

Hellhound Magazine



Issue I

Edited by Emma Ormond and
Jimmy Nicol

www.hellhoundmagazine.com

This publication contains works of fiction from various writers. All stories contained within are the works of individual imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. Keep out of reach of children. In the event of an emergency evacuation, we will not provide lifejackets or a whistle to attract the sharks. If persistent hauntings occur after reading this magazine, there will be no refunds offered. Have the ghosts for free.

Cover Art by Finnegan Deacon
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Introduction



It's another sleepless night. I'm lying in bed staring at the ceiling and willing the time to pass. Not even my rain sounds are helping anymore. A blue flashing light from the bookcase catches my eye and I wonder which one of my friends is having a meltdown now. I'm accustomed to weird late-night messages; lockdown has driven us all to the brink of madness. This time though it's not a usual suspect - which intrigues me. I can't remember the exact wording, but to sum it up:

From Jimmy - "Fancy starting an online horror magazine with me?"

I re-read the message again. A magazine? Me? What the hell would I be able to contribute to that? I'm not a writer or creative in any way for that matter. Is he sure he's messaged the right person? He has caught my interest though; horror is an old friend of mine. Oh, Fuck it, why not? It'll pass the time even if nothing comes of it. And from that one simple message spiral the thoughts of two horror fanatics, down the rabbit hole they go in the early hours of the morning, a monster by the name of Hellhound Magazine had been created.

Honestly the past 3 months since that conversation have flown in. Things went from 0 to 100 in the blink of an eye. And it's not stopped since. We realised pretty quickly that this magazine would re-

quire more than the input of 2 people and back up was needed ASAP. Fortunately, we knew people who were just as passionate about horror and found some great additions along the way. As the saying goes, 7 is the lucky number and with each new addition to the team, it felt as though we were levelling up. Everyone brought their own unique set of skills to the table and everything just seemed to click into place. The number of things planned for Hellhound Magazine's future is amazing. Either the stars aligned for us or we unknowingly made a deal with the Devil. We've just ran with it anyway.

It was nerve wracking opening our submissions in February, I wasn't sure we would get a lot of interest in our little endeavour, maybe a handful of stories and that would be that. But you guys surpassed our expectations and the short stories kept rolling in. Your talents know no bounds and it has been our utmost privilege to read your work. Thank you for taking a chance on us and for trusting us with something so precious.

We also wanted to thank everyone who has supported us through our social media platforms. It's through your word of mouth that the word about Hellhound Magazine spread and we are forever grateful. Without you guys, we would have just been shouting out into the void with no answer back

Now it's time for the big reveal. Welcome to Issue one of Hellhound Magazine, hopefully the first of many to come. We hope you enjoy.

Emma Ormond, Chief Editor, 19th April 2021.

Happy

J. C. Robinson



Dearest Friends and Family,

I am sure at this moment you are a bit confused as to why you are receiving this letter, about why things played out as they did, about why you are being asked to read this letter at our funeral at exactly 1:18 p.m. I didn't know things would play out this way either, but I can tell you that I am HAPPY that they did.

HAPPY. That's really what all of this is about. I've found happiness. Now, you might be thinking that I couldn't possibly be happy, but you are wrong.

My marriage to James is flawless. Every day he makes me smile, and every day I realize I am the luckiest of men. We eat dinner together, we clean together, we hike and read and sing together. The sex is amazing. I mean the orgasms...you wouldn't believe how good they can be. That is why I had to poison him last night. I had to kill him because I am HAPPY.

Work is wonderful too. After three years at the firm, I am making great money, not working overly long hours, and I truly enjoy what I

do. That is why I had to resign my position yesterday. I had to quit because I am HAPPY.

Our dog, Denver, has been an incomparable addition to our family as well. He plays fetch, he snuggles, he looks after us and our son, Beau. Denver is the best dog anyone could ever ask for, and that is why I had to break his neck. I had to snap Denver's neck because I am HAPPY.

Speaking of Beau, my god, how could I be any HAPPIER? Two long years it took James and I to adopt Beau. Can you believe that? We are finally that quaint, happy family: two loving dads, a son as perfect as a baby can be, and a dog. Does it get any better than that? I really don't think so. That's why I had to hold Beau under the bathwater last night until he ceased moving. I had to drown Beau because I am HAPPY.

And our house. Just wow. For eight years James and I have been together, and for six of those years we have admired this home. It's the perfect home. The light blue paint, the size, the luscious garden in front. We knew that this was the home we had to have. That is why I had to destroy our home. I had to burn down our house because I am HAPPY.

Now, don't stop reading. These are not the ramblings of someone in the midst of a psychotic episode, some murderous rampage. I know that at this moment you are probably asking yourself: What kind of HAPPY person would do all this? But the answer is obvious, at least to me. I am HAPPY, and I want to be HAPPY forever. I had to swallow the end of my Smith & Wesson last night so that I could stay HAPPY forever.

You see, at the moment I killed my husband, I loved him more than I ever could in the future. Marriage is hard and there would have undoubtedly been rocky patches, sadness, anger, words better left unspoken. Now that he's dead, our marriage will forever be as perfect and HAPPY as it ever could have been.

If I had stayed in my job with the firm, I would have eventually grown bitter, resentful, burnt-out, just like all of the partners at the

firm. I would have grown to hate my job. But now that I have quit, I will forever have loved the work I did. My memories of my time spent with the firm will forever be HAPPY memories.

Denver, while perfect now, would have grown old, slow. His joints would become painful, and he wouldn't be able to fetch as perfectly as he could now. His eyesight would fail, his hearing would become overly sensitive, and he would start barking at things that aren't there, being fearful of the normal things around him. Now that he is dead, he will be perfect forever; the only time we have spent with him now is HAPPY time.

Beau, my beautiful baby boy. He was, is, the perfect son, the sweetest, cutest. All of the moments in his short life were HAPPY moments. If he had grown up, he would have learned of stress, sadness, angst. He would have been bullied in school for having two dads. He would have faced a broken heart from his first big breakup; he would have had to grow old and watch his friends die someday. I have saved him from all of that. He and I will never argue or get upset with each other; all our times together were, and will forever remain, HAPPY times.

You see, now, my husband, son, dog, and I can forever remain HAPPY, even in death. We will never grow old and feeble. We will never grow apart. We can forever continue as the HAPPIEST of families. My life was at the pinnacle of HAPPINESS, and I know I would never be as HAPPY as I am now, ever again in the future. Why continue forward if you know you have already lived out the greatest, the HAPPIEST, of your days? So many people do, and that is why they grow old and miserable.

As you read this, you are sitting at the funeral of Henry, James, and Beau Stetson. You are all here because you were, are, our best friends, our closest family members. I love you all very much, and I am so HAPPY to have had all of you in our lives. And because of how grateful I am that you were in our lives, I want you to all be HAPPY forever as well. So, if all is on track, this letter should have taken you approximately

four minutes to read. That means it is about 1:22 p.m. at this moment. At 1:23 p.m., the bomb beneath the floor will go off, and then we can all be HAPPY together, forever. See you all very soon. Don't be scared, don't be sad, be HAPPY.

Love,
Henry.



J.C. Robinson is a full-time law student, part-time writer. His debut novel, *The Diner*, was published in March 2021, and he's currently working on a second novel while preparing to take the bar exam. J.C. is gay and loves reading horror from queer authors. Find him on Twitter: @jcr_scribe.

Tunnel Vision

Lady Trashbird



There are places on campus which, after dark, are to be routinely avoided.

I'm sure you've heard of them. After all, you're not a freshman, are you?

The old parking garage. One look should be enough to ward you off. Better to spend the night on the couch in the TA offices — maybe try again in the daylight.

The back alley loading docks. What possesses one to hang out back there defies reasonable comprehension. If you get close enough, you can almost smell the midnight mugging — hot, fetid steam rising from manhole covers, the perpetually wet pathway stretching on into the dark. Occasionally you'll find the odd postdoc flicking a cigarette over their shoulder, having just come from that way, but that lot seems to share a peculiar immunity to those darker places on campus.

