feet and had to grab onto the door for support as she pulled herself back up. His footsteps were getting closer, even at the ridiculously leisurely pace of his stroll. She only managed two more steps before he was upon her.

He pressed her to the wall, using his body to pin her there. She strained against him and suddenly he let her go, releasing her wrists and stepping back, giving her the briefest moment of relief washing over her. It wouldn't be logical for him to shove her against the wall, making her scraped knees ache even worse, but the paradoxical behavior he'd shown thus far made the reaction seem faintly possible. The feeling of hope was there as soon as he was no longer touching her, but almost instantly, she realized that she still couldn't move.

She looked at her hand and stared at it, thinking it

should move, willed it to simply pull away from the wall, but it felt as though her mind and body were disconnected. Nothing would simply make her move.

“You shouldn’t run away,” he said hoarsely. “Wives don’t run away from their husbands. Those who do are brought back to the village and stoned.”

By the time he finished the second sentence, he was saying the words matter-of-factly, as though he’d just read them from a textbook. It was a sharp contrast to the desperation in his voice that was there just a few moments prior. Even if she wanted to respond, she physically couldn’t. Something as simple as the movement of her jaw was impossible with whatever kind of curse he’d placed upon her.

He traced a finger down her spine. She felt as though she needed to shiver, but even a basic involuntary movement couldn’t jar her from this state of paralysis. He reached for her wrists and moved them with ease. With the spell holding her in place, he could move her any way pleased.

It almost felt as though he was mocking her, with how easily he manipulated her now.

“I didn’t want to have to use enchantments on you,” he said. “There was no reason for you to react so strongly.”

He turned her around so that she was facing him. She had no choice but to look at him, feeling miserable, vulnerable, and so starkly bare in contrast to his layers of clothing and the overcoat he wore on top of it all. She focused on his face instead, looking at the dark hair that looked as though he hadn’t bothered to cut in a while and the dark eyes that were transfixed on

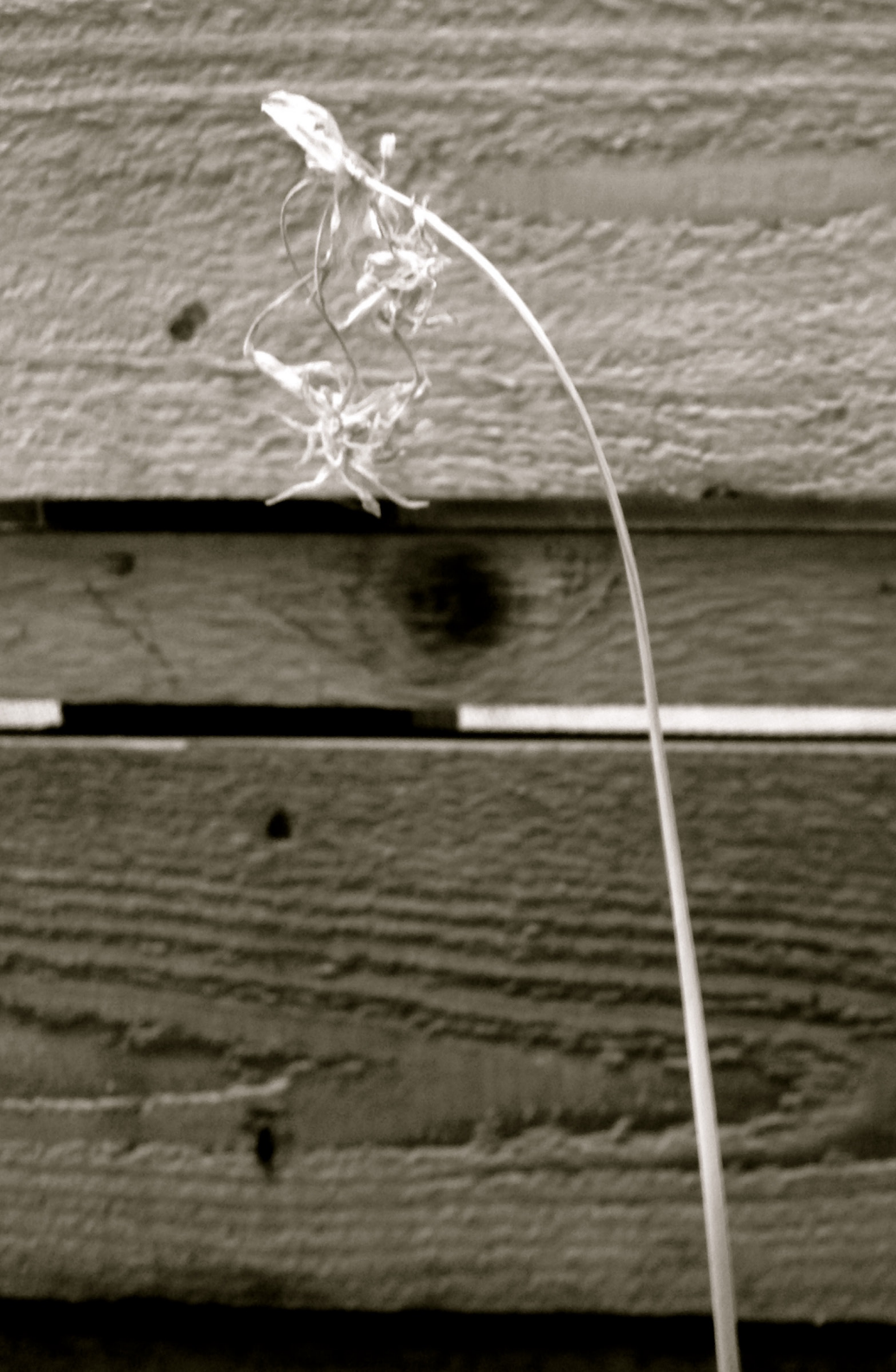
her. She couldn't quite tell if his eyes were dark brown or simply black, but she found herself hating the color either way.

"Other wives try to run but never can," he continued. "You promised you'd stay with me."

He placed his hand on her cheek and she wanted nothing more than to pull away from him. She was powerless to get away, she could scarcely even frown, but the curse didn't stop her eyes from filling up with tears of anger.

"You left me once. You won't leave me again after I've done so much to bring you back."

She was still immobilized as he reached up to brush away the tears that spilled over. She tried to pry her mouth open just a little, so that she could spit on him to protest the way he handled her, but she was still frozen in place. He shook his head slightly and pulled off his overcoat, draping it around her shoulders. He pulled her into another embrace, this one gentler than the last, but though he wasn't being as rough with her, she'd never felt more trapped than she did then.





Kristine Brown

FAMILY PLANNING

Amiel Rossin

The bobcat shit on the cypress tree, just for good measure. He had already marked his territory – a 4,000 acre swath of Spanish moss and oily lakes – by scraping the bark until the *taxodium distichum*'s pale meat was exposed to the Louisiana sun. The scraping alone would have been enough to ward off the other males. The shit was for insurance. The bobcat was vigilant, having lost his first home unexpectedly when his mother became ill and dismissed him far earlier than bobcat mothers tend to do. More than the other cats, this one understood the value of family, feeling the absence of his mother and siblings with every tree he spoiled. Everything within the range was his, and the other cats would know it when they recoiled at his heavy scent and quickly moved on – lest they feel the anguish in the sharp of his claws. Soon he would seek out a female, fuck her in the mire, and start a family of his own.

Just up the hill from the cat's latest bowel move-

ment was the home of Alvin and Marla Castille, as well as the Castille's five-year-old daughter Joanie. The cat did not include the Castille home within his range. Alvin Castille was a fumigator by trade – an enthusiastic one, who infused his house with anticoagulants at least twice a week. There were no live mice or voles for the bobcat to eviscerate, just a sea of screaming carcasses poking out from beneath the patio boards, faces twisted from circulatory shock, little pink hands reaching for the sweet marshland air. Still, the bobcat hunkered down and cautiously made his way up the embankment toward the crop of grasses outside Joanie Castille's bedroom window. His hope was to find an injured warbler that may have stupidly fallen victim to the pop of Joanie's air gun. Joanie was a dear girl, interested in dolls and finger paints, but Alvin had insisted on introducing her to the fine art of wildlife assault. Perhaps Joanie's corruption would prove lucky for the bobcat and he would find himself an unlikely dinner.

The bobcat pricked up his ears just below Joanie's window, where he could hear Marla Castille at Joanie's bedside, gently reading to the child from a weighty book. Of course, to the bobcat Marla's voice came only as a series of clicks and hums, with no particular effect on him other than distraction. But to a person, Marla Castille would have sounded something like this:

“The rats were wild, bold, ravenous; their red eyes glaring upon me...” Marla's tone elicited a strained whimper from Joanie, as if it were pulled from deep within the child like a bucket of water tugged from the dark of a well.

Normally the bobcat would not have been so brazen

as to go near the Castille home. His kind were more likely to avoid human contact, for fear of taking a spade to the face or a bullet in the ribs. But the bobcat's solidification of his range – his empire – had emboldened him. And soon he found himself peeking over the window sill and into Joanie's bedroom, where the girl was prone on her bed, hair matted to her brow with sweat, eyes and nose wet with tears and snot, and clinging to a filthy and unidentifiable stuffed toy.

Marla's hums and clicks continued. "They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world had no name."

The bobcat and Joanie Castille had been about the same size for the last month or so. The bobcat knew they had that in common. He did not know, however, that they would soon share more than their proportions. Earlier in the day Joanie's life took an atypical turn when Alvin threw a sloppy haymaker at Marla's face in a rage fueled by the speedy ingestion of a bottle of Old Forester. And Marla – upon collecting herself – selected a pencil from an office drawer and slid it into the soft nothingness between Alvin's right ear and his jawbone. Alvin, now deceased, lay in a pool of blood just outside Joanie's bedroom door.

Soon the police would arrive, lazily take Marla to jail, and toss poor Joanie into a deeply unsuitable foster home. But like the bobcat, Joanie would learn quickly. She would embrace her tortured solitary existence until she was ready to turn it upon its loathsome head. Like the bobcat, Joanie would come to understand that she could change things – that she could stake her

claim, build her realm, take a family of her own. And woe to the offender who stood in her way.

Marla carefully closed the book, leaned within a foot of her daughter's face to give the girl a single condescending peck in the air, then sauntered to the bedroom door and reached for the light switch. Just before Joanie's bedroom was plunged into darkness, the bobcat caught a glimpse of Alvin Castille's stiffening fingers, posthumously grasping for some kind of rescue, like the pink hands of the rodents whose tiny capillaries he'd so mercilessly hemorrhaged.

It was getting late. The bobcat nosed through the tall grass and found himself a prize better than a warbler. It was a fat barn swallow, still kicking, a BB lodged in its tattered chest. The cat took the bird in his mouth, then slinked down the hill and back to his range. The barn swallow's corpse would rest in the cat's belly until morning. Then the cat would find another tree to shit on. And he would shit on that one good.

IN THE WAKE OF FAULTY KITCHEN APPLIANCES

Kristine Brown

I followed the resident coordinator, calm in her narrative of how the complex came to be, how several decades back it housed dozens of luxury cars. A car dealership forsaken for rooms thinly painted, lines of unfinished concrete intersecting to form tributaries on the ground one couldn't avoid stepping into. "It looks like you cracked your mother's back. Again." My guide nodded as my foot pressed against a groove on the floor, and I somewhat leapt back as she told me more about upcoming renovations.

I lived too familiar with infestations of pharaoh ants and diminutive cockroaches, so online reviews claiming that squealing rodents and slithering garden snakes had their fun in all the efficiencies levied little to no influence on my insisting to lease this space. I called about its availability for three years, finding op-

portunities to experiment with sculpture and acrylics in an area without walls.

Spaciousness. A favored attribute, a structural concept promoting freedom and self-contentment. Or rather, self-containment. I looked to the resident coordinator, assuring her, "I'll pay everything today. Even the renter's insurance." She grinned, beckoning me to a groaning elevator that required five minutes to drop us two stories down. I sat before her, filled out my packets, paid for my coverage on a cracked smartphone. She asked if I ever slit my fingers on "those damn things." I told her this never happened to me, and in turn, inquired about the rats and serpents. She shook her head, eyes darted in askance towards the office's new coffee-maker. "That reviewer ran a prostitution ring from her unit. She posted that after the eviction." I looked for a window, settling my eyes on a Technicolor painting of a Pembroke Welsh corgi instead. Dogs smart enough to play cordial tetherball.

Pursuing this efficiency a good three years, I walked around it about five times, snapping my deceased mother's spine in thirty-six instances of clumsiness and heat wave-induced fatigue. But the efficiency felt cool, treating my heat rash without much of a costly doctor's appointment to receive numerous corticosteroid injections that left me relieved for two days, at most.

A luxury car dealership built and operated in the mid-1970s in a city fueled by tourism. I thought of those who bought a car, wondered if they were twenty-six like myself, and mused that possibly, some of

these adults were never quite teens, making up for hours making love to their calculus books by slapping tinted windows with clammy hands, toes too deep in the leather cushions on which toenail edges often left modest scratches. The garaged cars eventually sold, while most of the young people stayed nearby. I intended to stay for just a year. The area, strewn with paper-thin leaves with veins reaching at any obtuse angle, was where I resolved to live, at least for a year given increased rent.

