THE MONSTER INSIDE

and other Tales

By JG Faherty

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This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the Author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Dedication

This book is dedicated first and foremost to my wife, Andrea, who has put up with my long hours of writing and messy office for too many years to count. Thanks, honey, for believing in me through the dark times when I didn't think I'd ever publish anything. I also want to say thank you to my parents for instilling a love of reading and writing in me at an early age, and for telling me I can be anything I want to be.

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Finally, a thumbs up to Matt Schwartz and all the folks at Shocklines for so many entertaining late-night discussions.

To Harley & Buffy - Woof!

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Everyone has a monster inside

Guests in the Attic

This has always been considered one of my scariest stories by anyone who's read it. I hope you feel the same way.

***

Annabeth Temple heard the sounds for the first time about a week before Halloween. *Scratch-scratch-scratch.* Barely audible over the gurgling of the rainwater coursing through the drain spout outside their bedroom window.

Scratch-scratch-scratch.

There it was again. She lifted her head, more awake now, listening.

Scratch-scratch-scratch.

Was it in the wall? No, over her head.

She waited, ears straining in the darkness, cataloging every sound. The tick of the kitchen clock, the refrigerator's hum, the occasional burble of the water cooler in the kitchen.

Again. The sound of claws scratching at wood and plaster.

Mice? It wouldn't be the first time. The chill October nights often attracted furry creatures from the nearby woods.

Thump!

Annabeth sat up straighter. Mice didn't make noises like that. Something was up there. Something *big.*

Squirrels? Oh, God, *rats?*

"Steve? Steve, wake up." She pushed against her

husband's shoulder.

"Huh? What's the matter?" His voice, fuzzy with sleep, cleared as she kept shaking him.

"There's something in the attic. *Rats.*" The idea had become a certainty in her mind.

She tried to keep calm. This wasn't the city, where whole buildings got infested, and vermin could spread like wild fire. In the suburbs you laid a few traps, sealed a hole, and that was it. They'd had to do it more than once since moving here ten years ago.

So why was her stomach churning?

Scratch-scratch-thump.

"Did you hear them?"

Steve sat up, his just-starting-to-thin brown hair poking up at odd angles. He gave a little groan as he swung his feet out of bed.

"Yeah, I heard them." He banged on the wall with the flat of his hand, as high as he could reach. "Nothing I can do tonight. Tomorrow I'll put traps in the basement and the attic, maybe a couple under the kitchen sink."

He listened for a moment, and then crawled back under the covers. His muscular arms felt good as he pulled her close. She turned, spooning herself against him, enjoying the feel of his warm flesh against hers. She started drifting back into sleep, lulled by the deepening sounds of his breathing.

Until a sudden thought brought her awake again.

"Steve? What about the boys? What if the rats bite them?"

"Not gonna happen." The words were muffled by his pillow, but she heard them. "These aren't city rats, honey. Go to sleep."

She tried, but the idea had taken root in her brain and wouldn't die.

For the rest of the night, the walls were silent. Annabeth knew, because she never fell back to sleep.

###

Steve Temple frowned as he got up from the couch. The damned trick-or-treaters were endless this year. And it never failed; just as he got comfortable again, that's when the next batch of little vermin would knock.

He opened the door, his basket of miniature candy bars in hand, and found the porch empty.

A flashback to his own childhood made him look down. No brown paper bag of dog crap occupied the welcome mat. No voices giggled from the bushes.

The knocking sounded again, and Steve realized it came from inside the house. In the ceiling.

The damn rats again.

They'd been appearing intermittently since last week. He'd put out the usual glue and snap traps, but so far no luck.

The damn things were smarter than he'd given them credit for.

So far it was rats one, Temple family zero.

But that was about to change.

Annabeth had taken the kids to her sister's house for the evening, to trick-or-treat with their cousins. They wouldn't be back for at least three more hours.

Plenty of time to hunt some rats.

He ducked into Bobby's room and grabbed the pellet pistol from the closet. Annabeth was too much of a softie when it came to hurting animals, even if they happened to be eating holes in their walls and making nests in the attic.

Steve had no such qualms. Gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, he made his way as quietly as possible up the stairs to the attic. There was no sound as he turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

The attic was a full size room. Eventually they planned to finish it with walls and carpet, but for now it was just a plank floor over the insulation, and the rafters showing overhead.

The unofficial storage area of the house, over the years it had become a maze of boxes, cartons, and assorted junk.

Steve picked his way carefully through the obstacles. He was counting on the general fearlessness of rats more than his own stalking skills to get close to them.

Something thumped at the far end of the room, and Steve tip-toed his way towards the sound. The flashlight's narrow beam highlighted sudden movement between some

boxes, and he fired the pellet pistol.

A high-pitched squeal answered the gun's soft pop.

"Gotcha!" He ran forward and pushed the stacked boxes aside.

Clawed hands reached out and grabbed at his wrists, sinking needle-sharp nails into his flesh. He screamed in surprise and pain. He pulled back, dropping the gun and flashlight in the process, crying out again as lines of fire blossomed across his hands.

Freed from the creature's grasp, he fell backwards on the rough wood and scurried away, pushing himself with his feet and hands in crab-like fashion.

Hissing and screeching accompanied a flurry of movement in front of him. Boxes tumbled over. Glass shattered and crunched, and then something hard hit him in the chest. Looking down, he saw it was the flashlight.

The rubber handle was slippery in his hand as he fumbled for the button. When the light finally came on, he let out a gasp.

Four red lines furrowed across the back of each hand, from just above the wrist to the knuckles. Blood seeped from the wounds like flood waters rising over a riverbank. Crimson drops trickled down, staining his faded jeans.

"Sonuva--" Thoughts of catching rats disappeared, replaced by the realization that he needed a trip to the emergency room.

Worse, he'd have to tell Annabeth what he'd been doing.

As he escaped down the stairs, he did his best to ignore the triumphant screeches and crashing boxes following his exit.

###

Steve put on his best 'I'm a dope' smile as he met Annabeth at the door. Kyle and Jamie had already rushed into the kitchen to sort through their Halloween bags.

"Don't worry, honey, I'm okay," he said, attempting to forestall her certain anxiety.

"Oh, my God! Look at you!"

Annabeth's normally cream-colored complexion grew paler as she took in the extent of his injuries.

"It looks a lot worse than it really is," he said, nodding his head at the two maroon-splotched dish towels wrapped around his forearms and hands.

"What the hell happened?"

He shrugged. "I went up into the attic to kill those friggin' rats. I shot one with Bobby's pellet gun. Then --"

"You what?" Irritation was quickly supplanting worry on her face.

"Let me finish. I had one cornered behind some boxes, but when I reached for it, it grabbed at me and clawed my arms. So I came downstairs, washed up, and waited for you."

"A rat did all this?" Hands on her hips, mouth pursed,

one eyebrow raised. A poster child for disbelief.

"Obviously it wasn't a rat. I think we've got a raccoon nest up there."

"I can't believe you'd do something like this without me being home."

Steve frowned. "Think how I feel. I'm the one who's gonna have to get the stitches."

"You deserve them." Annabeth looked at him. Her round, dark eyes glistened, making them seem even larger.

"Hey, honey, it's all right." He kissed her nose, one of their little signs of affection. "I'll be fine."

She finally gave him a smile. "And?"

He didn't have to ask what she meant. "And...I'll call an exterminator first thing in the morning."

"Damn straight. Now I guess we have to get you to the hospital." She shook her head. "I'll have Cassie Henderson come watch the boys."

###

"Musta been some raccoon." Tom Clausen, owner of Pest-Be-Gone, raised an eyebrow at Steve's gauze-wrapped hands.

"Eight stitches in one, six in the other," Steve said.

"He thinks it's something to be proud of," Annabeth's tone carried her own opinion like a neon sign.

"Raccoon's are pretty tough," Tom allowed. "A thirty-pound 'coon can make mince meat out of a grown man."

"If I'd known it was a raccoon, I wouldn't have tried to catch it. I figured we had rats."

"More likely to get 'coons than rats. They love attics, 'specially with winter coming." Tom pulled a large flashlight from one coverall pocket. He'd already put on heavy work gloves and plastic goggles. "Now me, I don't take no chances. You wait down here while I go look around."

The stocky, bald-headed exterminator clumped his way up the steps. His eldest son, Jake, was busy examining the outside of the house, looking for possible entry points.

Annabeth leaned against the railing. "He won't kill them, will he?"

Steve glanced at his wife. In her artfully torn jeans and oversized football jersey, she could easily pass for ten years younger than thirty-six.

My wife's a hottie. The thought brought a smile.

"What's so funny?" She tilted her head, eyebrows furrowed.

"Nothing. He won't kill them. He traps them, and then lets them go somewhere far from here."

Annabeth exhaled. "Good. I'm going to get dinner started."

Something crashed in the attic, followed by a loud scream.

"What the--?" Steve raced up the stairs, Annabeth close behind him.

The clamor from the attic grew worse as Steve threw open the door. Shrieks of pain mixed with the sounds of breaking glass and falling objects, creating a deafening pandemonium in the confined space.

"Tom! Are you all right?" Steve tried to make his voice heard over the general din.

"Help!"

The commotion came from the far end, near where Steve had encountered the raccoon the previous day. Strobing flashes of yellow indicated where Tom's flashlight was spinning around in what seemed to be random motions.

Now that he was in the attic proper, Steve noticed the other sound, a high-pitched screeching.

Same as he'd heard when he'd been attacked.

Motioning for Annabeth to stay back, Steve hurried across the dim room.

A stack of boxes exploded outwards in front of him, causing him to stumble back and fall to the floor.

He barely noticed Annabeth's cry of terror as Tom's bloody, twitching form staggered towards them, hands outstretched and waving. Empty eye sockets stared out of a face shredded almost beyond recognition.

Tom's mouth hung open and an unending wail forced its way past teeth and gums exposed by missing lips.

Steve shouted out his own fear and disgust as the ravaged body fell on him. Something moved in the deep shadows between the boxes. No, *several* somethings.

Points of light appeared in the near-darkness.

Eyes.

Each luminescent yellow-green orb held an elliptical pupil in its center, fiery red instead of black. Unlike a cat's eyes, the pupils extended horizontally, creating an unsettling look that would have made a Hollywood special effects designer proud. The twin circles marking each animal's presence were low to the ground and not much larger than nickels, but no less terrifying for their small size.

It wasn't raccoons living in his attic.

Hot piss filled Steve's underwear.

One of the creatures hissed, loud and long. Steve held his breath, his heart triple-timing a painful rhythm in his chest, as he waited for the thing to attack.

Instead, it spoke to him.

"You're all going to die!" The voice was high and alien sounding, as if Satan had sucked helium before speaking.

A short, hairy arm stretched forward out of the shadows. Long, black claws, dripping Tom's blood, dropped something onto the floor.

A human eye.

Only then did the thing screech out its hatred and anger. Behind it, more of the pygmy monsters cackled and wailed.

Steve's field of vision narrowed until all he could see was Tom's blue eye staring at him.

Then everything disappeared into a black fog.

###

"Steven!"

The sound of his name cut through the darkness. Steve thrust out his hands to ward off the beasts' attack.

When the expected pain of teeth and claws gouging flesh didn't materialize, he lowered his arms and opened his eyes.

Bright lights, soft cushions. Annabeth's small, oval face staring at him.

He was in the living room.

"How did I get here?" His throat felt scraped and raw.

"You don't remember? You grabbed me and practically dragged me down the stairs. Then you collapsed here."

She knelt down next to him. "You left Tom up there. What happened? What were those things?" Rapid fire questions, too fast.

Up there. The attic. Clausen's dying body on the floor.

Steve sat up. He remembered everything.

"Where are the kids?" They had to leave, right now.

Before *they* came down stairs.

"Outside, playing in the front yard."

"You're all going to die," it had said.

He believed it.

"Steve!" She shook him. "I tried calling 911. The phone's dead. And my cell's in the car."

"That's fine. C'mon, we're getting the hell out of here." He grabbed her hand and started towards the front door.

"What were those things?" Annabeth asked again.

"I don't know." But deep down, he *did* know.

Evil, hateful creatures. Whether they came from Hell, another planet, or some laboratory didn't matter. They were deadly, and he was getting his family as far away from them as possible. Let the police handle it, or the National Guard.

Halfway to the front door, the lights went out.

"Shit!" Steve stopped, holding on to Annabeth as she stumbled into him.

"What --"

"Quiet!" He kept his voice to a sharp whisper. The hairs on the back of his neck crackled as they stood up. Annabeth's harsh breathing sounded loud in his ears, and he turned away from her, straining to hear anything out of the ordinary. A clocked ticked nearby, and there were the usual creaks and groans any house makes.

As he listened, his eyes grew accustomed to the near darkness. The sun was almost set, and Annabeth had shut the blinds on the living room windows earlier.

"C'mon," he said in a quiet voice. "Let's keep going for the door." Steve stepped carefully and slowly, trying his best not

to bump into anything while at the same time avoiding those places where he knew the floor squeaked.

The reached the door without incident. Steve turned the knob, then paused. "As soon as I open it, run like hell for the car. Got it?"

Annabeth put her hand on his arm. "Wait. How come nobody heard the screams?"

"What?"

"All that noise. How come Kyle and Jamie didn't come to see what was going on? Or Tom's son, Jake? He was right outside."

Outside.

What if all the demons hadn't been in the attic?

"The boys were probably making so much noise of their own, they didn't even notice. We'll grab them and head for the car."

He didn't mention Jake. There was only one way he could've missed his father's death cries.

Don't think about that now.

"On three. One...two...*three!"* Steve pulled the door open, then leaped back with a scream.

"Oh, Jesus! No!" Annabeth pushed past him, fell to her knees on the front steps.

Steve turned his head. The remains of the sandwich and tomato soup he'd had for lunch erupted from his stomach and spilled onto the entryway carpet.

When he looked up again, Annabeth had the lifeless bodies of Kyle and Jamie cradled against her. Her body jerked with the force of her sobbing, causing Kyle's eyeless head to roll bonelessly back and forth. His blood-matted brown hair, the only thing he'd inherited from his father, smeared Annabeth's shirt.

On her other shoulder, Jamie's mutilated face stared its blame at him, the missing eyes and nose creating a flesh-covered skull that wordlessly accused him.

How could you let this happen to me?

Steve grabbed Annabeth's arms and pulled her back inside, dragging the remains of their children along at the same time. When he had her all the way in, he slammed the door shut. No point in being quiet now.

"No, no, no."

Something cold gnawed at Steve's stomach as he listened to his wife keening over Kyle and Jamie's bodies. Hatred, blind and endless, forced its way past the fear that had been overwhelming him.

Those creatures had taken away his children. Without Kyle and Jamie, his own life meant nothing.

He was going to make them pay.

"Annabeth. Annabeth!" He slapped her face. Her eyes went from confused to angry.

He didn't care.

"Go out the back door. Run. As fast as you can. Head for the Peterson's house. When you get there, call the police. Tell

them the boys were attacked by some kind of animal. Then wait there for me."

"I can't leave them!" No tears now. Like Jaime, she was blaming him.

"I'll bring them. But there's something I have to do first."

"I'm not leaving!" She wasn't hearing him.

"I'm going to burn down the house, Annabeth. When I do, I don't want you here." He picked her up, set her on her feet.

Started pushing her towards the kitchen.

She fought him, and he let her. As long as she kept moving.

"Don't make me go!" When she tried to claw his face, he grabbed her hands and pushed harder.

In the kitchen, he pinned her against the wall while he opened the door.

Jake's body fell inside, the headless stump of the neck spilling thick, dark fluids onto the linoleum.

This time when Annabeth screamed, she clutched at Steve, burying her head against his chest.

"I can't go out there alone!"

There was no time for compassion. "You have to. I need you to call the cops."

She tried to punch him, but he held her too tightly. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her.

Her gaze cleared as reason returned. In the last moments

of dusk, her pale face was a moon, her eyes black craters underlined in shadow.

"Steve, no. Please don't..." He saw that she understood.

"Go." One last push and she was out the door. "Run!" He slammed the door shut and locked it.

Annabeth stood on the porch for a moment.

"I love you," he heard her say.

Then she ran.

He turned away, wishing they could have had a better goodbye. They deserved better.

A quick search of the junk drawer and the liquor cabinet turned up the items he needed. In less than two minutes he was ready.

Time to make some noise, make sure they were all waiting for him. He kicked over the kitchen table, sending dishes everywhere.

"All right, you monsters! Come and get it!"

###

Steve stomped his feet as he walked up the steps. He banged on the walls. He kept up a litany of obscenities, shouting as loudly as he could.

In the attic, he paused at the entrance. The demons had been busy. Most of the flesh had been eaten from Tom's body, and bloody stains were visible everywhere in the dim glow of the

flashlight still lying on the floor.

"C'mon, I know you're here. What's the matter, afraid of one lousy human?"

A demon shrieked from behind some boxes. Another answered from across the attic.

Steve's heart thumped in his chest. "Show yourselves, goddammit!"

Boxes fell over.

Something stepped forward.

The creature stood on two legs, its squat, gopher-shaped body hunched over so that its hands nearly touched the ground as it walked. Dirty, matted brown fur, coarse and straight, covered it from head to foot. The thing was about the size of a housecat, without the tail.

But it was the face that made Steve want to run for the nearest church.

The skull was dented and misshapen. A pointy, rat-like snout poked out from under the large, yellow-green eyes. Those eyes stared at Steve, and he felt the malevolent intelligence lurking behind them.

More of them, fifteen, maybe twenty, shuffled into view.

The nearest monstrosity opened its jaws. Instead of a tongue, dozens of pink, worm-like tentacles roiled and twined and waved, each one moving independently of its neighbors. Row after row of jagged teeth jutted out at all angles.

"Hu-man," the diminutive horror stretched the word out

into two long, rasping syllables. As shrill and alien as the voice was, it still managed to clearly convey disgust and hatred. “Time to die.”

Steve reached his hand into his pocket and grasped the cigarette lighter he’d taken from the kitchen. He tried to estimate how long it had been since he’d turned the gas on for the stove and oven.

“Come and get me.” He closed his eyes, braced himself for the pain.

Chittering laughter accompanied the click-click of hundreds of claws on bare wood.

He said a silent goodbye to Annabeth, and a prayer for her safety.

“This is for Jaime and Kyle,” he whispered.

As the first sets of teeth found his flesh, he lit the lighter, the flame spreading quickly across his vodka-soaked pocket.

The sound of agonized screaming filled the night air for almost five minutes before the house exploded and temporarily turned night back into day.

###

A quarter mile away, Annabeth paused as orange and yellow blossomed in the dark twilight. A moment later, the

booming roar of the explosion shattered the early evening stillness.

Annabeth watched the thick black smoke mushroom up over the trees, signaling the end of her life as she knew it. From the moment Steve had closed the door on her, there'd been no doubt as to his intentions. She'd seen the dead look in his hazel eyes. He planned on sacrificing his life to destroy the creatures that had invaded their home and murdered their children.

Sacrificing it to save her.

"Goodbye," she said to the funeral pyre he'd ignited. Then she turned her back, unable to look any longer.

Another fifty yards brought her to Cassie and Joe Peterson's house. A line of solar-powered garden lights outlined the driveway and front walk. The lamp over the door was on, but no lights shone through the windows.

She ran up the driveway and knocked. No answer. Just her damn luck for them not to be home when she needed their help.

The key.

They always left a key under the one of the flower pots on the porch. The first one she turned over showed nothing but cement. She kicked at the others, sending them flying into the yard. She'd pay Cassie back later.

The key was under a large geranium. It took several tries for her to control her shaking hand and get the key into its slot and turn it.

She threw open the door and felt around until she found the light switch.

Nothing happened.

Something hissed in the darkness. Annabeth froze.

Around her, tiny spotlights blazed into existence. Luminescent eyes with red pupils.

High-pitched laughter mixed with ear-piercing wails.

Annabeth's legs collapsed under her and she fell forward.

Into the warm, wet remains of Cassie Henderson.

Like those of her neighbors, Annabeth's screams went unheard.

R-Factor

My goal with this one was to really put the reader in the middle of the Florida swamps, with all the bugs, heat, and humidity. I guess it worked, because it won First Prize in the 2006 Hot Summer Something contest at From the Asylum.com.

***

> "R-selected species, such as amphibians, invest their reproductive energies into producing many offspring, few of which survive to adulthood. K-selected species, such as humans and apes, invest their reproductive energies in fewer offspring, each of which has a better chance of surviving to adulthood."
>
> – Karl Hannifin, former Associate Professor of Biology, University of Miami (2005).

###

Tracy Sue Baker pointed a dirt-encrusted finger at the ad in the Locahatchee Gazette. "Ray-Ray, listen to this: 'If you are a married couple under the age of thirty who has been unable to conceive a baby naturally, you may be right for our study. Participants who are accepted will receive three hundred dollars a month, plus free medical care for two years.'"

Tracy Sue slapped the paper down on the stained and

cigarette-burned card table, rattling the breakfast dishes. She wiped a sweaty hand across her equally sweaty forehead, pushing her limp hair away from her eyes.

"We's a married couple and we ain't thirty yet. An' three hunnert dollars is more'n you make in a month down to Willie's these days."

Ray-Ray shook his head, his long, greasy hair flip-flopping across his face and neck. He never looked away from the car race currently showing on their fifteen-inch black and white television.

"Uh, uh. Ain't no doctor sticking needles in me just so's you can have a whinin' shit machine runnin' 'round here."

Tracy Sue clenched her hands, held in a scream. Yelling at Ray-Ray never did any good. You had to go slow and careful with him if you wanted anything.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed two Keystones from the 'fridge. She handed one to Ray-Ray, then pulled the top back on hers and drank down half the beer in one long gulp. She moved the can to the back of her neck, the cold metal raising goosebumps on her steaming skin.

As far as Tracy Sue was concerned, nothin' was worse than July in Central Florida, what with the bugs, heat, and the smell of horse shit clinging to Ray-Ray's sweaty body like mud on a hog. In her head, she was already laying down three crisp hundred dollar bills and walking out of Wal-Mart with two air conditioners for their double-wide.

But Ray-Ray wouldn't go for that. Instead, she had to reel him in the same way he and his friends did with the catfish down to Kreiger's Pond.

"You know, with three hunnert dollars we could buy us a new color TV, something big. And you'd have enough left over to get that fishin' pole you've had yer eye on."

Ray-Ray stayed silent, but she caught the way his left eye squinted down. He'd heard her, all right. And he was already thinkin' about that new pole.