Then there's the tunnel stretching between McHugh and Wilson Halls.

Not even the postdocs venture into the tunnel after nightfall.

Under siege of pelting rain and heavy curtains of frigid sleet, the seasoned academic takes the long way around, across the lawn and back through the engineering quad, though it adds roughly seven minutes to the journey. Four, if you run.

Everyone knows why.

But no one says.

No one says the chill skittering down their spine could be more than just their imagination. That the inexplicable feeling of being watched is anything more than preservation instincts thrown into overdrive by the dubious blanket of inky black night. That there is something about that tunnel that compels one to suffer the elements rather than seek a few minutes refuge within.

They don't say.

But they know.

It's a well-lit space — no dark corners, nowhere to escape the harsh glare of scintillating fluorescent lights. During the day it overflows like the levees, students churning through like the push and pull of a battering ram. Chattering voices swell into building waves, crash with a roar, before ebbing back down into fizzling seafoam in the lull before the next hoard rolls through.

But once dusk falls, so too does the silence. The tunnel empties out and yet still feels strangely occupied; for though the students have vacated, there lies something else within. Something lurks there in the yawning maw of colonial brick.

Something perhaps best left undisturbed.

You've been through the tunnel in the daytime, yes? Have you noticed? You will now, when you next go through alone. It's fine in the day, just don't go at night.

It's quiet in the tunnel. But it's not the right kind of quiet, is it? That is to say, if you talk it echoes, you can hear yourself — it's not anything so obviously spooky as that. But it's as if the only sound in the tunnel is the sound you bring into it. As if the tunnel itself has no noise.

It sounds strange, I know, for a space to have noise.
But have you ever been in one of those noiseless rooms?
An anechoic chamber.

You don't realize how much noise there is in an empty room until it's sucked out.

There's a spaceless void swallowing up everyday static — the white noise, the soundtrack of your life you don't even know is playing — and creates the kind of silence that begets madness. A silence so profound the mind — to cope for sake of its own survival — begins to manufacture sounds of its own. The numbing, bandsaw-like buzz of a thousand cockroaches with crackling wings, strong enough to make your molars hum; far-off wailing cries, hauntingly baleful and pregnant with suffering; reedy, whisper-thin voices calling, growing closer, louder, until they needle sharp and clear into your ear, right behind you.

Auditory hallucinations, they call them.

But they never care to explain the source of the silence to begin with.

Years ago it had been a hazing ritual, goading freshmen into the tunnel, a scavenger hunt to retrieve a flier tacked to the notice boards at the far end. They would stow an upperclassman at the end to jump out and grab at the new students, screeches and laughter amplified in the exposed ducting, echoing the sounds of innocuous school pranks.

They did this every year.

They did this until one night, when the air was still and the stars were muted by light pollution, when the rhythmic thrum of cicadas was noticeably absent.

They did this until one night, a girl entered the tunnel and never returned.

#

It's easy — all you have to do is go into the tunnel and bring back one of the fliers from the notice board.

She tries not to look too nervous. She's a freshman in a male-dominated field, and she's tough.

One of the guys.

She didn't quite ace the first semester exams — she was too busy schooling the guys at beer pong, exchanging trash talk over cheap beer. If statistics had to slip, well... Besides, if she saw another Gaussian, she was going to fucking harf.

They're all close, and she's cool — but they don't think of her like that.

They still arrive that night tucking someone else under their arm, shielding them from the cool evening breeze.

She doesn't know what she's doing wrong.

They tease their girlfriends mercilessly. See? She's not afraid — she's cool.

I don't care, I'm not going into that creepy old tunnel.

They still get smacking kisses pressed to their cheeks.

She doesn't know how to get them to see her as more than their classmate, more than one of the guys. I can tell you anything, you're cool.

She doesn't realize this isn't the way. No matter how many tunnels she braves, she'll always be on the outside looking in.

Why don't you be more like her? She's cool.

"Easy," she calls over her shoulder.

Her footfalls are oddly quiet in the tunnel.

An overhead light flickers, and one of the girlfriends squeal.

She turns back to look at them through the mouth of the passage.

They feel it then, all of them.

The blanket of silence rolling over them with a sigh like fog on the moors. Like a body slipping into murky waters. They turn to each other, and they'll later deny how peculiar it is to actually see hair on someone's neck stand on end, to watch the first bead of sweat break from beneath their skin. They'll deny something insidious and otherworldly inhabit-

ed that space, caressing each one of them with the bony, pale hand of terror.

Everyone will later deny anyone had pissed themselves from the cold clutch of crippling fear that gripped their young hearts — though this is harder to deny under the hard gaze of a city detective.

It was only a second.

But when they turn back to the tunnel, she's gone.

She remains missing to this day.

The missing person fliers are old now. There are a few of them still tacked to the breezeway notice boards, fluttering up like fingers as students pass by.

#

It's a ubiquitous truth that the tunnel is unsafe at night.

But due to the nature of academia in and of itself there is always, of course, some contention over when 'at night' begins.

I know, I know — but it's never been in the nature of the academic to leave well enough alone.

#

They find him in the morning collapsed at the edge of the tunnel, having cleared the threshold by inches. He'd been riding a bike, trying to breeze through as the sun sank lower and the first stars twinkled in the deepening indigo sky. People talk, but it's just a fucking tunnel. The worst thing in the tunnel was Crazy Mike that time, homeless and screaming — he'd scared that underclassman so shitless she didn't leave her dorm for a week.

He can handle Crazy Mike.

He went through at speed, the sound of clicking pawls ricocheting like strings of firecrackers, hundreds of fliers floating up in his wake, railing against the blu-tack holding them to the bricks.

Suddenly he was running.

Screaming.

Legs pumping, stumbling, desperate to make it out without tripping over his bike shoes. They offered little purchase against the brick, stiff-soled with the slippery metal clip mechanism. Fuck, why did he even wear those stupid shoes?

He pounded at the ground, determined not to look behind him again.

He didn't want to think about what he saw. Wasn't sure he could even articulate it. And when he turned his head the barest fraction, tempted to sneak a glance, he found the exit had receded, that he had more tunnel ahead of him than to begin. As if he were slowing down and the tunnel was speeding up.

He was running out of time — he'd been there too long already, and every second he spent in the tunnel was a second he wasn't free of it.

His lungs burned. His eyes burned more but no fucking way was he losing sight of the end again. Not for a second.

Not even to blink.

The sounds were catching up to him. The skin-crawling sound of thousands of insects skittering around his ankles. The blood-curdling cries of the woman, her desperate fingers peeling at his shirt. The rasping voice sharp in his ear, right over his shoulder.

His eyes stung like sandpaper. He didn't know if it was because his eyes were drying out or because he could feel the voices closing in, but he was crying, tears streaming as he fought to keep his eyes open. The pain was overwhelming; he couldn't keep them open any longer. It was like trying to die by holding your breath — it doesn't work. Eventually, you breathe. Eventually, you—

Blink.

He was screaming again.

The figure in front of him, the image that would plague his dreams for the rest of his life — if he was lucky enough to live that long — reached out. It too, like the hungry open mouth of the tunnel, beckoned forth like false lights on a shipwrecked coast. He couldn't stop, he'd built up too much momentum in the minutes — or was it hours — he'd been running. Like a ship, he'd run aground and be dashed, dragged back into the tide like many before him.

He screams.

"Jesus, take it easy." The kid that shook his shoulder covers his ears, backing away as the early morning dew coalesces.

Lying on the cobbled pathway, alive and ghost-white, he dry heaves.

The cops arrive.

That'll happen when a student suffers a psychotic break. When a kid raves about moth-eaten faces and what about all those fucking bugs, man?

Tunnel vision, the detective called it

Tunnel vision is fucking right.

An illusion, the detective assured.

Then what the fuck happened to my bike?

He looked at the mangled bike, folded in and snapped like kindling, wheels bent as though they'd been chewed by an excavator.

The detective shrugged.