I didn't bring much upon moving in, wheeling my belongings in a red buggy cart from the room I rented down the same street. I would hang my freshly laundered clothes on the third floor, place pots, pans, and cupcake trays in their proper cabinets, and sigh with relief at the absence of brown recluses, pharaoh ants, feral ferrets, and the like. The hot water worked, the stove brought my rice noodles to a subtle crisp, and my windows stood firm within their frames during the meanest rains. But of all things in this open space, I couldn't open my microwave oven. Nor could I store lettuce in a fridge twice my height.

Moles in the wall, screaming, moaning, and shriveling with a final coo, their singed summer fur driving yuppies away every several months. This was a common complaint, published on Yelp and directed towards the efficiency in which I wrote lists of things I regretted on a cheap red futon. I could not smell too well, though I felt the nightly frequencies, the scratching, and human profanities.

The window to my microwave was tinted solid black, though I noticed minute dents from the inside.

Every day or so, I dismantled half a roll of generic paper towels, dousing them with water to mop the floor beneath the unopened refrigerator. From both appliances, there wafted no odor, and any sounds heard rose in their shakiness the further I walked away from the kitchen.

I didn't wish to bother the maintenance man, as I was happy enough to live in my first apartment as a single woman. I thought to call the police, or the fire department, regarding the locked, yet lively microwave. I could hear it. Then I didn't. I knew something was amiss. But the fear of ridicule suppressed any inclination to voice my concern.

Towards the end of my first month as a resident, I returned home from work, cutting my sandaled feet on glass trapezoids gracing the concrete tributaries like shards of imported beer bottles on hazelnut riverbanks. I crouched to the ground as a corner impaled the crease between my big toe and the ball of my foot. I rocked back and forth, and noticed the shadow of what I thought was a tiny child. Or a malnourished, sleep-deprived woman like myself. On the floor, I steadied myself with a bent arm, extending my torso forward to better look at the girl who broke the glass.

She mimicked my lame martial arts routine, blinking slowly, dry skin trailing down each corner of her chapped mouth. Her bottom lip was pure mud. Blood gone dry like the curdled milk she swirled in a tiny, coral clay mug that shook, enclosed by half-eaten fingers. Her knuckles, knobs of thickened skin, white at the border though purplish on the inside. She stared at me, demanding I offer my insides. I shook my head. She

was so quiet, there in the locked microwave I was too complacent to fix.

“Mama, mama, why?”

I slanted my eyes, placing my palms to my face, only to moan “Goddammit” as I realized some glass made its way into the palm of the hand laid flat against the floor. I scraped my cheek, right beneath my eye. My once captive roommate rivaled my sanguine corsages, her feet like chickens in their gnarled pacing, fingernails pitted, bruised a good gray. Like myself, she bore no eyelashes, but mine were lost through a prodding desire to release the least of tensions, even if my bad habits resulted in conjunctivitis.

On the coffee table laid a flyswatter. I grabbed it, extending my hand towards the girl to assert that I meant no harm. I used the handle to sift through the glass as I crawled further towards where she kneeled. We stared at each other a moment longer, but still, I couldn’t smell the dying flesh or rotting teeth that curled outward from her collapsing build. I inhaled again, smelling nothing but cool air, and found myself sitting across from her, my uncut palm outreached. She slapped me across the face, then growled.

I figured this was a case like the one in California, in which a grown girl was found confined to a toilet, already late for that critical period when one retains meaningful language. I tried to gesticulate, pointing to her, waving at the shattered microwave door, and finally, forcing a grimace as I looked to the bottom of the refrigerator, still dripping with some dark fluid. I turned to her and she bit at her nails, as cats so nibble

at overgrown claws in the absence of a sturdy scratching post.

I still could not take offense at odors I imagined one would ordinarily smell while staring at the viscous liquid dripping from refrigerator's lowest door. The withered girl placed her mug on the ground, full of ivory curdles and black rings associated with poorly brewed chai tea. She crawled to the refrigerator, unable to walk upright.

Raising myself to my feet, I took care not to follow too closely, keeping my shadow away from her shoulder as she squeezed her head between the fridge and its neighboring kitchen cabinet. The crevice could never accommodate my calf, but her little head did well, nodding and shaking in a moderate tempo that betrayed neither sorrow nor eagerness. She propelled her body forward, branchlike limbs scratching the thin paint that coated the concrete beneath us. I heard her chew, pick, and spit. She had reached to the back of the fridge, pressing four numbers with identical dial tones, and slowly withdrew from the darkness separating dry packaged food from whatever seeped from my otherwise functional refrigerator.

I took a step forward to open the door. She remained squatted on the floor, though stretched out her arms to scratch my dry skin; dust falling to the ground like disrupted flour when one makes chocolate chip cookies. I failed to tear a sheet from my only paper towel roll, the dark fluid increasing its reach to the crevices beneath the kitchen sink. The girl growled again and whimpered, "Moo." My jaw shook as I looked down

at her famished being, thinking of just how many regurgitations she endured to survive off those somehow odorless milk curdles. It occurred to me that the rings in the mug were not born of chai. Within the microwave oven, this little girl subsisted off her own dwindling waste.

“Calm, calm, calm,” I whispered, trying to lock my eyes with hers, but always looking away as a stripped tooth sprouted from her rotting lips. She took a deep breath, growled softly, and scooted back. I opened the refrigerator door, completely at a loss for why I still smelled nothing. I flinched as light struck my naked eyes.

On the top rack, wrapped in layers of hardy Ziplocs, were two cats. One a scraggly tabby, the other a standard tortoiseshell with an open mouth and gapped front teeth. All their eyes stared at us, their tufts of fur blowing weakly beneath the shield of everyday plastic. I stared into the mouth of the tortoiseshell, intrigued by the keratin spikes on its tongue, quite well preserved and inducing an itch. I scratched at my nose, turned to the girl, and in my awe and annoyance, asked, “Why does the apartment not smell like shit? Look at this!” I pointed to the now rippling pool of dark fluid ready to flood the kitchen, then the entire efficiency.

The girl wrapped herself with all that she had. Pockmarked arms the girth of jumbo pencils, at most. She parted her lips, slowly clacking her teeth bound to chip. I realized that since my move, I never touched the thermostat. The temperature remained at fifty degrees Fahrenheit. The coldness didn't seem to bother this

banished child, though my lack of complaint rooted itself in characteristic complacency.

I closed the refrigerator door, turning to the girl who then pointed at my forehead. “Sky, sky,” she calmly repeated. I craned my neck to face what remained of the shattered microwave door. My face was two shades paler, my eyes betraying some psychosomatic jaundice. Tears brimmed, and I winced at the pain from having no more eyelashes. I swallowed several times, whipping my tongue across the sides of my mouth only to feel no moisture. I was burning, she kept staring, and passively, I counted the cuts on my skin. Thirteen. Half my age, though accurately representative of my emotional maturity and responsiveness in dire situations.

Finally, I gagged, applying pressure to my forehead with a piece of paper towel I tore without grace. The girl, weakened by her rickety frame and months unfed, looked up at me, corners of her lips upturned. The fluid that flowed from the cats’ chilled slumber rose to our ankles. Chunks of undigested sausage tossed themselves out of my aching mouth as my eyes grew wide, their shades of brown settling into something darker than black. The coral mug of milk curdles and dried excrement rolled splashed into the flood. The girl meekly picked it up, holding it to her crater of a chest while grinning at me, the blood on her lips peeling away, her matted hair seeming more kept beneath the glow of the apartment’s brightest bulb.

I last remember falling, shaking as the cat waste entered my lungs. After weeks in the hospital, shaking my head in the negative and refusing to provide explanations to every question asked, I returned to an emp-

ty apartment, free of sludge with new appliances. The girl, however, left. I remained unsure as to whether I should try to find her, or at least ask apartment management if a scraggly young female was spotted on the premises. But after my lease ended, I chose to look elsewhere for another open space, hoping to open a door to the silence of soothing aromas.

GOOD HELP THESE DAYS

Gordon Brown

Esther Klein is the kind of person who has answers.

The kind of person possessed of an unshakeable self-confidence that you must either envy or admire, and I have always found myself among the latter. She's not a great beauty by any means. Not even the wealthiest or most well-traveled in our little circle. And yet, in these turbulent and troublesome times (when innocent vampires are staked in their own homes and the price of strawberries soars ever higher) it is inevitably a trusted and unflappable friend whom we must set our anchors in. Someone unperturbed by the latest change in fashion (no matter how radical) or the dire prophecies of the newspapers. Someone without interest in the ways of the world but not ignorant of them. Someone who you can count on for level-headed answers

when it comes to a family of werewolves attempting to join the congregation, or some shocking French film depicting human-gelatinous-cube relations in a positive light. Or the role of bigfoots as babysitters, which was the topic of conversation that sunny morning at the Carrington Café.

“The thing about Bigfoot,” she said, pausing to stir her coffee. “Yes, the thing about Bigfoot... is that they’re pushovers. Lovely people, but absolute pushovers. When it comes to children, anyways. You don’t hire a nanny so much as a granny when you hire a Bigfoot.”

“Are bigfoots – bigfeets – are they really so bad? There’s worse things to hire than a granny.”

“As I say,” Esther murmured, lifting the mug to her lips and giving a prudent sniff of the coffee, “They’re perfectly nice. But nice isn’t always good. Not where there’s a child concerned. And the little ones will take advantage, as they are wont to. I’ve seen bigfoot nannies making butter and sugar sandwiches for a child just because she threatened to stomp her feet and hold her breath.”

Esther took a sip of the coffee, swishing it around in her mouth before nodding (more to herself than to anyone else) and taking another sip.

Quality. That’s what you can always count on Esther for. A real eye for quality.

“And by the way, dearest – it’s not ‘bigfoots’ or ‘bigfeets’, it’s ‘bigfoot.’ The same in its singular and plural forms, like sheep or deer. And I’m not saying this to put you off, only there’s a Bigfoot a few tables over – don’t look – yes, a few tables over, and I believe he’s becoming quite irritated with you. Not that it’s any of

his business.”

“Oh...” I murmured.

“Never you mind,” Esther said, graciously returning to the topic, “Who else did you have in mind?”

“I had thought about a centaur, maybe...”

“An excellent choice.” Esther gave me a warm, approving, and almost-proud smile. Almost.

“...Only Eddie would never allow it.” Esther’s thin, bluish eyebrows climbed the considerable height of her forehead.

“And why’s that?”

“It’s just that he had a centaur tutor growing up – “

“It’s what they’re good for.”

“Yes, but – “

“You know the Montresors? They had a centaur come in to help with their little girl. Not even as part of the staff – just to look after her for the weekend. This was back when you could do that sort of thing, mind you. And when they did get back, well what did they find but their little Hannabell is quoting the classics. In the original Greek – and better Greek than Homer’s.”

“Yes, but it’s just that they’re so awfully strict. At least, Eddie’s was. I’m sure he exaggerates it a bit, but he did sound like a real tyrant and he’s sworn that he’ll never let Leonora go through the same thing.”

Esther sniffed. A hard, contemptuous sniff. The kind she usually reserved for modern music or certain politicians.

We sat in silence for a while, Esther turning her gaze out onto the open street, looking at the passing cars, the fruit stalls, the spires of St. Wulfran’s peeking out over the canopy of trees in the park. Here and there

she would shake her head, struggling to comprehend Eddie's stubborn foolishness – though she would never confess that to me. It was enough that I guessed at it, and when I had suffered enough, she turned back to the table, folding her napkin with a sigh of resignation.

“What about an undead?” I ventured. Esther leaned back in her chair, considering my conversational olive branch.

“Hmm... an undead...”

Quiet. Clean. At least, those that have their stitching done on a regular basis. And loyal as a dog. Perhaps more so, as a dog doesn't keep running after you've hacked its legs off or set it on fire. Only...

Well, best I not say.”

I leaned forward. It wasn't like Esther to withhold her opinion. About anything.

“Only what?”

“It's really nothing.”

“Oh, go on.”

“Well,” Esther murmured, “Since you insist...”

This happened a good while back. Long before you and Eddie would've moved here. I was still a young girl, in fact. Seventeen –

No, sixteen. I remember because that was the year of the great storm, when all those fish-people got beached down at the shore.

Anways, there were these neighbors who had moved in up the street. Young couple. Newly married – they still had that glow about them, if you know what I mean. Handsome young man. Beautiful young wife. And a baby too, just a few months old.

The wife was beautiful, as I said, but she was a deli-

cate thing. I believe they had come here for the climate, but she was still quite frail. And what with him being at work in the city, there were nights when he simply wouldn't be home at all. It was just her and the baby, up there on hill in that big, empty house. Try to imagine it. All those rooms. All those long, quiet hallways. If the place wasn't haunted you'd surely feel like a ghost yourself – just drifting from one empty room to the next. Hours and hours and hours in the still darkness.