"And it wouldn't just be one check. They'd have to pay us the whole time I was pregnant. That's nine months, Ray-Ray. Nine times three hunnert is..." she tapped a hot-pink fingernail against her beer can as she counted, "more'n twenty-five hunnert bucks!"

One of his eyebrows went up. The hook was planted. She got up and headed for the door, figuring he'd need about an hour to let things stew in his head.

Just before she walked out, she looked back and said, "Besides, who says we have to keep the baby after it's born?"

The screen door swung shut with its rusty squeal, but not before she caught sight of the small smile turning up the corners of his mustache.

Gotcha!

###

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Baker." Dr. Karl Hannifin entered the examination room, where Tracy Sue reclined on the cool upholstery of the gynecological table.

She wore a crinkly paper gown and had spent most of the morning with her legs up and spread so Hannifin and what seemed like half the world could peer into her womanly regions, as her mother liked to say. But she didn't care. They could film a movie in her cootch if they wanted, long as she got to relax in the marvelously frigid air conditioning of the clinic.

Ray-Ray sat in a nearby chair, thumbing through the latest issue of Bassmaster and turning down the corners of pages advertising fishing gear. Judging from the number of pages he'd marked, you'd think they were lookin' at three *thousand* a month.

Of course, she'd heard stories 'bout how a white baby could fetch twice that much, if you knew where to sell it. And there weren't nothin' Ray's Uncle J-Bird couldn't fence or hock.

Maybe it was time to have J-Bird over for a few cold ones.

Hannifin waved a clipboard full of papers as he took a seat on a stool next to the table. "We've gotten the last of your test results back, and you're both perfect candidates for our program."

Ray-Ray smiled and closed his magazine. "So when do we get..."

"Get started?" Tracy Sue interrupted. "We've been

waiting a long time to be parents." She'd warned Ray-Ray not to talk about the money, but of course he couldn't go ten minutes without thinking 'bout how he was gonna spend 'his' cash.

"Uh, yeah, that's right, Doc. Tracy Sue always wanted herself a big family. House ain't the same without a few rugrats tearin' around, ain't that right?"

Tracy Sue clenched her teeth but kept the smile on her face as Ray-Ray patted her leg with a grimy hand.

"Well, we'll be getting started as soon as you sign the consent forms. They basically say..."

"Don't matter what they say, Doc. We trust ya. Give 'em here."

Dr. Hannifin smiled and handed the clipboard to Ray-Ray. "Just sign by the 'X.' You too, Mrs. Baker."

Tracy Sue signed her name next to Ray-Ray's illegible scrawl, then passed the documents back to Hannifin, who peered through his thick glasses at their signatures before placing the clipboard on the counter.

"Excellent." The doctor's pudgy apple face beamed as he opened a small refrigerator and took out a tray with fourteen syringes on it.

He picked one up and held it to the light, tapped it, and looked again.

Tracy Sue felt a shiver run up her spine that had nothing to do with the cold air. "Hey, Doc, what are all those shots for?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Baker." Hannifin gave a short

chuckle, the extra skin of his jowls dancing in time to his laughter. “Just one quick injection. No worse than a flu shot.”

He wiped her arm with an alcohol pad and jabbed the needle in with one quick motion. She never even felt it break the skin.

“Every two weeks you will return here and I will give you one of these shots. This is the fertility drug you have agreed to try, in return for your payment.”

“Oh. I thought, I don’t know, it’d be a pill or something.” Tracy Sue looked at her arm, where Hannifin had finished swabbing the site a second time.

“Tracy Sue, you said you’d do anything to have a baby, didn’t ya? A few needles ain’t so bad.” Ray-Ray smiled at her over the magazine. Flecks of Cheez-Curlz from his lunch stood out like orange stars against the dark of his beard.

Keep smilin', butt-head. That first check is yours, but I got plans for the rest.

“Mr. Baker, don’t think we’ve forgotten you.” Hannifin removed another tray of labeled needles from the refrigerator. The fluid in these was pink instead of clear.

“Whoa, Doc. I gotta get a shot too?” Ray-Ray stepped backwards, until the wall stopped him.

“The fertility treatment requires enhancement of the sperm as well as the ova, Mr. Baker.” Hannifin moved in close, swabbed Ray-Ray’s arm just below the sleeve of his cut-off flannel, and drove the needle home before Ray-Ray could object.

"Hey!"

"Anything for the baby, right, *honey?"* Tracy Sue made sure to give him an extra big grin.

"Shuddup." He rubbed his arm and glared at her.

"Now, Mrs. Baker, it's important that you both return exactly every fourteen days for your shots. You'll also be getting a complete examination each time, so we can monitor the baby's growth."

"What about our money?"

"Er, yes, Mr. Baker. After each appointment, you'll stop at the front desk and pick up a check for one hundred fifty dollars."

"Let's go, then!" Ray-Ray stood up, tucked his magazine into the back pocket of his overalls.

"I gotta get dressed," she reminded him.

"Well, hurry up. I'll meet ya out front." Smiling and whistling, he hurried out of the office.

"Two weeks, Mrs. Baker," Hannifin gave her a look, as if he thought she was as dumb as Ray-Ray.

"Don't worry, Doc. We'll be here."

###

Tracy Sue noticed the first changes ten weeks later, right around the time Dr. Hannifin said she would. She hadn't had any pregnant cravings yet, which she guessed was good, seein' as

they only had fish sticks, beer, and Beef-a-Roni in the house. She supposed she could always go to her momma's and raid the 'fridge, if need be.

She was getting ready for their trip to the clinic when she caught sight of herself in the bedroom mirror.

A definite bulge had overtaken her previously flat stomach. She ran her hands over it, tracing the gentle curve that began above her belly button and ended just above the Lynyrd Skynyrd tattoo Ray-Ray called his 'go sign.'

Once a month or so, after a few beers, he'd drag her off the couch and into the bedroom. "Gimme the go sign, baby," he'd say, as he undid her pants. As if his goin' down on her with his filthy beard and mustache was the highlight of her night.

Now, if she looked straight down, her stomach actually hid the tattoo.

Damn. I'm really pregnant.

She'd seen her momma go through it, with little Janey, and both her sisters had been poppin' out kids for years. Six reasons right there why she'd always made sure to take her pill every day. She hadn't exactly found their pregnancies attractive. Their sunken eyes, rashes, and mood swings made getting knocked up seem a lot less pleasant than on TV.

But now she felt different. Healthy. Happy, even. Maybe it was the vitamins Dr. Hannifin had her taking. Her mirror showed a young girl whose sandy hair had more life, whose cheeks were rosy instead of pale, and who was fillin' out her bra

better than she ever had.

The longer she thought about it, the more she actually wanted this baby.

How could she have ever considered selling it?

When they arrived at the clinic that afternoon, Dr. Hannifin seemed pleased with her progress as well.

"You're looking excellent, Mrs. Baker. Right on schedule."

"I don't know, Doc, she's gettin' pretty fat," Ray-Ray said, rolling down his sleeve.

"Healthy babies need healthy mothers, Mr. Baker. Nutrients, vitamins, balanced meals. A baby can't grow if it isn't fed."

"But I ain't eatin' any different," Tracy Sue said. "And it's like my stomach just grew overnight."

"Don't worry, my dear. You're just right. There will be even more weight gain as time goes by. We'll monitor you, and I'll let you know if you're gaining too much or too little."

That night, lying in the God-blessed air conditioning of the bedroom, watching "American Idol" on their fancy new color TV, Tracy Sue felt something move inside her.

That can't be the baby kicking already. It ain't even three months yet.

She thought about calling Ray-Ray in from the living room, where he was busy finishing off the last of the Kentucky

Fried they'd bought on the way home.

Then she heard him belch as he popped open another can of Busch and turned on the ball game.

Maybe later.

By the time Ray-Ray came to bed, the movement had stopped and she'd forgotten about it. She lay in the darkness, pretending to be asleep as he arranged himself next to her. The September night had even grown cool enough that she'd turned off the A/C and opened the windows.

She fell asleep to the soothing lullaby of bellowing 'gators and chirping, grunting frogs from the nearby swamp.

The sounds of home.

###

"Doc, this ain't right." Tracy Sue complained, as Hannifin prepared to slide the ultrasound wand over her belly. "I'm like some kinda whale. I musta gained fifty pounds already."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Baker. You're right where you should be for your third trimester. Your excessive weight gain is mostly water retention due to the fertility treatments. Once you have the baby, you'll lose the weight so quickly you won't believe it."

Dr. Hannifin positioned the monitor away from Tracy Sue and pressed the wand against her distended stomach. The

speakers emitted the *wah-wah* sound she recognized from the medical shows on TV.

"Excellent. You're doing just fine."

He made some notes in his charts and then closed the folder. "There's one more thing we need to discuss. Sometime in the next two to four weeks, probably the third week in April, you will be going into labor. When you do, I want you to call me immediately. Do not go to your local hospital, or call 911."

Tracy Sue nodded as she wiped away cold jelly with the paper towels he handed her.

He passed her a business card. "Call this number, day or night. I will dispatch a special ambulance to bring you here, so we can monitor the birth."

Something in Hannifin's tone of voice set off an alarm in Tracy Sue.

He wants to take your baby.

Now why would she think that? But try as she might, now that it was there, she couldn't get the thought out of her head.

No one is going to touch my baby!

"Sure, Doc. We'll call." Tracy Sue forced herself to smile, and shoved the card in the back pocket of her pink terrycloth shorts.

"This is most important, Ms. Baker. The moment you feel the first contractions, call me immediately."

Over my dead body.

The words almost jumped out of her mouth, and she had to clench her teeth to keep quiet.

With a quick nod, Tracy Sue brushed past him and out of the office.

###

"Something's wrong, Doctor." Gail Grady watched through the window as Mr. Baker hurried across the parking lot to catch up with his wife.

"You may be right." Karl Hannifin joined the nurse at the polarized glass. "Mrs. Baker seemed unusually nervous today."

"You don't think the serum was too strong, do you?"

"Highly unlikely. The genetic material and hormones were calculated specifically for their body weights."

"What are you going to do if they don't come in for the birthing?"

"We'll just have to make sure they do. Starting tonight, I'm going to have two men watching them at all times. As soon as she exhibits any sign of going into labor, our team will bring them here."

"What if someone sees?"

Hannifin drew down the blind, cutting off the sight of the Bakers driving off in their decrepit Dodge. "One of the reasons we chose them was for the remoteness of their living

arrangements. I'm certain my men can escort them away from a trailer in the swamplands without any fuss."

###

"Damn if I ain't hungry again," Ray-Ray complained. Dressed in his usual after-dinner attire of stained Jockey shorts and matching wife-beater t-shirt, he was staring into the refrigerator. Only a case of Busch beer stared back at him from the otherwise empty shelves.

Spotlighted in the dim glow from of the refrigerator's bulb, his long hair, straggly beard, and hairy chest made Tracy Sue think of cave men digging for food.

Tracy Sue ran her hands down her body, let them linger over the medicine ball of her belly. Under the skin, the baby kicked and punched. It seemed like it was always active now.

One hand drifted lower, pulled at the string of her sweatpants. She was suddenly hot. Sweat coated her body, even with the air conditioning set at sixty-seven.

Hannifin had told her she might experience hot flashes or muscle aches as her due date drew closer. But this was more than hot flashes.

She pulled down her sweat pants, kicked them to the floor. Her blouse, sopping wet under the arms, followed. Naked, she lay back against the rough material of the couch cushions and let the air conditioning blow across her skin.

A wet, musky odor wafted up to her, and she realized it came from her.

From between her legs.

"Jesus, Tracy Sue. Watch'ya doin?" Ray-Ray stood by the TV, a can of beer in one hand.

"Somethin' don't feel right. I'm all hot, and the baby's kicking like a 'possum in a garbage can."

"What the hell's that jizz comin' outta ya? Is you supposed to do that?"

Tracy Sue stuck a hand between her legs. Sticky, thick fluids coated her fingers. He held her hand up. In the light of the TV, glistening, slimy strings hung from her fingers.

Another kick, this time so strong she actually saw the skin bulge out for a moment.

"Oh, Jesus. It's time. The baby's comin'."

"Well, call the doctor, then."

"No. I don't want him near it." She thought he'd get mad, but he nodded.

Having it in the trailer didn't seem right either, though. It should be...

Outside.

The swamp.

The sudden need was overwhelming. Tracy Sue heaved her body from the couch and pushed Ray-Ray to the side in her haste to feel mud and water under her feet. She cradled her super-sized belly as she ran through the tall grass and scrub

brush that separated the back of their property from Hangman's Swamp.

Warm heat, heavy breathing, and man-odor told her that Ray-Ray had joined her, but she paid him little attention.

She had to reach the swamp before it was too late.

###

Karl Hannifin's cell phone danced and vibrated in his pocket just as he was getting into his Lexus.

"Hannifin."

"Doctor, it's Timmons. Something weird is going on."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the two of them just ran out of the trailer buck naked, and took off into the scrub."

It can't be...

"What's back there?"

"Far as I know, nuthin' but swamp that eventually butts up against Lake Okeechobee."

"Follow them. I should be there in less than an hour."

No time to get his medical team together. He'd have to handle this himself.

Hannifin jammed the key into the ignition, filled the still night air with the sound of grinding metal as he held it in the start position too long.

This can't be happening. The dosage shouldn't have

been strong enough to activate any instinctive responses.

Moments later he was doing twice the speed limit as he headed south on 721.

###

"Christ almighty. What the fuck are those two doing?"

Satch Timmons knelt on the damp ground next to Larry "Red" Reynolds. Through the intervening clumps of waist-high grass they had a clear view of Tracy Sue and Ray-Ray Baker, who at the moment were moving back and forth through the muck at the edge of Hangman's Swamp. Coated in black ooze, Tracy Sue looked for all the world like the amateur mud wrestlers at the titty bars.

"Damned if I know," Red whispered. "If they wasn't naked, I'd say they're looking for somethin'. But the girl sounds like she's in pain."

Satch listened to the moans coming from the pregnant woman as she splashed in the muddy shallows, Ray-Ray following behind her.

"Who lets their pregnant wife walk naked in a swamp? That's just...wait, my phone's vibratin'."

Timmons drew his cell phone out and flipped it open. "Timmons." He listened for a moment, then spoke. "From the back of the trailer go straight into the brush. Walk about ten minutes. You'll hear 'em way before you see 'em. Just stay

low." He closed the phone.

"Hannifin?" Red asked.

"Yeah. He's at the trailer."

"Good. Sooner he gets here, the better. This whole thing's startin' to creep me out." Red jerked a thumb towards the swamp, where Tracy Sue had gone down on all fours and was digging in the ooze about ten feet from shore.

###

Timmons was right, thought Karl Hannifin, as he approached the swamp. Even from thirty yards away, the guttural shouts and splashing water were clearly audible. The April air held a definite chill, and the wild scents of sulfur, decaying plant matter, and stagnant water were overlaid with a musky aroma that was all too familiar.

I'm too late. Unless I can bring them back to shore, they'll complete the ritual in the swamp.

Hannifin caught sight of Timmons and Reynolds to his left, but ignored them. There was no need to hide from the Bakers; in fact, it was essential that they see him.

He emerged from the scrub grass at the edge of the swamp. Setting down the two Styrofoam containers he carried, Hannifin called out, "Mr. and Mrs. Baker! Please, listen to me. It's most urgent."

Out in the water, Tracy Sue stopped digging and looked

up. Ray-Ray stood behind her, spatters of mud from his wife's activity spotting his body.

Hannifin aimed his flashlight at the couple.

"What's goin' on, Doc?" Timmons and Reynolds had emerged from their hiding place in the grass, both of their flashlights adding to the visibility.

Before Hannifin could answer, Tracy Sue shook a fist at the three men.

"Doc, you stay the hell away from me! You ain't gettin' my baby."

"There is no baby, Mrs. Baker. At least not yet. Please, come out of the water and I'll explain everything."

"You're lyin'! You jus' want my baby."

"No, Mrs. Baker, I just want you to give birth in the clinic, where I can document everything. If you leave your eggs here, I'll never be able to..."

"Eggs? What the hell are you..."

The rest of her sentence was lost in an agonized scream. Tracy Sue doubled over in a fetal position, then rolled onto her back, the shallow water not even covering her lower body.

Ray-Ray waded forward to help, calling her name. All Tracy Sue could do was moan and shake her head.

"Doctor, we gotta do something." Reynolds started towards the water, his freckles standing out against pale skin like pepper on a napkin.

Hannifin stopped him. "It's too late. Here, take one of

these." He handed the man one of the coolers. "All we can do is try to get some of the samples back to the lab."

"Samples?" The man took the container but didn't move.

"Just go!" Hannifin began forcing his way through the muck towards the moaning woman. "You'll know when it happens."

Hannifin was still six feet away from Tracy Sue when she arched her back and spread her legs as far as they would go.

From between the swollen lips of her vagina a stream of grayish, thick mucus streamed out. The long, irregular strands curled into a globular shape at her feet. Round, pearly-white objects, each the size of a marble, hung suspended throughout the mass. As more and more material exited, her stomach grew smaller and smaller.

"Oh, God!" Reynolds dropped his cooler and turned away to vomit.

"No! I need those eggs!" Hannifin increased his pace towards Tracy Sue.

Just as he reached her side, a heavy force knocked him sideways into the water. He wiped mud and swamp scum from his eyes and found Ray-Ray Baker standing between him and Tracy Sue.

"Sorry, Doc, can't let you no closer." Ray-Ray held his fists out and ready.

Hannifin scrambled forward and pushed into Ray-Ray's legs, knocking the other man into the water, then crawled past

him. He tried to scoop up the eggs, using the lid to guide the mass forward.

Sudden pain made him drop the container as Ray-Ray grabbed his arm and bent it backwards at the elbow. The wooden sound of breaking bone echoed across the swamp. Hannifin tried to scream, but it turned into a gurgle as Ray-Ray thrust his head under the water.

As his vision faded away, he faintly heard Tracy Sue calling out, “Don’t let them touch my babies!”

###

In the three weeks since giving birth, Tracy Sue had been living on the rotted flesh of Dr. Hannifin and his assistants. Ray-Ray brought her hunks of meat each day so she wouldn’t have to leave the eggs.

Now, beneath their semi-transparent coatings of protective jelly, the embryos had reached a state of almost constant activity.

It was beginning.

Inside the sticky sac, her babies burst free from their eggs. The thick jelly slowed their escape, and Tracy Sue gently broke the mass apart, opening it up so the young ones could enter the world.

One by one, the miniature forms pushed their way out into the water and swam away, tiny arms and legs pumping

furiously as the babies made their way into the safety of the deeper water.

Tracy Sue smiled. The girls all had her blonde hair and skinny bodies; the boys were duplicates of their father, right down to their little beards and mustaches.

In a week, maybe two, they'd grow large enough to join their parents at the trailer. In the meantime, she was starting to feel very horny.

On the beach, Ray-Ray waited for her, hard and ready.

When the Carnival Comes to Town

I don't write a lot of poetry, but what I do write tends to be very dark (surprise!). This is one of several I did that harken back to the Carnival of Fear. I liked the idea of pairing a cute, simple rhyme with such dark subject matter.

***

Calliope music, the barker's voice
Sounds so loud, lights so bright
Cotton candy, corn dogs, candied apples
Sensory overload, senses fight

Tall and thin, with stick-like limbs
The man in yellow, orange, and red
Greets the crowd in merry voice, with
Stovepipe hat upon his narrow head

Children laugh and play the games
Run back and forth, from ride to ride
The tall man watches, his grin quite mad
He knows their souls have no place to hide

Teens try their luck on games of chance
Wasting dollars to impress their dates
The fortuneteller takes hard-earned cash

Delivers grim predictions of people's fates

Into the tents the patrons swarm
To see the Freaks, to scare their wives
Find out too late it's all a trap
It's time to offer up their lives

Screams of fright become too real
Teeth rend flesh, blood sprays the walls
The man in yellow, orange, and red
Spreads his arms, presides o'er all

The Monster Inside

Although it wasn't published until 2007, this was one of the first stories I ever wrote, way back in 2000. It was accepted by a UK magazine that went out of business before the first issue got released (and before I was paid!). It's my take on the classic werewolf trope.

***

From the Diary of Gustavos Donescu

Everyone has a monster inside them.

I've lived with mine as long as I can remember. As a young boy, it would come upon me with no warning. I'd try to explain to my family, tell them the real me had gone away, that the stranger had taken over.

He was the one who did the terrible things they blamed me for. Not me.

As I grew older, learned more about my dual nature, I tried to fight it. But my consciousness, my ability to control my own body, would disappear, and I would be lost once more.

Lost inside the beast.

###

The year was nineteen hundred and six, and I was eight. I was wrestling with my brothers in our small yard, as boys are wont to do. Next I knew, Jacob and Charles were holding me down, while Katrina tried to comfort young Peter.

I couldn't convince them it hadn't been me who'd bitten the mouthful of flesh from Peter's leg.

Not when his blood still ran fresh from my mouth.

I tried to explain, but they didn't understand. Voices in my head? Blackouts? What could my family, so trapped by tradition and the 'old ways,' know about modern diagnoses? I didn't learn the truth of my condition until I was much older.

By then it was too late.

Eventually I left home, became a drifter. Each night, with the dirty sheets of yet another cheap boarding house wrapped around me, I prayed *he* would stay away. Sometimes *he* would disappear for so long, I would begin to feel hope again.

But *he* always returned.

That's how I ended up here.

###

I woke in darkness, rough cobblestones under me, my hands wet and gritty. Nearby, two overturned trash bins spilled their rancid contents across an alleyway.

Voices approached from around the corner. Serious. Searching. The memories of what *he* had done poured over me in

crimson waves.

I had to get away!

I dug my fingers into the crumbling mortar of a brick wall, and quickly climbed up. From the top, it was only a drop of twenty feet to the next alley, where I crouched in the dark.

"Witness said the screams came from down here," the first voice said. Male, official sounding.

I imagined them holding their lanterns high, chasing away the shadows of trash bins and broken wooden crates. Their other hands would have guns in them, shaking perhaps, but ready to fire.

"Only one way out of here. I'll check this side while you...Jesus and Mary! Frank, over here!"

Tears flowed down my cheeks. I knew what they'd found. The sounds of vomiting were followed by frantic shouts for help and the shrill call of police whistles.