Lock your bike up next time. Shit happens in the city

#

It's easy to think the cops are ignorant, derelict in duty — to blame them for not investigating the bike or giving up on the missing freshman when they did. But I've seen the haunted look on those of their faces who are unlucky enough to be dispatched to the tunnel.

I often wonder if they know more than they let on. If they have their own history of those curious places on campus, tucked away in an

unnamed folder in the back of a filing cabinet, full of accounts and evidence that can't be put into an official report. At least not if they want to keep their jobs.

But the survival instincts of the general academic population seem to have evolved on their own over the generations. The number of people seen entering the tunnel is infinitely less these days, and the unsolved missing persons are down astronomically over the last decade alone.

But they're never zero.



Lady Trashbird is a chemical engineer by trade, and while she loves spooky things, she's a bit of a chicken. You can often find her watching spooky movies from between her fingers in broad daylight.

Meals On Wheels

Georgia Cook



Alfie slumped over the steering wheel with a groan. The horn blared across the street, propelling a cat off a nearby wall and startling a cloud of pigeons into the air. Curtains twitched. Eyes glared from the sleepy shadows. Alfie smirked, pressed harder for good measure, then sat up.

It was just after dawn, and a dim grey light had begun to seep across the quiet streets and neatly clipped lawns of Mickmore Housing Estate. Alfie imagined turning the wheel, jamming the ignition, smashing the van through one of those low brick walls, splattering the lawn, decimating the twee little flower beds. That'd serve em' right.

The van was punishment enough; blocky and square, painted a cheerful baby blue, complete with So-Good Food Co's grinning pink cat logo on the side:

All Natural! All Home Cooked! Bespoke Meals On Wheels!

Those were the promises touted by So-Good Food Co, offering personalised home-delivery meals for the elderly and infirm.

Alfie had grown to loathe the van. Grown to loathe that logo every bit as much as he loathed So-Good Food and its herd of ancient, shuf-

fling clients. He didn't want to be awake. Didn't want to be here. Didn't want to be wearing this sodding uniform, driving this sodding van.

Deliveries would take all morning, interspersed with phone calls reprimanding him for driving too fast, or wearing the uniform incorrectly, or mixing up orders.

Alfie jumped from the driver's seat, strolled to the back of the van, and let himself inside. He had twenty deliveries to make today, each of them stacked at the back in neat white boxes.

Alfie made himself comfortable on the van's hard plastic floor and reached for the first box. It was weighty - always a good sign. He slid open the little plastic clasps and inspected the contents with a critical eye.

There was a container of soup (Mr. Wilkin always had soup; for his teeth) a piece of soft bread, wrapped in cling film. And there, in a little covered bowl. Alfie grinned.

Bingo

He pried it open. A perfect little blancmange glistened up at him. Alfie wasted no time in extracting it from the rest of the tray, grinning. He hated his job. God, Alfie hated his job. But there were perks. There were perks to everything if you were willing to find them.

Soon the floor at Alfie's feet was covered in little plastic boxes of dessert; cakes and jellies and firm slices of pie, tiny individual tarts and helpings of smooth vanilla custard. Consideration made for every diet and dietary requirement.

So-Good Food Co believed in bespoke treatment of its clients, and bespoke treats.

It was the work of a moment each morning to gather them up and secret them away in the back of the van, and Alfie took a special delight in seeing all of them laid out before him. At first, he'd only taken the ones he liked the look of - wanted to eat - but he'd quickly graduated to pilfering the lot. Looked less suspicious, didn't it? On no, Mr. Jefferies, we don't provide dessert. No, no. We never have.

So far, nobody suspected a thing. Alfie was the 'poor confused boy' who'd done some mischief, but was helping out in the community now, and wasn't that nice? The desserts were his. His reward for putting up with this stupid job and its stupid flock of old fogies.

Alfie reached for the final box. There was a little sticky label attached to this one, written in the neat cursive handwriting that was the only communication he had with So-Good Food Co beyond irate phone calls.

Special Meal- Handle Carefully!!

Alfie glanced at the address. It was new; a street he didn't recognise, some European name he couldn't pronounce. The box was heavier than usual. Alfie weighed it carefully in his hands before flicking it open.

A rich meaty smell filled the van, mingling with the scents of sugar and dust. Alfie surveyed the familiar collection of plastic containers: a bowl of stew, by the look of it, another bundle of grainy rye bread. And there, in its own little plastic tub. Alfie popped the lid.

What would it be? Another bowl of jelly? (a depressing regularity) A slice of pie? Some weird granola?

It was a slice of cake. A deep, rich-red sponge, frosted with white icing.

Alfie picked it up. It was moist to the touch and heavier than he was sure a sponge should be. The smell of the stew lingered on it, pungent. For a moment Alfie wondered whether he should leave it, or just chuck it in a bin on his way past. Maybe 'special meal' meant medication in the cake batter, maybe gluten-free or sugarless.

He took a bite, chewed thoughtfully.

Stopped chewing. Went pale. His eyes bulged.

Alfie spat the bite out into his hand, rubbing his mouth viciously with his sleeve.

Ugh! God!

The cake tasted rotten. Like spoiled meat, or the scent of hamburgers on a hot day. Sickly sweet and mushy. The clumpy, over-moist

texture fell apart in his mouth, reminding Alfie of under-done mince. He stared at the remaining cake in his hand, clumped and moist, then threw it hard against the opposite wall. It landed with a sticky thwack, stuck there a moment, then began to slide down, leaving a long red trail.

Suddenly the other desserts no longer appealed. Alfie stared at them in the van gloom, punctuated by that meat-mould scent of cake, and fought down a wave of nausea. He stood, gave the blancmange box a vicious kick, then stomped to the van doors and back out onto the street.

The meat taste didn't fade all morning. Alfie conducted his deliveries in seething silence, occasionally wiping his mouth. What kind of special meal required a clumpy meat cake as a treat? What kind of deranged old person requested it? Stupid old people and their stupid, disgusting food. Stupid job. Forcing him to be here, doing this.

Last delivery of the day: a drab little house on a grey little cul de sac on the edge of the estate. Curtains drawn, roof sagging. A garden overgrown with weeds and tangled rose bushes.

Alfie had been avoiding this one, partially out of spite, partially because the gorge rose in his throat whenever he thought about it.

The new address. The new meal. The rotten cake.

He pressed the doorbell. It rang once - a muffled *ding dong* back inside the house - followed by a long moment of silence. Then came the sound of slow, shuffling footsteps. Dark shapes moved indistinctly behind the glass. Finally, the door was opened by an immensely old woman.

She was small and hunched, with a mass of grey-white hair and tiny, beetle-black eyes. Her nose was sharp and triangular - like a beak or a wedge of cheese - and she wore a shapeless grey dress that hung about her knees. Alfie tried not to notice that she wore no shoes and that her feet were cracked and dirty.

She squinted up at him suspiciously, before her face broke into a wide, toothless smile.

“Oh, how nice,” there was an odd tinge to her voice—not exactly an accent, but a crackle. As if her throat was lined with something thick and rough. “A visitor.”

“Morning,” Alfie glanced at the name on the box, trying hard not to breathe. “Mrs. Padury.”

“That’s Padurii, dear,” her eyes darted to the food container. She licked her lips. “Oh, and you’ve brought my little box. So early too! Come in, come in,” she motioned Alfie inside.

Alfie stared over Mrs. Padurii’s shoulder into the gloom.

The curtains were drawn here as well, wrapping the house in shadows. A strange, dusty odour crept out from around the old woman, imbedding itself in her hair, her clothes, the grey, sagging wallpaper.

“Actually, I’m supposed to just give you the box...”

Alfie felt a hand on his arm - wrinkled and dry, but surprisingly strong - then Mrs. Padurii was pulling him through the door and into the house, calling cheerfully as she went.

“Not at all, not at all! Just pop it on the table, dear. I want to get a good look at it!”