They hired an undead. Someone to look after the baby. Someone to keep the wife company. Of course, they're not what you'd call a talkative bunch, but just having someone around the house can be enough.

I remember seeing them the day they came down the hill to fetch her. She had come from Innsmouth or Dunwich or someplace up north. Little towns, but very respectable. She had come from a good family, or that's what the papers said. The husband had gotten a referral from some friend of a business partner.

I remember them driving back up the hill. The husband in the front of the car, along with his wife – pretty but so pale, even in the morning sun. And in the back I could see the undead holding the baby. Not just holding, but cradling it. And I don't need to tell you that should have been a warning.

The undead was very attentive to that baby. The wife used to push it around in a beautiful Steinway stroller but now the undead just carried it everywhere. Nothing the wife could say would convince it to put it back down. And it wasn't as if the undead's arms could get tired, so why fuss over it?

She couldn't go into the church with them. Not in

those days, anyhow. But that really didn't matter as babies weren't smiled upon in there either. The two of them sat together on the steps, the undead gently bouncing the baby up and down, up and down.

'She's such a good nanny.' Everyone said. And everyone really and truly thought it.

I don't know how much truth there is to any of this, but...

After a month or so, the wife was woken in the black, empty hours of the early morning. Her husband was out. Had been out all weekend. It was just the three of them in that big, empty house.

It was a cold night and frost was starting to fog the windows as the wife slipped nervously of out bed. Old houses creak. They moan, they groan, and they thump – but this hadn't been anything like that.

She tiptoed out of the room, whispering for the undead. She usually waited there, in a chair just outside the door. She could sit there motionless for hours, for days, weeks, months – waiting for a command. But that night the little chair sat empty.

I don't know how the wife knew to look upstairs. Up in the nursery where the door had been left ajar. I don't know how, on a moonless night like that one, there was enough light though the window to silhouette the undead, leaning over the cradle.

I don't know how the undead learned to talk. Or if it just remembered. Or if it even had ever been really and truly dead.

All I know is this:

It was leaning over the crib.

Leaning into the crib.

Over and over and over whispering, 'my baby, my baby, my baby.'

I don't know what became of the baby either. They never found any trace of the three of them. When the husband got back the doors were still all locked and the windows were closed. And if there were any tracks in the snow, the police never found them."

Esther looked back out to the street. A car ran a red light and Esther tutted disdainfully through her teeth.

"I'll talk to Eddie about reconsidering a centaur." I said.

"Yes," Esther murmured, "I think that would be advisable. But you do whatever you thin is proper, dearest."

You can always count on a friend like Esther for solid and sensible advice. And it is so hard to find good help these days.





THE DISSOCIATIVE EFFECT

Steve Carr

Walking along the sleep pods Danielle looked at the screens above each of the pods, noting the readings: blood pressure, respiration, body temperature, body chemistry, pod temperature. As the ship's medic on the wake shift there wasn't much for her to do. The ship's computer did most of it. Only the faces of her crew mates were visible through a transparent metallic plate. She didn't know most of the six crew in the pods. They slept for a year while she was awake, and vice versa. But she knew their names and positions by heart without even looking at the identification plate on the front of each pod.

The sleep chamber was the quietest place on the ship and after six months of performing the same routine every twelve hours in the quietude she had to re-

mind herself that she needed to remain alert, no matter how complacent she felt.

Yawning, she looked at the readings of Jack Moran, ship's engineer, then at his face. At the pre-launch dinner he had made a pass at her which she quickly rebuffed. He wasn't a bad looking guy, but she didn't like the burly type, which he was. Additionally, if she was going to have a shipboard romance with anyone it would have to be with someone on the same wake shift as she was. His readings were as usual. He had slightly elevated blood pressure, but nothing to be concerned about. His was the last pod before she would exit the sleep chamber.

As she started to press the button to open the door to the chamber she heard a noise behind her; a whisper. She turned and looked around the chamber: three pods on one side, three on the other, the screens silently flashing the readings, four air vents, the door to an escape module at the far end.

Seeing nothing out of the ordinary she shook her head "hearing things" she mumbled to herself making a mental note to record it in her personal log later. She put her hand on the button again and heard tapping behind her. She whirled about, then quickly walked past the pods again looking at the sleeping faces. At the door to the escape module she turned to return to the door to the chamber and was suddenly face to face with Jack Moran.

"What the hell?" She said.

He raised his hands and put them around her neck and lifted her off her feet. Choking and gasping for breath she kicked him and swung her fists at his face.

Her vision blackened and her body went limp as she dangled in his grasp.

“She’s coming to,” was the first words Danielle heard. As her vision cleared the face of the ship’s pilot, Commander Lansing, was close to hers.

“Are you okay?” The Commander asked.

Danielle quickly sat up. She was in the infirmary and on the exam table. With the Commander was Tou, the ship’s cargo specialist, and Ruiz, the technical operations specialist.

“How did I get here?” Danielle said.

“I found you passed out in the sleep chamber,” Tou said. “You’re now in the infirmary.”

“I can see where I am,” she snapped at him. “He tried to kill me.”

“What do you mean?” The Commander asked. “Who tried to kill you?”

“Jack Moran choked me,” Danielle said. “He had his hands around my neck.” She put her hands to her neck, wincing as she touched both sides of her neck.

“Jack Moran is in a sleep pod,” the Commander said.

Danielle hopped off the table and went to the mirror and looked at the bruising on her neck. She turned to her crew mates. “I didn’t do this to myself,” she said pointing to her neck. “Somehow Jack Moran got out of his pod and tried to kill me.”

“Is that even possible?” Ruiz asked. “I mean unless a crew member on the wake shift or the emergency system initiates it, a person can’t get out of a pod on their own.”

“And then get back in,” the Commander added.

“Don’t you see the bruising on my neck?” Danielle said defensively. “I didn’t do it to myself.”

The Commander ran her hand over her bald head. “Yes, there is the matter of the bruising and that you were passed out. You’re the medic on this team, Danielle and you’re the only specialist on the sleep pods we have. Is it possible that Jack Moran got out and chocked you, then got back in?”

Danielle hesitated, looked at the faces of her crew mates awaiting an answer. “No, it’s not possible. But it happened.”

Benson, the engineer was on his back in a short crawlspace whistling “Pop Goes the Weasel,” a song he whistled, hummed or sang incessantly. He reached up and adjusted part of the communications system conduit with a long metal screwdriver-like tool. The past six months had gone smoothly, boringly so, with the exception of what happened to Danielle. He thought she was a bit screwy anyway and her choking herself wasn’t unlikely as far as he was concerned.

The only crew member among the wake shift who was married with children back on Mars, he fought off the tedium by thinking about them. This ship, named *Polaris*, was on it’s maiden voyage. While there were always things that needed monitoring, it had been assembled with the intention that it basically could do long distance space travel without anything going wrong, even though there were parts of the ship like the new sleep pods that had only been tested in labs and not on space flights. He could have let the conduit he was adjusting go for the entire two year flight and

it would be fine, but boredom was a huge motivator to fix things that didn't need fixing.

He stopped humming and began to sing softly "all around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel." He stopped briefly when he heard whispering coming from the entrance to the crawlspace, then when the whispering stopped he continued "a penny for a spool of thread, a penny for a needle, that's the way the money goes." Then something tugged on his foot. He looked toward the end of the crawlspace and saw Thompson, the communications specialist from the other shift.

"Hey, why aren't you in your pod?" Benson asked.

Thompson said nothing, but stood there glaring at Benson.

"I'm coming out now," Benson said. "Something must be going on if you're out your pod already." With the words "pop goes the weasel" just escaping his lips he was pulled out of the crawlspace by his boots and still holding the tool.

"Hey, what gives?" He asked landing on his buttocks outside of the crawlspace. He didn't have time to react as Thompson grabbed the tool and drove it into his brain right between his eyes.

Danielle pulled the sheet back that had been laid over Benson on the exam table and gasped.

"This is how you found him?" She asked Marcie, the ship's flight navigator, and Ruiz who were standing nearby, both with blood on their gray flight suits.

"Yes," Marcie said, "that tool was sticking right where you see it."

The Commander and Tou came into the infirmary and looked at Benson. Tou rushed to the sink and threw up.

“Do you have any idea when this happened?” The Commander asked, looking at Danielle.

“The wound is very fresh,” Danielle said prodding the skin around the tool sticking out of Benson’s head.

“I saw Benson just before he went down to the crawlspace, and that was about thirty minutes ago,” Ruiz said. “Marcie and I were on our way to the kitchen and went down to tell him he had a video message from his wife and found him like this.”

“Tou was with me,” the Commander said. “Where were you Danielle?”

“In my quarters,” Danielle said.

“Is the camera on in your quarters?” The Commander asked her.

“No, it’s not,” Danielle said. “You don’t think I had anything to do with this do you?”

“I don’t know what to think,” the Commander said. She turned to Ruiz. “I want to review all of the ship’s interior video recordings for the past hour.”

“There are no cameras where Benson was working,” Ruiz said.

“Whoever did this had to go through a corridor with a camera leading to that crawlspace,” the Commander said. “Get that thing out of his head, Danielle, then I want you to restrict yourself to your quarters.”

“Why?” Danielle said.

“Because everyone can be accounted for when this happened except you. Marcie you do the next sleep chamber check,” the Commander said.

“Why me? I only have rudimentary training when it comes to the sleep pods,” Marcie said.

“You will know if something is wrong, and if there is contact me immediately,” the Commander said leaving the infirmary with Ruiz following her.

Amidst her collection of Earth’s moon rocks, Danielle sat at the computer console in her room rapidly going from one screen of text about sleep pod technology to the next. Nothing she saw added to what she already knew. Deep space sleep pods had been used for as long as there had been long space journeys and there were very few incidents of anything unusual occurring, certainly nothing about crew members getting out and back in one without assistance. Had Jack Moran even been able to open his pod, all sorts of alarms would have gone off. They wouldn’t have stopped sounding until the main computer had been given the all-okay from the medics or the Commanders on either shift.

That Benson had been found murdered so soon after the incident she experienced in the sleep chamber left no doubt in her mind that the two occurrences were linked. She never liked Benson, but she certainly didn’t want him to die that way; not that she was consciously aware of. She changed the text search to psychiatry and began re-reading about space psychosis and psychiatric disorders related to long space journeys.

The Commander and Ruiz were seated in their chairs in the flight control cabin looking at images on the large view screen of the interior of the Polaris. The numbers on the bottom of the images was the time the

tape had been taken that they were watching. Though the *Polaris* wasn't a large ship, not counting the mile of cargo compartments it pulled through space, it was taking some time reviewing the images of each of the four corridors leading into and out of the shaft and crawlspace where Benson had been working. They had started out depending on the ship's computer to do the work and identify anyone moving through those corridors during the specified time frame, but the video kept freezing with the computer reporting an anomaly.

"What kind of anomaly?" Ruiz asked the computer.

"Unable to ascertain the nature of the anomaly," the computer said.

"That's really strange," the Commander said. "The computer is actually saying it doesn't know what is going on. What would be considered an anomaly that the computer couldn't figure out?"

Ruiz punched several keys on the view screen console. "The ship's computer sees what it has been programmed to see. The ship has only twelve crew members on board, and the computer is programmed to only account for those twelve. If we had a stowaway the computer might determine they were an anomaly."

"A stowaway going unnoticed by us for six months would be an impossibility, Ruiz," the Commander said.

"I was just giving an example of why the computer might report an anomaly, Commander," Ruiz said, continuing to punch keys on the console.

"Danielle isn't showing up on these recordings either," the Commander said, "and she's no anomaly."

"Crazy, yes," Ruiz said. "An anomaly, no."

"Go to the recordings taken in the sleep chamber,"

the Commander said. “We should have checked out Danielle’s story instead of assuming she is, as you say, crazy.”

Ruiz punched several keys. Below a blank screen the words sleep chamber cameras inoperative appeared.

“Inoperative? Are they working now?” The Commander asked.

Ruiz pushed a key. “No, they’re not.”

“How can that be?” The Commander asked. “Come on we need to get down there,” she said as she leapt out of her chair.

Marcie entered the sleep chamber as if entering a mausoleum. She hated both. While the rest of the ship hummed or beeped depending on where you were, the absolute silence in the sleep chamber gave her a case of the willies. As the door to the chamber closed behind her she looked down the two rows of pods she gave momentary thought to the idea of leaving immediately and just reporting that she had checked the pods and everything was okay. But being the oldest crew member and after eleven years doing long distance space flights, she didn’t want to be found shirking her responsibility which would immediately end her career. During the flight she hadn’t gotten to know Danielle very well, but as far as medics went, she knew her stuff. Though the guys didn’t seem to like Danielle and thought she was odd, Marcie was certain that Danielle hadn’t put the bruises on her own neck and certainly wasn’t capable of shoving a metal tool into a man’s brain.