Her blood covered me. Even in the dark I could not hide from what the *other* had forced me to do. Each bestial atrocity replayed itself in my mind, as she joined the multitude of other innocents brutalized throughout the years.

By me, but not me.

Reinforcements arrived. I forced myself to run away before my sobs of self-pity and remorse gave me away.

I ran until I could run no more, desperately wishing I could escape the demon lurking within me.

When my legs and lungs gave out, I'd left the yellow

glow of the city's gas lamps far behind, and stood at the edge of a forest.

I dragged my exhausted body through the woods until I located a stream. There I washed the girl's blood from my body and clothes, until the signs of my latest shame blended into the years of murderous stains already embedded in the fabrics.

I knelt down to drink from the cold, metallic water. The cold, silvery orb of the nearly-full moon illuminated the night, showing me a dim reflection of my human face, so familiar yet so frightening because of what it hid.

The monster within.

The next morning I trudged back into Shelton, a relatively large community north of Manhattan. It was time to pack my meager belongings and move on.

Before the moon rose.

On the main streets, the paperboys were already hawking the morning edition.

"Read all about it! 'The Beast' strikes again!"

Again?

I parted company with two hard-earned nickels. Under a crude drawing of a creature part man and part lizard, the article detailed my crime. The criminologists had matched my bloody fingerprints to a murder in Otterskill last month.

There was a manhunt out for the 'The Beast.'

I made my way to Dayley's Boarding House, where I'd

been renting a room by the week. Even in the worst section of the city, I didn't blend in well. My fellow occupants were all permanent residents. Down on their luck, yes. Transients? No.

Everything about me shouted drifter.

How long would it take one of these wretched old men to tip someone to the presence of a stranger, in return for a dollar or a hot meal?

I pulled my battered, road-worn suitcase from beneath the cot. Somewhere downstairs, a radio played Sweet Georgia Brown. According to my railway schedule, the first train out of town didn't leave for three hours.

An emotional malaise crept over me. I decided to take a short nap, figuring I'd be safer in my room than in a public place.

I can't explain my lethargy. Maybe *he* still had some control over me. Maybe it was a mental fugue brought on by my despair.

Perhaps it was just Fate.

I woke up as the last orange-tinted rays of the sun ran across the windowpane. I felt the first stirrings inside me, and knew I'd somehow slept the entire day away.

And it was the first night of the full moon.

I had perhaps a quarter hour to hide myself away. I did the only thing I could think of. I ran down to the basement, taking the dirty, seldom-used stairs three at a time. Once there, I shut the door behind me and hid at the far end of the musty

room.

That was when Fate interfered once more. A janitor chose that moment to open the door. I imagine the sounds of my transmutation attracted his attention.

Damn Fate and her secret agendas!

By the time my full awareness returned, it was too late. His screams had drawn a crowd.

I thought about running, but there were too many people gathered around. Instead, I remained still. I knew the only way to ensure my survival would be through rational thought and docile actions.

The next few hours were among the worst in my consistently unpleasant life. The police arrived, guns drawn. I held up my hands in surrender, hoping they'd correctly interpret my gesture. I feared the collective low intellect of the officers would result in them filling me with lead. Finally, one burly sergeant stepped forward, a long pole in his hand.

"Step back, everyone. Someone wants this one alive."

It took all my will to let him approach. I'd recognized his weapon right away. An electric prod, used to move cattle along.

I closed my eyes and waited for the pain.

I awoke to the stench of my own vomit and piss. Heavy leather straps bound me to a metal bed frame. A thin, worn

mattress did little to dull the broken springs poking my back.

A cracked and water-stained ceiling looked down on me. From what I could see, the walls and floor were in no better shape.

I was human again. That meant I'd been unconscious at least eight hours. No electric shock could have done that.

Two orderlies entered, one holding a heavy night stick, the other a large needle filled with yellow fluid.

My suspicions were confirmed. I'd been drugged.

"Those won't be necessary." My voice was cracked and shaky, but clear. "I'm no danger, not now. Please let me speak with a doctor."

I used a quiet tone and kept my eyes down. I'd heard tales of the sadistic orderlies who worked in mental asylums. I had no desire to experience their brand of medical assistance.

I doubt they cared a whit about me, but a distinguished-looking man in an expensive suit followed them in and ordered them to step back.

"Gustavos Donescu?" he asked.

"Most people call me Gustav," I said. "Please, what time is it?"

The white-haired man removed a shiny pocket watch on a gold chain. "Almost noon."

"Listen to me. The moon rises in less than seven hours. When I change, make sure I am alone. I'll be able to break these bindings, but by the time I do, I should have regained control

over the wolf. If I'm drugged when I change, I don't know what will happen."

"So it's true? You can..." he paused, either unsure of what to say or afraid to voice it.

"Yes. I'm a werewolf, what my gypsy ancestors call the changeling." I sighed. Like the wolf, I would do whatever was necessary to survive. "Whoever you are, I'll tell you everything, but I'm no good to you dead."

The man pulled a small notebook from his jacket pocket.

"Very well. Let us begin with introductions. I am Doctor Robert Van Cleef, Sanitarium Director. Do you understand what that means?"

"Doctor, I'm a werewolf, not a simpleton. You're in charge of a nut house, a place for the insane. That's all right; this may be where I've belonged all along."

"Why, Mister Donescu? For killing that man at Dayley's?"

"I didn't mean for that to happen. I was hiding down there so I *wouldn't* hurt anyone."

I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. The transformation takes a lot of energy, usually replenished by hunting. Meat, fresh and bloody, fuels the wolf. I hadn't eaten from the janitor's body, and I was weak.

"The wolf form has all the intelligence and memories of the human," I continued. "The reverse is also true. That's why no one's ever captured a werewolf in recent times."

"In recent times?" Van Cleef asked. "Lycanthropes have been discovered before?"

"How else could you have the legend? Decades ago, werewolves were simpleminded animals because their human halves were uneducated peasants. Today we live in cities, attend schools, and hold jobs."

"How do you hide all the killings?"

I laughed, a short, bitter exhalation. "What killings? During the full moon, we take ourselves away from human populations. The wolf hunts deer or rabbit, and the human returns home after the moon sets."

Another vomit-flavored laugh forced itself from the pit of my stomach. There was no humor in it, only my acceptance of Fate and her close companion, Irony.

"Doc, what you have before you is the first werewolf to commit murder in over one hundred years."

A hint of disbelief crept into Van Cleef's face.

"Then how do you explain what happened yesterday?"

I shook my head, as much as the bindings allowed. "Bad luck. There is a brief period after the change where the wolf's instincts are in control. During those few minutes, I'm truly the beast of legend."

Warm tears trickled down my face.

"He walked in just as I changed. Five minutes before or after, and I could have simply knocked him unconscious and made my escape."

"So, Mister Donescu, are you trying to tell me this is the first time you've committed murder?"

I looked at him. Something about his voice.

He knew!

I glanced at my hands.

Dark smudges stained my fingertips.

They'd found fingerprints at the murder scene. They knew my name, which meant they'd been to my room at Dayley's.

A person picks up odds and ends in his travels. Railway stubs, matchbooks, a ticket from a ball game. How easy had it been to match my random souvenirs to other cities, other murders?

Time for the truth, all of it. Fear and relief warred inside me. I cleared my throat, preparing to deliver my freedom to this stranger.

"No, I guess it's not. But it wasn't me who killed those people. Not me, and not the wolf. It was *him."*

"Him?"

I told him everything. The blackouts, the things *he* forced me to do. How the only time *he* couldn't appear was during the full moon.

"The wolf-me is stronger than the human me, thank God. It keeps *him* away. You can't imagine the atrocities *he* would commit if *he* could control the wolf."

Van Cleef's gaze never left me as I confessed to the

murder of more than eighty-seven persons over the past ten years.

I looked into his brown eyes and hated what I saw. Not fear, not compassion, not sorrow for those innocent victims. Only cold, clinical pleasure. I'd presented to him the greatest mass murderer in history, who also happened to be a werewolf. Thanks to me, his name would soon sit beside Jung, Freud, and Pavlov.

Van Cleef closed his note book and called for the attendants. After he made his exit, my two burly guards proceeded to thrash me with their batons. Then came the sting of the needle in my arm.

And finally, blessed, dreamless sleep.

###

I awoke to a sour taste filling my mouth and a pattern of aches and pains tattooed across my body.

I lay naked and unbound on a cold metal table. Overhead, six men in white coats, including Van Cleef, stood behind a long window.

I was in an operating theater.

I felt a moment of intense panic, believing they planned on vivisecting me. Then the first warm currents of energy flowed through my body, and I understood they had something else in mind. Movement overhead caught my attention. Someone was

glancing at a timepiece.

The show was about to begin.

As I regained awareness, I gave silent thanks to whoever had chosen this particular room. The bed was nothing more than a tangled mess of twisted metal. Dents and scratches marred the door and walls.

I looked up at my audience.

Half a dozen hands scribbled words into notebooks.

The coppery tang of fresh, raw meat distracted me. I bounded across the room just as the small panel in the wall closed.

I sniffed deeply, trying to determine if they'd poisoned the meat. It smelled clean. Deer, freshly killed.

My empty stomach won out over caution, and I tore into the venison. Two pounds, maybe three. Not nearly enough to satisfy me, especially since I hadn't eaten in almost two days. After that, there was nothing else to do but show them I wasn't a raving lunatic.

At least not in wolf form.

I sat down on the floor, my legs crossed in 'Indian' fashion. I didn't have to wait very long. The door opened, and the smell of fear rolled off their volunteer in waves. My instincts slavered at the thought of hunting him down, but intelligence ruled.

Two guards, armed with hunting rifles, waited in the

doorway to make sure I didn't make a meal of the unlucky young man quivering in his shoes and pissing himself.

Raising my arm slowly so as not to alarm the guards, I waved in my best approximation of a friendly gesture. I tried to look non-threatening, a difficult task for a seven foot werewolf. When I received no response, I held out my paws and pantomimed writing. It took several tries before someone understood me and brought a pad and pencil to the medical student, who slid them across the floor to me.

My wolf-hand isn't designed for writing, so I had to hold the pencil in my fist like a child. My scribbles were crude, but legible.

My name is Gustav. I will not hurt you.

I pushed the pad back across the floor. The student took it and ran from the room.

For the next six hours they left me alone.

###

They kept me in the operating theater for four days. At least they fed me. When they were sure my cycle was over, two orderlies bound me in a straight jacket and returned me to my cell. Van Cleef accompanied them and saw to it I wasn't beaten.

Van Cleef became my constant companion. I answered all his questions regarding my condition, but lied about anything having to do with my relatives.

I wasn't going to put them in danger.

I imagine the police tried to locate my parents, but they'd have no luck. As soon as my name appeared in the papers, they would have moved away, taken new identities.

Thanks to *him*, I'd never see my family again.

On occasion, the good doctor brought me the newspaper so I could keep up with the world outside. I soon learned to skip the front pages and go directly to the sports.

Too many headlines about the 'maniac killer.'

No one on the outside knew about the wolf, but no one knew about *him*, either. Only I, the one innocent of the three, received all the blame.

Each month they moved me to the surgical room for observation. I went along with all their tests. I understood, perhaps better than they, that it kept me alive.

After four months, Van Cleef transferred me to the general patient ward.

"There's no need for you to be in solitary confinement, except during your change," he explained.

"No, you can't! That's what *he's* waiting for!"

Van Cleef shook his head. "Gustav. We've talked about this. There is no *other*. The constant strain of hiding your condition led you to create him. Now that you have revealed the truth, there is no need for him."

I begged, but it did no good.

He waited three days before revealing himself. I was in

the commons area with the other inmates while our cells received their weekly hosing.

He surged up from deep inside me, a gas bubble of evil rising to the surface of my consciousness, and forced me down into the blackness, the place where I am blind and deaf.

I regained my sense of self hours later. Bound in a straight jacket and locked in solitary again.

Within moments, the memories, the visions, came rushing forward.

He'd killed two patients, one with my bare hands, breaking his neck, the other with a pencil stub. *He* pushed it deep into her eye, stopping only when my fingers hit brain matter.

By the time an orderly found the bloody mess and screamed for help, it was far too late for either victim.

I was eating the woman's flesh when the guards arrived.

The beating I received would have left an ordinary human crippled for life.

But I only had to endure the pain until the next change healed me.

###

They keep me in permanent solitary now, except when I'm in wolf form. That's when Van Cleef comes to see me. It's yet another cruel twist of irony that he only feels safe around me when I'm *not* human.

Not long after the murders, he told me what I'd shouted over and over as the guards pulled me away from the bodies.

He believes it confirms his diagnosis. I say it proves him wrong. But we both know I'll never be free of *him*. My every waking hour is haunted by *his* words:

"The wolf won't do it, so I have to!"

Jacob

This was a little something that just popped into my head one day. A lot of my ideas happen that way. I wonder if that says anything about me.

***

Rydell curled in a tight ball on the thin mattress, straining against the white straight jacket. His words came out in small bursts through clenched teeth.

"A ghost shouldn't hurt, but it does. Oh, God, it hurts so much. When it's inside you."

Sitting in her chair across the room, Dr. Sara Mackenzie raised one eyebrow. "Inside you? Are talking about possession?"

"Possession? I guess that's what you'd call it. Of me. By Jacob. What I did, it wasn't my fault. No one believes. Forced me to do it. Needles in my mind. Stabbing, jabbing. Tried to resist, couldn't. Couldn't bear the pain."

"Who is Jacob?"

A deep breath. "Jacob died thousands of years ago. When Christ was alive. He's ancient. And evil. Angry. So angry. A leper. Dying. Went to see Christ. To be cured. But the savior passed him by. Too many people, pushing, crowding. He had no strength to fight back."

Rydell's face was twisted, his jaw muscles bulging. Tears squeezed out from half-shut eyes as he continued his story.

"Afterwards, men came. They beat and stoned him to

death. But he didn't die. His spirit stayed. Fueled by hatred. Hatred of the young, the healthy. He possesses people, makes them do his horrible, evil..."

"Go on," Mackenzie prodded, when Rydell paused.

"Red dreams, full of pain. Couldn't stop him."

Drool spilled out of Rydell's mouth and ran down his face. Droplets sprayed as he choked out the words, his throat tight and neck rigid.

"Thousands of years, forcing people to do unspeakable things against their will. People like me. Try to refuse, he drives razor claws into your brain. Sets fire to your organs. Fills your veins with acid. I couldn't..."

"Couldn't what?" Her pen flowed across the pad. In her lap, the pocket recorder whirred.

"Had to do it. Kill those people. Innocents. Them, me. Tore their flesh with my hands, ate the pieces. But not my hands, my mouth. His. Puked up flesh and blood, he made me eat more. Blood everywhere. Sticky, red. All over me. Taste of metal in my mouth all the time."

Rydell whimpered, a tiny, forlorn sound from deep in his chest.

"Every day another body. I stopped counting. Twenty days, a month. Agony all the time. Couldn't think anymore. Jacob chose them. Always someone alone. Knife to the back. Throw them in the car, take them home. Chop, chop, eat the pieces. Skin, heart, eyes, cocks. Kill and eat. Makes the pain go

away. Keep killing until they catch you."

"What happens then?"

For the first time since he'd been brought to Cannondale Institute, Rydell's body relaxed, and he smiled.

"Then he's gone. Leaves you behind. No more pain, but more pain. In your heart. No one believes. But you will. Yes, you will."

Rydell stopped speaking. Sarah Mackenzie looked up from her notes. "So why hasn't he..."

Sudden pain, blinding agony in her skull. The voice, evil liquid fire in her brain, telling her what to do.

"No, I won't! I won't!"

"Now she believes!" Rydell shouted at the ceiling.

The voice told her how to stop the pain.

Strong hands grabbed her hair, pulled her. There were voices, but she couldn't understand them. The only voice that mattered was Jacob's.

Be a good girl, the pain goes away.

She buried her face deeper into Rydell's stomach, chewing, swallowing. Pink and red hole before her eyes, blood and meat everywhere.

Laughter in her brain, insane howling.

Twenty thousand long years.

Twenty thousand more.

Interruptions

As you might expect, this one came to me after a bout of 'writers block.' It made me wonder how long I'd actually sit at the computer trying to put words to paper.

***

A crawling tickle interrupted my train of thought. I turned away from the typewriter and watched yet another ant struggle through the forest of hairs on my left arm.

Goddamn bugs. I flicked it away.

It was my own fault. The place was a mess. I'd been so involved in my novel I hadn't cleared away the beer bottles and half-eaten sandwiches piling up on my desk.

In a minute.

I placed my fingers back on the keys and tried to enter that place again, the one where *good* writers go.

> "She walked into my office out of nowhere. I could tell right away this one would be trouble. She had that look. Fancy suit, long legs that went up to heaven, and eyes that made you feel like a teenager again."

That was as far as I'd gotten, but I knew I was onto something big. This book would put me back on the map. No one believed I had another one in me. Not my agent, not Margaret. But I'd show them.

Every writer goes through a tough time. Writer's block, they call it. Mine had lasted longer than most. But I was all right now. The words were flowing fast as my mother-in-law's insults. I could see the whole story in my mind, waiting to be put down on paper.

I sipped my coffee. Cold bitterness flowed over my tongue. Time for a fresh pot. I can't think without a hot cup of joe next to me.

I turned on the hot plate under the tiny percolator. While the coffee brewed, I poured a shot of Old Crow from the bottle in the bottom drawer. Just enough to keep the imagination juices flowing.

Whiskey-laced coffee in hand, I returned to my writing. That's one of my problems. Everything has to be just so. The slightest distraction, and suddenly half a day's wasted.

Or six years.

Margaret had been the worst distraction. Always harping about something. Bills, work, how I had no time for her. She never understood how hard it is to write. Any hack can type pages. It takes an artist to create stories people want to read.

Murder at Night had paid for the down payment on the house, but Margaret hadn't been satisfied. She wanted me to "get a job." She didn't understand. How was I supposed to produce a steady paycheck *and* write my next novel?

Another prickle on my arm. *Damn ants. Where do they come from?* I squeezed this one between my fingers, rubbed my

hand on my pants.

I sipped my coffee. Movement on my tongue told me the bugs had found their way into the cup again. *Let 'em drown.* I have work to do, can't afford to lose my train of thought.

I need this book.

> "As soon as I saw her, I knew she was going to make my life ~~dificult~~ difficult."

Good line. What next?

I warmed my cup with more whiskey.

All good writers drink. Margaret hadn't understood that either. Neither did Sy. Some agent he was. Told me he couldn't represent me anymore, I was washed up. I'd show him. Show them both. When this one was finished he'd be begging to represent me again.

Unlike everyone around me, I never lost faith. That's why I didn't put up a fuss when they fired me from the grocery. I'd never wanted to work there anyway. All it did was take time away from my writing.

Of course, Margaret didn't see it that way. Every day was the same. Just when I'd start to get an idea in my head, she'd barge in, going on about money for food, for clothes, for electricity. I'd scream at her, we'd have another argument, and she'd storm out.

And there I was, left with a blank page and nothing to

show for a day's work, my muse totally shot. A never-ending cycle, day in, day out.

On top of that were the usual distractions that come with working at home: noisy neighbors, car horns honking, kids yelling outside. Even after Margaret left, intrusions on my creativity continued to plague me. They still do.

The worst offender is Emily Jermaine. A real estate broker from down the block, she's been known to waltz in like she owns the place, going on and on with all sorts of nonsensical prattle. I've tried everything possible to chase her away but nothing works. Now I just ignore her and pray she leaves quickly.

> "As soon as I saw her, I knew she was going to make my life ~~dificult~~ difficult. Trouble. That should be my middle name."

Hey, that's good, builds the character. Writing is like that, start small, build the momentum. For years I tried to force stories out, my frustration growing as I sat in front of the blank paper. I always knew if I could just get a few weeks of peace, even a few days, I could get in the right frame of mind.

But there was always something. After Margaret left, the phone interrupted me all the time. Sometimes I actually believed it waited until my fingers moved towards the keys before it rang.

At first it was Margaret calling two or three times a day.

The sad truth was I didn't miss her, and she didn't like hearing that. Eventually she got the hint and stopped calling.

That didn't stop the phone from ringing at all hours of the day or night. Mostly creditors. One thing I did miss about Margaret, she always kept the bills paid.

Once the collection agencies are on your trail, they don't let up. The phone was the first thing to go. I wish I'd gotten rid of it sooner. Without its nagging cries I experienced actual quiet for the first time in years.

It also meant the other bill collectors couldn't get hold of me. They tried coming to the door, but it was easy to pretend I wasn't home.

The bank sent several notices threatening repossession, but after a while they gave up. That meant the pressure was on. I needed to finish and sell a rough draft in order to keep the house.

With no Margaret and no phone to distract me, I actually started putting words on paper. If it wasn't for that nosy Jermaine woman, and these damn bugs, life would be downright perfect. But no matter. Even a temperamental artist like myself can't ask for that. Life's not perfect.

I knocked a heavy brown beetle off my leg and re-read what I'd written.

> "Trouble. That should be my middle name. Not ~~beouse~~ because I look for it, but because it always seems to find me. Now it had found me

again, and ~~it's~~ its name was Cynthia Primrose. She told me she needed my help. I should have said no, but I'm a sucker for a pretty face. Not to mention a nice set of gams."

A child's shout jarred me from the story. *Damn!* I could feel the words sitting in my head, just waiting for life. Now this.

Two snot-nosed brats rode their bikes back and forth in front of the house. I yelled at them through the window, but they ignored me.

Why can't those damn kids play quietly?

When I was their age, we knew better than to create a disturbance this early in the morning. I tried to remember their names so I could say something to their parents later, but the boys didn't look familiar.

Come to think of it, the whole neighborhood looked different. Several families had new cars, futuristic vehicles with rounded front ends so different from the square, long cars of my youth.

The Thompsons used to own a Nash, a real beauty. Now a sleek pickup truck sat in their driveway. I wondered if Margaret still had our '52 Packard or if she'd sold it out of spite.

It struck me that I hadn't seen the Thompsons for quite a while. A man I didn't recognized left the house across the street, driving away in one of those new cars. When had the Wyatts moved?

It was all too distracting. I took a moment to regroup my thoughts. Closed my eyes and breathed deep. “Put yourself in your characters’ heads.” Professor Sloan at Rutgers always said that.

The boys no longer played in the street. Small blessing. I brushed some ants from the handle of my cup and took a sip.

Cold again. How long had my eyes been closed?