Alfie found himself being dragged down a dark, messy hallway to a tiny kitchen. The carpet crackled underfoot. Picture frames lined the walls, depicting strange twisting shapes that could have been trees, could have been people, but were too shrouded in gloom to tell. Furniture clogged the rooms, giving Alfie the disquieting sensation of creatures lurking in the dark, of never being quite sure just how tiny the space really was. A naked bulb light flickered overhead, providing the only suggestion of light. The dusty-sweet scent was stronger now, mixed with a cloying back-in-the-throat floral smell that made Alfie gag. He hated old people’s houses. Hated old people.

Mrs. Padurii snatched the box eagerly from his unresisting hands and set it down on the kitchen table. The tablecloth, Alfie noticed, was marked with brown and red stains, as if something had been smeared across it long ago and left to fester.

“Lovely.” Mrs. Padurii licked her lips doubtfully, eyeing the tray’s meagre offerings. Alfie turned to go—he’d done his job. Delivered the crazy old woman’s food. Now he could leave.

“Oh but wait-” Mrs. Padurii lifted a finger. “Where’s the cake, dear?”

Alfie froze.

Fuck

He turned, raising his eyebrows innocently.

“Cake, Mrs. Padurii?”

“Cake, dear. There should be a slice of cake.”

“Don’t think so, Mrs. Padurii. We don’t do cakes.

“Oh, but I requested it specifically. Specifically.” Mrs. Padurii licked her lips again, rubbing her crooked old hands together. “I’m afraid this simply won’t do.”

“I can have a word with HQ if you like.”

She shook her head.

“No, no. It should definitely be here. I have very particular dietary requirements, you see. Very particular.”

Something about the way she said it. Very particular. Alfie suppressed a surge of revulsion. What had he eaten?

He wanted out of here. He wanted out of here now. Away from this mad old woman and her stinking house. Away from the smell of meat and the rising taste of cake.

“Yeah, well...”

“You didn’t take it, did you dear?”

Her eyes were on him now, searching his face, small and darting. Alfie tried to calm himself. It wasn’t as if she could do anything. Her grip had been strong, but she had to be over 90. He could take her if he had to.

She just grabbed me! She’s insane! I had to!

“Of course not!”

Mrs. Padurii sniffed the air. Hard and sharp. Then she smiled.

“You smell of it, my dear. You smell of meat and blood and offal. You smell of everything I need.”

She snatched his arm. So sharply that Alfie jumped back with a yelp. This time Mrs. Padurii’s grip was like iron. Her nails dug into her skin.

“Look, I ate it, alright?” he gasped, “I ate your stupid...”

Alfie was suddenly aware—horribly aware—that Mrs. Padurii was standing between himself and the door. She seemed to have grown larger in the last few minutes. She filled the space from wall to wall until the sparse light from outside was blocked entirely by her shabby grey dress and wiry grey hair. Her eyes gleamed.

“Oh, well,” she said, and smiled with a mouthful of small, needle-sharp teeth. “That can be remedied, dear.”



Georgia Cook is an illustrator and writer from London, specialising in folklore and ghost stories. She is the winner of the LISP 2020 Flash Fiction Prize, and has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, Staunch Book Prize and Reflex Fiction Award, among others. She can be found on Twitter at @georgiacooked and on her website at www.georgiacookwriter.com¹

1. <http://www.georgiacookwriter.com>

Hush Little Baby

Maria Balbi



My sad lullaby muffles the sound of my shoveling in the churchyard.

Madeleine regurgitates cough syrup, threatening to wake up. Her drowsy cawing irritates a murder of crows.

"Immaculate conception...? Crow Daemon's kin." The townspeople muttered, "bury the sin."

My baby's squawk summons the crows. Beaks stab my body. Despite the slashes, I dig faster.

Madeleine's black eyes snap open. Our father's gaze.

Shivering, I lay her in her six-foot crib.

She sucks in a deep breath of dirt and air and wails. My ears bleed.

The crows unearth Madeleine and carry her to their nest in the bell tower.



Maria Balbi (she/her) is an Argentinean Psychologist living in Buenos Aires with a grumpy cat named Benito and has a tendency to indulge in Dulce de Leche and the dark depths of the soul in equal proportions. Can be found on Twitter @alejandrabalbi9

Daddy's Home

Adam Down



Someone knocks at the door, making Lucy jump.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Mommy laughs, “It’s Daddy, that’s all.”

Lucy scoots back. It’s late, and Daddy has his own key; he never knocks. Mommy reaches for the latch.

The door explodes inwards in a cloud of splinters. Mommy wheels away screaming, a hinge embedded in her eye.

A figure steps through the gap, wearing Daddy’s coat and overalls, and his face as a mask. Behind ragged flaps of skin, masses of red worms contort and writhe.

“Don’t worry, kiddo,” gurgles the thing, as its face drops into Lucy’s lap, “Daddy’s home.”



Adam writes stories about bad people doing bad things, often to one another. His work has appeared in Coffin Bell Journal and Friday Flash Fiction. He resides in the UK, and can be found on Twitter @AdamDownFiction.

The Lamp

Rebecca Harrison



We laughed about the shadow.

“What do you expect for 70% off?” Pete said as I rotated the lamp and watched the darkness move around the walls.

“It wasn’t in the ‘reduced because of a creepy shadow’ section,” I said. “How does it make it, anyway?”

Between the telly and the fireplace, a shape crawled half out of the ground. its long snout pointed to the ceiling; its talon claws stretched into thin knives.

“Personally, I think it’s high time Laura Ashley expanded their range from ye olde English country gardens to psycho moles. Who knows, maybe they were a major feature in the lives of the landed gentry back in Georgian times, and this is just a bid for authenticity?” Pete said.

I tried to laugh, but it lodged in my throat like my mum’s lumpy mashed potato. I turned the lamp off.

“Does it look the same to you?” I asked Pete the following evening. He looked up from his phone.

“Like it wants to eat our entrails?” He raised an eyebrow.

"It's bigger, like it's crawled out more."

"You're imagining things." And he went back to clicking messages. I took a pencil and made a tiny mark on the wall at the tip of the shadow's claws.

The next evening, the claws reached an inch above the pencil mark. I turned the lamp off. And in the morning, as soon as the shops were open, I bundled the lamp back in its box and got myself in the queue at Laura Ashley. The shop smelled of magnolia and mirrors.

"I thought they'd recalled all of these," the assistant said. Her brow was furrowed. She turned the card reader towards me. I tapped it with my card. The refund beeped. "There's a special hotline, just in case you have any other issues."

"Other issues?" But she just wrote a number on a card and passed it over the counter. I put it in my wallet.

But that evening, when it grew dark and we put the lights on in the living room, the shadow was still there. Still there, but further out, claws curled, snout starting to open showing razor teeth. Pete stared and said nothing, his face the colour of my mum's lumpy mashed potato.

"Laura Ashley gave me a number in case of problems," I said, reaching into my wallet.

"I think this qualifies," Pete said. He even shoved his precious phone at me. I dialled.

"This number is no longer in operation," a computer voice said. And then there was a sound like claws scraping earth. I shoved the phone back at Pete. There was a silence between us thick and clinging. Pete inched closer to the shadow.

"It smells," he said. And it did. Not an unpleasant smell. It was like a garden on a November morning. It even brought back memories of my Dad building bonfires and me scooping armfuls of soggy leaves and piling them. "We should keep a record or something, see how much it's growing every day."

He got the pencil and reached to mark the shadow's height.

"Ow!" He dropped the pencil. Blood dripped from his finger. "It cut me."

We didn't rush out of there. We shut the door slowly. Pete washed and put a plaster on his cut. And we went to bed. But when I slept, my dreams were full of the sounds of earth scraping and the smells of soil.

"You'd better see this," Pete shook me awake.

I followed him downstairs into the smell of earthworms and hedge roots. In the living room, between the telly and the fireplace, where the shadow had been, was a pile of soil like a molehill. Only it was larger than a molehill. I was dressed, and in the car, and on my way before he said anything. I waited outside Laura Ashley. Pete sent photos to my phone.

It looks like it's getting bigger, he messaged.

Any sign of the shadow? I texted back.