Looking at the faces through the transparent plates she didn’t look forward to when she would be inside

one of the pods and someone would be looking in at her. She had traveled in pods for months before, but this would be the first time doing so for a year. And while most pods were alike, these were the first she had seen where the body was kept in a standing position the entire time. Even with knowing that you were supposed to come out of one feeling stronger than in pods where you lay down the entire time, she couldn't shake the feeling that sleeping shouldn't be done standing up. As she reached Jack Moran's pod she looked at his face, heard a whisper behind her, and turned around and saw him standing there. She looked at his face in the pod again, then back at his face behind her. Then the Commander of the other team, Commander Wilson, stepped out of his pod without opening the pod door. Bill Thompson did the same thing.

Marcie froze.

Shih Tou had gotten out of Beijing just before terrorists blew the city up with a nuclear device. Being young and with his entire family obliterated by the blast and with nowhere else to go, he quickly finished his degree at China's University on Mars. He was hired for his first long journey space flight as a cargo specialist aboard the *Polaris*. Two years to the developing colony on Jupiter's moon Europa with a return to Mars didn't seem such a long time, especially knowing he would be asleep for half of the trip. The Commanders, he and Marslow, the other cargo specialist currently in a sleep pod, were the only ones with experience in doing space walks. Every few weeks he left the safety of the interior of the *Polaris* and traveled along a guide wire the entire

length of the cargo compartments making sure there were no problems, which there never were, but doing the walks broke the monotony.

Walking down the corridor between the crew's cabins he thought about stopping to see if Danielle was okay. Unlike Ruiz and Benson, he didn't think her room being cluttered with useless moon rocks meant she was crazy. It was odd but not crazy. He was about to knock on her door when he heard a voice whispering behind him. He turned just in time to see the face of Marslow just before she wrapped a cable around his neck and yanked it, instantly breaking his neck.

Hearing a noise, Danielle opened her door and went out into the corridor in time to see Marslow dragging Tou's body into the sleep chamber. She hit the button on the ship's intercom. "Commander meet me at the sleep chamber," she yelled into it.

"We're right behind you," the Commander said running down the corridor toward her with Ruiz following.

"They got Tou," she said.

"Who is they?" the Commander asked not breaking her stride and pulling Danielle along with her.

"The crew in the pods," Danielle said.

"How is that possible?" Ruiz said as they came to a stop outside of the sleep chamber.

"I don't know exactly," Danielle said. "It's some kind of dissociative effect, only in this case it's not mental, their bodies are materializing outside of their real bodies and outside of the pods. It's like split personalities where both personalities have a form. The buried psy-

chopathic part of their personalities within each of the crew members in the pods is forming outside their bodies”

“What would cause that?” The Commander asked.

“The pods,” Danielle said.

“You said Marslow had Tou,” the Commander said. “What about Marcie?”

“I don’t know,” Danielle answered. “But we can’t go in there.”

“We have no choice,” the Commander said, putting her hand on the button to open the sleep chamber door.

As the door opened, in front of the escape module stood Commander Wilson, Thompson, Marslow and the other medic, Renslow. Behind them Marcie was pounding on the window from inside the escape module, a look of terror on her face and contorted into inaudible screaming. Commander Wilson put his hand on the eject button of the module.

“Don’t do . . .,” Commander Lansing yelled just as Commander Wilson pressed the button. The module shot off into space away from the ship, sucking Commander Wilson, Marslow, Thompson and Renslow out with it.

Commander Lansing hit the button to the sleep chamber door, closing it just as the monitors of the crew in the sleep pods went blank.

In the flight cabin the Commander re-calibrated their trajectory back to Mars. “We’ll be home in six months,” she said.

“Will they ever be able to find the module?” Danielle asked.

“Not very likely,” the Commander said. “No one thought using that escape pod was going to be necessary, especially this far out in space.”

“One thing is for sure,” Ruiz said. “I’m staying awake the entire way back.”

“How are you going to do that?” Danielle asked.

“I’ll tell you my life story,” he said. “It should take about six months.” He paused, then began “I was just a small boy on a farm in Mexico when I looked up at the stars and . . .”

HANDS & MOONS

Ryan Dodge

Khalis shifted under the console and banging noises rang out, followed by muffled cursing.

“Remind me again why we signed up for this?”

I smiled as I looked over from my workstation to see Khalis pulling himself out from the access point to the control panel, partially exposing his dirty face. His dark, tattooed skin was covered in sweat and oil, and his fist was full of cut wires. His slim features and lanky limbs made him perfect for working inside the ship, which is why he was always the one to check when something needed repairs.

“Maybe for views like this?” I said as I motioned towards the sight of the planet slowly filling up the viewport. “Or because you like helping people? Saving lives?”

“Nah, I’m in it for the vast amounts of money we get

paid.” Khalis said with a crooked smile.

“What money?” Tallis said straight-faced as he walked onto the bridge. “Cause I ain’t been getting paid shit.”

Tallis was the kind of guy who commanded attention, with his hulking muscles and towering height being hard to miss. He, unlike his brother Khalis, was not covered in tattoos; between that and the size differences, it was almost impossible to tell that they were related. Except when they smiled; those were exactly the same, lopsided grins that seemed to show up often.

“Oh right, I forgot. We work for the Galactic Navy. They don’t actually make any money.” Khalis said, mocking disappointment, which had us all laughing for a few moments.

Tallis spoke up again. “Did you finally get the long range sensors fixed?”

“Yeah, it was just a matter of replacing a few wires. It was a bitch, but all done. And on that note,” Khalis said as he ran his fingers through his non-regulation length jet-black hair in an unsuccessful attempt to tame it, “I’m going to shower and get all this grimy shit off.” He gave a mock salute as he walked out of the bridge.

Tallis chuckled a bit after his brother left, and then walked over to sit at his newly repaired station.

“What can you tell me about our position, now that the sensors are operational?” I asked, shifting back into work mode.

“It’s right where it’s supposed to be, same coordinates as where the distress signal came from.” Tallis said, not looking up from his station. “Civilian, S-class transport vessel.”

“An S-class? Those things are gigantic!” I said incredulously.

“I’ve only been on one once, when I was a kid,” Tallis said, looking out the viewport to where the ship should be. We were still too far away to see it without screen magnification. “It was when my family moved from Mars.”

“I always forget you’re from the Inner Systems,” I replied. “Mostly since you left behind the wealth of your family and stupidly joined the Galactic Navy. Usually IS kids are smarter than that.”

“Oh shut up,” Tallis said, feigning anger. I saw the hint of a smile right before he looked down to his screen.

“Well, there’s no sign of debris or any meteor that could have impacted.” Tallis continued assessing the data. “According to the scanner, the hull is intact. The problem must be inside the systems of the ship itself then.”

“So you’re saying we need to go in for a closer look?”

“Yes ma’am. Time to call the captain. Your turn to wake him up.”

“Dammit, I was hoping you’d forget that,” I said with resignation.

“That’s what you get for insulting an IS kid.”

I scowled at Tallis before I hit the comm and dialed the captain’s quarters. “Captain Leif? Sir?”

There was a scramble of noise and muttered curses from the other end before a sleepy voice mumbled, “What the fuck do you want, Jayne? You better have a damn good reason for waking me up. You know I don’t like being interrupted while sleeping.”

I swallowed before continuing. “We’ve got the long range sensors back up. Tallis says it’s clean from here, so we’ll need to go in closer. Permission to take us in?”

There was silence for a few moments before the captain answered, less anger in his voice. “Start our approach. I’ll be on the bridge in 5.”

I looked over at Tallis as the comm line shut off, and he just shrugged his shoulders.

“You know how the captain is when someone wakes him up,” Tallis said innocently. I rolled my eyes at him before looking back at the controls.

“Well, here we go.”

“Everyone suited up?” The captain looked around at the three of us.

“Sir, yes, sir!” Khalis said, grinning as he pulled his feet together and straightened his back as his hand came up to salute. He held this pose until the captain turned his gaze back to him, and slowly lowered his hand back to his side, his grin sinking simultaneously.

A momentary smile appeared before Lief spoke again. “You know the drill. This is a normal investigative operation. Get in, assess the situation, help fix whatever is broken, and evac any wounded. Are we clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” We all yelled out in seriousness.

The Captain opened the door to the airlock, and stepped through. Khalis glanced at Tallis and I, and shrugged before he followed after him.

“And the fun begins,” I muttered under my breath as I climbed through and into the other ship.

My eyes widened as I saw the enormity of the ship. We had mostly been on rescue ops for ships close to our size, a handful of midsized passenger ships, but nothing like this. The ceiling had to be at least 15 meters high, cargo spread all around the walls of the room. There was another door at the other side, but it had to be at least a hundred meters away, minimum, and cargo scattered in piles on the floor.

“They use these bad boys to haul supplies to the Expansion Territories,” Leif said, answering our curiosity. “Some of the planets have natural resources or are farm-ready, but others need some terraforming to make them habitable.”

There was a console that had lit up when we entered the ship, and Khalis had stationed himself in front of it, typing away.

“How many people does it take to man one of these things?” I asked, still staring in awe at the bay we had come out into.

“Usually it can hold at least a hundred, but according to the manifests, this one was run by a skeleton crew of 30 or so,” Khalis said, staring intently at the console.

“30?” Tallis said as he closed the door to the airlock. “If there’s 30 people on this ship, then where are they? Shouldn’t they be here to greet their rescuers?”

The silence that followed Tallis’ words was the heaviest silence I’ve ever heard. It pressed in from all sides, overbearing in its vastness.

“We should be able to at least hear them at this point. Hear anything,” I said quietly.

“Tallis, you and Khalis check out the bridge. See if

you can find anyone on the way and figure out what's the issue. Keep your comm channels open. Jayne," The captain said as the other two took off down the hall. "You're with me. We're going to check the living quarters."

The quiet nature of the ship was almost overwhelming. Every step Leif and I took down the hallway echoed in a very invasive manner, as if the sounds we made were unwelcome; silence ruled in these metal walls.

We approached a split at the end of the hallway, and Leif pointed towards the left. I kept in the front, flashlight scanning ahead while Leif scanned behind us. Khalis had managed to get some of the systems working before we split up, but the lights had been one that would require further tinkering. Khalis had said he'd make it his first priority getting those on, but potential visibility wasn't terribly reassuring in light of the current darkness.

There was a doorway on the right and I motioned towards it, pressing myself against the wall to the right of the doorway. Leif stood in front of it, one hand on his holstered gun as he pressed a button on the console. The door silently slid open and Leif slowly walked in as he swept the room with his lightbeam. I followed, staying alert as I entered. Both of our lightbeams illuminated a majority of the room, revealing what appeared to be one of the barracks. There were two doors in the corners opposite of where we entered, presumably for the lavatories. Another door was on the right wall, which must have been where the crew stored their personal gear. There were bunks all over, probably 50 sets, with

some lining the walls and others forming a loose square in the middle. Some had bedding on them, others were bare; most of the used ones were towards the middle.

“Looks like this is where the crew was staying,” I said as we approached the bunks, picking up the sheets and looking around.

“There’s close to 30 bunks with bedding, so they all must have stayed in here.” Leif continued through the bunks and towards the lavatory door on the right. “Apart from the captain, and however many officers were aboard.”

I got down on my knees to look under the bunks closest to the floor. “It doesn’t appear that they kept any personal affects in here, so they must all be in the closet,” I said, my voice slightly muffled by the bunk. I heard a door slide open, and peaked back up to see Leif entering the restroom.

“Any sign of anyone?” I asked as I pulled myself up off the floor.

“Nothing.” Leif came back out, closing the door behind him. “Check the other lavatory, I’m going to check the closet.”

I walked over, lightbeam in front of me as I opened the door. It was a standard bathroom; a few stalls and two sinks with mirrors above. I examined each of the stalls cautiously, but found nothing out of the ordinary. I began walking out to the main room when I almost slipped on something wet. Once I gained my balance, I pointed the light towards my feet and found the ground was covered in some sort of liquid, too thick to be water. I bent down to get a closer look, but stopped when something dripped on my check. I quickly wiped

it off, shining the light on my hand to find the smear a dark red color. I pointed the light above me and couldn't stop the gasp that escaped my throat at the sight of the body on the ceiling.

"Jayne? What's wrong?" Leif came in quickly, only to let out a few swear words when he noticed the cause of my gasp. The details became clearer as I managed to calm myself down from the initial shock.

The body was almost naked, save for undergarments, and whoever it was had been a male. He was muscular and tattooed, which indicated that he was one of the crew, since that was the typical look of crewmembers for these private shipping companies.

What really drew our attention, however, was that he was attached to the ceiling. Metal stakes had been hammered through his hands, feet, and stomach, and into the ceiling. Each one dripped blood, but the main source was from his stomach, which formed the puddle I had nearly fallen into. Aside from the stakes, there were also a number of cuts covering his body, from his ankles all the way to his face, which was probably the most horrific part of the sick display. His mouth was open, in what must have been the screams that accompanied his agonizing death, and careful inspection showed his tongue was missing. His eyelids were open as well, but that revealed the haunting absence of his eyeballs; the empty depths stared down in eternal blindness.

I felt my stomach heave, and I brushed past Leif as I hurried out of the room. I sat on one of the bottom bunks, slowing my breathing as I stifled the urge to gag. I put my hands over my face, trying unsuccessfully

to rid my mind of what I had just seen. I felt tears spring from the corners of my eyes, and a sob escaped before I could get a grip. I stayed as I was for a few moments, trying to compose myself. I heard footsteps move from the bathroom and stop in front of me. I wiped my face and rubbed my hands on the bunk before taking the hand Leif offered towards me to help me up.