I poured another shot. Better than cream. Have to conserve the coffee; I don’t have money to buy more. That’s all right, there’s still plenty of booze in the cabinet.

Heavy drinking hasn’t hurt Hemingway, it won’t hurt me. I used to tell Margaret that, when she nagged me about the booze.

“You’re no Hemingway, Stan,” she’d say in her almightier-than-thou tone.

“No, I’m not,” I’d shoot back. “Hemingway’s smarter. He moved to paradise and lives alone.”

Then we’d be off to the races again.

Focus, Stan. You need this. Not just for the money, but to prove you’re still a writer. This is the one, I can feel it. Sometimes you just know.

Another beetle fell onto the desk and I flicked it away.

Really should clean up.

I’ll take a small break after the next chapter to recharge my batteries. Clean up the house, maybe sit outside and enjoy the fresh air.

Speaking of outside, who's at the door but good old Emily Jermaine again. And she's not alone. Why can't she get it through her head? I still own the place, at least until the creditors tell me different.

Unless...maybe the bank already foreclosed and I'd missed the letter?

No, that couldn't be. They'd have sent someone to evict me. Missus Go-Getter Real Estate Broker is no different than the ones who'd come before her. Buzzards, circling around the dying man, jockeying to be first to the spoils.

Fine, let her act like she owns the place. I'm glad I didn't clean up yet. Teach her to show up unexpected.

> "Not to mention a nice set of gams. She crossed those legs and that was it for me. She could have asked me to shoot her mother and I'd have agreed. But what she asked me was"

Emily opened the front door, already chirping about some inane topic. I purposely didn't look up from the typewriter, doing my best imitation of someone home alone.

"This is the living room. As you can see, the last owners completely re-did it. New baseboards, new fireplace mantel. All new windows throughout the house. I think it's so much nicer to have the extra light coming in."

"The windows are beautiful." The smart-looking blonde

followed close on Emily's heels, as if she'd get lost without her guide. A young man, no doubt her husband, walked with her. "And everything's so clean."

"The owners painted all the rooms before they moved. Over here is the combination dinette and kitchen." Emily's shrill tones penetrated walls and brain matter with equal ease.

"There used to be a sit-down counter separating the two rooms, but now it's just a nice, open space."

A vague memory of us eating at the kitchen counter wafted through my mind. When had Margaret gotten rid of it?

No matter. Concentrate. I need a motive for Cynthia. What does she want? Something to do with money. It's always about love, sex, and money. That's what sells.

"Across the hall from the kitchen is the den. It's also a very good size. Right now it's set up as a family room, but you could use it as an office."

My three uninvited guests marched through in single file, a mother duck with her two ducklings.

"The nook at the far end is perfect for a desk. You could sit there and write holiday cards or letters as you look out the window."

"It's fantastic," gushed the blonde, walking past me without so much as a glance in my direction. All three ignored the disheveled appearance of the room, and me, as they did their circuit. Emily must have warned them ahead of time.

Emily extolled the woodwork and the solid construction.

The pretty young thing and her husband asked the occasional question, but most of the time it was Emily's mindless, numbing chatter that assailed my ears.

I willed my fingers to type but they were frozen. It happens whenever she's around. She is my anti-muse.

I dumped the remnants of my coffee into the waste basket, relocating two beetles from the bottom of the cup in the process.

Might as well make a fresh pot, I'm not going to get anything done with these people wandering around.

I turned on the hot plate, added some whiskey to my cup, and tried to remain patient while the water boiled.

"How long has the house been empty?" They were in the hallway now.

"Almost a month."

Of all the nerve. I couldn't take it. What was I, invisible?

I stood and threw a plate against the wall. When that didn't elicit a response, I kicked over my waste can, scattering papers and several empty bottles of rotgut whiskey across the den. I picked up one of the bottles and flung it into the hallway behind them.

Emily, used to my tantrums, didn't react. I expected the couple to scream, run out of the house, do *something,* but they just kept asking questions, taking their cue from their guide.

"Why is the house for sale?" This from the young wife.

Unbelievable. They must really need a house.

To hell with them. Regaining a bit of my composure, I tuned them out as best I could. The caravan moved upstairs to the bedrooms, but I could still hear their voices through the heating grate over my head.

"They just had a child and needed a bigger place. The original owner was a celebrity of sorts. Stan Lourdes. He wrote a best seller in nineteen fifty-one and bought this house the same year."

"I actually grew up just down the street," Miss Blabbermouth continued, "and I still remember him. He used to shout at any children who played in front of the house. My parents said he never wrote another word after that one book. He'd just sit at his typewriter day after day, right until the end."

I wanted to scream in Emily's face but I knew it would do no good. It never had.

Nothing I did ever disturbed Emily or her delusional monologue of lies and insults. The other real estate agents had been the same way. Something they were taught in real estate school, no doubt.

Fine, let them have their fun. A few more minutes and they'd be gone.

> "She needed me to help get back the money her lover had stolen from her. How could I say no?"

Footsteps descended the stairs. *Finally.*

I leaned back in my chair, poured some fresh coffee into my whiskey, and said a silent thank you as the intruders headed towards the front door.

The young man paused in the hallway.

"Is that coffee I smell?"

Emily glanced my way and smiled. "I don't smell anything. But if you like, we can stop for a cup on the way to the next house."

I screamed at them, but they left the house without looking at me again.

Turning back to the typewriter, I placed my hands on the keys.

And waited.

The Wet Spot

This was just a nasty story I wrote as a lark, after seeing a gorgeous girl in the local mall and wondering what she was doing with her overweight, filthy, rude husband.

***

"Oh, babe, that was great." Carl Samuels rolled over onto his side and exhaled.

A foul wave of stale cigarette breath, liberally laced with the odors of sausage and Budweiser, washed over Gina where she lay next to him. Stifling an involuntary retch, she nodded and tried to move away from the jizz spot already growing wet on the sheets.

"You're always great, honey," she said, then clamped her teeth over her lower lip to keep the rest of her thoughts from escaping.

Compared to a dead buffalo, maybe. I don't know what smells worse, your ass or your breath, you disgusting bastard. A monkey would be cleaner. Go take a shower, you fucking pig!

With a grunt, Carl slid his bulk out of bed and ambled towards the hallway. For a brief, hopeful moment, Gina thought he might actually be following her unspoken command, but then he dashed her hopes.

"Be right back. Gotta drain the lizard. Then you can gimme a backrub, get this ache outta my shoulders. That is, if Little Carl didn't tire you out too much." He waggled

something—either his pathetic, semi-hard penis or his finger, she couldn't be sure—at her and laughed as he trudged into the bathroom.

Bright light filled the hallway, letting her know he'd left the door open as usual.

That was when the voice returned, the one that had been speaking to her every night for the past week.

- *Kill him when he comes back. This is your chance.* -

Always the same thing.

- *Kill him.* -

"Goddammit." Carl's voice, echoing from the bathroom.

"What's the matter?"

- *You don't care. Just kill him.* -

"I think I pissed on my fuckin' foot."

- *He won't clean it, you know. Kill him. Use the knife.* -

Gina's hand crept down the side of the bed. Her fingers touched the wooden handle of the carving knife. She'd found it wedged between the mattress and the box spring three days earlier, after the voice had told her to look there. Instead of returning it to the kitchen drawer, she'd held it for a moment, admiring the way the morning sunlight glinted on the wide, triangular blade.

Then she'd slid it back under the mattress.

Now the handle felt warm and smooth in her hand, felt...right.

- Just stick it in his fat belly. No one would blame you. –

Yes they would. He's never hurt me. Never laid a hand on me.

- He's a piece of shit. Every night he smothers you with his stink while he ruts on top you like the beast that he is. And we both know he doesn't satisfy you. -

It doesn't matter. He's my husband. For better or worse.

Her fingers ran along the cold steel of the blade.

- Nothing could be worse. Kill him! -

"Oh, man, that water's cold." The same bad joke he told every time he pissed. Carl's words were accompanied by the gurgling echo of piss striking water.

- He's an animal. You know half of it's going on the floor or the seat right now. There'll be a puddle waiting for you tomorrow. -

I can't do it. I'm not a murderer.

The toilet flushed and the bathroom light went out. Carl paused in the bedroom doorway to scratch his bloated belly. For a moment, his pear-shaped body was framed by the moonlight streaming through the bedroom window. Even in the near darkness, the thick, matted hair on his chest and groin was easily visible. His shiny, bald dome reflected whitely, and for that brief second he resembled an enormous orangutan more than a person. His hand moved upwards to his armpit, completing the image. Then he stepped forward, leaving the square of light.

- Do it NOW! -

He climbed into bed and rested one sweaty arm across her chest. His hand was damp as well, and she had a sick feeling it was piss, not sweat, on his fingers.

She rolled over on her side so she wouldn't have to smell the cheesy stench of his armpits.

Her hand relaxed its hold on the knife.

Carl let loose a loud fart. "Whoa, baby! Dinner's really kickin' my ass tonight!" He flapped the covers, filling the room with an odor like rotten meat soaked in sewage.

Gina clutched the knife handle so hard her knuckles ached.

The voice laughed.

- *You'll do it. Sooner or later. I can wait.* -

The Key To Her Heart

I can thank Nirvana for this one. I was listening to 'Heart Shaped Box' on the radio and I pictured a key being put into that box, only instead of a box it was a real heart. The rest of the story just sort of evolved from that.

***

Zoey took a seat at the end of the bar. "Appletini, please," she asked, as the bartender zipped by. She'd arrived early on purpose, wanting to get a little liquid courage going before her date arrived.

Halfway through the drink, someone tapped her on the shoulder. "Hi, are you Zoey?"

She nodded. He took the seat next to her and held out his hand. "I'm Tom. Thanks for telling me what you'd be wearing, it sure makes it easier than going from person to person asking names."

Zoey sipped her drink and eyed her blind date, a pleasant-looking man in his mid-twenties. As he'd said in his email, he wore black jeans and a blue denim shirt with a Budweiser lizard on the pocket.

Tom ordered a beer for himself and another round for her. After their drinks arrived, a moment of awkward silence stretched on for several sips. Finally, Tom set down his drink and gave her a sheepish grin. "Look, I, uh, haven't really done this before. You know, online dating."

Zoey smiled. “Me either. Let’s just pretend we met here, and you’re hitting on me.”

He chuckled, his soft brown eyes crinkling with laugh lines as he did. “Is that what I’m doing?”

She stared at him, and hoped he was as attracted to her cultivated modern goth look as she was to his rather ordinary, Midwestern high school-quarterback-all-grown-up features.

“That depends. Buy me another drink?”

###

Zoey fell backwards onto her bed, pulling Tom along for the ride. He stopped just before he landed on her, supporting himself with one muscular arm while with the other hand he fumbled at getting his jeans opened.

“Let me,” she said, her sentence ending in a tipsy giggle. She slid his pants down to his knees, and then removed her own t-shirt and leather mini while he kicked his shoes off and freed his legs.

For the next fifteen minutes they ‘knocked boots,’ as her roommate liked to call it. At one point, Zoey had to hold back a laugh, knowing she’d get an earful from Melanie in the morning about the headboard banging against the wall.

Too bad, she thought. *She’s got a boyfriend. I haven’t had it in a while.*

Afterwards, Tom rolled off her, grabbed his beer from

the nightstand, and took a long swallow. She reached over and stroked his chest.

"You never even took your shirt off," she chided him.

"Didn't have time." He raised an eyebrow, teasing her.

"I want to see your chest. You certainly saw enough of mine." She undid the buttons, exposing well-tanned flesh. His hairless, smooth skin felt warm against her hand as she tickled her fingers up from his stomach.

Until she touched icy-cold metal.

"What's this?" Zoey held the object up. It was a key, the long, old-fashioned kind like her grandfather used to carry, only this one had a big circular grip at one end and a jagged, triangular projection at the other.

Tom slipped the gold chain over his head, let it dangle in front of her. "This is the key to your heart."

Zoey snorted laughter. "You're getting romantic already? We haven't even done it twice!" She reversed the direction of her stroking fingers, moving them downwards below his waist. "At least, not yet."

Without warning, Tom's hand lunged forward, driving the pointed end of the key into Zoey's chest just below her left breast. Her mouth opened wide, but only the barest hiss of air came out as the frigid metal slid between her ribs and punctured her heart. She fell back against the pillows, twisting and jerking in a St. Vitus dance of thrashing spasms. Tom straddled her body and pushed down until the key buried itself in her flesh up to its

round handle.

Zoey's mouth opened and closed, making small choking sounds, and her hands beat against the blankets. With a vicious twist, Tom turned the key sharply to the left.

"With this key, I lock thy heart. You belong to me, never to part. Now your love is like a door, closed to others forever more."

Glowing pink light burst from the hole in Zoey's flesh as Tom turned the key straight again and withdrew it. One tiny drop of blood fell from the tip and rolled down over the mound of her breast. The small wound closed up, neatly sealing itself until no mark remained. Her mouth snapped shut, teeth clacking together loudly in the quiet dusk of the single candle they'd lit earlier.

Tom got up and started to get dressed. He watched the life come back into Zoey's eyes as her chest heaved and she took a deep breath.

"Where are you going?" she asked him, sitting up and reaching out to him. "You're not leaving me, are you?"

He patted her leg. "Only for a little while." He took a business card from his pocket. "Go to this address tomorrow night and wait for me. The other girls will explain everything." He kissed her cheek, then left the room, carrying his shoes and coat.

###

Melanie was already sitting at the table drinking coffee when Zoey entered the kitchen.

"Oh, look who finally woke up," Melanie said with a laugh. "That was some night you had, at least from what I heard. Grab a cup and tell me all about your new friend."

Zoey poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. She stared into the hot liquid, saw Tom's reflection just below the surface, his face smiling at her.

She felt a stupid grin growing on her lips.

"He holds the key to my heart."

The Lesson

I used to teach laboratory classes in Comparative Anatomy, Ecology, and Ecology of the Everglades when I was in grad school. Both my parents were teachers, too. So when I had the opportunity to write a story about school children, I decided to go very dark with it.

Very, very, dark!

***

I think I may have taught them too well.

They learned faster than I thought they would. I guess they really took their lessons to heart. Motivated to learn. Is that more the sign of a good teacher or good students? Perhaps both. It doesn't matter. Not now. They'll be back soon. For their final lesson.

And mine.

It started simply enough. I had a theory I wanted to test, one I'd pondered since my first education class in college. The classroom would be my laboratory, the students my subjects. The other fifth-grade classes would be the controls. Not a perfect experiment design, but the best I could hope for under the circumstances.

For years, scientists and educators have debated the

relative values of parental influence versus the influence of teachers on how children turned out. Do the home life and family values of a student determine their performance, or is it the teacher, motivating them and interesting them, who sets a student on a particular learning path?

While I finalized my plan for testing my theory, I was forced to admit my motivations were more than a little tainted by my own background, my desire to reconcile a horrific early upbringing followed by my adoptive parents' dedication to providing me with the best education possible.

I've never been a person who believes in salvation, but I have no other word to describe what happened to me when my eventual adoptive family saved me from fourteen years of bouncing between a series of progressively nightmarish foster homes, the last of which featured a patriarch who now resides on death row for practicing his penchant for sadism on young boys.

Had I not been rescued from my hellish life by a loving mother, who was also a teacher, and her husband, an attorney teaching contract law at the university, I have no doubt I'd have ended up on the streets, probably dying long before my time.

Indeed, it was my adoptive parents who gave me not only the stability I craved, but also the foundations for the experiment I planned on initiating, instilling in me a craving for knowledge and the methods necessary for developing and testing a hypothesis. After that, it was only a matter of biding my time until, after college and graduate school, I found a teaching

position where I could begin following my real passion.

Unraveling my life and the mysteries of who holds the real key to a child's education.

Now, however, I wonder if I was ever truly saved.

It began with the first day of school. Lesson Number One.

"Good morning class. My name is Mister Harris. I'll be your teacher for this year. Tell me, how many of you like school?"

A scattering of hands went up among the twenty-something students. More than a few looked nervous, as if I might punish them for disliking school.

"Okay, fair enough. Now, how many of you would rather be taught at home, by your parents?"

This time fewer hands went up. One boy in the back, the traditional row for the behaviorally challenged, laughed out loud. "Spending the day with my parents is the *last* thing I wanna do!" A few other kids joined him in his laughter.

"Interesting comment—" I glanced at my seating chart. "—Brad. So you're saying, given a choice, you'd rather be in this classroom than studying history or math with your parents?"

"I'd rather be playin' baseball," Brad Norris said, eliciting more laughter.

"Wouldn't we all?" I pointed outside, where another fine

September day warmed the school grounds. “But that’s out of our control. However, we can control what happens in here. The school says we have to learn History, Mathematics, Science, Reading, and Writing. What they don’t say is there are things we can learn besides those subjects. Fun things. Secret things. Are you interested?”

I had them. Most of them nodded, their eyes wide. A few still looked confused or worried, but I felt confident they’d come around.

“All right, then. Let’s get started. The first thing we have to do is swear to secrecy. If the principal finds out what we’re doing, he’ll get mad. He might even fire me. And then you’d be stuck with a different teacher, someone who doesn’t care about fun. So I’m going to pass around a piece of paper, and everyone’s going to sign it, including me. Do you all know what a contract is?”

Nods, and a few ‘yes, Mister Harris’ acknowledgements.

Ten minutes later, I began the first lesson.

In the beginning, the hardest part was keeping things hidden from the school administrators and other teachers. Principal Warwick had a habit of dropping in unannounced to check on his new teacher, so I took to lecturing from near the door, where I could monitor the hallway through the window. The class got a big kick out of this, and although I hadn’t

planned it, the deception actually helped cement my bond with them. Children love secrets, and they love to rebel against authority. The more we co-conspired, the more they thought of me as the cool big brother or uncle.

By the end of September, I had Warwick's schedule down pretty good, and I increased what some might call my misuse of authority.

The first lesson was simple enough. Go home and steal something from a family member. Nothing so large or valuable that it would be missed; just a trinket or some cash or even a photograph. I gave them a week to find something.

"On Friday we'll have a secret show and tell," I told them.

They surprised me from the start. Based on that, maybe I should have seen my present situation coming.

Most of the class did what I'd told them. However, a few took things a step further. Mary Sanderson showed us a letter her father had gotten from his girlfriend, who her mother didn't know about. Luke White brought in a handful of bullets from his brother's room.

"I'd have brought the gun, but I couldn't reach it," he said. I told him to stay away from the gun. We didn't want anyone getting hurt. Not yet, anyhow.

Tanya Hoag made several classmates blush when she showed a naked picture of her brother's girlfriend. "He keeps a whole box of them in his closet."

After everyone had showed their stolen articles, I congratulated them. “Good job. Now you’re ready for Lesson Two: Telling Someone a Lie.”

By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, I had the class firmly in my grasp. There was no doubt they considered me a more important influence in their lives than their parents or guardians. By that point, I’d guided them way past petty theft and simple white lies. The day before the holiday break, while some classes drew turkeys by tracing their fingers on paper and others slept through stories about the Pilgrims, my students showed me the results of their latest assignment.

Think of something so bad your parents would punish you for the entire Thanksgiving vacation if you got caught. Then do it.

It’s one thing to risk an Indian burn or black eye from a sibling, or being sent to bed with no dessert. It’s another thing entirely for a ten or eleven-year-old child to risk giving up their entire vacation. But sure enough, the whole class carried out their illicit homework. And, as I’d come to expect, most of them exceeded my instructions, almost as if they enjoyed showing me I wasn’t taking things far enough.

Janey Waltham opened a cardboard box. Two dead rodents lay inside. “I killed my little sister’s hamsters, then I left the cage open and told my parents Jenna must have let them get

out, and they were loose in the house someplace. My mom spanked Jenna and told her no TV for a week."

Ken Ortega put eighty dollars on his desk. "I spray-painted my brother's bicycle and sold it to a kid who lives down the street."

Brad Norris, who'd gone from barely passing to a straight-A student, gave me a defiant smile. "That's all baby stuff. I poured sugar into the gas tank of every car on my street. In a day or two, they'll all have to go in the shop."

And so it went. Switching spoiled milk for good milk. Putting laxatives into brownie mix. One girl even collected a bag of dog turds and dumped it in the neighbor's pool.

Every single student completed the assignment. When I looked at their faces, I no longer saw fear, only anticipation for the next task.

Looking back, that may have been the point where I should have ended the experiment.

"This next one is going to be tough," I said. "Some of you might chicken out. If you do, it's okay. I'll understand."

"What is it?" Cathy Chen asked.

"I want you to hurt someone. It doesn't matter who, or how. But you have to cause them physical pain, and they can't know who did it."

Just then, the bell rang, signaling the end of class and the beginning of the Thanksgiving break.

As the children gathered their books and coats, Brad

Norris called out to me in a loud voice.

"Hey, Mister Harris. You should've given us something harder."

I paused in the act of closing my briefcase. "What do you mean? You could get in a lot of trouble if you get caught."

Brad laughed. "Dude, we're in fifth grade. It's not like they can send us to jail or something."

Several other students voiced their agreement. I stood there, unsure of what to say, as they filed out to start their vacations. Had I made the assignment too easy? Or did it just seem that way to an eleven-year-old who came from a broken family on the wrong side of town?

That question stayed with me for the next four days.

As always, I covered all the required lessons before taking my spot by the door and telling the students it was time to go over their secret homework. That they'd carried out the assignment I had no doubt; the only question was how they'd interpreted my intentionally vague instructions.

"Who wants to go first?"

Stella McDonald raised her hand. I expected her to tell me a story of pre-teen, back-alley violence. Throwing rocks at the younger kids. Punching someone when they weren't looking. Perhaps knocking someone off their bike.

I wasn't even close.

Stella held up several pictures. “I pushed my little brother down the basement stairs and blamed it on the dog.”

I looked at one of the photos. It showed a young boy of four or five at the bottom of a staircase, his eyes closed and one arm twisted in a way no arm should bend. A suspiciously dark stain peeked out from beneath his head.

“What happened?” someone asked.

Stella smiled. “He broke his arm in two places and got a concussion.”

The rest of the class clapped while I continued to look at the pictures. Without any urging from me, Brent O’Leary stood up.

He, too, had pictures in his hand.

“My father always keeps a glass of water next to his bed. After my parents fell asleep, I snuck into their room, took the glass, and then put broken glass on the floor and poured some water on it, so he’d think he knocked it over in his sleep. In the morning, he stepped on the glass and cut his feet open. He had to get fourteen stitches.”