It's daylight.

Close the bloody curtains and put on the light, then. He didn't reply to that. He was always touchy. And soon they were opening the doors. I pushed my way inside.

"You told me to call if I had problems, but it was a dead number, and now I've got this in my living room." I held up my phone. The assistant's eyes were bulging with worry. She muttered something about getting the manager and scurried off.

I'm waiting for the manager. Did you try closing the curtains? I messaged Pete. He didn't reply. Still offended, no doubt. So, I sat down on one of the awful hard sofas that looked like something from Hyacinth Bucket's home. My hair smelled of freshly dug earth. I pulled a hairband out of my pocket and tied it back, so I couldn't smell it anymore.

They're taking their time. Was the shadow there? I messaged Pete. But he still didn't answer. I found a sofa that was actually comfortable and let myself sink into it. There was the click-clack of high heels.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” It was the assistant again. “We have some forms for you to fill in.” She handed me a pile of papers, a biro, and a magazine to lean on. Then she left me to it.

Unbelievable. All they’ve done is give me some bloody forms, I texted. But I filled them in.

“Someone should contact you within 48 hours,” the assistant said as I handed them over. I glanced at the clock. It was nearly midday, and they hadn’t so much as given me a coffee.

Leaving now. What a joke, I messaged Pete. Still no reply. Even for him, this was a lengthy sulk.

“Bloody useless lot,” I said as I turned the key in the front door.

I coughed at the stench of soil. There was no point asking Pete why he hadn’t responded to my messages. The best course of action was to pretend it hadn’t happened. But the house was quiet, like an empty garage. The living room door was shut. I turned the handle. The curtains were closed but the lights were off. The molehill was wider, and soil spread across the carpet. I reached for the light switch, blinked at the brightness. A shadow stretched up from the molehill. It had Pete’s shape. Its arms flung out as if clutching, but from the waist, it buried into the ground. My heart was all through me. I plunged through the soil, tried to grab the shadow arms. But all I felt was the wall. And then, slowly, very slowly, he sank lower and lower into the ground. I watched his fingers disappear.

Then there was nothing left of him.

“You’ll be well compensated,” the Laura Ashley representative said on the phone. “We’ll even throw in a new carpet. We just didn’t have the staff to get someone out to you right away. These things happen, I’m afraid. The compensation will be in the form of a credit note, you understand.”



Rebecca Harrison sneezes like Donald Duck and her best friend is a dog who can count.

The Deal

Steven Skibicki



What could prompt such a lightning striking succession of events such as these,

one moment all is an orchestra of chaos, then the conductor appears a gangly gaunt man in a suit.

He snaps his fingers, deafening silence invades; nothing heard not even the cool morning breeze,

dressed as pitch black tar with a hacksaw smile stretching ear to ear giving rise to the mute.

Crimson and hazel eyes deadlock whether of resilience or a sense of being filled with vile dread,

he breaks the standstill first with his eerie ominous guttural voice uttering "don't be so uptight."

Calm as a madman's lullaby he pulls out a set of the chairs from the air colored in Venetian red,

He gestures with his hand politely yet menacingly as if to instill a sense of obedience and fright.

He moderates his tone like a salesman's pitch saying, "I've come here because I like you."

Keenly aware that isn't the case by his overall predatory demeanor and stature.

Before you can properly access the gravity of the situation he states "I've made a deal or two,

so please have a seat my friend I'm not here for your end I want to discuss a suture."

Unsure if you can decline, you traipse forward breaking line of sight for a moment only,

regaining your vision on the insidious stranger of otherworldly means you shudder.

Not sure if your eyes were playing tricks on you, but his visage turned hollow and ghastly,

For a split second, you could have sworn he was horrifically burnt and heard the trace of thunder.

Resuming his speech, "good ... I'm glad we could sit down and talk about this civilized,

now then son of Adam what is it you desire, fortune, fame, women, all are within my reach.

I am the power of the air I can manifest any poison mankind has ever contrived,

filling the worldly needs of those in want is what you might say is my marketing niche."

Twiddling thumbs, you hope and pray silently this is all a night terror of soon you'll awaken,

but he raises a brow and snaps his fingers assuring you with his overbearing voice "I am real."

A meager quiet voice pops out of you, "I don't need anything... but uh... thanks, any... way?"

Glaring, his pupils tighten making a snake's slit stating "I didn't come here for your beau ideals."

Eyes making you feel as though you were an ant trapped underneath a magnifying glass,

If you could spontaneously combust, you would certainly be incinerated by his gaze.

Stammering to get your question out, "what exactly do I have to give in return if I may ask?"

Smirking as the corners of his mouth touch his ears, "your soul is what I'll come to claim."

Looking away you can't believe you're doing this but it's not as if you could actually refuse,

as you carefully say, "I want it all ... everything, money, fame, women." Feeling ashamed.

Giddy he laughs in an ocean of voices as he takes out a contract leaving you obtuse,

taking a pin out of his right breast pocket, "blood always gives a true name for us to claim."

You prick your finger and touch it to the paper as the ringing goes off in your ears,

opening a drowsy eye you slam your hand down on the off button of the clock to start the day.

Getting up you walk to the bathroom glad it was only a dream, such a relief to your fears,

hearing the phone ring, you walk back to see what it is while you were sleeping the night away.

A voicemail, but no missed calls the thought of who it could be crosses your mind,

dialing, you decide it would be best to hear what the message is after your nights' wild ride.

Entering your password, you listen in as the voice reverberates to your deepest despair inside,

"just remember I have delivered my end so at the end of 10 years there's no use trying to hide."



Steven Skibicki lives in Dayton Texas USA. His current work in progress is called American Darkness. Which can be found at www.wattpad.com/user/Firesidesin¹ or on Twitter at @skibickisteven

1. <http://www.wattpad.com/user/Firesidesin>

I Could Hear Them Breaking Free

Darren Davies



Click.

A low hiss breaks the silence. The sound stretches out, broken by crackles that are gone almost as soon as they appear.

Another sound emanates, louder than the hiss, ragged where that is steady. Easier to place, organic rather than mechanical, this sound is gasping, uncontrolled exhalation of rattled breathing. Together, the sounds tug at the hearing even as they are joined by a high, thin screech of a third, one that goes on longer than it should and has the substance of nails scrapping across a blackboard. The breathing becomes more erratic still, hassled, panting, the edge of panic made real. Slowly, almost aching, it calms when the screeching is not repeated, and after an eternity becomes a voice.

“Oh, Christ sweet Jesus Christ please...”

It is a sound that raises flaccid hairs on the backs of arms, demanding attention. At first, the voice is indiscernible as male or female, for the cadence of terror is something raw and universal. It peaks, then fades to a low sob, the sound of a wounded and frightened animal. It

wants to become louder, to pour out the fear and distress, but it cannot. Something holds it back, something unseen.

“Jenny I’m sorry...”

The voice fades to silence again, the sobbing dying with it. An eternity passes to the soundtrack of the background hiss, steady and resolute.

“They’re coming, God help me they’re coming. God help us all.”

It stops again, ceasing abruptly, speech turned to the low tension of managed breathing while other senses search for threat. When it returns it is more coherent, distinguishable now as male.

“There isn’t much time. They’ll find me soon enough,” the voice says. Stronger now, more composed than before.

“They’re out. I could hear them coming out, scratching, clawing at the air. More than I could count. We set them free, Christ help us, we turned them loose.”

The voice takes panic and hones it, forging it into anger.

“It shouldn’t have been opened. I don’t know how why they did it. Thought they were so fucking clever. I told them not to, not to mess about with things they didn’t understand. They didn’t listen. But I knew. I knew something was wrong. And now they’re dead because they wouldn’t listen.” The voice pauses, lowers. “I’m dead too. So are you. We’re all done.”

To listen to the voice is to imagine it straddling a ridge, a precipice with sanity and the light of reality bathing one side. On the other is something dark and drunk with madness that skitters and capers about in fathomless depths, a whispering seductiveness. It would be easy to fall from that dividing line, to abandon everything and just let go. But not yet, not just yet.