“Let’s go. We need to get to the others and figure out what the fuck is going on.” Leif put his hand on my shoulder and walked with me back to the hallway. His voice was soft, softer than I had ever heard it before. He was always a hardass, no matter what the situation. I felt my heart rate pick up, the seriousness of our current predicament beginning to really dawn on me. As we got into the hallway, Leif cautiously swept the room one last time with the lightbeam before we moved out.

We briefly inspected some of the other rooms, but didn’t spend too much time in each as we hurried towards the bridge. The lights came on as we came into the mess hall, and it took a few moments to adjust to the artificial illumination. We both looked towards the food bar, and found ourselves looking at chopped up body parts. The blood had filled the various containers on the service line, and had formed a pool on the floor as it overflowed and dripped. Some parts were hard to initially identify, but I clearly saw some feet, a hand, and the back of a women’s head.

This time I couldn’t stop myself, and I hurled up my last meal on the ground, leaning on one of the tables for support until my heaving ran its course. Leif walked

over to get a closer look, and when I finally stood up he had his back turned to the body parts and was running his left hand through his graying hair.

“We need to find the others. Now. Straight to the bridge.” Leif unholstered his gun, a standard Y-76 blaster, and clicked the safety off as we stepped back towards the hallway.

Luckily the bridge was close by, and we quickly walked through the doors to find Khalis and Tallis at different consoles.

“Hey guys, so kind of you to join us,” Tallis said. Neither of them looked away from what they were doing.

“We found some of the crew,” I said, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Well that’s great, right?” Khalis said, still busy at the terminal he was working on. “Why aren’t they with you?” He looked behind us, and then his eyes narrowed on Leif’s drawn gun. “Captain, what’s going on?”

“They were dead,” Leif said. Instantaneously both Khalis and Tallis exploded with questions.

“What do you mean, dead?”

“Where are the bodies?”

“How were they killed?”

“Both of you, enough! Listen.” The Captain’s voice got through their questions, and their voices died to reveal rustling coming from underneath one of the control panels. Everyone became alert, with Leif gesturing us away from the source of the noise as he began to slowly approach it. He stepped closer and closer, his right hand gripping his sidearm. Tallis, Khalis and I watched in anticipation.

Leif grasped the panel, and ripped it off in as he drew

his blaster and aimed it into the darkness.

“Don’t move! Come out slowly, with your hands where I can see them.”

He set the panel down and stepped back, blaster still trained on the interior. Slowly, shaking hands came out of the hole, followed by arms and a person that they were attached to. It was a woman, obviously small due to her ability to fit underneath the console. She had light green hair, a common enough occurrence on freighter ships. Her exposed skin was covered in tattoos, and her clothing matched that of a deckhand. Her face, however, drew all attention, as it was covered in fear. She looked like she had been crying quite a bit.

I moved towards her, but was immediately stopped by Leif before I could reach her.

“Who are you?” Leif asked, gun still pointed at her. He wouldn’t let up his guard, not until he was absolutely sure it was safe. “Answer me, now!”

“My name-” She started speaking, but was interrupted by a coughing fit before she could continue. “My name is Devran.”

“Devran, why were you hiding in under a console of the bridge? Where is the rest of the crew?” Leif asked, lowering his blaster slowly but not holstering it yet.

“The crew?” She asked, almost blankly, looking around her without much recognition.

“Yes, the crew,” Leif spoke slowly. He glanced back at me, and I mouthed the word “shock”. His eyebrows rose, and I stepped forward slightly.

“Your name is Devran, right?” I asked quietly. She nodded without looking at me, still taking in her surroundings. “Devran, you’re a part of the crew of this

ship. Where are they now? Are you all alone?"

At the last question, something seemed to click for Devran. The blank look faded from her face, giving way to something primal. Her eyes bulged out of their sockets, her skin began to shine with sweat, and her hands visibly shook at her side. She opened her mouth, but no noise came out.

"Devran, what's wrong? What's going on-"

Leif stopped speaking as we all became aware of a noise from elsewhere in the ship.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

We all turned towards the entrance to the bridge, absorbing what we just heard.

"Is that-" I started asking, but Khalis interrupted me.

"Someone's walking around. Someone else is still here!" Khalis started towards the doorway, but Leif's arm shot out and stopped him in his tracks.

"If someone was still here," the captain said slowly, "they should have come to us the minute we boarded."

"What are you saying Captain?" I asked, my throat constricting.

"I'm saying that whoever or whatever we just heard is probably what killed everyone."

Khalis' smile disappeared, and Tallis seemed to shrink ever so slightly.

"Whatever? What do you mean?" Khalis said. "It's gotta be one of the other crew members right? Right?"

His last question was directed at Devran, who was still frozen in her fear.

"You've heard the stories, Khalis," Tallis said. "You know about the weird things that happen this far out

from the Inner Systems. Ships get lost, ships are found abandoned and wrecked. There's a lot of unexplored planets out here; who knows what could be on them."

No one said a word; we were all too busy thinking about what could possibly be out there.

Leif looked at the doorway for a moment, listening to the silence before turning back to us. "All right, something is going on here that we don't understand. We need to leave, now, and call this in. This is more than we can handle." Leif said, maintaining a calm composure. He checked the energy levels and made sure the safety was off before looking at us again. "Out. Now."

He took lead, with Khalis, Devran, and myself following right behind and Tallis taking up the rear. We moved as quietly and quickly as possible, the mystery and awe of the ship now being replaced with a growing sense of terror. Every turn of the corridor brought us closer to escape; yet each turn increased the sense of dread that threatened to overwhelm me.

We finally turned the corner to the door leading back into the cargo bay we first came through, but it was now shut. We raced to the door; Leif tried the controls, and when met with no response, banged his hand against the door.

"Dammit. Dammit!" Leif cursed.

"What do we do now, Captain?" I asked, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice. Before he could answer, something else answered for him; footsteps on the cold metallic floor.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Devran began crying, silent sobs wracking her whole body as she leaned against the wall nearest her.

“Aw shit man, I don’t wanna die. I can’t die yet!” Tallis began to panic, banging his hands against the door uselessly. “Let me out! Let me out!”

Leif seized Tallis by the shirt and slammed him against the door.

“Shut up and pull yourself together, Tallis! Don’t you dare lose it on me now, focus! Khalis, get started on the door. There’s got to be a way to bypass this lock.”

Khalis popped the door console out and immediately began sorting through the wires, a cold determination on his face. Leif had let go of Tallis, who was sitting against the wall muttering underneath his breath. I turned to Devran, trying to sooth her for a moment. Leif kneeled to my side, placing his hand on Devran’s shoulder.

“Devran, I need to know what happened here. Who killed those people?”

She continued crying, unresponsive to the Captain’s questions.

“Devran!” He forced her to look at him, and she looked wildly for a moment before she seemed to gain some self control and nodded. “Devran, what happened?”

“It all was going so normal,” she said softly. “Just a standard supply mission to a colony in the Helion system. And then crewmembers started vanishing, one by one. It’s a big ship, but it was still noticeable. The captain couldn’t figure out what was happening, and people started panicking. Everyone started running around the ship with guns, searching wildly until Wegner accidentally shot Nadia. Then everyone was shooting each other, everyone was dying, I couldn’t

handle it and I ran, I ran until I got to the bridge and sent the SOS signal. And that,” she paused for a moment, looking at both of us with eyes full of fear, “that was when the screaming began.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Khalis,” Leif said, turning from Devran. “Anytime now.”

“I’m working on it. Give me a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute. We need it now.”

“Shut up and let me concentrate.”

“Shit man, I don’t wanna die.”

“Tallis, shut up!”

“Khalis-”

“Got it!” The door slid open, and at that moment a dark shape appeared at the other end of the hallway. The figure was covered in a cloak, obscuring the details of its body. It was fairly tall though, at least 2 meters high, and that was with it being hunched over. We all froze for a moment, caught up in finally seeing the source of the noise, before being scared shitless by a guttural roar that erupted from within the cloak. It was like a dying animal, a howl that chilled straight to the soul.

“Go, go, go!” We all rushed through the door, Khalis immediately typing away at the console on the other side to close the door. The silhouette moved closer, making its way down the hall in a frenzied manner. The noise of its steps rang out, each one driving fear further in our hearts.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Khalis, let’s go! Just get to the ship!” Tallis pleaded as we ran towards the airlock door.

“I can lock it in there! Just one second!”

“Now!”

Leif had already gotten the airlock door open, and was shoving me and Devran inside while Tallis yelled at his brother. Khalis tapped one more button, and began running through the cargo bay.

That was when the lights went out.

“Khalis!” Tallis screamed. He reached inside the airlock and grabbed one of the X-14 heavy blasters mounted by the doorway before he went charging back, firing into the dark as he yelled for Khalis.

“Tallis, no!” I screamed.

“Stay here!” Leif said. He locked the airlock from the outside before running out of my sight. I banged against the door, and then opened my comm channel so I could hear what was happening. There was nothing, just breathing and footsteps. Then the screaming started.

“Khalis, no!” I whimpered, tears falling down my face. Yelling followed, Leif and Tallis trying to find the source of the noise. Energy blasts rang out in rapid succession, each briefly illuminating the cargo bay whenever they hit something. One of them dropped a light-beam, and I could better see the chaos at hand. Lief was facing back towards the door we had come through, firing into the dark as he searched for whatever had gotten Khalis. Tallis was spraying energy bolts all over, screaming in rage at the unknown. It seemed like they weren’t hitting anything, simply blackening the walls of the room that was void of any other movement.

Then the shadows seemed to move to the right of Tallis, and before I could cry out a warning, something

grabbed him, pulling him straight into the darkness and leaving Lief alone. He turned towards where Tal-
lis had disappeared, blaster ready as he scanned for
movement. Something detached itself from the dark-
ness and stepped into view of the lightbeam, except
whatever it was had stepped behind a stack of cargo
boxes that obstructed my view. Lief, however, could
see it. His grip on his gun almost seemed to slip for a
moment, and confusion covered his face.

“No,” he said in disbelief. “It can’t be.”

The light from the ball on the floor vanished, and
there was the sound of movement and flashes from
Lief’s gun before the screaming came again, as did more
silent tears down my face. Then it was done, just as
quickly as it began. The silence returned, and I lay on
the floor, too deep in shock to react.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My heart froze in my throat.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I scrambled for the console, opening the door back
into my own ship as I dragged Devran in and sealed the
airlock. I started the emergency disengagement proto-
col, and looked up right as the docking locks released.
The ship slowly began moving away, the dark airlock
still visible.

I forced myself to turn away and looked at Devran.
“You need to tell me what happened Devran, now.
Who was it?” She looked up, the shock seeming to
have faded a bit.

“We all knew him so well. Everyone did. He was so
normal.”

“He? Normal? What are you talking about?” I was

confused, and I looked back at the ship as I waited for a response. Right through the airlock windows I could see a hand against the window, a hand with a moon tattoo.

“Khalis!” I gasped, reaching out instinctively towards the hand. I started programing a return sequence to the ship to get Khalis, only to stop when I saw that the hand wasn’t attached to anything. The bone was partially exposed, and skin was hanging off where it had been detached.

It was being held up.

THE NASCENT HORROR

Bryce Simmons

Although my hands tremble from the psycho-somatic shock of having borne witness to atrocities of which I will not speak, I will to the best of my ability relate the chronicle of death, matricide, and obscenely despicable possession that has wrought my tremulous state. My name is Eric Maxwell, and I will begin my tale at a point in medias res, both for the sake of time—for I do not know the duration of my captor's dispossession—and oddly, clarity; for even though the beginnings of my story are relevant, they would only serve to muddy what is already a fantastical and admittedly dubious narrative.

All that you must know is that I was in pursuit of a woman whom I believed to have stolen from me a very important heirloom. I had suspected her kleptomaniac tendencies early on in her employment as my

home-secretary, but could not afford to fire her in what was a very busy and important period in my professional life. Her assistance was completely necessary, and the initial missing items which I suspected may be in her possession were of little value compared to the profits I would have made from my work. Unfortunately, my leniency granted her the confidence to steal an irreplaceable and invaluable piece of my family's lineage. A theft which brought upon the events that I will now recount.

Fortunately, her peripheral awareness was lacking, or my night-sheltered stalking was more skillful than I thought. Her gait wavered between a purposeful march and heavy-footed shuffle, as if a chronic pain inhibited a consistent stride. I maintained a distance of about thirty yards, ensuring, with the sonorous downpour of rain, that the sound of a broken twig or nudged bush would not alert her to my pursuit. The trees, barely visible in the dark-choked forest, loomed imposingly over the trail, distilling the emitted lunar brilliance to a dull, unnerving luminescence that only enhanced the already cryptic atmosphere around us. Eventually, after a period of no less than twenty minutes, we entered a natural clearing in the brush that spanned a diameter of at least several dozen yards. It separated our section of the wood from a further, frighteningly darker section ahead.