Brent’s photos showed bloody footprints on a wood floor.

Something cold turned over in my belly. “Did you all take pictures?” I asked.

Most of the class responded in the affirmative. “We figured we should,” Brent said. “Otherwise, you might not believe us.”

"You talked about this during vacation?"

They nodded, and Cathy Chen added, "We always talk about our assignments. Sometimes...sometimes we have to help each other."

That was new to me. "Help each other how?"

"Well, like this time. You said the person we hurt couldn't see us. So some of us acted as lookouts for each other."

Brad pointed to the boy next to him. "Yeah, like, I couldn't never have done mine without Jimmy keepin' an eye out for me."

Jimmy Elster smiled and nodded.

"What did you do?" Somehow, I knew Brad's would be the worst.

"Check it out." He passed a photo to me. None of the children who handled it even looked at it, which told me they'd already seen it.

It showed an old man lying on the sidewalk, the back of his head covered in blood. Next to him lay what looked like a piece of cement, or a broken cinder block.

The ball of ice in my stomach grew larger. "You...you didn't kill him, did you?"

"Nah. At least, I don't think so. He was still alive when the ambulance took him away." Brad's voice carried a hint of amusement, but no other emotion.

I wanted to tell them they'd gone too far, but how could I? After all, it was my own fault. I'd been so eager to see what

they'd come up with, I never even considered they'd kill someone.

You did tell them you wanted an act of violence.

Yes, but there's a big difference between violence and murder.

Isn't there?

While I contemplated my own question, the rest of the class came forward. Most dropped pictures on my desk; a few asked if I wanted to hear their stories.

I had no answer for them, but before I could say anything, movement in the hallway caught my attention and I hurried everyone back to their seats. Belatedly, I realized the evidence of a dozen violent crimes sat on my desk, and I held more in my hand. Two long strides carried me to the desk and I hurriedly swept all the photos into my top drawer. Just as I slammed the drawer home, the classroom door opened and Principal Warwick entered the room.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harris."

"Principal Warwick." I nodded, and then returned my gaze to the class, thanking God I'd left the last part of the math lesson on the board.

"Okay, class. Who wants to solve the last word problem?"

Jessica Stewart raised her hand, and I pointed at her. Principal Warwick listened politely to the answer, then nodded at me and left.

A moment after the door closed, the bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. Relief washed over me, until I saw none of my students had left their desks.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Jeff Keppler answered for them. "What's our next assignment?"

Next assignment? I thought. *I'm still trying to comprehend what happened with the last one.* I had to come up with something fast, though, because they were all staring at me. "Um, I'll have to think on that. When the time is right, I'll tell you."

Their expressions told me I hadn't satisfied them. They were like junkies, eager for the next fix and suddenly denied. All of them except Brad Norris. As he walked past, he gave me a sly smile and an exaggerated wink.

I gathered the pictures from my desk and stuffed them in my briefcase to shred when I got home. Even then, though, I didn't feel better. All night long, my mind kept returning to the images in those photographs.

And Brad Norris' face as he left the classroom.

It happened on Saturday night. They planned it well, with military precision. I got out of my car, pizza in one hand and house keys in the other. I never saw the black cord strung across the walkway. They were on me before my body hit the

ground, four of them, the four biggest in the class. I rolled over and managed to kick two of them away. Then I saw Brad Norris, his face a pale, sneering moon hanging over me in the dark.

His arm moved, and my head exploded.

I woke up in my own basement, with a terrible pain in my head and feeling like I might throw up. Cold liquid dripped down my face and shirt, and I understood they'd splashed water on me to wake me up. I glanced down. The water had a pink tinge to it, which made me wonder how deep the wound on my head was. I knew it had to be pretty bad; it throbbed in time to my heartbeat, but with a power all its own, as if plugged into an amplifier. I remembered Brad's picture of the old man. The chunk of cement.

Smart boy. Stick with what works.

Movement to my left caught my eye and I tried to turn, but something held me in place. A closer look at myself revealed they'd strapped me to a chair with what appeared to be miles of duct tape.

"Hey, Mr. Harris," someone said. The pain in my skull made it difficult to recognize the voice. Then the speaker stepped into view. *Brad Norris. I should have known.*

"What...why are you doing this?" My voice was harsh and cracked, as if I hadn't spoken in weeks. Each word shoved spikes of agony through my brain.

"It's your own fault. You wouldn't give us an assignment. Some of girls thought you were mad because we'd

hurt people more than you wanted. But me and a couple of the guys thought maybe you were just scared. So after you went home, we snuck back into the classroom. All the pictures were gone."

I nodded, then stopped as a dizzy spell overcame me. "Of course. Couldn't get caught with them. We'd all go to jail."

Brad shook his head. "No, only you would. We're just kids. But that got us thinking. Maybe you weren't doing it to protect us. Maybe you wanted to get us in trouble."

"No, I'd never--"

"'Cause after all, who would the police believe? A bunch of kids, or a schoolteacher?"

"No!" This time the dizziness mutated into nausea, and I jerked forward, vomiting hot liquid into my lap. The force of my spasms sent lightning bolts through my skull, and the world went black.

When I opened my eyes again, the whole class stood before me.

"Please. Help me." The words came out in gasping whispers. "I promise to keep the secret. We...we signed a contract, remember?"

"If you told, we wouldn't go to jail, but we might get in a lot of trouble." Melanie Hopkins frowned at me. "Special schools. Counseling. Maybe even juvie homes."

I wanted to shake my head, tell them no, but my body refused to respond.

Brad picked up the story. “We had a meeting. Even if you didn’t tell on us, you might end the game. We decided we like being this way, doing these things. We don’t want it to stop. So we had to figure out how to keep the game going without getting caught. We had to figure out the next lesson.”

“What comes after violence?” Cathy Chen asked me.

I knew the answer.

Murder.

They left the room after that, left me alone down here. Brad was the last to go; before leaving, he wrapped more duct tape around my head, covering my mouth. “My dad says it fixes everything,” he said through a sneer. “Sure glad you had some.”

I can hear them upstairs. Talking. Rummaging in the kitchen and in my office. Doing what? Removing all evidence of my experiment? They’re only in fifth grade, for god’s sake. They shouldn’t be this smart.

Wait. They’ve stopped.

More footsteps in the kitchen.

The basement door opening.

God help me. I think my final lesson is about to begin.

Out of the Garden

This was my first professional sale, ever. I wrote it based on an assignment in a writing class I took, the Borderlands Writers Bootcamp. It's a fantastic class that I recommend to anyone who's serious about writing.

***

Chet clicked the mouse on the file icon labeled "Primate Enhancement: Laboratory Log." Finger tapping rapidly on the mouse's buttons, he scrolled through the table of contents but saw no entries indicating justification or purpose for the project.

He took a deep breath, stretched his arms and shoulders, and rotated his neck to relieve the tension. He'd resigned himself to skimming the entire set of lab notes to find the information he needed.

But he wasn't happy about it.

> March 9, 2005
> 9:00 a.m. First series of PE 221 injections administered. Subjects 104M and 104F, a bonded pair of bonobos, showed no deleterious effects. The second series has been scheduled for three days from now.

Katie came up behind him, leaned over his shoulder. Her brown hair tickled his ear, and he forced himself to concentrate

on the job they had to do.

"Find anything yet?" she asked.

"Look for yourself." He turned the screen slightly, so she could see.

"Just data on the compound's structure, and an outline of experimental parameters. Skip to the next entry."

Chet obliged, scrolling through pages until a new date came up.

> March 12, 2005
> Second series of PE 221 administered. According to the computer projections, enhancement of the frontal and temporal lobes should be visible by CAT scan within one week. Daily intelligence testing has begun [see file PE 221: Subject Test Results.]

"What type of enhancement?" Katie's warm breath feathered across the back of his neck.

Focus. Our time here is limited.

"Cellular regeneration and increased neurochemical production. I saw a reference to it in one of the other files."

Chet tapped the page-down key. "Ballard's hypothesis centered on increasing the capabilities of the speech centers as well as overall cognitive functions."

"Cognitive function enhancement is one thing, but

bonobo anatomy isn't designed for speech. What good would it do to make modifications in that area?"

"Vocal cord implantation." Chet released a sibilant sigh through his teeth. "Don't ask me how. The data on the surgical technique must be in another file we haven't come across yet."

"Not that it matters." Katie pulled a chair over to the desk. "Every aspect of their experiment violates the prohibitions against animal experimentation. Whoever's in charge here is going to be staring at an awful lot of jail time."

"You'd think so. I'm willing to bet they get off with a slap on the wrist and maybe some fines. In fact, after the government sees what happened here, they'll probably recreate the entire experiment somewhere else, somewhere it won't be found."

"You're a pessimist." Katie touched his hand briefly, to take the sting from her words.

"Yeah, I am. Let's see what else is in here. I'll skip a few months."

> September 23, 2005
>
> CAT scans continue to indicate a 60% or greater increase in temporal and frontal lobe size, with concurrent increases in neurological activity.
>
> Both subjects appear interested in the computer, but have only mastered the most basic of commands. However, there has been no

> concurrent increase in vocabulary, either written or in sign, and no demonstration of vocalization. Subjects have made no progress beyond the norm for non-enhanced bonobos.

"No progress?" Chet glanced around the room. The empty, open cages stared like dark eyes at the two dead bodies on the floor. Rosettes of blood decorated the bright white of the lab coats. "I think maybe Sloan was mistaken about that," he murmured.

"Keep going." Katie gave his arm a nudge. "We don't have all day."

"I'll skip ahead to yesterday's entry." He tabbed down until he found the previous day's date.

> January 24, 2006
> After extensive analysis of the data, the committee has voted to end this phase of the project. The remaining lots of PE 221 will be disposed of, and tomorrow we will sacrifice 104M and 104F. Autopsies will be carried out at 9am to try and identify a cause, either organic or chemical, for the failure.

"That's it." Chet pushed the keyboard away, moved his chair back from the desk. "I searched through just about every

one of Sloan's files. I even did a keyword search. No historical background on the experiments. Maybe we'll find something in the administrative records."

"Suppose we do find something? Then what?"

"I don't know." He shook his head.

"Chet, there's nothing we can do to stop it. Even if we find the evidence we need, get it to the right people, it won't matter. There could be a dozen secret labs like this one set up around the country."

"We can't let them get away with it."

"Right now we don't have a choice. It's too dangerous for us to get involved any more than we already have."

Chet looked at her. Something akin to fear was growing in her soft, brown eyes.

He knew she was right.

"We'll have to go underground. This was a government-funded project. They're going to have people looking for us after what we did."

Chet slid off the chair and walked over to Doctor Maximilian Sloan's body, delivered a hard kick that sent tacky blood flying in all directions.

"Chet, no more. He'll never hurt anyone again." Katie held out her hand to him.

"You're wrong." He took her hand in his, feeling the rough hair against his callused palm.

He stroked the ragged scar running down her throat.

“For us, the pain will never end.”

Home on the Range

I don't write a lot of zombie stories, but when I do, I always try to find a new twist on the zombie trope. No slow, shambling, dim-witted creatures moaning for brains. I like my zombies to be...different.

***

"Safe to enter!" Bishop called out.

Dom opened the corral gate. Eighty or ninety head of livestock scrambled away, crying out in fear. With a few shouts and some judicious use of his cattle prod, Dom managed to separate twenty adults and guide them into one of the smaller pens. Grunting from the effort, he swung the heavy wooden door shut. He kept a wary eye on the remaining herd as he backed out of the corral and locked the gate.

"Hit the switch," he called out to his partner.

Twenty yards away, at the main gate, Bishop pulled the lever that restored power to the electrified fence. "Gate's hot!"

Dom turned off his prod and slipped it through the special loop in his belt. In his ten years as a livestock manager, there'd been no stampedes or injuries.

He planned on keeping it that way.

"C'mon, let's get this done," he said, as Bishop joined him. "It's been a long day, and I feel the need for a beer or two."

"I was planning on headin' downtown tonight." Bishop patted his hip pocket. "It's payday, and I'm hornier than a

drunken sailor."

Dom stared at the tall, skinny farm hand. Only twenty-three, Bishop had no idea of the way things used to be, before the laws were passed. At fifty-two, Dom remembered the old days all too clearly. He'd lost a lot of friends back then.

"Bishop, you keep spendin' your time in the meat packing district, one day you're gonna get yourself in big trouble." Dom shook his head at the folly of youth, spit bitter dust from his mouth, and led the way to the back of the building.

"Hell, man, it's just sex. Ain't hurting no one. What good's having cash if you can't use it to get laid once in a while?" Bishop grabbed the crotch of his faded jeans and smiled.

"Never mind. You'll learn your own lessons, same as I done at your age."

"Fine, I'll go with you. But there better be some hot ass there or I'm hittin' the market."

At the back of the barn, they entered through a small door next to the loading dock. The air inside the dim room reeked of shit and sweat and industrial detergents. To the right was a small office, which Dom unlocked.

Dom pointed to the control panel. "Hit the lift button, would you?"

"No problem, boss." Bishop's dark face glistened with sweat in the stifling heat of the room. He pressed the green button as Dom took a seat in front of the television screen.

The black and white picture showed the livestock

gathered at one end of the pen. There was no sound, but Dom knew from past experience the rank air would be filled with anxious moans and whimpers. He tapped a button on the console and the screen split, now showing the meat room as well. The steel door between the two concrete quarters began to rise up. On the fifteen-inch screen, the green, black, and purple-mottled skin of the meat showed in shades of gray.

As the door rose higher, the hungry moaning emanating from the meat locker actually became audible in the office, a distant rumbling more felt than heard. Open mouths drooled putrid, contaminated fluids as the meat stumbled forward towards their meal. The first ones crawled under the gap. In the split view of the security cameras, it was if they disappeared into nothingness and then re-appeared on the other side. Others followed as the opening grew wider.

The meat descended on the livestock in a frenzy of violence, tearing at flesh with fingers and teeth. Black sprays of blood splattered the walls and floor of the pen. In moments, each of the meat took one of the herd to the ground and commenced eating.

Dom pulled out his handkerchief and wiped at his sweating face and neck. As always, his memory filled in the sounds of feeding. The cracking of bone.

The wet, tearing of flesh as the meat ripped and chewed their meals.

Back when the government established the first farms, ranch hands had been required to operate the doors manually, and stay just outside the pens to ensure nothing, and no one, escaped. Another thing Bishop was too young to remember, but Dom still had nightmares about.

One by one, the meat finished their meals and stood up, wiping bloody hands on equally bloody bare chests. When the last one finished, an older male of about sixty walked over to the intercom and triggered it.

"Hello? We're all good in here." Its previously rotting skin was already healing, taking on a human-like appearance.

"Thank you," Dom said into his microphone. "Please exit in the back to the showers. You'll find clean clothes in there, too."

The figure nodded and then turned away, signaling to the other meat to follow it.

Dom glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes. Right on schedule. "Okay, Bishop. I'll meet them in the dressing room with their assignments. You go start the bus."

Bishop flipped a mock salute and left the office. Dom rose from the desk and headed for the door, then stopped. Turning back to the desk, he turned off the power to the security cam, cutting off the sight of arms, legs, and entrails scattered about the cement floor.

Like he did every feeding shift, Dom thanked God he no longer worked clean up.

###

Dom tilted the bottle back and drained the last of the foamy backwash. He lifted it in the air and wagged it back and forth until Katie noticed.

"Two more, Kate." Turning to Bishop, he said, "After this round, I'm outta here."

"What? C'mon, it's still early."

Bishop finished his mug and set it down. Before Dom could respond, Katie picked up the empties and placed the next round on the bar. "This one's on me, boys." She gave the dark wood a perfunctory wipe with her rag.

"See?" Bishop slapped his hand on the bar. "You can't leave now. We're getting free beer."

"I don't need no more beer," Dom told his assistant. "I got a pregnant wife waiting at home. Someday you'll understand why I needed to come out, and why I can't stay."

"Damn. There's a lot of fine women here tonight. Sure you don't wanna relive some of your youth?" Bishop laughed as he took another swallow of icy-cold lager.

Dom didn't smile. "My youth is something I'd much rather forget than relive."

Bishop put his bottle down. "What was it like?"

"What? My youth?" Dom turned on his bar stool, facing out towards the Friday night crowd.

"You know what I mean. I only been in the business a couple of years. Started as a meat truck driver in Texas, then got promoted here. You were in it from the beginning."

Dom remained silent, watching happy hour unfold around them. Business professionals, shop owners, plumbers, housewives. Care-free. Able to forget their jobs and enjoy the evening.

Did he want to get into this conversation? On the other hand, didn't the kid deserve to know?

Maybe it might be good to talk about some things, things he couldn't discuss at home.

"I started back in seventy-five," Dom began, his eyes still on the crowd. "The livestock farms had only been operating about six months at that point. It took the government a while to find out the meat needed a regular supply of human brains and organs to maintain their intelligence. Then they had to figure out a way to legally feed them."

Dom tilted his beer bottle at Bishop. "You won't hear this in any history books. The farms actually operated for almost a year before cloning was perfected."

"Where'd they get the livestock before that?" Bishop asked.

"That was easy. Criminals, the homeless, political prisoners. No shortage of cattle back then who wouldn't be missed if they disappeared."

Bishop's eyebrows went up. "They got away with that?"

Dom nodded, his weather-worn face expressionless. “Until the meat population got too large to feed. Packaging plants couldn’t harvest parts and ship them fast enough. There were some incidents where the meat went bad, and more than a few human workers got attacked. That’s when the government stepped in and passed the law that only government-contracted companies could own and outsource meat for labor.”

“But people still find ways around the law,” Bishop said.

“Folks is always gonna do things that ain’t legal,” Dom agreed. “That’s why the meat district ain’t safe. You don’t know if you’re gettin’ government goods or somebody’s private stash that ain’t been fed lately.”

“You can tell by how they look.”

Dom shook his head at the over-confidence of youth. “Maybe you can. Maybe. Me, I don’t trust no meat, ‘specially street meat. I’ve seen what happens when it goes bad. When I first started, they didn’t have all the safety precautions we got today. I saw good men, better workers than you or me, torn to pieces ‘cause someone got careless, or didn’t notice the meat was spoiled.”

“How often did it happen?” Bishop’s voice was little more than a whisper.

“I’ve cleaned the blood and guts of my co-workers more times than I want to remember. You think I’m a hard ass, but you can’t be too careful in our business. If the meat’s not trying to eat your head, the livestock’s trying to bust out of the pens.

They're both dangerous."

Dom looked at his watch. It was after nine; Cindy would be waiting. He didn't normally bring unexpected dinner guests home, even though Cindy always said he could. But he found he was enjoying the male bonding with Bishop. He was three beers over his usual limit, and actually having a good time.

Besides, he and Cindy had never been to Texas.

"Hey, kid. Feel like a home-cooked meal tonight? I gotta get going, what with Cindy bein' pregnant and all, but she'll have enough food for ten people. And I got beer in the 'fridge."

Bishop glanced around the bar, then nodded. "Sure, what the hell. Let's go."

###

Dom pulled into the driveway. Thirty-three Wilcox Lane was an average-size, one story ranch with a fairly new coat of paint and a neatly trimmed lawn.

"Nice place," Bishop said. He'd followed Dom's Trailblazer in his own beat up Jeep Wrangler.

"Thanks. We've been here about six years."

"Rent or own?" Bishop asked as they walked up the path to the front door. The warm, California air was full of cricket sounds, fresh-cut grass, and the mixed scents of Cindy's flower boxes.

"Rent, with an option. You know how it is; company

could transfer us any time. I don't wanna be bothered with buying and selling houses. Hell, I've lived in nineteen cities across eleven states over the last thirty-odd years."

Dom opened the front door. The warm, homey smells of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, mingled with hints of scented candles and fresh-vacuumed carpets, billowed out into the air around them.

"Honey, we're here." He'd called on the way home to let her know they'd be three for dinner. As he'd expected, she'd been fine with the last minute arrangements, overjoyed to entertain a guest at last.

"In the kitchen, sweetheart," a voice replied.

"Wait 'til you taste Cindy's meatloaf. I swear, she could—" Dom's words broke off as Cindy emerged from the kitchen, all blonde hair and happy smile. Under her blue apron, she wore tan slacks and a green shirt the same sea foam shade as her eyes. The bow-tied apron string accentuated a thin figure just starting to swell with pregnancy.

"Mmm, it's good to have you home!" She threw her arms around him and gave him a firm kiss on the lips, which he happily returned.

"Ahem," Bishop cleared his throat in an exaggerated manner.

"Honey, this is Bishop. He's the new guy at work I was telling you about."

Cindy stepped forward and gave him a quick hug.

"Pleased to meet you, Bishop. You should feel honored. Dom's never brought home anyone from work before."

Bishop stared at Cindy for a moment, his eyes narrowed, before responding. "Well, if your cooking's as good as it smells, I can see why. You'd have people bustin' down the door every night lookin' for a free meal."

Cindy covered her mouth and giggled. "Why thank you, Bishop. Why don't you two have a seat in the kitchen. Food's all ready, and I'll grab you couple of beers."

Dom looked carefully, but Bishop no longer wore the curious expression on his face.

Had it even been there?

Cindy led them through the spotless, furniture store-perfect living room and into a cozy kitchen decorated in yellows and greens. Dom took a seat at the round table, and motioned for Bishop to join him.

"Here you boys go." Cindy placed heaping plates of meatloaf, potatoes, and string beans in front of them. Two ice-cold bottles of beer followed.

"Oh, man, this looks good. Aren't you gonna join us?" Bishop asked, scooping up a forkful of meat.

"No, I ate earlier. That's what happens when your husband works late and you're eating for two." Cindy patted her slight bulge, the corners of her wide grin nearly touching the rosy blush on each cheek.

The next few minutes were filled with the sounds of

Dom and Bishop eating. Cindy puttered through the kitchen, wiping down the stove, adding notes to a shopping list, and getting second helpings of food and beer for the men.

Bishop wiped up the last specks of meatloaf from his plate with a slice of thick-cut French bread, then leaned back in his chair and held a hand to his stomach. “That was the best meal I’ve had since I moved out here.”

Dom covered a wet burp with the back of his hand and then said, “Honey, you outdid yourself this time. That was great. I hope there’s some leftover for lunch.”

He turned to Bishop. “There’s nothing better than a cold meatloaf sandwich and...” Dom paused when he noticed Bishop staring at Cindy again. “What’s the matter?”

“Now I remember,” Bishop said, but he was speaking to Cindy. “I knew you looked familiar. Cindy Bauer, right?”