“It was buried for a reason. All that time, all those thousands of years under the desert, buried on purpose, the press release said. On purpose, those are the important words here. How they could tell that I

don't know, but nobody thought to ask why. Or if they did, they didn't bear it any mind. Bloody arrogant fools. Fucking..."

The voice checks itself just as it was about to rise beyond a whisper and become a shout. But that wouldn't do, because loud would draw notice, attract curiosity. Loud might make things come, things which would make other sounds, rending and tearing sounds that would make anybody listening clap their hands over their ears and pray please God just make those noises stop.

"It's quiet now," the voice says, softly. "I don't think there's anyone else left alive. I ran faster than the others." The voice rises near the end, teetering on the ridge, swaying but holding as if it were on a tightrope.

The voice has stopped to listen again, and there, so far in the distance that it is barely audible over the low hiss and jagged breathing, comes the shivering revulsion of the screech, vibrating through skin and bone. It is answered by the distinctive, rapid crack of gunfire, bursts appearing and disappearing in the background. For a few seconds the echo of it lingers and then is gone. The voice sobs again, slow and heaving, unable to give vent to its feelings for fear of hastening what it already knows is inevitable.

At first there was nothing," A faint sniff as the man's voice resumes. "They opened it and the cameras whirled and we stared and the scientists stared and everybody stared. The army was there because they'd dug it up. Biggest archaeological find since King Tut's tomb the press said. It was. I wrote the headline."

Shrieks come, drawn out aches of wretchedness pummelling the hearing.

"Do you hear them now? I could hear them as they came out. Even when I ran I could hear them. I could hear them breaking free."

The voice pauses, becomes silent. Yet the silence speaks. The man behind the voice is concentrating on the piercing howl beyond, determining how close it is. Listening before beginning again, in a tone hushed and conspiratorial.

“They find you, you know. Even if you run, they find you. Because they don’t sleep. They never rest, and they can’t be stopped. But you’ll know soon enough. Yes, you will.”

It giggles quietly. The voice is a whisper now, an exhalation stirring the dust of a forgotten room. The darker side of the precipice has become too tempting to resist, and the voice is sliding, slipping down into the warm, soft arms of abandon.

Again the screech comes, painful and insistent, the hunter bearing down on the prey.

“Here they come, here they come...If you hear this, then you’re lucky. Or unlucky, depends on how you want to look at it. But if you do hear this, then you’ll know. You’ll know what we did. This is how it started.”

Another giggle. The next shriek is shockingly close, rising into a roar that is almost jubilant. Answering howls and wet, slithering sounds join it, a cacophony of chaos. Ratchet like clicking noises beneath those are a disjointed, irregular percussion.

The voice has fallen silent. It is listening as it falls from the ridge, down into the blessed, comforting darkness.

The slinking, scraping sounds are close enough now to touch, drawing themselves together. A loud thud comes, the sound of something heavy striking something sturdy. Another thud, and then another. Screeches fill the void, terrible reverberations that tear at the air itself.

“I’m sorry, Jenny I’m so sorry. I love you, I always have...”

The thuds continue their hammering, one after another with no time between them as they drown out the voice and all other noises. Creaking resonates, transforming into the crack of splintering as something reliable yields to the inevitable. Squeals sound in triumph, the whoop and holler of victory, then frantic tearing noises drowning out all the others. Finally, the sounds of something being punctured, being torn apart.

“I can see you now, I can see...!” The voice speaks for the final time, rising to pour out in a scream all its repressed fear and hidden anger. It is a scream that does not stop for the longest time.

Muted wails and scrapings, wet, shuffling sounds up close, intruding in on the ear with their unnatural noise. Sniffing, scratching, another screech that draws out into an uneasy juxtaposition of longing and satisfaction. The whoosh of air rushing as something draws back. Then a crunch.

Silence.



Darren Davies grew up in North Wales but now makes his living as an engineer in Ireland. His spare time is spent writing horror and science fiction stories; his work has previously been published by Cold Open Stories.

Feast

49



Salacious scalpels slice three fingers from the left hand; precise, neat cuts.

1, 2, 3.

A dull, blunt blade lingers over the right forearm, flirting with the tip of the ulna. Rusty, jagged edges tease the skin before grinding at the bone: the sinews and nerves twitch in unison. Raw flesh exposed like clumps of tenderised meat falling from the bone, its host a rotting carcass. Mutilated, manipulated. What's on the menu tonight?

You are.



Decadently deviant, 49 offers a twisted and tormenting insight into their living nightmares and the menacing reality of mental illness. A newly established composer of unnerving art and obscure narrative, this UK based LGBTQ+ creator digs into the darkest depths of depravity leaving no room for mercy.

Partners

Bill Hughes



The kid cracked his knuckles. I grimaced. He stopped, looking sheepish. I didn't give him Clemente's old line, that nervous habits—especially noisy nervous habits—meant trouble. Clemente was right, but it didn't matter.

Overall, the kid wasn't bad. Reminded me of me when I was starting out.

"Tell me again," I said.

"I know it," the kid said.

"Humor me."

"The window's in back, ten paces off the driveway. You get the latch. It lets us into the kitchen. I go in first, you follow. No lights. The door to the basement is directly across from the window. I open the door. Three steps down, right turn at the landing, nine more steps down. Don't know contents of basement. Don't matter. There's a door to another room in the far wall. I'll need the cutters. The cash and any merch he's holding will be in the room. No talking. No bullshit. In and out in five minutes."

I smiled. He had all the right answers and none of the wrong questions. Twenty years in the business, I'd never worked with a partner. Well, except Clemente. He taught me almost everything I know, then sold me out in a pinch. I did twenty-eight months in Lucasville and notched one last lesson: never work with a partner.

We drove to the spot. The block's only streetlamps were dark, burned or shot out. A blanket of clouds hid the moon and stars. At two a.m. getting out of the car was like diving into an inkwell. Bailey's house was dark, a tighter blot of blackness in the overall gloom. Bailey wasn't home, of course. Rando had made sure of that. Still, we kept quiet as we strolled up the drive and stepped into the backyard. The window only took a moment, then we were in. The stillness of the house suffered little from our intrusion. The kid led the way to the basement door and down the stairs. At least he knew how to move quietly. If I were in the market for a partner, I could do worse.

Crossing the basement in the dark was a bit treacherous. Piles of boxes and scattered junk seemed, at first, to have us blocked. Rando had said Bailey had had a wife and kids before domesticity failed him and she split. Either Bailey was a packrat, or the Mrs. and the brood had left a good bit behind. It took the kid a few minutes working in the dark, foot by foot, to find the pathway to the far side, but he did it.

When we got there, I popped the soft beam on, keeping it low. The door was a tell—a thick, metal-paneled monstrosity that didn't really make sense. At least within was quiet. I don't know what would have happened if the thing had started making a bunch of racket. As it was, the kid didn't seem to think twice as he held out his hand for the bolt cutters. He snapped the padlock, grasped the knob, and started to pull the door open. I swung the light upward, curiosity getting the better of me, and we shared a rushed glimpse of a face—a strangely ruddy conflation of wolf and gorilla that seemed to morph and shift in the beam of my light as it moved toward us, jaw gaping to display impossibly large, yellow teeth. The kid gave a yelp and a half-step back but ran into me

and could retreat no further. He didn't have time to begin to scream before the thing had him by the throat and was rag-dolling him into its lair. Rando had said it was quick, but still, I was stunned. Not stunned enough, though, to forget to pull the Pneu from my waistband and pop three darts into the beast's back. Rando had been right about three. Whatever that thing was, it was big.

It didn't like being shot. It wheeled and came toward me, its yellowed teeth now freshly pinked. I slammed the door and leaned against it. I felt it shudder as the thing flung itself against the other side. Once, twice, three times. The door held, of course—Bailey liked living too much to have left any doubt about that—and the thing moved off. Angry snarls and half-barks ruptured the quiet of the night, but within a minute they had faded as the sedatives went to work. I texted Rando and then eased the door open.