The only means of concealment existed by shadows of the trees that slanted from the stress of their own bulk, veering into the vacant circle like inquisitive children peeking through forbidden doors. By the time

I reached the entrance, she had already crossed a dozen yards into the open space. I risked a dash towards the deepened darkness of shadows and waited for several seconds. She had not noticed the burst of activity; her focus was still held by whatever means or entity of transfixion that guided her onward.

Upon entering what could be approximated as the center of the clearing, she knelt down and touched the dampened soil. The proportional beauty of her nakedness was further accentuated by the untarnished moonlight shining over her. A curvaceous, God-sculpted form shone brilliantly like polished marble, while a hair of stygian blackness punctuated her figure, culminating in an almost surreal display of pure femininity. From my enshrouded position, I could feel a sexual radiance, an emission of lust-soaked intoxication vibrating through the air.

She, by cognizance or natural metabolism, gave off an allure beyond any other woman. My captivation was soon dissuaded when, after a sudden and inhuman cackle simultaneously resonated as a shriek of agony, she threw back her head and began shoving worm-infested clumps of soil into her mouth. Handful by handful she forced the loam down her gullet, apparently in desperate need to satiate some unnatural desire for the consumption of earth.

There was a disturbing, inexpressible morbidity about her actions, beyond just a general disgust at the odd feeding. Dirt, mud, gravel, all have at some point been consumed by tribes of more savagely-inclined people, although neither her nor I could be described as such. It was the primal, almost bestial manner in

which she imbibed the slop, like a monstrous beast consuming the viscera from the freshly slain corpse of its prey. Adding to the gruesomeness of the situation, was the way her body shifted with each helping. She writhed with a deplorable salacity that no man, no matter how desperate for the sight of a beautiful woman would find attractive.

She performed a knelt dance that was somehow elegant and animalistic, laced with a tinge of inhuman gesticulation. At her seventh shovel, her belly had begun to noticeably swell giving her the appearance of late-term pregnancy, yet again heightening the sick nature of the horrid scene. It was at this moment I noticed the precious gemstone of my family passed down through ancestral offerings, embedded in her forehead. Somehow, for reasons ineffable, she had lodged the jewel in her skull. Its soft twinkle was enhanced to noticeable levels by the illumination of the moon overhead.

Her belly expanded to a bulbous, inordinate size, glistening sublimely. There seemed to be no physiological limit to her consumption. Neither pain nor her skeletal framework impeded upon the feast, and after seconds more of intake, the swollen mass billowed in size beyond any extreme of obesity I had ever observed. At last, when her stomach stretched to cartoonish proportions, and with her face all but concealed by sludge, she stood and threw her arms out in some horrific, lunar-lit cruciform pantomime. Facing the moon, she began uttering a guttural, otherworldly incantation whose pronunciations and intonations I have fortunately evicted from memory. Only the diabolical lyrics,

portending some dreadful, inhuman arrival, have survived among the accounts of that night, which I will relay for you here.

“By the sigils inscribed in an unbroken line,
 by the boiling of bones and the drinking of brine.
 This caucus of oblivion, imparted by the governance of hell,
 in a rot-filled womb this demon does dwell.
 A child of murk, an infant of mire,
 this carrion birth cleansed in vaginal fires.
 Fall from me, boy, soaked in my slime.
 Begin your intrusion of this human-forged time.”

Upon the final pronouncement, a darkness befell the clearing as if the moon had been thrust to unreachable depths in the cosmos, blanketing the earth in immitigable darkness. I first thought myself to be blinded somehow, by the sheer foulness of the devilry before me, but shortly after the blotting of light, I felt a tangible presence come to existence. Through some vague, indescribable and most likely animalistic intuition, I knew this darkness was a creation.

A sinister entity through occult-like persuasion, had breached the sanctity of the realm in which Earth dwelt. An orb began to manifest in the darkness, emitting through some self-illumination a light that was terrifying in its sublimity. After moments, it became clearer, more distinct in form, and I saw then that it was the corpulent body of the demoness I had foolishly pursued to this sacrilegious site of demonology.

Her head hung backwards, neck obviously broken with her face contorted in a disgusting repose of os-

tensibly sexual satisfaction. Although I presumed her to be dead, or at least vexed by some satanic reverie she still stood in that mock crucifixion, posed ceremoniously before Earth's unseen orbital ally. From within the soil-filled cistern of a stomach, came an eruption of sound like a gurgling of evil-purposed concoctions within a wizard's cauldron. The raucous was reminiscent of a child's laugh, though distorted, deepened, and filtered through the chords of demonic timbre. In an oration of tone, both nascent and primeval laced with intonations of irreverence for life itself, the neonatal entity spoke from within its mother's corpse.

"Oh, what have we here? A young planet to be despoiled? Eyuck, I can feel its heart beat below. Far too weak to be worthy of my satiation. And the beings who dwell upon its bosom? Insects. Wretched bitch, why have you sired me here? Nonetheless, I will plunder. Dark will besiege light."

My heartbeat escalated to a pulsation far too rapid if I had hoped to remain alive to witness the unholy proceedings that were sure to occur. Fortunately, in an instance of fortune that would only see to prevent that cardiac danger, the entrenched darkness became weighted and burdensome. My metabolism and arterial circulatory processes seemed to slow, then ceased completely under the oppression of the blight.

The entity's first plunder, would seem to have been my life had it not been for the onset of yet another otherworldly event. Thought to be dead by her horrified observer, the mother defied her assumed state and spoke a sentence that elicited a revitalizing flame through my body, but also sent a conflagration of fear

throughout my spirit.

“From Earth thou hath been born, by eyes of earth thou shall see, and on earth thou will tread. I bade thee to evacuate from me. Thou are not my child, but the offspring of a wondrous, supremely talented sorcerer. It is he who hath given thee life, through the ingrained portals of magical transference that connect the netherworld and this place. I was merely an incubator, a vessel through which thou were transported from a bog of discarded, worthless souls without memories. I am mother to none, certainly no invalid specter.”

The conclusion of the derisive speech, brought upon the blackened atmosphere a tinge of purplish aura that swirled about the corpse-mother and harbored child. A Tyrian tumult spun in atmospheric concord with the ebon haze, creating a wild, massive tornado of diabolical composition. My body began to rise from the wet soil, and hover amidst the stygian mist like a blown petal upon a stirring sea. Rain, wholly abated by the dire fog, hung suspended above us.

A crystalline cover that alone would have been mesmerizing, had the terrible display before me not been sufficiently vexing. By this point, the demon—for there could be no other nature of this creature—was entirely obscured by the abhorrent miasma. Dangling without support as if floating on some nimbus of hell, I heard a rapturous exhalation from the center of the ever-increasing storm. It was a boisterous laugh of such inherent depravity, that the trees encircling the perimeter seemed to recoil by some natural aversion to the stark morbidity of that sound.

A cyclone manifested from the tumultuous chaos, and began drawing in a whirlwind of dirt in an earthly orbit. I too, was thrown into that revolution wholly without control, and still near comatose from the vibrant darkness. The speed at which I revolved, would surely have sent me dashing against a tree at undeniably lethal speeds if I was set loose. Afloat and nauseous, I could do nothing but try and capture a glimpse of the witch presumably still standing at the eye of the pandemonium. This was a futile endeavor, due to the shifting of ethereal vapors, dirt and abysmal iridescence.

Just as the commotion grew to become too chaotic for my senses, I along with the orbital debris was suddenly cast from the hellish atmosphere, and thrown a considerable distance. Fortunately, I landed in a pocket of cold mud embedded within the ground a few dozen yards away. Though dazed and somewhat sore from clashing with harder clumps of detritus in the vortex, I was largely unharmed owing thanks to the frigid cesspool in which I laid.

My body ached from the pains felt eternally by the moons that accompanied their maternal planets, and my mind was just as frenzied as the turmoil from which I had been spared. I regained my faculties and rose to my feet, determined still to see the ultimate nature of the decadent witch. The sight I beheld was so ghastly, so obscenely macabre, that even a true lord of the underworld would have averted his gaze in disgust. Lying supine, engorged stomach torn open, was the woman. The darkness had cleared, and a fresh moonlight shone on the scene, illuminating a gruesome picture that

even butchers of the foulest abattoirs could not have stomached.

Gradually arising from the gleaming viscera, was a creature covered in blood, earth, and what was most likely fecal matter, and an infant, whose head bore various protrusions of demonic bone that formed a crown atop its scalp. Spinal thorns pierced the skin of its back, giving it the appearance of some primordial reptile. Its arms were long, impossibly elongated formations that ended in fingerless tips, and it had demon-spear limbs, which I somehow knew would surely penetrate the hull of the most formidable man-made constructions. Everything about the creature held a grotesque familiarity, as if somewhere within the shared memorial lineage of humanity, existed a fear of this entity that then uprooted itself within my mind.

The monster still sat within the ravaged bowels of its surrogate mother, apparently lavishing in the putrescence and gore, and it was only after a careful focus of acuity that I realized the grosser horror. The lower regions of its body, specifically starting at the nape, were fused with the abdomen of the slain demoness. With its post-birth writhing, she too jerked about though uncoordinated and without life. For the second time tonight, I had watched that woman die, and although she sired an even more detestable evil, I still could not bring myself to lament at her demise.

This creature had somehow stopped the demoness's wild storm, which seemed to be of an ultimate and preternatural evil. That revelation had brought me great fear, for whatever it intended to do would surely beget something impossibly worse. It spoke, as if sensing my

pedestrian revulsion.

“Onlooker, you seem distraught. Do not fret, my nubile hominid. I have known of your presence since before we entered this damned wood, and could have removed you from the narrative of life before I was birthed. As you can tell, I am inseparably attached to this whore.

Though powerful in supernatural ways that could topple your cities with the ease of waves against sand-forged sculptures, I still require a body with which to perform the requisite gestures of destruction. You seem to have adequately survived the maelstrom of my mother’s attempted portal to the subterranean realms.

Good, you will be an excellent host to my spectral self. Oh, do not look so frightened. You will retain your mind and senses. I will simply operate the body of my own volition. Together, we will commit atrocities that even the most sadistic of your kind could not conjure in the vilest of dreams. Accept this fate, there is nothing else left for you. I have subsisted in the timeless, inescapable oblivion as nothing but a formless wisp of screams and nightmares. I will enjoy myself as a corporeal entity, in you.”

That monstrous, enveloping darkness again returned and consumed my senses. I felt a presence wrap itself around my body completely enclosing my form, and dragging me into some indescribable mire of darkness. My mind failed to comprehend what besieged my body, and after an interim of what seemed like eons, I awoke on the muddy field.

I tried to stand, tried to make some kind of movement to affirm that I was still in the world of the living,

but the wills of my cognition were not transmitted to my extremities. My body, apparently, was no longer mine. This inference was confirmed as fact by an inner cephalic cackling, as if some mischievous imp had invaded my skull and danced upon my brain. I knew, with grave certainty, that I had been tossed aside—ejected from spiritual control by that nascent horror.

SEMETARY

Provolone Sinatra

Between Aiden and I, stood only a rusting, twisted gate. The sky was raging more furiously this midnight, than I had ever experienced in the forty odd years of my life. I had been sitting inside my car for thirteen minutes, with my headlights beaming on the black gate. The radio was turned to light jazz, and a cigarette smoldered on my lips, dying without my participation. My gaze had glazed over moments after I was parked, and I had stayed like that until the music slowly dried into an absent white noise, that existed just behind the veil of my acknowledgement.

The door to the medieval gate, was crudely locked by a series of complex mechanisms that were composed of several interwoven chains and padlocks. Rain was falling dramatically, in puddles rather than

droplets, drenching my over coat in mere moments as I staggered from my vehicle. All around me, echoed the roaring storm. Above me, darkening clouds twisted and turned into varying malicious shapes; it appeared that both the wind and rain were coming from every direction. The rusting chains held strong for a few moments. They initially resisted the efforts of the bolt cutters, but required little perseverance to finesse away.

The gate doors creaked forward and lurched for my lapels, as if to casually shake me to my senses. The act was almost friendly, but I am not so easily fooled, and immediately diagnosed this lurching as an act of ill intent on behalf of my iron acquaintance, of course. I stepped forward, allowing muscle memory to carry me down the trail towards my destination. Upon passing the threshold of the gate, I could sense that it was a place of great evil as I had done many times before in the past week. Still, through the prying sense of dread, I continued forward.

The soil was most certainly predominately packed with well-dressed skeletons. I was surprised the roots of any plants had found room amongst the bones to grow. A few scrawny trees had taken root, and were actively reaping the nutritional benefit of the rich carrion. These despicable, miniscule trees had a thick, jagged, black bark that formed a very abrasive exoskeleton around the thin and fragile plant. To run your hand over it was the equivalent of a tiger shark, or freshly laid gravel. Their leaves withered indefinitely, and sported a sickly dark-purple hue. These bastardly plants, had a single redeeming quality, which was their ability to produce sweet fruits that resemble fuzzy or-

ange grapes. I plucked a few off a passing tree, and toss one into my mouth. Lightly, my front teeth cracked its thin skin, and allowed its juice to spill passively into my mouth. The taste was bright against the grey, all-consuming background.