Cindy cast a wide-eyed glance at Dom, then shook her head at Bishop before turning away and busying herself with the coffee pot.

“Who’s Cindy Bauer?” Dom asked. Cold fear began fighting for space with the meatloaf in his stomach.

“She is.” Bishop pointed at Cindy. “Cindy Bauer from Macon, Georgia. Class of ninety-two, right?”

Cindy kept her back turned to the table, head down.

“Couldn’t be.” Dom shook his head. “We’ve never even been to Georgia. Besides, I thought you said you was from Texas.”

Bishop looked over at Dom. “No, I moved here from Texas. I grew up in Georgia. We lived in Macon ‘til I was nineteen, then my momma moved us to Atlanta after my daddy died. Cindy, you was two years ahead of me in high school. You used to hang with Melanie Fitzpatrick and Dana Demuth. C’mon, it ain’t been that long. You must remember them.”

Bishop got up and stood next to her, staring at her profile.

He never saw Dom come at him from behind with the heavy frying pan.

###

Bishop woke to pain. Waves of it pulsed through his skull and down his neck. Cramping bolts of agony racked his shoulders. The pins and needles feeling of cut off circulation filled his hands and feet.

Opening his eyes ratcheted his suffering up another level and sent the world spinning around him. Gut-wrenching nausea followed and he vomited a hot stream of meatloaf, bread, string beans, and beer into his lap and down onto the floor.

He tried to move away from the mess, but couldn’t.

Someone had tied him to the chair.

“Sorry about hitting you like that,” Dom’s voice came from behind him. “But I couldn’t take any chances.”

Amidst the forest of misery inside Bishop’s head, a

memory brightened into existence. He spat out flecks of regurgitated food. A chill ran through his body that had nothing to do with the cool basement air. He tried to speak, coughed, and then got the words out.

"Cindy Bauer died the year after I moved to Atlanta. My cousin told me."

"That's right. If I'd known you were from Georgia, I'd have never invited you over. All these years we've been so careful. Too careful, Cindy always said. Never staying in one place too long. That's why we came here. What were the odds of someone from Macon showing up in California? But I can't take any chances. Not with the woman I love."

Dom's blocky form stepped in front of Bishop, carefully avoiding the mess of half-digested food. He still wore his faded green Dickies pants and shirt from work. The dim glow of the basement bulbs bleached his tanned, leathery skin to a pale, sickly, yellow. His voice lowered to a conspiratorial whisper.

"It's my own fault, really. I should have known better. But I let the beer get to me. I was having a good time. You see, Cindy's condition means I don't get to socialize much. It's the only problem in our relationship. Sometimes she gets upset, says I'm ashamed of her."

Dom stood back up, his knee joints popping in the quiet of the musty room. "Like I could ever be ashamed of her. Shit, I been in love with her since the day she came through the pen. She's the reason I brought you home last night, so she could

have some company in the house, pretend we're a regular family, even if only for a few hours."

Bishop rubbed his tongue along the roof of his mouth, trying to work up enough saliva to talk. "You brought her home from the farm?" he managed, his voice a raspy croak.

"A different one. Back in Fayettville, in ninety-six. I was working the meat truck, same's you are now. We loaded 'em up after feeding, and there she was. She turned and smiled at me as she walked up the ramp, and I knew. Back then it was easier to help yourself to a little on the side, jus' like you do down in the meat packing district."

Bishop turned his head as his boss took a seat on a nearby workbench. "You took her home to be your sex slave."

"Yeah, I guess I did. At first. But it only took a couple of nights for us to fall in love."

"Meat ain't got no feelings. That's the point of using them."

"Bullshit, sonny. The ones you and I see every day, that might be so. They're like robots. But once in a while, you get one that's something more. And I figured out why."

Dom tapped his finger against his head. "It's the brains, Bishop. We let 'em eat brains and livers and kidneys and all the other parts. Brings 'em back to life for a few days, with no real memories of anything. You train 'em to do a job, then three or four days later you got to feed 'em again and start all over. It's like reprogramming a machine."

Dom held up a finger like a teacher making a point. “But you’ve seen some of them. They hold on to a few memories. They usually end up as the pack leaders, like the one today who spoke to us in the feed pen.”

“Meat’s meat. Everyone knows that,” Bishop said.

“Don’t believe it. If you feed ‘em right, you get something different.”

Bishop started to shake his head, stopped when the dizziness and nausea threatened a comeback.

Dom smiled, a cold, hollow expression. “For twelve years now I been feedin’ Cindy nothin’ but brains, and she’s the closest thing to human you can get. She remembers our life together, she cries when she’s sad, and she laughs when she’s happy. She even feels pain if she hurts herself. But she don’t remember much of anything from before she and I met.”

“Dom, I hear you. Hell, I’d probably do the same thing if I had the chance. Ain’t much different from me gettin’ some ass from meat I know ain’t legal, right? I won’t tell if you don’t.”

The stocky foreman continued as if Bishop hadn’t spoken. “It hasn’t been easy, Bishop, I don’t mind tellin’ you that. I can’t take the chance of havin’ her start to turn rotten while she’s grocery shopping or something. That means feeding her every other day. It took a while, but I figured out a system. Couple times a week, I sneak back to the farm at night, or stay late after everyone else is gone. Then I turn off the security camera on the livestock pen, go in with the shock stick, and take

one, usually a young one."

Dom chuckled, a self-deprecating laugh. "Funny thing is, if things had stayed the same, there'd be no problem. No one notices if one or two cattle goes missing. If I need more, I get 'em the old-fashioned way. Hookers and street people, the ones who're never missed if they disappear. But lately I've had to do extra shopping, if you know what I mean." He slid off the table and came back over to Bishop.

"See, two or three brains a week ain't enough anymore. Not when Cindy's eatin' for two now."

Bishop's stomach churned. "You mean...?"

"Yeah, it's mine. Don't ask me how. It ain't supposed to be possible between humans and meat. My theory is all those brains have done more than just keep her memories and emotions alive. They've brought her flesh back as well. That's why I gotta make sure she don't go even the littlest bit spoiled. It might kill Dom Junior."

Dom opened a drawer in the workbench and pulled out a long, curved knife. "It's a shame, really. I enjoyed working with you, Bishop. After you're gone, I'll have to put in for another transfer."

Bishop's heart started hammering in his chest. "No! I swear I'll keep quiet! Please, Dom, don't kill me." His voice cracked with the force of his shout, and warm wetness filled the crotch of his pants. He struggled against his bonds, but they held fast.

"I'm surprised at you, Bishop. I ain't gonna kill you." Dom smiled. "You should know better than anyone. The livestock's no good if it's dead."

A shadow grew from behind Bishop, and he craned his neck around so fast something cracked inside. Cindy stood there, her thin, life-like fingers and petite arms masking the undead strength contained in her muscles.

Dom's voice whispered in his ear. "The knife is for after. Waste not, want not."

His cheerful voice filled Bishop's head.

"Good thing I like meatloaf."

Natural Selection

Back when I hardly had any publications to my credit, I submitted a poem to a magazine that's now defunct. They liked it, and it became the first poem I ever sold.

***

I kill them when I see them.
I have to; they're evil, horrible creatures.
Hairy legs, poison fangs,
Multi-orbed alien features.

They hide within the shadows,
Lurking, waiting, pouncing on their prey.
Dissolving from the inside,
All who come there way.

Cold and calculating,
No emotions, fear, or sympathy
Death on eight legs
They remain my morbid fantasy.

No light undertaking,
Their dried husks litter my collection
The ultimate predator,
Carrying out my natural selection

The Armies of Anubis

I've always been interested in ancient history, especially the temple building societies like the Egyptians and Mayans. In this instance, I decided to try my hand at alternative history and naturally I went with Egypt as the place to start. The result was a story that sold to the first magazine I sent it to. It's one of my favorites.

***

Excerpts from the Diary of Corporal Kyle Overton

(Archived in the Imperial War Museum, London, England)

31 October, 1942

Northwest of Cairo

Hell rained down on us. Mortar fire and tracers lit the night sky, bringing dawn to the desert hours ahead of schedule.

The desolate land quivered from the heat and thundering vibrations. Over the dunes lay a scene that defied sober description. The battlefield could only be discerned as a confused arena where men struggled beneath a roiling cloud of acrid smoke. Towers of flame erupted in haphazard fashion from the artillery bombing of both sides.

The roasted pig odour of scorched metal and burnt human flesh spilled over the hateful sand in waves. Stretchers went past in an endless parade of death and mutilation. The first aid tents filled faster than the corpses could be carried out. Barely audible over the deafening barrage of detonating bombs was the constant shrieking of mortally wounded soldiers.

Through everything, the damned, unbearable sand remained a constant companion, burrowing inside clothes to chafe and grind at tender flesh, borne on the same ceaseless winds that carried toxic smoke past the tents.

A never-ending litany of hatred and fear revolved through my head as I made my way to the communications tent Lieutenant Harris had set up a mile behind the front.

Damn this bloody desert! Over and over I repeated my mantra, trying desperately to keep my thoughts as far from my own impending death as possible.

A pair of mortars burrowed into the ground less than a hundred meters to my right. I threw myself into the thrice-damned sand as their deafening explosions sent shrapnel flying overhead.

Saying a quick prayer that the next round would not land in the same place, I changed course to skirt the edge of the crater.

Six steps past and it happened.

The ground gave way beneath me. I clawed for purchase but the rivulets of crystal particles gave no support to my clutching fingers.

I fell into darkness.

I cried out in pain as I hit solid rock less than two yards down. From above, miniature waterfalls of sand followed me, adding yet another gritty layer to that already coating my body and my mouth.

Spitting out the bitter particles, I rose to my knees and pulled out my trusty Dunhill. The tiny flame barely made a dent against the dust and darkness, but it provided enough light for me to see my immediate surroundings.

Natural caves and sand-filled depressions in the underlying rock were uncommon but not unheard of; it was into one of these I first assumed I'd fallen. But the presence of hand-cut walls and an even, smooth floor made me realise I'd stumbled upon some type of ancient chamber.

One cannot spend time in Egypt without acquiring some knowledge of local history. The stone blocks before me seemed to be of a similar sort to the pyramids outside of Cairo. Hieroglyphics, so omnipresent everywhere from cities to ruins, covered the ancient walls.

I circled the small chamber, which measured only twenty steps in each direction. The pictographs meant nothing to me; the usual assortment of birds, dog-faced people, and symbols.

But the chest in the middle of the room, that was a different story all together.

The muffled thunder up above faded from my notice as I brushed sand and grime away from the square container. Unlike the stone around me, the mysterious rectangle was made entirely of black, volcanic rock, something I'd never seen in my limited visits to the street markets in Cairo, where for the right price you could purchase anything from a young girl to a thousand-year-old artifact.

I cleaned faster, sure I'd stumbled upon an unknown treasure and worried that a well-placed mortar could seal me inside the chamber forever.

No markings adorned the glass-smooth surface. I pushed the top back, exposing a hollow within. My heart raced as I looked inside, anticipating gold and jewels.

At the bottom of the chest sat a single item, half-covered in rotted cloth. A small statue, carved from the same glass-like substance as its resting place. Perhaps ten inches high, it depicted some sort of mythical being, with the head of a dog-like creature and the body of a man. In one hand it held a long spear. I recognised the figure as being similar to some of the pictures on the walls.

"Bloody hell. That's it?" I made to throw the statuette against the wall but something stayed my hand.

Antiquities had been known to fetch a fair price on occasion. Better a few pounds than none at all.

I stashed the figurine in my pocket.

After that, it was several hours of brutal work to slide the abominably heavy chest across the floor and stand it on end under the cave's opening. The sun had already risen by the time I emerged from my temporary tomb.

When I reported back to the Lieutenant, I explained I'd been knocked senseless by a mortar blast and just awakened. My dishevelled clothing lent credence to my story. Harris told me to see the medics before resuming my duties.

Knowing there was nothing wrong with me, I took the opportunity to grab a canteen and some chocolate, and catch a bit of rest behind a nearby dune.

2 November, 1942

Northwest of Cairo / El-Alamein

He appeared out of the swirling sand as I chewed a square of dark chocolate and had myself a fag.

"You are the one who summoned me."

"Christ!" I dropped the fag into my lap and had to brush off hot ashes.

The man standing before me wore a white robe tied loosely at the waist by a yellow cord. Similarly coloured embroidery ran around the neck and cuffs of his garment. All of

this I gathered in an instant before my attention was irresistibly drawn to his face.

His eyes seemed hewn from the same material as the statuette nestled in my jacket pocket. His gaze was at once cold and burning, as if he could read my very thoughts. A thin moustache rested on his upper lip, hiding in the shadow of the great curved beak of his nose. Hair the same colour as his eyes peeked out from beneath the cloth that wrapped his skull.

A head shorter than my own six feet, he held himself in a manner that reminded me of certain members of the royal family.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" I regretted the impertinent question immediately. The man before me radiated power and death the way the citizens of Bombay exuded the odour of curry.

"I am Al-Hazad, High Priest of Anubis. You summoned me."

He'd mentioned that twice now. "I didn't summon anyone, old sport. You must have me mistaken for someone else." Best to send him on his way. I certainly didn't want him near me.

He lifted his head slightly and stared at me with the impersonal, calculating gaze of a desert hawk. The movement revealed a necklace, a single leather strip with a medallion on it.

A man with a dog's head.

"That medallion," I pointed to it. My other hand touched my jacket pocket. The statuette felt warm through the heavy cloth.

"Yes. For more than four of your centuries we have waited. Now, in our time of need, you return our greatest weapon to us."

"Well, I suppose this is yours then." I removed the statuette from my pocket. Suddenly, all I wanted was to be rid of it. "Here you go, friend. Best of luck with it."

He took it from my outstretched hand, but didn't leave.

"You must come with me."

I sat there, surrounded by a hell-storm of violence and death, and felt myself quaking in a way no battle had ever caused me to do. At that moment, I would gladly have traded places with any front line soldier rather than accompany my insistent visitor anywhere.

"Sorry, but I have a job to do. You may have noticed we're in the middle of a war here." I started to rise.

Again he worked magic with his eyes, pinning me in place.

"Come with me and I will help you win your war, if that is what you so desire."

God help me, I believed him. So I walked with him into the empty sands.

Into the unknown.

2 November, 1942

Cairo / Al Alamein

I followed Al-Hazad through the gradually worsening winds. Sand battered my face, a constant attack as if ten thousand wasps swarmed through the air. Our trek brought us across two dunes to where my silent guide had two camels tethered. From there we rode, he straight on his mount, protected by his robes and scarves, me hunched and cursing, hanging on with one hand while using the other to clear the grit from my eyes.

South we went, for how many miles I have no idea. My world consisted of dun-coloured earth and matching sky, the rising storm having obliterated any sign of the horizon and stolen away my already suspect sense of direction. We encountered no roads, no troops, no signs of civilisation. As we moved on, the roar of the wind overwhelmed the sounds of battle behind us.

As best I could tell, we were south of Al Alamein and Alexandria, and east of Cairo and the Nile.

We were nowhere.

After almost a day's travel, Al-Hazad brought the camels to a halt with a single word.

Throughout our journey he had remained silent. More than once I felt myself doubting my decision, considered turning my camel about and heading back to my encampment. I could

excuse my absence by saying I wandered off, disoriented by my supposed head injury.

But each time these thoughts came to life within me, the enigmatic man riding ahead of me turned and look back, his expressionless face issuing a wordless command: Follow him, or face the consequences.

And each time I obeyed.

"We have arrived." His camel bent at the knees and he slid to the ground, agile as a child. My own aching bones and cramped muscles left me awkwardly crawling to the blessed relative solidity of the desert floor.

I looked around. The limited visibility showed me nothing but featureless desert plains. How he knew where he was, I could not say.

"Come, time passes swiftly and we have much to do."

We waded through ankle-deep sand. It flowed into my boots, weighing me down until every step became an ordeal. I envied my guide's open sandals, which allowed him to traipse effortlessly across the shifting waves.

Ten minutes' walk brought us to firmer ground. Small walls appeared on either side of us. The further we walked, the higher the walls grew. It wasn't until they reached my waist that I realised we were gradually descending.

The moment our heads sank below the top of the walls, the air around us cleared and the wind ceased its incessant battering. Now I could discern how walls and path alike had

been constructed from thousands of matching stone blocks. A sense of antiquity enveloped me, grew stronger with each step.

Our descent stretched on for what seemed to be half an hour, until finally, with the top of the walls more than four yards above us, we reached an opening.

For the second time in two days I found myself entering an ancient chamber.

Al-Hazad stopped before the pitch-black entrance. “Beyond lies the first gate.” After uttering his cryptic words he turned and walked through the forbidding opening. I stepped through as well; if he’d intended to kill me it wouldn’t have been necessary to bring me here. No, I had the distinct feeling he had another purpose for wanting me along.

Three steps inside and I stopped, completely blind and disoriented. Al-Hazad fumbled about with a box of matches, finally getting one lit. A moment later stronger light flared, causing me to shield my eyes as he set the match against a torch taken from a holder on the wall.

Two massive statues, giant twins to the one I’d found, stood before us, framing another doorway. Carved of the same stone as the cavern, each guardian towered several arm lengths over my head. Glittering red jewels sat in the eye sockets, and gold jewellery patterned the crowns and necklaces carved into the grey rock.

"Behold Anubis, guardian of the Underworld, realm of Osiris. We give thanks to you who have brought us the key to freedom."

Al-Hazad's speech held the distinct flavour of ceremony. He held out his arm, indicating I should pass before him. I took the torch and walked forward.

Into Hell.

I found myself surrounded by the dead. Eighteen months in Egypt had allowed me numerous occasions to view a variety of cloth-wrapped corpses, from ancient kings on display in museums to the alley shops where, for a fee, natives would demonstrate the art of mummification or even sell you pieces of long-dead ancestors.

None of it compared to the bodies laid out before me. Row after row, lying atop the ornate coffins known as sarcophagi in this land so devoted to the afterlife. The room seemed endless. I estimated there had to be several hundred mummies, if not more.

The apricot-like smell of dried skin mingled with the exotic scents of myrrh, juniper, cinnamon, and coal tar, filling the air with age and ceremony. The sickly-sweet perfume of ancient death wrapped my tongue and crawled down my throat until I thought I would choke.

Al-Hazad lit more torches. To my relief, the burning pitch also drove away the aroma of the dead.

"Please join me." His voice echoed hollowly in the stone-walled chamber.

I stood my ground. "You said you could help me win my war."

He nodded. "I shall. We shall help each other. But first I must perform the ritual, one that has gone unspoken since before the construction of the great pyramids."

I made my way to him, staying close to the wall and avoiding any contact with the dusty bodies resting on their platforms. Their wrappings, which I imagined had been brightly decorated at one time, had faded to a uniform dull grey. Sections of bandage hung loosely from arms and legs and heads, as if the corpses within struggled to unwrap themselves.

Al-Hazad waited beside a small dais on which rested a book, its pages yellow and brittle with age. More hieroglyphics filled the sheets; the colourful animals, people, and symbols so detailed they seemed to move and dance in the sputtering torch light.

"In the time of the kings and Gods, Anubis ruled the Underworld."

Al-Hazad moved his fingers across the text as he intoned the words but he never looked down at the book. "After the evil Set murdered his own brother, Osiris, Anubis handed his duties to Osiris and became Guardian of the Underworld, Keeper of the Dead, and Preparer of the Way. While the majority of the dead passed on to Osiris, Anubis wisely selected the greatest warriors

from among those passing through the gates. These he kept here, in the first chamber, where he separated the ka from the khat, the soul from the body."

Reflected firelight lent Al-Hazad's eyes a demonic glow as he continued his recitation.

"These warriors he kept here to protect the kingdom of Egypt. Nine times the priests called upon him and he reunited ka with *khat*, to bring forth his great army and defeat our enemies."

Al-Hazad drew the statuette of Anubis from his robe and placed it on the dais. "After the last battle the key to the warriors was lost. Only then did Egypt become vulnerable, beginning with their defeat by the Romans. The priests of Anubis have waited, generation after generation, for the return of the key."

He bowed to me. I gave a small bow back, unsure of how to respond.

"Now the armies of Anubis will rise again, yours to command against our common enemy."

"Er, what?" I felt I'd been duped. Bring a room full of mummies back to life? I'd been a fool for following him here only to find him full of superstitious poppycock.

"You do not have to believe, Mister Overton. Only watch."

He held up the statuette with one hand. From within his robe he withdrew a mask, patterned after face of Anubis, and placed it on his own face. He began to read from another section of the book.

"O gods who are in the Underworld,
who are behind the ruler of the West,
who are stretched at their side,
who are sleeping on their supports,
raise your flesh,
pull together your bones,
collect your limbs,
unite your flesh.
May there be sweet breath to your noses.
Loosening of your wrappings.
May your head-masks be uncovered.
May there be light for your divine eyes
in order that you may see our enemies.
Stand up from your weariness and fulfil your destiny.
Defend the lands of the kings against those who mean harm."

He stopped speaking, set the statuette down, and removed the mask. He stood there, arms outstretched, motionless as the black stone before him.

I'd had enough. "Look, I don't know what your game is, but you bloody well better take me back--"

"Quiet!"

His voice froze me in place, my mouth still open and ready to utter my next word.

The first whispers of rotted cloth on stone reached me in the ensuing silence. I found myself able to move again and I turned my head, not wanting to look but *having* to see.

The army of Anubis was rising.

In twos and threes and fives, they slowly swung their legs down and unwrapped their swathings, exposing the desiccated brown flesh beneath.

I screamed then, shattering the relative quiet of the chamber. My voice came back to me over and over, rebounding from the cavern walls. Heads turned; dry, dead eyes peered out from beneath their bandages.

I backed away from them, the re-born dead and their priest. I would have run from the cavern but Al-Hazad grabbed my arm, his unnatural strength holding me in place.

"You cannot leave, Mister Overton. They need you."

Visions filled my head, of yellowed teeth and nails tearing my flesh to shreds to feed centuries-long hunger. My bladder released, filling the air with the harsh odour of piss.

"No, no, leave me alone!" I cried out.

"Listen to me!" The priest shook me until my teeth rattled and my arm felt as if it would leave its socket. "You are the one who unearthed the key. You are the one who must order the attack. Without you, the army of Anubis will not know whom to fight. It will strike blindly, destroying all foreigners on our soil, including those who fight on Egypt's side."