The creature was sprawled across the kid's body, conked out in the middle of devouring him. I tried to take stock of what Bailey had engineered—the massive arms, the taloned fingers, the lean, muscular legs. I wondered for the hundredth time how Rando and his crew thought they could control the thing and what they had planned, but I pushed those thoughts away. None of that was my problem.

I stepped back out of the room and closed the door. Through the darkness, I could hear Rando and his boys making their way down the basement stairway. They came right on, like a squad of soldiers. The last two had a gurney. Rando nodded to me and brushed the hair out of his eyes. I swung the door open for him to see. He nodded again and motioned his team forward.

My eyes drifted back to the kid: an open red moat from chin to navel, a half-unpacked sack of offal. It was his own fault. I'd never pushed him, not even at the end. A smarter person would have seen the evasions in the yarn I'd spun and backed away. Stupidity has a price, and he would have paid sooner or later, with or without me.

As his team strapped the unconscious creature into the gurney, Rando handed me a grimy envelope. I headed for the stairs without bothering to count it. I know Rando always makes good on our deals, just like he knows I only work on individual contract.



Once upon a time, Bill Hughes edited a small press magazine called Dread, which later was resurrected as a website, Dred. Over the years, he has published over numerous stories in a variety of markets, including Flesh and Blood, The Edge, Page & Spine and Electric Spec. Currently, he is the webmaster at www.dreadimaginings.com¹

1. <http://www.dreadimaginings.com>

Panic

Brie O'Reilly



The attack came. Elena fought for the tiniest bit of air. The world dipped and dived, darkening in front of her as the heat of blood rushed into her face. Her stomach threatened to revolt. She felt lightheaded. Breathe! Her lungs screamed. Elena inhaled, the air sharp and biting as she leaned against the rough brick wall. Her eyes flew open, and her face began to cool. When had she closed them? How long had she stood there motionless? Never close your eyes... He would claim you.

Elena stood there long enough to fight off the dizziness then set off at a run, her lungs yelling in protest. She could never stop running. No matter where she went, he had always been there, hovering at the edge of vision.

The doctors had all tried to convince her that he wasn't real, that he was a figment of her overactive imagination. They said if she took her medication he would disappear. Elena had stopped seeing the doctors. She had also stopped taking the pills they'd prescribed. The drugs had only prevented her from fighting him.

Who was he? They had asked, voices mocking. He was dread and doubt. He was everything anyone has ever been scared of, but his name

was Panic. Panic, the most dangerous of emotions, there was no escaping his hold. You can only experience so much anger before you erupt, and only so much love before your heart breaks. But he—Panic was a black bottomless pit. Elena had known him since the very first time she'd wandered away from her mother at the grocery store. He had feasted upon her childish terror of being lost and alone. Panic was that strong tide of the ocean pulling you to crash against the rocks. He had owned her from that very first moment.

Elena's feet slapped the wet pavement as she ran in the rain. Thwack, thwack, thwack. She had thought an early morning jog around the neighborhood would calm and clear her mind. Now, she realized that it had only exhausted her further. Every part of her body ached with fatigue. She hadn't had a full night's sleep in weeks, settling for short catnaps and large doses of caffeine. Elena knew that she couldn't run forever. Eventually, her body would shut down, allowing itself the respite she denied. Until then, she'd take every step to avoid him.

As Elena approached her apartment, she slowed her pace, stopping just short of the front door. An unbearable weight dragged at her as she entered, and she fought to stifle another yawn. Each step took enormous effort, until she could go no further, and she collapsed onto the couch. Yawning widely, it occurred to her that a jog might not have been a wise decision, and her eyelids began their slow descent.

Everything was dark. He loomed over her, a silhouette against the light. How was that possible? There was no light in the dark? A familiar sensation began to rise, and she stifled a scream. He shifted closer. Suddenly, her dread was gone, and she felt safe. Safe? The question burst in her mind like a flare.

"Yes, Elena. Safe. Do you not ever tire of this chase? Always questioning. Always running. I've waited too long for you to stop running, Elena."

His voice held a note that she hadn't anticipated. Why had she run? Elena strained to look at him. Panic stepped forward again, his features now clear and defined.

She had never seen him. She had always fought to escape his hold. Why? The answer eluded her as she studied his face. His features were simple enough, pale skin and dark hair, but his eyes—oh, those eyes. How could Elena have forgotten them? They were the coldest, deepest blue she had ever seen. They could drive one mad.

"You remember," he spoke again. His words wrapped her in thin tendrils of warmth and something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered, her thoughts sluggish. The haze began to lift, giving her a small glimpse of things long forgotten. Just as quickly as it had come, the memories vanished, leaving her in a cloud of confusion. Elena drew her legs up, wrapping her arms around them for comfort.

"I scare you," Panic said simply.

"Yes," Elena whispered.

"That is why you ran."

"Yes," she replied.

"If that is true, then you should also fear yourself," he said.

Elena met his eyes once more. They held a deep sorrow, stirring a long-forgotten memory.

"Why would I fear myself?" she whispered.

"Because, Elena, you are Fear."

Her head swam, and she struggled to breathe. Centuries of memories flooded through her, images of love, hatred, power, and death. She collapsed.

Elena stirred. Strong arms cradled her. Arms that had built a kingdom only to see it smashed to pieces and begin rebuilding once more. Arms that held someone they'd lost, hoping one day for a reunion.

"I knew you would return."

Elena leaned into his embrace, content. They had been reunited. There would always be a reason to run, but now everyone would be running from her. After all, Fear and Panic had always been lovers, a King and Queen ruling their court of terror.



An avid reader, Brianne O'Reilly developed a love for all things Fantasy at a young age. It should come as no surprise then, that she attended Drexel University—home of the Dragons, and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Digital Media. When she's not writing, Brianne enjoys crocheting, singing karaoke, and taking out mobs in her favourite MMO.

The Reluctant Cannibal

John Tinney



I wake up on a meat hook surrounded by pieces of the dead. A family replete with butchers, practical jokers and psychos, and I insist on being different. Serves me right, I suppose. I'm a glutton for punishment and not for meat. I don't even like the killing part. The time I saw Uncle Leathermask sticking a chainsaw in that hysterical blonde guy from Kil-winning still haunts me. It's just a shame my family doesn't believe in PTSD or hemophobia.

I can't even tell what's human and what's animal. My family doesn't do time for distinction. "So much to kill and so little time" is what granda used to say. He'll be down there now looking up at us. What nature didn't create, he made sure to nurture. Everything was game. But not to me. I can't bear it. I close my eyes again and pray for release, but this place hides from God and divine intervention. Only the devil visits our farm in Stranraer.

Lumbering footsteps approach the meat locker. It's Uncle Leathermask. No one moves like him or casually turns on a chainsaw for ambience. I can hear the demented whooping of Cousin Inbred behind him.

The door flies open. I open one eye and see two butchers aprons covered in blood.

‘There’s the sensitive wan — the wee pussy.’

Cousin Inbred always reinforces the need for us to widen our gene pool. Uncle Leathermask comes up to my face and tilts his head to the side. For a man with a repulsive mask, his icy-blue eyes are the envy of everyone. It’s just a shame he’s practically mute and an irredeemable, homicidal lunatic.

‘Couldnae kill,’ he says. I hang corrected. ‘Couldnae eat human flesh. And noo he wants tae be a vegetarian! We’re no vegetarians!’

‘Aye, we eat meat,’ Cousin Inbred says. ‘Meat!’ Guy was born without the capability of an indoor voice.

‘Aw ah said was we’ll live longer. And it’s better for the environment if we don’t eat aw these people and animals aw the time. The emissions fae dairy farming is a major contributor tae global warming. Have you no noticed how much hotter it’s getting here?’

‘So?’ Uncle Leathermask says. ‘The heat slows doon the prey.’

‘But if we have mair greens and a plant-based diet, there’s a good chance we’ll live longer. Then we can still keep luring bait and...’ I can hardly bring myself to say it. ‘Killing.’