All around me spun a field of lost heroes and villains. Amongst them were mothers, officers, fathers, writers, sons, nurses, and daughters. The narratives of their lives were all reduced into crudely agreeable phrases, and plastered onto smoothed granite for the world to pity.

Fuck epitaphs, I thought, an entire biography would not suffice for my son. Birds cawed and screeched in the distance. Sometimes, I could catch a glimpse of their silhouettes fluttering against the autumn sky. It appeared that they were watching me. Certainly, they were an avian regiment dedicated to pushing me forward.

I finally found myself standing in front of his black granite headstone. Though beautifully laser-etched, I could not bring myself to admire the calligraphy that so eloquently presented his name. I am sickened to report that I did not cry at first. I stood in the rain with my hand hovering above my left breast. My fingers twitched in place. Beneath my lapel, resting in my coat's linen pocket, sat a Smith and Wesson Model 60, polished, wood grip. My teeth clenched so tight, they threatened to shatter as I removed the firearm from my pocket, and slide my back down the gravestone. I fingered the trigger as the tiny barrel danced around my temple. Should I shut my eyes? Or keep them open? My breathing had escalated at this point into a shuddering

raspy panic, causing spittle to dangled from my mouth as I drew a plethora of deep breaths. What if he wasn't there, wherever there was?

No, I couldn't do it. Not here. Not in front of him. I thought I could, but I couldn't, it was too ugly even for this damned place. When I made the realization that I would not be seeing him tonight, is when I cried. At the time, I didn't know it, but I had a better plan than killing myself.

I don't know for how long I sat there, whimpering with a revolver pointed at my face, and drenched clothes wrapped icily around my body. At some point, the intruding sound of heavy footsteps quickly making their way down the path to where I sat, roused me from my frozen position. Instinctively, I raised my arm up until I felt the revolver was pointed at the space of nighttime darkness, that would soon be where the person clobbering towards me would be standing. The footsteps disappeared. I tightened my grip on the gun.

"You go'n shoot boy?" a grizzly voice sounded from behind a tree about thirty feet in front of me. Native southerner, by the sound of him, and large.

"Who are you?" I said. My voice is quiet but harsh, like a strained whisper.

"Groundskeeper," he said, "who'dya think?"

I lower my gun and stand up, "It's away," I said, feeling guilty at my hostility. I could feel him peeking from around the tree, though it was too dark to see him. Slowly, he stepped into view.

Before me stood a tall and lanky old man. He smelled like death, and looked as though life had chiseled the wrinkles of his face into a permanent scowl. He wore

faded light blue jeans that were covered in muck, as was his white tee and unbuttoned flannel. The company sported on the cap lowered to his eyes, seemed to be a towing service.

“I know why you here boy,” he said, spitting dip at the floor between us.

“Oh yeah?” I retorted.

“It ain’t go’n work boy, just superstition, is all.”

He was staring at me intently, making an assessment, his light grey eyes unmoving from mine. Suddenly, I was aware of my... suspicious condition. I pushed my long black hair back behind my face, and felt the stubble on my face. Surely, I must look like a well-dressed homeless man, or a grave robber.

“Look, I’m just here to see my son. That’s all I wanted.”

“In th’ dead-o’-night?” he rasped questioningly. I looked at my shoes, my behavior reminiscent of a child being scolded by his parents for staying up too late.

“Y’know how hard my job is boy? Without your lot.”

I laughed. “What?”

“It’s devil magic boy!”

I stepped back, a little alarmed at his increasing aggression to my presence. I had lived in this town for a month before my son died, and didn’t speak much after he did. The people here were different, I knew that much. Maybe I was paranoid.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,” said the groundskeeper, “John 11:25.”

“That’s... nice, thank you.”

“How old was he? Your boy?”

“Six.”

Silence. The old man looked at me questioningly, his tongue slowly rolled around his mouth as he pondered.

“Sum’n the folks here, they hear stories. Then they tell stories. That’s all they are, boy, stories.”

Interested, I straightened myself, and prepared to question him further. I didn’t need too, he continued naturally, clearly well-versed and practiced in his speech.

“On the other side of the lot, you see, there’s a great big tree at the top of a hill. Just like these here lil one’s, ‘cept huge. Unnaturally so, you see? Ever since my pop ran this place before me, people have been obsessed with it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Horror films, I think.” His expression changed from stern to genuinely confused.

“What?”

“That land isn’t holy, boy, it’s evil. People say that it can do... miraculous things. Because of that, I have to be out here almost every night to watch these graves.”

I scoffed.

“What, is it some kind ancient Indian burial ground?”

The groundskeeper’s eyes lit up, enraged.

“Native American, boy!” he looked all around him, paranoid. “Watch yer tongue ‘round these parts... lest they hear you.”

“So,” I started, “people really think that land can raise the dead?”

“Only their corpse,” he said, “not their souls. It would be an abomination before God. You understand? He wouldn’t be your son. It would be a monster, he would

feast on the flesh of th' living, and forever be damned on this Earth until th' coming of our Lord."

"What's the point then?" I asked.

"Why do people even do it? They have nothing but hope," the groundskeeper whispered to me, "and that's dangerous."

"I am a man without even hope," I said.

"That's even more dangerous."

We both laugh nervously.

"So, is there some kind of blood ritual or something?"

We stayed at my son's grave until the sun came up, the old man told me of all the strange telling's that have surfaced over the years regarding the mysterious plot of land. At the end of our conversation he said to me, "Don't be foolish now, boy. Go grieve the way a normal man would."

I am not a normal man. In fact, by the end of our conversation I felt as though I had shed the flesh of man, and had taken on the skin of a master necromancer. Of course, I knew all about the haunted land even before I planned to off myself. It's all these hicks would talk about when I first moved here.

"Stay away from the graveyard," they would all say super ambiguously, "mysterious things happen there." Nobody had details though, "Talk to the groundskeeper if you want the real stories," they all said. Now I have. Now I know everything, everything I needed to know.

The following midnight, I was standing in front of my son's grave, yet again. This time, I strutted with intent through the previously intimidating iron gates, and found myself quickly shoveling mound after

mound of dirt far over my shoulder. I was only three feet deep, when the groundskeeper showed shouting.

“Having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked! Your son will rise again, but this is not the way! There is no true power in that defiled land, only the power bestowed by superstition!”

I turned to him, he was crying, his hands held together as if he would pray.

“Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” I asked, “Corinthians 15:12.”

The frail old man tried to mutter a response, surely another quote from his damned book, but could not as I had already brought the shovel across his face, and knocked him into a nearby tree. He then fell to the floor, and struggled to comprehend my actions. With dirt and mud caked around his mouth, he looked up at me and whimpered. Blood had begun to ooze from various orifices, as well as, from a gash across his right eye. I struck him again. Harder this time, but not too hard. I would need him. I wondered how many before me had tried to raise their dead loved ones, only to be stopped amid their mission by this decrepit old bastard?

With a newfound calming silence, I returned to the desecration of my son’s burial place. Tears no longer streamed down my face, as I contemplated what he may look like down there after a week of rotting in the soil. Before now, whenever I thought of it, the hollowed image of his face it was so haunting. I won-

dered if he still looked precious while he decomposed. While insects engorged themselves on his flesh, would he still resemble my little boy? Now, I did not care. He would arise a monster in his own right, a beast, an unholy abomination. He would still be my little boy, even after I watched him tear the jugular out of the throat of his first human meal. He was, is, and will forever be, my son.

After what seemed like hours, my shovel's tip nicked something solid. I knelt and brushed away the top layers of dirt, yeah, it was wooden. A casket. My heart skipped but half a beat. I was ready for this. The lid creaked slowly open, and out wafted the damp and warm stench of decaying flesh. I dropped the lid, and tore away from the decorative box in disgust. I could hear his voice in the distance, giggling. My God, that kid's smile could cure the world of any ailment, I was sure of it. I tore the casket open with deadly intent, and with my eyes peeled back, stared at the perfectly assembled little boy in the light blue casket. His eyes were shut. Arms crossed. He looked so peaceful; he looked just the same only hollower. Grey. Deceased. I brushed his hair over, and rubbed my thumb on his cheek. Everything was going to be okay again.

By the time the groundskeeper regained consciousness, he had already been transported to the far side of the lot, and was chained to the trunk of the tree at the top of the hill. He didn't talk at first, no, he just mumbled a bit and rolled his head around. I didn't pay any mind until he screamed. He must have seen the pentagram.

At the base of the tree, I had painted the grass with

gasoline and had set it aflame. The sign of the beast glowed indignantly. I cast the hood of my black robe over my head, as to feel no guilt as the groundskeeper watched me, and gagged in horror.

In the middle of the pentagram was chained a ram. Beneath this goat is where my son was now buried, soaking up the cursed magic that lingered in the soil. I stepped towards the ram in the center of the flaming pentagram, and produced a jagged dagger. The moon was finally in position. I raised the dagger towards the sky, and slowly drew it down towards Hell. When the dagger was pointed at the floor, I raised it once more, and slit the ram's neck. He let out a shrill scream and twitched a bit, then fell to floor motionless. His blood was warm on my hands.

I sat in the middle of the pentagram, waiting for the soil beneath me to rumble. I waited for the grey fingers of my monster son to poke out through the dirt, and grasp hungrily at his offering chained to the tree. I waited, and waited...and then I cried. I couldn't stop crying.

THE 4 OF US

Mark Christopher

My most recent episode begins with a chainsaw fight.

Father, upon partaking in multiple whiskey wedge cocktails of the single malt variety, concludes the moment has arrived to replace the lighting in our home's common areas (regardless of whether or not their filaments continue carrying forth life), and I am directed to the nearest hardware store for the purchase of fresh bulbs—a minor task he and mother feel I'm capable of performing without the requisite supervision.

Green Line South. Twenty-five minutes round-trip. Two bus tokens and a folded piece of yellow paper from my pocket.

Father's calligraphy:
Seven packs of bulbs.
Three bulbs per pack.

125 watts per bulb.

Rectangular boxes. Various sizes. Brand names printed in bold, primary letters. Soft yellow refulgent fanning out between misshapen layers of corrugated cardboard, spilling into a sinking horizon and slicing through dust filled air. Sunglasses from the pocket of my grey hoodie. Protection—eyes scorched and the blinding perdition. Customers shuffle about. Shopping carts with spinning, squeaky wheels scrape along the floor, plastic baskets for smaller items.

Passing judgments.

Dr. Sawyer by my side, retro in her navy-blue pants suit and rimless reading glasses, instructing me to utilize the deep breathing techniques we've practiced. Positive coping skills.

“Get perky, ‘Manda. You gonna need to pluck your daddy’s wants from the top rack, ‘cause that’s where they hide the best ones.” Raven pulls the headphones from around her shaved head. “C’mon girl, rise up high up on those steel toes.”

I give her the finger. (She knows dropping the “A” pisses me right off the rails.)

Shaytan’s turn to speak. He removes the menthol from between his coffee stained teeth and blows blue smoke rings. “Absolutely not, the best brands pay out the nose to stare at you dead center.”

My response is, “You can’t smoke in here, jack-ass.”

Dr. Sawyer’s in-lobby-pre-session check list: 7 – Please Rate from 0 to 10 (10 being the best) FOCUS and CONCENTRATION.

“Incandescent.”

“Halogen.”

“LED,” Raven giggles, thrusting a pair of tattooed hands into the pockets of her black Pea Coat.

I drop my arms and spin around, my patience at an end. “Jesus Christ, will the two of you shut the fuck up for half-a-second.”

Rating = 3

“See Raven, see what you did?” Shaytan whispers. “You’ve gone and made Nigel upset.”

Nigel sits cross-legged on a pallet of wallpaper paste. He straightens his red bowtie, throws me a wink and places a thin finger to his lips.

Raven and Shaytan disappear down the aisle.

Dr. Sawyer’s in-lobby-pre-session check list:

#5 – Please Rate from 0 to 10 (10 being the best)

ABILITY TO MANAGE ANGER

Seven boxes of bulbs fill my basket, and my breath is fiery mist escaping the lungs and charring my lips. I throw Nigel a look that cracks glass, our gazes’ static and my left hand a clenched fist. His finger remains stuck to his lips, a slow and deliberate exhale.

“By the way, next time I light one up, I’m burning a hole through that fucking plaid shirt you insist on torturing us with. And a bowtie, really?”

I tell myself to breath and not allow those blinking red buttons to be pushed flush against my skin. Nigel combs his fingers through his hair, pushing the dirty blonde from his baby blues.

Rating = 2

Store front.

Cattle through turnstiles. Twenty-one checkout lanes with square, plastic cubes stretching high and

luminous.

The shopping hordes with hands wrapped around steel framed carts and arms cradling blue baskets with black handles (painting supplies, sections of fencing, various tools and nuts and bolts being gathered for weekend DIY projects).