I stopped struggling. I could not let those monsters loose on my fellow soldiers.

But the Germans?

"Tell me what I have to do."

3 November, 1942

El Alamein

We led them back, more than one thousand strong. The shifting oceans of sand deterred them not, bone-thin legs wading through the depths like scalpels through flesh. Some carried spears or knives; others came empty handed, their only weapons the blackened nails protruding from the thin layers of flesh on their fingers.

Each living corpse had more of a resemblance to the pictures in anatomy books than to real men. Masks of taut skin pulled tight over skulls, exposing every bone and tendon. Coal-red eyes bulged from beneath withered lids, looking out on a world last seen more than two thousand years before. Peeling, wrinkled flesh barely held itself together around muscle and sinew.

We went on until the sounds of battle reached us. I'd already plotted a roundabout route that would bring us to the southeast edge of the front, where Al-Hazad and I would loose his supernatural warriors into the German lines.

In the dust and sand, I didn't notice I'd misjudged the speed of the advancing enemy troops until it was too late. We met up with the advancing Afrika Korps more than a mile deep into Axis territory.

It didn't matter.

The Italian and German soldiers had no chance. I gave the order and Al-Hazad spoke the remaining words of the spell, sending the armies of Anubis swarming forward.

Hands and teeth and knives tore at fragile human bodies, carving a swath of bloody terror through the enemy masses.

At first the soldiers did not understand what was happening; then, when the true nature of their attackers became apparent, they panicked, as any sane person would.

Some broke rank and fled; others fired into the advancing horde of death. Bullets did not harm mummified flesh. Even when bombarded by machine gun fire the madly grinning corpses strode forward, fatal wounds healing within seconds.

A few of the Egyptian revenants fell victim to wisely-thrown hand grenades, but the warriors of the Underworld learned quickly. Soon they were turning the Germans' own guns against them, taking weapons from dead and dying soldiers and operating them with uncanny ability.

In less time than I could have believed possible, I stood within an ever-widening circle of extermination. I knew then that

nothing would stop Death's own soldiers from completing their appointed task.

"I must return to my unit," I said to Al-Hazad. "I have to let them know what's happening, warn them not to fire upon your army."

He nodded. "I will come with you. We will tell your commander you struck a deal with the desert people, the nomads. They will believe that."

I had my doubts. It would be impossible to hide the truth of our sudden allies, especially from those on the front lines. But I needn't have worried. Human nature being what it is, no mention of an army of the dead was ever made. The few who did try to tell what they had seen were laughed off as crazy, told they suffered from hallucinations brought on by battle fatigue.

My own lieutenant was less inclined to believe my story until one of the local Egyptian commanders joined us, at Al-Hazad's request. At first confused as to Lieutenant Harris's questions, he quite rapidly changed his story and attested to the truth of everything we said.

That is, once he saw Al-Hazad surreptitiously fingering the Anubis medallion.

24 November, 1942

Cairo

On the fourth of November, Rommel defied Hitler's orders and initiated a retreat from Egypt. In the end, the Allies lost more than thirteen thousand men. The German and Italian forces lost more than twenty-five thousand, most in the final battle at El Alamein. General Bernard Montgomery earned recognition for liberating Egypt, and from there all of Africa.

I met Al-Hazad in a cafe near the centre of Cairo's market district. Amid the blizzard of smells and sounds, he joined me at my table, accepting a cup of the bitter, aromatic coffee the Egyptians prefer.

Al-Hazad wore his Anubis medallion in plain sight on that day, causing several native passers-by to raise hand to face, circling an eye with thumb and forefinger. A ward against evil.

I no longer felt fear in his presence. He, too, seemed more relaxed.

"Where are they now?" I asked.

He smiled. "Where they belong. Where they will stay until needed again."

He slid something across the table to me. A duplicate of the symbol he wore around his own neck.

"You saved my people."

"And you mine." I had nothing to give him; on impulse, I handed him my Dunhill lighter. "In case you run out of matches."

He smiled briefly, then finished his coffee and stood. “We will not meet again, you and I. But the priesthood will always be here, ready to defend our lands.”

He disappeared into a crowd of similarly dressed natives.

I stared at the amulet in my hand.

And prayed my country never went to war with Egypt.

It Fell Off the Back of a Truck

I wrote this because I thought it was hysterical. Growing up, a lot of my friends and acquaintances came from New York City, and many were Italian, with stories about how in the 'old days' trucks would roll into the neighborhood with stuff for sale. Of course, all of it was hot. This is my own take on those neighborhood stories.

***

The truck rolled down Harbor Street and came to a stop by the pier, same as every Thursday.

Luigi "The Gavone" Manelli glanced out the dusty window of Carmine's Pool Hall.

"Yo. Truck's here."

Luigi's brother, Fat Tony, put down his stick, placed a cigarette between his grayish lips, lit up, and sucked in a mouthful of smoke before speaking. "'Bout time. Miserable bum's late again."

"Yeah. Better be worth da wait."

The two brothers squeezed their beefy frames between the tables and went outside. Up and down the street, neighborhood residents were doing the same thing, shuffling out of the bakery, the barbershop, the corner deli. When Big Johnny's boys brought a truck, people even gave up their place in line at Sal's Trattoria. Hell, Papa Sal himself usually left the kitchen, unless he was elbows deep in sausage.

By the time Luigi and Tony reached the corner, a crowd of sixty or seventy people milled around, waiting to see what Big Johnny had sent this time. Wives and teenagers hurried down the sidewalk, mingling with the men.

Tony smacked the palm of his hand against the driver's door. "Hurry up, ya mook."

The driver, a skinny kid with greasy black hair, climbed out and pushed past the Manelli brothers. "*Va fa napole, idiota morto*." His mouth curled in a sneer as he made his way to the back of the truck.

"Go to Hell yourse—" Tony stopped as Luigi grabbed his arm.

"Zip it. Dat's Tattoo Vic's boy."

Tony shut his mouth. Like everyone else, he knew Tattoo Vic ran everything down at the docks. Get on his bad side and it might be weeks before the next truck came through.

"Kids ain't got no respect these days," Tony mumbled, following his older brother to the back of the truck.

The crowd parted to let the Manellis through. It was the brothers' job to inspect the merchandise and divvy it up. Fat Tony and Luigi ignored the groans and growls; anticipation was par for the course, and no one dared break ranks.

Not if they valued their heads.

"Whattya think it's gonna be?" Tony whispered, while Vic Junior opened the padlock.

"As long as it ain't purses," Luigi responded. "Angie's

already got a closet full of Coach and Louie friggin' Vitton."

Vic Junior rolled up the heavy door. A heavy slaughterhouse stench rolled out, and the crowd moaned as one. "Youse guys can help yourselves. Compliments of Big Vic." He stepped aside and let Tony climb in.

"Well?" asked Luigi.

"*Madonn'!* We gots *gabagool!"*

Tony held up a tiny arm. The soft pink of the baby's limb contrasted sharply with Tony's dead, gray flesh.

"Tell Angie to put on a pot of gravy. We gonna eat good tonight!"

The Longmarsh Witch

Lots of people write about zombies. But in this story, I decided to focus on the origin of a zombie myth rather than the zombies themselves.

***

The old man spat a brownish-red stream of tobacco juice into the dirt and wiped his grizzled chin with a sleeve already crusted in sweat and grease stains. Closing the gas cap of Gretchen Stone's Jeep, he said, "Sure, I can help you. Everyone round these parts knows about Mother Dahlia."

"Mother Dahlia?" Ray Stone asked, popping open a can of soda.

The man, whose shirt had "Travis" stitched on the pocket, nodded. "The Longmarsh Witch. That's who you asked 'bout, ain't it?"

"Yes! Finally, someone in this town who'll talk about it," Gretchen replied, grabbing her pad and pen from the front seat. "What do you know?"

Travis shrugged. "What everyone knows. She been livin' out there long as anyone can remember. Longer than I been alive, and my daddy before me."

"How can that be?"

"She got potions. Makes 'em from the roots and animals that live in the swamp."

"Have you seen her?" Gretchen's hand was flying across the page of her notebook, filling line after line.

"'Course I have. She comes into town ever' now and then to peddle her vials or buy supplies."

"Can you take us to her?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Ain't safe."

"You're afraid of her?" Ray asked in a teasing voice.

Travis frowned at the younger man. "Damn straight. Everyone hereabouts is. If'n she wants, Mother Dahlia do a lot more than cure a fever or bring lovers together."

"Like what?" Ray made no effort to hide his amusement.

"She got the juju, son. Bad magic. She can make people disappear. Or worse."

"What could be worse?"

Travis leaned close, his breath a foul mix of Red Man, cheap whiskey, and tooth decay. "Zombies."

Ray snorted laughter. "Zombies? In Georgia?"

The man's rheumy eyes narrowed. "Don't mock me, boy. You ain't seen them, walkin' the back roads at night, starin' straight ahead, stumblin' over their own feet."

"Sounds more like drunks than zombies." Ray shook his head and got behind the wheel of the Jeep.

"Forget him," Gretchen said to Travis. "Tell me how to find her."

Travis sat down in his rocking chair on the gas station's porch. Next to him, Chet Nelson flicked a match on his thumbnail and lit up a Camel.

"Too bad about them," he said, watching the Jeep drive away.

"Yep." Travis spat more tobacco juice. "She was a real looker, too."

"Stop here. That's the turnoff." Gretchen pointed to a muddy path leading into woods.

Ray pulled over. "Are you sure?"

"The old man said to go two miles down Route 47 and look for the trail that'll lead us to Mother Dahlia's shack."

"Great." Ray shifted into four-wheel drive and guided the Jeep onto the path. "If we get stuck out here we're screwed."

"He said the Jeep would make it," Gretchen said, hanging on as the car slewed back and forth in the thick, wet soil.

"The Jeep might. But what about us?" Ray asked, fighting with the wheel.

Fifteen minutes of rough driving brought them to a forced stop. Ten feet ahead, the path disappeared into the brownish-green waters of Longmarsh Swamp. A rowboat floated at the edge of the water, tethered to a nearby branch.

A hundred yards out, a lopsided shack occupied the

space between four giant cypress trees, mounted to the sturdy trunks that held the structure ten feet above the bog.

"Let me guess. The home of the one-and-only swamp witch." Ray nodded towards the structure. "Maybe she can brew a potion to get rid of these mosquitoes," he said, waving at the attacking hordes of bloodsucking insects.

"You can buy that in the store, mister. It's called bug spray."

Both of them jumped and then turned around at the unexpected voice behind them.

"Oh! You startled us," Gretchen said.

Unlike his wife, Ray found himself unable to form any words. The young woman standing by the Jeep was possibly the most beautiful person he'd ever seen. She stood a little taller than Gretchen's five-seven, with cocoa-colored skin and almond-shaped eyes so brown they might as well be black. Beaded dreadlocks fell to just below her shoulders. The tiny, colored beads clicked against each other each time she moved, adding a background beat to the sultry rhythm of her voice. Cut-off shorts and a cropped t-shirt showed off her long, lean body. Drying mud caked her bare feet and ankles.

The young woman raised an eyebrow at them. "I wasn't 'specting company."

"Are you Mother Dahlia?" Gretchen asked.

"I am. And who might you be?"

"Gretchen Stone. I'm a reporter, doing a story on local

legends, unexplained phenomena, that sort of thing. Would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

The woman stared at Gretchen for a moment and then turned her smoldering gaze on Ray. "You got a name, sir?"

"Uh, yeah. Ray. Ray Stone."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Stone." She held out a hand, old style, palm down as if to be kissed.

Ray hesitated, then reached out and grasped it. Her skin was cool and dry in the sweltering heat. A hint of musk, or scented oils, surrounded her.

"My pleasure," Ray said. "Um, can I ask you something?"

"You can ask. Doesn't mean I'll answer." She flashed him a quick grin, showing ivory-white, perfectly straight teeth.

"The guy in town made it seem like you'd be...um..."

"Older?"

"Ancient."

"I will confess to being older than I look."

"You can't be more than twenty-five," Ray said.

Another smile. "Mr. Stone, you should know better than to ask a lady her age."

"I-"

"I hate to interrupt," Gretchen said with a scowl, "but I'd really like to ask you a few questions."

Mother Dahlia's smile disappeared. "Ain't got nothin' to say."

"Is it true you're a witch?"

She nodded, her hair tinkling a musical accompaniment. "That's a word some people use. Now if you'll 'scuse me, I got business to take care of."

"Wait! I'm not done." Gretchen hurried after her.

"But I am," the dark woman said as she stepped into the boat and cast off.

"Just one more question!"

The boat moved away, its lone passenger rowing in silence.

"The nerve of her!" Gretchen stood with her hands on her hips. Her blonde hair hung limply around her shoulders, having succumbed to the tropical heat.

"So much for that interview," Ray said. "C'mon, let's go before these bugs eat us alive." He returned to the car, Gretchen stomping along beside him.

"If she thinks I'm through with her, she's wrong," Gretchen said, her blue eyes flashing. "I'll come back here every day until she talks to me."

Gretchen griped all the way back to the hotel, but Ray tuned her out. It wasn't hard to do, not with Mother Dahlia's dark, sensual voice filling his head.

He was already looking forward to hearing it again.

She was waiting by the water's edge when he got there.

It was after two in the morning and the fetid heat of the day had given way to cooler air. After sneaking out of the Cranseville Super 8, he'd hiked to the swamp, holding his shoes and socks as he slogged his way down the muddy trail.

"I knew you'd come," Mother Dahlia greeted him, barely visible against the black waters and dim outlines of trees. "I burned lavender and rose."

Ray cleared his throat. "I was hoping you'd talk to me. You and Gretchen kind of got off on the wrong foot." He'd been telling himself the same excuse since slipping out of bed and leaving his wife behind.

"We'll talk," she said, her smile Cheshire Cat-like in the night. "And I'll show you my secrets."

She rowed them to her shack in silence. Against the backdrop of peeping frogs and softly calling birds, the feel of her legs brushing against his was a magnificently sensual experience that had him aroused in seconds.

Mother Dahlia's home wasn't what Ray expected. A ladder nailed to one of the large tree trunks brought them to the platform that served as a porch and walkway. Inside, one large room occupied most of the space, with a small kitchen off to one side. Whoever had built the cabin had carefully incorporated the cypress trees into the structure, their wide, grayish trunks making up the four corners. No paintings or pictures decorated the plain wood walls. Aside from two chairs and a long table, there was no furniture. Jars of herbs and things he couldn't identify covered

the table.

"Are those for magic?"

She laughed, a sound as musical and relaxing as the voice of the swamp. "Of course. But the real magic is below."

"Below?"

She walked to one of the cypress trunks and touched the wood in a rapid pattern.

Without a sound, the front of the trunk disappeared, revealing a metal-lined compartment six feet in height and just wide enough for two people to squeeze inside.

Ray's eyes went wide.

"Holy shit."

"Holy shit," whispered Gretchen, as she filmed her husband and Mother Dahlia entering the futuristic chamber. She'd followed Ray to the swamp, expecting to catch him cheating with the attractive black woman the same way he had with that slut from Charleston two years ago.

She hadn't counted on anything like the scene she'd just witnessed.

After waiting a minute to make sure they weren't returning, Gretchen rose from under the window sill and entered the shack, foul-smelling swamp water and mud dripping from her clothes as she crossed the room. She rewound the digi-cam back to where Dahlia had opened the doorway. After viewing it

three times, she did her best to imitate the motion.

The front section of the tree slid sideways into a recessed space.

Gretchen raised the camera and filmed a twenty-second shot of the polished interior. No buttons or panels marred the smooth, featureless metal.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside. The panel closed and there was a sudden sense of gentle motion, as if she rode the smoothest elevator ever created. She'd counted to twenty-eight when the feeling ceased. She brought her camera up to her eye.

The door opened.

Mother Dahlia stood there, a small device in her hand.

A bright light flashed and everything disappeared.

D'ahlia picked up Gretchen's unconscious body and carried it to the medical chamber. Depositing it on one of the diagnostic tables, she initiated the cranial drill.

The door opened behind her. D'crell and Z'lan entered, their oral palps wriggling in amusement. "Is that the intruder?"

D'ahlia nodded. "The male's life mate. She must have followed him."

Z'lan waved four fingers on her lower arm, signaling concern. "She was not afraid to enter the swamp alone."

"Something must be done. If she does not return, others

may come looking for her," D'crell said.

"We must send a message the natives will fear." D'ahlia did her best to sign low-level urgency with only five digits. "We will send her back."

"So soon after the last one?" Z'lan asked.

"It is the only way," D'ahlia said.

"What of the male?" D'crell asked, as the scanner completed its work.

"I already placed him in the reconstitutor," Z'lan said, one eyestalk dipping to indicate her eagerness for fresh proteins. "We will dine well for many shifts."

The buzz of the subsonic drill prevented any conversation for the next thirty seconds. When it finished, a small red spot decorated Gretchen's forehead. D'ahlia used a mixture of local botanicals and oils to cover the spot with a meaningless symbol.

"She is ready. I will release her when she awakens." D'ahlia followed the others into the living chamber. It would be several hours before the human regained consciousness.

More than enough time to shed her alien form and join her mate-sisters in consummating their passions for food and each other.

The young woman staggered down Route 42 in the crimson glow of the setting sun, her bare feet bloody and raw.

Welts and bug bites covered her mud-splattered body. As she approached Cranseville Gas-n-Go, one of the men sitting out front pointed at her.

"Ain't that the reporter gal who stopped by here t'other day?" Travis Kent asked.

"Looks to be," Chet Nelson answered.

They watched as the figure continued to walk in stumbling, aimless fashion towards Main Street, her arms hanging limply at her sides, her wide-eyed gaze vacant. A thin line of saliva hung from her open mouth, adding to the wide stain on the front of her shirt.

"Shame. She was a pretty one."

"Guess Mother Dahlia kept t'other one for herself."

Travis nodded as he rose from his rocker. "Damn zombies. You wanna call the Sheriff?"

Chet stood up and took down the old hunting rifle from where it hung on the wall. "You go ahead. Tell him I got this one."

The phone was still ringing in Travis's ear when the shot echoed through the stagnant, muggy air.

Crisis of Faith

A lot of firsts are associated with this one. This is the first horror short story I ever wrote. I met editor/writer Jeanne Cavelos at my first convention, where I was trying to sell my first attempt at a novel, and she mentioned she was doing an anthology on Van Helsing and I should send something in. Of course, I had nothing to send, but I started writing this story the next day. I ended up coming thisclose *to getting accepted, but alas, I didn't make it. I did later sell the story to a now-defunct webzine. The whole process made me think it was so easy to get published. It was 18 months before I sold my next story. Shows how wrong I was!*

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1866. That was the year I cleansed my mind, my soul, of any doubt as to the necessity, the fundamental *need*, for what I do. I suffered my one and only crisis of faith that year, and after I resolved it I was left a much harder and colder person. There have been many times since then when I have doubted myself, but never again have I doubted my calling.

It was spring in Amsterdam. I was nineteen, and classes were ending for the semester. As always, there were the requisite gatherings outside of classrooms to view posted grades. Those who passed, toasted with glasses of sherry or wine. Those who

hadn't, drowned their sorrows in pitchers of beer. I had no worries in that area. Thanks to my tireless devotion to my studies, my grades placed me at or near the top of all my classes.

My lack of social availability played a large part in this, as when I was not studying for classes I was being tutored by my mentor, Arminius, in much more serious matters.

Arminius considered my formal education merely additional preparation for my true calling, for he believed the only way to combat the supernatural evil plaguing our world was through a knowledge of both modern science and the ancient lore and superstition that surrounds the creatures of darkness. "Know and understand your enemy," he would say. "Never rely solely on articles of faith."

I was in my room when two pieces of news arrived almost simultaneously. The first was a cable from Arminius, telling me his pursuit of a vampire in Buda-pesth would keep him away at least six weeks. I was to continue my studies and weapons training on my own. I clenched my fist around the paper in an odd mixture of anger and relief. Anger because again he'd denied me permission to participate in a hunt. Relief because I still felt doubt about dedicating my life to killing the undead.

My roommate, Andreis Groeneveld, delivered the second message. "Abraham, I have the most exciting news. We are going to America!"

"America?" I scoffed. "And where have you found the

guilders needed for us to travel halfway around the world?"

"My aunt and uncle live in San Francisco, in California," he said. "My uncle owns two bakeries. I'm going to spend a year there learning the business."

"A year? But what about school?" I could not believe Andreis, an honors student, would leave school to work in a bakery.

"I've spoken to the Dean, and he has agreed to count this as a senior internship in business."

For a brief moment I felt a spark of excitement inside myself. Then cold reality set in. I had no family to provide me with funds; they were long dead, victims of an evil, soulless creature. No, I would be spending my semester break studying in the anatomy laboratory and practicing the crossbow.

"This is all well and good for you, but how do you propose that I accompany you? I certainly cannot make payment for a steamship ticket."

Andreis was my closest friend. Together with Diederik, Gerolt, and Jacob, he kept me from neglecting my social responsibilities. Maintaining a semblance of normalcy was crucial, lest anyone suspect the truth of my after school involvements. The general belief was that I assisted my "uncle" at his medical practice. Arminius held several degrees, including physician, so this was not an outright falsehood.

"That is the best news. My uncle has said they will pay for one of my friends to accompany me. We will stay at their

home, and we'll have until the semester break is over before I have to start work at the bakery."

At first I was not sure I had heard my friend correctly. Free passage and lodging? Could this really be true? The smile on Andreis's face indicated that it was.

"This is wonderful!" I said. "In fact, the timing is excellent. My uncle has been called away, which means I am not needed at his practice for several weeks."

"How amazing!" Andreis clapped his hands like a child. "Come, we must tell the others the good news. They are already packing."

"The others? But surely your aunt and uncle are not paying for all our tickets?"

"Gerolt and Jacob have obtained funds from their families, who believe this would be an excellent learning experience for them. And Diederik still has the funds left to him from when his father passed on."

My heart pounded with excitement as we hurried down the hallway to the room shared by our three friends. America! This was the kind of adventure I wanted, not stalking the *vampir* through dark woods and foggy graveyards.

For too many years I had devoted myself to learning the ways of the undead, motivated by the thought of avenging my family's murder, but lately I had begun to wonder if I was wasting my life in a pointless pursuit. Did I really want to spend my life traveling across the most desolate regions of Europe,

hunting the nosferatu, surviving on meager wages and pitiful donations?

I thought of Arminius, an old man of more than sixty, living in a cold, dreary apartment. A man of science who could have been a prominent professor or physician.

Do I want to end up like him? I feared it would soon be time to make a decision, one way or another, regarding the rest of my life.

Our trip across the Atlantic, and our subsequent train ride from New York to California, did much to keep my mind off my predicament. In the presence of companions such as mine it was impossible not to be of good cheer. Especially when Andreis made sure to keep us all well supplied with spirits.

We arrived in San Francisco eager to begin our holiday. The Groenevelds occupied a large, two-story structure near the center of town. Two bedrooms on the second floor had been given over to us. Andreis and I took one room, while Diederik, Gerolt, and Jacob shared the second.

On Saturday morning, two days after our arrival, we determined to see what sights lay 'off the beaten path.' We started with lunch at a restaurant offering Oriental dishes in a Cantonese style. The hot, peppery food was a far cry from the bland meals served at school, and afterwards we all felt the need to quench our thirst with some ale.

Evening found us enjoying cold beer at an establishment near the harbor. It was not the most distinguished of taverns, but we were eager to experience the wild side of town. As the night progressed and we became more inebriated, one of the local girls, a dark-haired beauty with ample flesh showing above her dress, began paying special attention to Jacob.

Jacob and his new 'friend' danced to several songs, while the rest of us groused good-naturedly about his fortune with the ladies. Before too long Jacob announced to us in a voice rough with alcohol and excitement that he and "Katrina" were going down the street to her apartment, and we shouldn't wait for him.

We toasted Jacob's good luck and spent the remainder of the evening talking and planning the next day's activities. At half past two we agreed we'd had more than our share of sweet American ale, and we staggered out the door to make our way back home.

"Hold on, boys, I need to piss," Diederik announced, stepping into a nearby alley.

"What do you think Jacob is up to at the moment?" I wondered out loud. Gerolt laughed and said something about "sleeping on a fine set of pillows."

A hoarse shout from Andreis interrupted our laughter.

"Over here. There's a body!"

We rushed to Andreis and there, amidst some garbage and broken crates, lay a prone form. Instinctively I leaned down

to check the neck.

"Abraham, what are you doing?" asked Andreis.

Quickly I thought of a logical explanation.

"I'm checking his pulse point to see if he's alive."

In order to reach the correct spot on his neck I had to turn the body over. When I did so, we all stepped back in horror.

The corpse was that of our friend Jacob.

Even in the dim light, the two puncture wounds over his carotid artery were visible to my trained eye.

Vampire!

I grabbed my friends and led them away. "Come, we must get help. We need to find an officer of the law."

We hurried back to the street and shouted for help. From the way shutters slammed and passersby ignored us, I inferred that death was no stranger to this neighborhood, but our cries eventually acquired the attention of a constable.

At first ready to haul us in for creating a disturbance, when we showed him the body he summoned reinforcements. They questioned us, and we told them everything we remembered about the woman he'd left with.

The police promised to look into Jacob's death but they held the opinion that a jealous lover or whore's master had killed him. They expressed little hope of solving the crime.

We sent a cable to Jacob's family, who made arrangements for the body to be shipped back to New York, and then on to Amsterdam. Since the next train didn't leave for four

days, the body would wait at the morgue.

I could not let this happen; I knew too well that three days hence Jacob would rise from his coffin as one of the undead. That left me 48 hours to dispose of my good friend.

The next day was gray and somber inside the Groeneveld home. After a tasteless evening meal, everyone retired early. I waited until almost midnight before taking my leave and hurrying through the streets to the morgue, where I had a most gruesome appointment to keep.

I approached the back door, intending to break the glass window, reach in, and open the lock. Instead, I found the glass already shattered and the door unlatched.

I entered as quietly as possible and made my way through the dark rooms to the downstairs storage area. The cumbersome door stood open, wisps of chilled air escaping from inside as if the spirits of the dead were leaving this plane and moving on to the afterlife.

From within came heavy sounds I recognized. Someone was searching through the coffins, lifting and shutting the lids. I crept into the frigid room on trembling legs. I had no idea if the intruder was human or nosferatu. Despite the cold air, my flesh broke out in a clammy sweat as I realized that despite all my training, I had no real experience with violence.

The stranger stood with his back to me, hands on his hips, staring at the few remaining unopened coffins. In the dim light of a single lamp resting on a table, I saw his breath

steaming in the frosty air and recognized him for human. Without further thought I stepped forward and rapped him severely between the shoulders with my faithful walking stick.

The man fell onto the hard floor, striking his nose and emitting a pained cry. I kicked him with my foot to roll him over.

"Who are you and why are you trespassing among the corpses?" I demanded.

"Son of a bitch!" the man shouted, holding a hand to his nose, which bled profusely. "What the hell was that for?"

I waved my stick at him again and repeated my question. He scurried away from me, putting as much space as possible between us. When his back hit a table leg, he stopped and answered me.

"My name is Ambrose Bierce. And who, sir, might you be?"

"I am Abraham Van Helsing," I said.

The courtesy of introductions seemed to lessen the tension in the air. Criminals do not usually provide their names, after all. Bierce pulled himself up and dabbed at his bloody nose with a handkerchief. Then he straightened his jacket and stared at me, holding himself with an almost military bearing.

"I believe we both have some explaining to do."

My initial feeling of distrust dissipated, and I felt his presence here was no more evil than my own. I decided to speak as candidly as I could, under the circumstances.

"I am here to claim the body of a friend who was murdered yesterday."

"Really?" he asked, looking at me in an odd manner. "I'm here to do the same thing. Except my friend was killed two days ago. The police told me they have no clues, and the undertaker wouldn't let me see the body after I identified it."

My heart was harder than during the brief altercation. Two murders! Could they both be the work of the vampire?

"By any chance, was your friend found with two holes right about here?" I asked, pointing to my own throat.

"Yes, how did you know? The police said he'd been stabbed, but there was no blood around the wounds or on his clothes."

I sighed, knowing I would have to explain the truth of the matter to this man.

"Let me tell you a story," I began. I told him of my homeland, how the vampires had existed there for as long as recorded history. Then I told the tale of my own family, slaughtered by one of the evil creatures when I was just a boy, and how Arminius had saved me, killing the vampire and tutoring me in the ways of the undead. I finished by detailing the events of the night before.

I expected Bierce to laugh at me, call me a superstitious fool, but he did just the opposite. He believed.

"That makes a lot of sense," he said. "Hell, I've heard and seen a lot worse during my time in the army. If ghosts and

witches exist, why not vampires? Fact is my buddy left with a girl who sounds an awful lot like this Katrina you talked about. So now what do we do?"

"We must find our friends and remove their heads from their bodies, else they will rise as vampires themselves."

Bierce grew paler, but he nodded. Together we searched the room until we found the bodies we needed. Using the surgical implements at hand, we sawed off the heads of our dead companions.

I am not ashamed to admit we both had tears in our eyes while we carried out our grim task. I placed the two heads in a burlap sack, which I intended to burn later. As we exited the morgue, Bierce spoke in a low voice.

"I want to kill this monster," he said. "Show me how."

"If you truly want to help, meet me tomorrow night." I gave him the name of the tavern where Jacob had met Katrina. "We will find this woman. She is either the vampire who did this or in league with the demon responsible. Regardless, we will end the beast's unholy existence before more lives are taken."

Bierce agreed to meet me at ten the next evening. I told him I would bring everything we needed to dispatch the creature, but that he should arm himself with a heavy blade and a cross, silver if possible.

Sunday passed too slowly for me. I was anxious and irritable all day, and before noonday meal my friends had decided I was too morose to be suitable company. When the

police came to tell us of the mutilation carried out upon Jacob's body at the morgue, I feigned shock and outrage at the quality of care provided to the dead by the Americans.

I used the excuse of wanting to take a walk and be alone in my grief to make my way down to the basement, where I appropriated four sturdy pieces of fencing. I used my knife to sharpen the ends down to fine points.

Everything else I needed I carried with me out of habit. Two blades, one held in an inside pocket of my coat, the other concealed in my walking stick. A pair of silver crosses, one that I wore around my neck, the other tucked into a pocket. From my case I took a bottle of holy water, a smaller bottle of kerosene, and a box of matches.

As I had the night before, I waited until my companions took to sleep before making my exit. I hurried through the streets until I reached the tavern. Upon entering, I paused, searching for Mr. Bierce. A waving arm caught my attention, and I found him seated at a table near the back of the room.

"I thought this table inconspicuous enough, while still allowing us to see the entire room," Bierce said.

"This is fine," I agreed. "It is half past ten now. We will wait until midnight. That is the time Katrina arrived when we saw her. If she hasn't shown by then, we'll search the streets and alleys nearby."

"What if we don't find her tonight?" Bierce asked.

"Then we return each night until we do. This vampire is

careless and vain. It leaves evidence of its attacks for anyone to find. Ah, here comes our server. Let me ask her about Katrina."

After the young girl took our order, I asked if she remembered my friends and me from two nights previously.

"Aye," she said, nodding. "I remember you. The foreign lads. This one is new, though," she added, pointing at Bierce.

I barely heard her, my attention stolen by the three figures entering the tavern. Andreis, Diederik, and Gerolt, staring in our direction! They had followed me. Upon seeing us they came over and demanded to know what was going on.

"This is Mr. Ambrose Bierce," I explained, while Bierce occupied the serving girl's attentions. "One of his friends was murdered two nights ago, just as Jacob was. He, too, was with a young lady, one who bears a strong resemblance to the woman Jacob left with. We believe it was she who either killed both men or lured them to their deaths. We intend to find out the truth."

I did not tell my friends about the murderer being a vampire; this was neither the time nor the place. Bierce seemed to understand my reticence and said nothing about our conversation—or activities—the night before.

"Well, we knew something was wrong when you left the house fully dressed tonight, and without so much as a word to anyone. It was Gerolt who told us. He was up to piss and saw you pass by."

Nodding, I turned to the serving girl and asked her if she knew the woman named Katrina who had left with Jacob.

"Oh, that one! She's a regular here. Comes in five nights out of seven, she does. A working girl, if you ask me, though I've never seen money change hands. Like as not that happens elsewhere, after the deed. Your friend must have told a fine story, to get all of you back here looking for that one."

With a laugh and shake of her head, the girl left to take care of another table. Then it was just a matter of waiting. I had been right in thinking this vampire was keeping to a small territory, believing itself safe. Americans were not a superstitious people. Here a vampire could flourish, subsisting on sailors, tourists, and newly-arrived immigrants without ever raising alarms.

As I'd expected, we did not have to wait long before Katrina arrived.

Clothed in fine silks and lace, she moved like a lioness, graceful even in the ungainly cage of her dress and petticoats. A calculated sway in her gait ensured that everyone in the tavern caught glimpses of bare leg, and there was not a man in the room who didn't stare hungrily at her.

"Remember our plan," I said. "Whomever she feigns attraction to, the others let it be. We'll follow when they take their leave. The same applies if she chooses someone else in this place for her victim."

The others nodded, still eyeing at the raven-haired seductress as she stood by the bar, an untouched glass of red wine in her hand. She glanced around the room, and locked eyes

with Gerolt. Holding his gaze, she slowly brought her glass up to her mouth.

Was I the only one to notice the wine never touched her lips? Most likely.

Gerolt stood, and without a word walked over to her. I remembered how the vampire possesses the power of mesmerism.

Gerolt was already under her spell!

We watched as Gerolt finished his ale in three long swallows, his eyes never leaving her. Then she leaned forward and spoke into his ear. He nodded and the two of them took their leave, heading for the door. Not once did he look our way.

"Hurry!" I said. "We must not lose them in the alleys."

The four of us stormed out into the night, just in time to see Katrina and Gerolt enter an alley one block away. We surged down the street in their direction, two of us ready to do battle with a soulless creature from Hell, the others eager to inflict physical harm on the person who they believed murdered their friend.

I took the lead as we entered the alley, charging forward with my cross held out in front of me. I reached them in time to witness Katrina lift her face from Gerolt's neck, blood dripping out of her mouth in black streams, her face a hideous parody of the beautiful appearance she normally wore.

I thrust the cross at her and she hissed like a great cobra and jumped back, dropping Gerolt's body to the bricks.

"Foul demon! I will see you burn in the fires of Hell!" I shouted, withdrawing a stake from beneath my coat.

Pinning the monster against a wall with my cross, I prepared to thrust the stake into her black heart, but before I could deliver the killing blow something struck my arm. Numb from the impact, my fingers convulsed and I dropped the stake.

"Abraham, have you lost your senses? You cannot commit murder. We must hold her here and call for the police."

It was Diederik, still believing this daughter of Satan was human. As yet none of the others had seen her true face. I had time to curse my stupidity for not telling my friends everything and then the vampire's hand struck me in the chest. One of my ribs snapped and I tumbled backwards, the cross falling from my hand as I gasped for air.

With no holy power to hold her down, Katrina rose up and turned on my companions.

For the first time they saw her as she truly was. Her face a desiccated mask pulled tight over the bones of her skull. Her eyes red with Gerolt's blood. With a flattened, bat-like nose and fangs protruding from her upper jaws, Katrina was no more human than the giant lizards that inhabit the islands of the Asian seas.

Diederick and Andreis stepped back, releasing harsh cries of disgust at the living corpse standing before them. Even Bierce, who knew of the vampire's true nature, stood frozen in horror by the site of the abomination.

Katrina laughed, a shrieking yowl that raised the hackles on the back of my neck. There was no humor in that cry; it was the triumphant sound of a wild animal preparing to kill.

The beast leaped forward and grabbed hold of Andreis's shirt with a hand transformed into the claw of a great reptile or bird. Lifting Andreis off the ground, she prepared to sink her fangs into his neck. Despair washed over me. I was too far away and too short of breath to do anything but watch.

Then, with a cry of rage, the creature suddenly drew back, dropping Andreis to the ground. Blood dripped from his neck, but he still moved, giving me hope that he'd live. A caught a glint of metal in the moonlight, and I realized he must be wearing a cross.

With relief came a surge of strength through my body. I stood up and drew my second cross. I pulled two more stakes from beneath my jacket and handed one to Bierce.

"Come, we must finish this vile thing for good," I said, stepping over Gerolt's lifeless body. "Demon" I shouted, advancing forward with stake and cross held high. "I will not let you kill again."

Katrina turned and growled like a caged tiger, the sound emanating from deep in her chest.

Eyes flicking back and forth, the she-bitch spoke to me. "You are powerless to stop me. 'Tis you who will die tonight."

Instead of attacking Bierce and I, the vampire whirled and grabbed Diederik, who had backed up against the wall of the

alley, watching the unfolding events in a near state of shock.

"Nooo!" he screamed, as the demon pulled him towards her. Bierce and I echoed the cry and rushed forward.

Bierce reached her first, bringing his stake down with all his might. But she sensed his attack and spun away faster than human reflexes could follow.

Even as she tore Diederik's throat out, spraying Bierce with a wash of blood, she placed my friend's dying body in the path of the stake. Driven by Bierce's mighty effort, the sharpened wood punctured his sternum and scattered blood and gore onto the pavement.

Diederik's corpse had not even hit the ground when Katrina, using the inhuman strength possessed by all vampires, leaped into the air and came down behind Bierce. She grabbed him by the shoulders before he could turn.

"This is what happens to humans who think they can kill me," she said, showing her enlarged canine teeth. "They become food."

Unlike my companions, I was schooled in the ways of the vampire, and I knew not to attempt a direct attack with my stake. Instead, I leaped onto Bierce's back and shoved my cross down the top of her dress.

With an agonized shout she dropped Bierce and whirled away, clawing at her chest to free herself from the holy medallion.

"Hold her!" I shouted to Bierce. "She is helpless while

the cross binds her!"

Bierce grabbed Katrina by the legs, forcing her to the ground. I moved forward, kneeling on her chest as Bierce laid his body across her kicking legs.

I raised my stake above my head and brought it down with every last vestige of strength in my body. She tried to stop me, but without her supernatural powers she was no match for my righteous fury. So hard did I drive the shaft into her chest that it went completely through her, splitting her heart and continuing on until it struck the hard brick beneath her.

"Die, foul spawn of Hell!"

Although I felt nothing at the time, the next day my back and arms were almost useless to me due to the shock of the stake impacting the pavement.

Katrina's body arched up so violently that Bierce and I were thrown off and landed several feet away. She thrashed about as if in the throes of convulsion, a putrid, black bile foaming from her mouth and nose. But we were not finished. Even as the vampire's body stopped moving, I knew there was one more thing that needed to be done. I stood and offered my hand to Bierce, helping him up.

"We must remove the head, or there is a chance she could return to life," I said. "It is the only way."

I drew my hunting blade. Almost equal in length to my forearm, it was made of silver-coated steel and sharp as the finest scalpel. Grasping Katrina's hair, I lifted her head and with three

forceful strokes removed it from her body.

The moment they separated, the two sections began to decay, the accelerated decomposition filling the alley with a corrupt, fetid odour.

Bierce retched and turned away, but I forced myself to watch. This was all I could offer my unlucky friends, standing witness to the final death of the beast who had cut short their lives. Andreis was a statue, his face never changing expression as the vampire's body deteriorated into that of an ancient crone, bones protruding through rotted flesh, sections of whitish-yellow skull visible where the parchment-like skin fell away in patches.

I would have liked to comfort my old friend, but shouts and whistles drew our attention to the mouth of the alley. The noise of our struggle had finally drawn the attention of the police and now they gathered around us, startled for a moment by the tableau before them.

I imagined how it looked. Two men dead, their throats torn out. One ancient corpse, its head cut off. The three of us, covered in blood.

And me, the knife still in my hand.

I offered no resistance as the officers demanded I relinquish my weapon and turn myself over to them. Bierce protested, trying to explain all was not as it seemed. For his efforts he received several blows to the head, which eventually silenced him.

Andreis put up no struggle, not even responding when

spoken to. With my medical training I recognized his catatonic state immediately. The police believed it was due to the shock of seeing his best friend commit murder. I knew better. Before they locked me in my cell, I told the police Andreis's name and his uncle's address.

They allowed each of us one communication. I used mine to cable Arminius. It would take days for my request to reach him, even more if he were not yet back from Buda-pesth. I feared myself doomed to long months in prison, waiting my turn with the hangman.

Four weeks passed, during which time I heard nothing of Andreis or Bierce. Then the miracle happened. Footsteps in the hallway alerted me to the presence of someone approaching my cell. I looked up to see Arminius standing there, Bierce at his side. The guard accompanying them opened the cell and signaled for me to get up.

"Come my friend, let us get you out of this parasite-infested hole," Arminius said.

"Am I truly a free man?" I asked. I could not believe this rapid change in my fortunes.

Bierce smiled at me. "We both are. Your uncle has worked magic to remove all charges against us."

"That is not quite correct," said Arminius. "No magic was involved. But a great deal of money, along with letters of recommendation from certain well-known persons who owed me favors, has proven effective in gaining your release."

"But what of Andreis? And what of Gerolt and Diederik? We were unable to give them the true death before we were arrested." By now both of them would have risen and begun killing innocents.

"No need to worry, Abraham. The Groenevelds have not forgotten the old ways. As soon as they saw their nephew's neck, they contacted Gerolt and Diedrik's parents and told them the truth of what happened. They agreed to have the bodies cremated immediately."

"And Andreis?" I asked again.

Arminius sighed. "I am afraid I have no good news for you. He remains catatonic. His aunt and uncle have placed him in a local asylum until his family can come and collect him. I fear he will never recover. I have seen this before, and you will undoubtedly see it again."

As we walked out of the station house and into the bright California sunlight, I turned to Bierce. "And you, friend Ambrose? What will you do now?"

"Since the end of the war I have been searching for a career. I think maybe I have an idea now."

"Oh, and what is that? Will you, too, hunt the undead?"

"No, that life is not for me! I believe I'll become a writer. As I said before, during my time as a soldier I heard about, and saw, many unbelievable things. Supernatural things. I think maybe others will want to read about them as well. And San Francisco seems like a nice place to settle down, now that

we've made it safe to walk at night again."

Bierce held out his hand to me, and I clasped it in my own. "Good luck to you, Abraham Van Helsing, and be careful." With that he turned and strode away.

Arminius and I watched him walk down the street until he was lost in the throng of people going about their daily business.

"And what about you, Abraham? You have killed your first vampire, faced the danger, seen firsthand what harm the monsters can do. Do you still wish to continue with your training, or perhaps now you would prefer to pursue a safer life in the field of medicine?"

I thought about what a life such as his would mean for me. Forever without companionship except for those who shared the hunt. Ridiculed for my beliefs, always in danger of death or imprisonment by those who did not understand.

And, of course, the constant threat of that fate worse than death: transformation into one of the undead.

Then I considered my family, murdered when I was a child. And now Gerolt, Jacob, Diederik. All good men, all dead. Andreis, my closest friend, forever locked away from the world, his mind shattered by what it could not accept.

That is when I realized what I had to do, *needed* to do.

"Arminius, now, more than ever, I will do whatever it takes to put an end to the bloodsucking evil vermin among us. Continue my training? I want to train even more! I want to

accompany you on the hunts. I will not rest until the race of vampires is no more!"

Arminius nodded. "I am glad to hear it. Let us prepare to return to Amsterdam. There is still much for you to learn, from me and in school. The world is changing rapidly, and it will take a modern man of science to continue our war as the years go by."

We headed towards the train station, two men; one old, one young, soldiers in a never-ending battle against the greatest evil in the world.

Never again would I doubt the righteousness of my work.

The Dentist

C'mon, whho doesn't hate going to the dentist? This poem practically wrote itself!

***

It eats me up inside
This rage
Overpowers me, takes control
A secret beast
Makes me hurt them, cause them pain

They don’t know when it will happen
But I know
When I hold the tools once more
Sharp, pointed
My hands become instruments of torture

They want to scream, to shout
To cry
I don’t stop; I go deeper
Deeper still
I smile behind my mask

Their blood is my joy, my goal
I want to laugh
I am the bringer of their pain
I hate them
Their vile, rotten mouths offend me

About the Author...

A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, JG Faherty has been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award® and ITW Thriller Award, and he is the author of six novels, eight novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA dark fiction/sci-fi/fantasy, and his works range from quiet suspense to over-the-top comic gruesomeness. He enjoys urban exploring, photography, classic B-movies, good wine, and pumpkin beer. As a child, his favorite playground was a 17th-century cemetery, which many people feel explains a lot. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, www.jgfaherty.com, and http://jgfaherty-blog.blogspot.com/

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