Heads turn, smooth and without age—mannequin faces boring through me with lidless eyes and gaping mouths, and mindfulness is a fevered poker tearing up my spine and slicing across the shoulders, unforgiving and demanding to leave this place, my quickest exit, the Express Lane escape and it's there, miles away, check-out lane #17 and The Green Line, but that poker is white hot purpose pushing me forward. Run. Like. Hell.

Raven's screams snatch me by the throat and haul me back to the now; music pounds through the store's speakers. I drop my basket and rush to the rear of the store. A large, reflective sign with blue lettering hangs from the warehouse ceiling: LAWN AND GARDEN.

There is a roar, bellows of blue smoke, aroma of gasoline and oil.

Dr. Sawyer's in-lobby-pre-session check list:

#3 – Please Rate from 0 to 10 (10 being the most intense) OLAFACTORY HALLUCINATIONS.

Around the corner and a wall of choking smells—blood and copper, steel and singed hair and flesh. Raven pinwheels. A chainsaw bounces at her feet and scrapes against the floor, sparking the air. The left side of her Pea Coat is soaked through with blood. Her screams, laughing, spinning and the brilliant red spray from the hollow of her shoulder.

Shaytan is missing a leg and sits awkwardly on the deck, bent at the waist, both hands curled around the handle of a lime green, blood covered chainsaw; the machine's teeth throw aside the leftovers of Raven's arm—flesh and bits of bone, the blood hot and wet against my face, and I am a ghost beneath endless rows of harsh, fluorescent lighting.

Mannequins stand above me in long rows, stiff and prudent...questioning (drenched in red with parts missing and cries without form, deafening through every pore), and the star, desperate and singular in its depth, explodes frantic with the endless shades, colors and rhythms penned daily in my journals.

Dr. Sawyer by my side, classic in her navy V-neck vintage print dress and tortoise shell-rimmed reading glasses, instructing me to use journal entries as a private means of documenting my inner most thoughts.

Rating = 7

Shaytan's finger remains pressed against the trigger of the saw, eyes milky white orbs set deep into the abyss, and his smile the colored stitching of tossed aside fabric. Nigel sits cross-legged on a pallet of plywood, covered in blood and delighting in it all—the screams, the laughing, the dismembered mess that is Raven and Shaytan.

Silence follows. Nigel's hair is damp and matted on one side; when he turns his head, I see his fingers exploring the opening where an ear was recently attached. Raven is pale from blood loss, and her face is shaped into a child's pout.

"Too much fun?" she asks.

Niles turns and looks at Shaytan, who's busy collect-

ing his missing limb. Raven kicks her arm to the side.

Niles sighs, "I think we went too far."

"Again?"

Shaytan answers, "Yeah, I believe so."

Confusion now, disorganized thoughts and the chaos of figuring out which body parts belong to whom, and my head is the pain of a thousand razor blades, and the yellow paper with father's handwriting is a damp, crumpled up ball in my red hand. Light fades. The dark noose tightens. I hear them, around me, whispering, yelling. How it begins, always...each time. Fighting for breath. My legs turn soft, and the world goes sideways.

Vision is shapes and a patchwork color wheel—wanting to focus and clear away the blur—and there's a single voice bedside, soft and familiar. Questions I've heard previous, what I know and feel.

What I believe.

Attempting to discover unison for expressing idea with sound. Thoughts are fog and mist running on instinct (letters becoming words becoming sentences becoming answers).

The star is reborn and rests, patient in the knowledge that I will again be unable to determine real from fantasy.

Cute nurse wraps my left arm in bandages. Circles of pink seep through the white felt. Cute nurse smiles and exists the room. Mother stands in the hallway, her face pale and weary. Tearful. Sadness. Doctors with hands tucked deep into the pockets of their white coats. Nurses' station. Police officers (all turning in unison, staring with their button doll eyes). I shiver as

the door closes.

“Is she awake?”

“I’m not sure, but that hospital gown is hideous.”

Voices familiar and refreshing. Comfort. Raven and her missing arm, Shaytan balancing on his one leg. Niles leans against the wall with Shaytan’s severed limb resting on his shoulder like a broken umbrella.

Raven says, “She’s so thin. Her arms and legs...”

“Poor girl.”

“Yes, poor girl.”

“Oh, and they’re using restraints this time. Sad.”

“Very.”

“Restraints are serious business.”

“There’s blood on your hands,” Shaytan says, his voice dusted with worry, “and things might be a bit different this time around.”

I ask Niles, “How bad was it?”

Niles turns a slow head towards Raven. She bites her lower lip, pulling a smear of black lipstick.

Deep breath, and Shaytan continues. “There was blood, beautiful. Lots of it.”

He reaches to wipe my tears, but I pull away.

“More than broken plates and black eyes?”

“Afraid so, love. People are dead.”

“Raven?”

She raises her head. Black mascara is dry and cracked against her cheeks.

I ask, “What should I do?”

Rain pelts against the room’s small, single window. Darkness and shadows beat with life—flowing down walls, sliding across the floor, and I am bound and gasping, clawing at the bed sheets.

“What do I say this time?”

Dr. Sawyer’s in-lobby-pre-session check list:

#1 – Please Rate from 0 to 10 (10 being the most intense) AUDITORY AND VISUAL HALLUCINATIONS.

Raven is silent. Shaytan hops, splashing blood. Niles adjusts Shaytan’s leg to stay against his shoulder.

My voice cracks. “Please help.”

Raven, Shaytan and Niles move to separate corners of the room, step into the dark places and their forms disappear.

“Please.”

There is only the rain, aggressive and unrelenting.

Rating =





Kristine Brown

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE

Kristi Petersen Schoonover

The fire in our factory was an accident.

I was enjoying my last cigarette before the end of the twelve-hour work day. Smoking was against policy on the floor, but many of the foremen did it frequently; we blew smoke through our lapels so we were less obvious. Charmed into complacency by the fireproof status of our building, we were confident in the metal cistern beneath the Greene Street window.

My girls were bent before their dimly-lit stations, feeding the sewing machines, aiming for my required number of shirtwaists per hour. Rosa was my newest charge. She was young, bright, and nimble; never had she broken a needle, and never had I docked her for mistakes. Also, never could I say no, for she had the most amenable smile, and the most endearing birth-

mark beneath her left eye: pink, in the shape of a teardrop. She summoned me, for she had to go to the toilet, and I let her step out and do what was needed—even though there wasn't much left of the day. There were just seventeen more minutes before all two hundred and forty women and girls on my floor collected their wages, and flung themselves into the early spring evening.

The next foreman over, Kelly, was heavy-handed, hungry, and had already forced out another foreman and taken his girl-approach. His eye hawked on Rosa's empty chair.

"It's too late in the day for a break."

I looked beyond him, toward his area. One of his girls was on a chair, shaking a hanging light, which had apparently gone out. A tiny spark shot into the air.

"Perhaps you should be paying mind to your own charges."

He glanced at them, then back at me. He nodded at my cigarette.

"Extinguish that."

He watched as I took one more puff, and then tossed the nub the few feet toward the cistern. He retreated with a grunt. I anxiously awaited Rosa's return. At first, there was a tingle in the nose, a tickle in the throat, an itch in the eyes. Then there were pigeon-colored, greasy clouds of smoke, reeking of oil and singed cotton. Before long, flames swept across piles of cuttings on the floor, hopscotched to an unused table, leapt to some hanging patterns, and licked at the corner ceiling. I did not attempt to put it out; I was transfixed by it, a ravenous bird spreading its wings.

Kelly seized one of the water buckets we kept about the floor in case of fire, and hurled it on the conflagration. It did little to harness the phoenix. He glared at me.

“Look what you’ve done!”

From the other side of the floor, beyond gargantuan flames that were now beginning to channel across the ceiling, there was screaming.

“You fool!” He growled. “We get out of this and I’ll have your head! Now get another bucket!”

But it wasn’t me, it wasn’t! It couldn’t have been. The smoke had been coming from the other side of the room, not behind me, not from where I’d thrown the cigarette. I was not going to lose everything I’d worked for. I coughed. The back of my throat tightened. I seized a water bucket nearest me, next to the door to the Greene Street stairs, and doused him.

He shook himself off. “What are you doing?”

I heaved the galvanized bucket, and struck the big man on the head. He fell, smacking into the edge of Table 3 on the way down. Shrieking. Cries of I can’t see. There was going to be nothing of what I worked for left to save. I looked at Kelly, face down on the plank floor. I seized his meaty arms. Moving him would be an impossible task. There was time to help some of the women. Time to shout to guide them toward me, but only if they were willing to plunge through the fast-growing flames- fast-growing flames that were about to block my exit route.

I fled down the stairs. I stood on Greene Street, watching what looked like bales of clothing plummet from the windows, and land with bone-jarring

thuds on the pavement. Then I saw Rosa, standing in a window on the eighth floor. She waved a handkerchief, closed her eyes, and jumped. Her burning dress snagged on a wire halfway down, and there she hung, screaming. I could swear she saw me, and reached for me until her dress burnt all the way through, and she dropped the rest of the way.

“Look what you’ve done!”

At the trial, it was revealed that there were too many other things wrong at Triangle Shirtwaist: locked doors, blocked exits.

“Look what you’ve done!?”

Narrow corridors. A rusted fire escape. The lack of a sprinkler system.

“Look what you’ve done! You fool!”

I married (I saw Rosa). I had a daughter (I saw Rosa). I grew old (I saw Rosa).

I died.

I awoke with the smell of melted gum and exhaust thick around me, and my back on something warm and hard. Buildings rose to the sky, but at first, they were nothing I recognized. Some of them were boarded up, and appeared to be abandoned; others had signs noting they were homes to garment makers. Then I discovered that they were familiar ... white, gray, brown cast iron with elegant facades, some with scrollwork, some with cherubs, fleurs-de-lis. I was on Greene Street, but devoid of human life.

The sun set, its dying rays glinting off the windows of the building that once housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. A building, that in after years, belonged

to New York University. A building, I had not laid eyes upon since that day. I smelled something getting stronger: smoke, smoldering hair, scorched lard. I heard something getting louder: Hish-spittle. Ssssss. Huhhhh. I noticed something, getting closer: immense, caliginous, quivering.

As it came nearer, I identified a horde of ruined bones in bloodied sacks, blackened husks, and charred skeletons. Leading it ... leading it, her head lolling, her smile broken, her face solid with soot except for her birthmark. Rosa.

I swore she saw me.

I swore she reached for me.

I pivoted and ran for the nearest door, a green behemoth barred by a rusting metal beam. I could not lift the beam. I could not push the door. They were coming. I raced to the next building, but its access was blocked by a metal gate. I curled my fingers around the skinny ribs and pulled, hoping for I did not know what-something to shudder free, but it barely even trembled. They were coming. Smoke burned the back of my throat. My eyes watered.

They were coming. I pulled on doors and rattled gates. The smell of incinerated flesh filled my head. Billows of smoke cottoned my vision. I tried almost every building on that section of Greene Street, and I was almost to Washington Square. Oh, if only one, just one, of those doors or gates would have yielded, just even slightly, just even a crack I could have slipped through. I could have embarked upon a stairway. I could have found a corner in which to hide. They would have passed me, not looking, not seeing, as their blackened

eye sockets beheld nothing ahead of them, but the sodium-lit sidewalks, the vacant buildings, the garment makers' signs.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't escape.

"Look what you've done," Kelly said, as his meaty arms crushed my chest, but I insisted that the fire in our factory was an accident.

I was enjoying my last cigarette before the end of the twelve-hour work day. Smoking was against policy on the floor, but many of the foremen did it frequently; we blew smoke through our lapels so we were less obvious. We were charmed into complacency by the fireproof status of our building, confident in the metal cistern beneath the Greene Street window.

AUTHOR BIOS

GORDON BROWN grew up in the deserts of Syria and now lives in the deserts of Nevada. Since his arrival in the New World his work has been published in *Danse Macabre*, *The Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal*, *The Golden Key*, and *Tales to Terrify*. He spends his free time looking after his cats, of which he has none.

KRISTINE BROWN is a research-driven freelance writer and editor who resides in Southwest Texas. In January 2017, her first collection of poems and short stories, *Scraped Knees*, was published by *Ugly Sapling*. Her creative work appears or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *Forage Poetry*, *In-Flight Literary Magazine*, *Vagabond City Literary Journal*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Rambutan Literary*, *Dulcet Quarterly*, *fingers comma toes*, among others. She blogs at <https://crumpledpapercranes.com> and amuses herself with experimental milkshakes.

STEVE CARR began his writing career as a military journalist and has had short stories published in *Double Feature*, *Tigershark Magazine*, *The Wagon Magazine*, *CultureCult Magazine*, *Fictive Dream*, *Ricky's Back Yard*, *The Drunken Llama*, *Sick Lit Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Door is a Jar*, *Viewfinder*, *The Spotty Mirror* and in the *Dystopia/Utopia Anthology* by *Flame Tree Publishing*, the *100 Voices Volume II* anthology by *Centum Press*, the *Waiting for a Kiss* anthology by *Fantasia Divinity Magazine* and the *Neighbors* anthology by *Zimbell House Publishing*, among others. His stories are scheduled for publication in *NoiseMedium*, *Panorama*, *Bento Box*, and

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