‘You’re no one ae us,’ Cousin Inbred says. ‘You a weirdo! Kill him, Unc! Before he tries tae escape again!’

‘If you let me get ma phone, ah’ll show you the literature.’

Uncle Leathermask pulls out his blood-spattered iPhone 8.

‘Show me then. And nae funny business or your face will be oan ma plate.’

‘Do it, Unc!’

Leathermask slaps Cousin Inbred’s face. And not before time.

‘Can you get me aff the hook first? It’s a bit restricting.’

I’ve never been so happy to put my feet on the floor. What a shit life I’ve led. I give my uncle’s phone a long overdue wipe with a Kleenex and conjure the basis of my arguments against cannibalism and eating

meat. It doesn't take long before he's flailing around insanely with his trusty chainsaw. This is what you call the proper motivation.

Watch me run through this wasteland with a chainsaw-wielding maniac and a meat hook-carrying cousin inches from my skinny posterior. Survival has a way of keeping you on your toes.

'Where is he, Unc?'

I watch the chainsaw come down on Cousin Inbred's troglodyte face. I consider myself a pacifist, which is difficult under the circumstances, but that was probably for the best. The last thing we needed was Cousin Inbred pro-creating and perpetuating that Habsburg jaw.

Uncle Leathermask goes sawing through hedges instead of walking around them and keeps looking for me, a flashlight attached to the saw illuminating the ground before him. Subtlety has never been the family's strong suit. He's just lucky we don't have a neighbourhood watch, or else we'd have been rumbled a long time ago.

I can hear the mouth-breathing above the sputtering chainsaw. I'm Stranraer's next corpse unless I become death, the destroyer of worlds.

'Here, veggie veggie!'

This is Stranraer's worst uncle at his playful, verbose best. He only gets talkative during the hunt; then he reverts to a Buddhist monk without the trivial pacifism. I know I can't hide up this tree forever, especially when my uncle and my cousins are having a kickabout in the next few hours with the head of that last victim.

Uncle Leathermask sniffs the air right beneath me. The guy is half Pitbull, and I'm half bacon. My stomach does a double somersault dismount and completes a dodgy fart on landing. We make eye contact—so much blue, so much terror.

'Come down, nephew!' Like calling me nephew will make me forget he's a serial killer armed with a chainsaw.

I naturally refuse, and he doesn't take it too well. I listen to the hellish sounds of a tree-hugger's nightmare as my abominable uncle sets about my favourite tree with a chainsaw. I am without choice. I pull

granda's Luger from my pocket and drop it. Shit. Uncle Leathermask's demented laughing dies with the chainsaw meeting the tree. The tree wobbles and threatens to topple. It's time to act. I leap towards the luger, and everything goes darker than Cousin Inbred's internet history.

I come back online surrounded by mutilated...parts.

'Dinnae try tae get aff this hook,' Uncle Leathermask says. 'Granda wants you tae keep the family goan.'

Granda's been dead for a while, but it's not beyond the realms that my uncle has a direct line to him in Hell.

'But...'

'But nuthin. If it were up tae me, you'd be stew, but you're the pet project, and my granda wants you to be a cannibal come hell or high water.'



John Tinney is a Glaswegian writer. You can find some of his work in 404 INK Literary Magazine, Every Day Fiction, Razur Cuts Magazine and other venues. Can be found on Twitter @johntinney888 www.medium.com/@johntinney88¹

1. <http://www.medium.com/@johntinney88>

Silence

Samantha Kelly



The sign appeared one night, painted on the wall in perfectly formed black letters. Or at least, it wasn't there when curfew began and was by the time you all woke up. But you suppose it could have been there all along and no one saw it – you have some experience with that. Of being unseen. Not that you mind. You've always been more concerned with what's directly below your feet than around you. You have a job to do after all, and it's only once the floors are clean that you can risk a glance up.

You hadn't known what the sign meant at first. You do now.

That morning, months ago now, voices were raised, tumbling over each other. Wanting to be listened to. You did not raise your voice, did not speak at all. Since birth, whenever you opened your mouth to reach for sound, nothing happened. Some primordial lesson in your mother's womb you don't recall having missed. They used to think you were a burden. There is no one left to think at all now.

It took you weeks to get the floors clean again. Your back still pains you during the night. You hear heavy boots behind you. You continue to work, for you know what will happen once they open their mouths.

And anyway, you prefer the silence.



Samantha is a graduate of the University of Warwick and now works (occasionally for money) as a freelance copywriter. She has been published in STORGY and Tether's End Magazine. She lives in the UK with her family and a cat named after the Terminator. Can be found on Twitter @SambucaJK

Revealed

Kathleen Palm



The ice cracks as I claw my way up through the darkness of death.
Through the cold.
And quiet.

Then there's light. A single icy glow.

The bright white oozes over a tunnel of sharp edges then explodes in a shower of daggers. The brilliant spot of my salvation waits as I climb, my fingers slipping and sliding. My body burns from the cold. Final images, pieces of my life creep and crawl through my mind, leaving faint smoky trails of memories.

My work. My home. My wife. My kids.

Gone. Left behind.

Because I died. I remember the end, the loud, terrible end.

But I move on. After a life of providing, of giving everything, of success. I go to the glorious, promised reward. One I deserve.

My palms crunch against the ground as I haul myself onto a blinding plane of white. I stand and wait for my vision to clear, for the sight of the gates to Heaven's eternal peace to appear.

But only a snowy expanse comes into focus. A grey cloudy sky hangs overhead, roiling and churning as if ready to fall and smother me. Cold sinks into my core threatening doom. And quiet settles in my thoughts, bringing dread.

“Hello?” I mean to yell, to shout, but the word is a trembling gasp.

I shuffle through the snow, squinting into the distance as the terrible rasp of my steps disturbs the silence, cuts it, destroys it. I worry that it will strike back.

The heavy stillness returns when I stop.

Where am I? There’s nothing but frozen ground.

No angels singing. No golden gates.

A howl calls in the distance. The quiet shudders as the sound rushes over the whiteness.

A scream answers.

I scan the whiteness. Not pure, not heavenly, but made of pain. A white so bright it hurts.

A crack sounds in one direction.

A growl comes from another.

A shriek.

I spin at every sound, unable to hold back my fear and confusion.

A wail.

This isn’t right. This isn’t where I should be.

A spot forms in the distance. I’m not alone. The excitement at the thought sends me stumbling forward, my feet crunching in a horrible rhythm.

The shouts continue to attack from every direction. The cries of what must be agony. The roars of what might be danger.

“Hello?” I yell as I run. The dark dot grows bigger. Head and shoulders. Arms and legs. A person.

Maybe they don’t know where we are either. But at least I’m not alone.

I race up behind them. “Hello?”

They turn. Dark eyes. A darker smile. But a person.

I shuffle to a stop, glancing at my companion, then out at the frozen land. "Where are we?"

Under a worn jean jacket, his hunched shoulders jerk as he stares at me. "You don't know?"

The wind howls, cutting past us like a thousand blades. My acquaintance flinches as the current whips across his body.

"I know I died. So, this should be...well..."

"What? Heaven?" He laughs as the wind chills and the snow swirls.

"Yes." That's what I deserve.

His grin turns to a scowl as his fingers become black claws, as his skin shreds up his arm. He raises his hand, or what was his hand, and curls it into a fist.

Shock stifles my thoughts. Fear tramples any words I want to say.

He stretches his neck as his hair falls out and great horns sprout from his skull. "We are where we belong. Where the monsters go."

His humanity crumbles. His eyes turn red.

"I'm not...a monster." I back away, my hands curl into fists as fear and anger clash in my mind. "I'm a man."

A beast looms over me. "What kind of man?" the creature says, the words wrapped in a growl.

"What does that mean?" I slip as I step back, falling on the ground with a sickening crunch. My hands sink into the snow which bites my fingers with icy teeth. "I'm a good man. I gave to the church. I worked hard. I provided for my family."

The monster lunges at me, claws nicking my chin and spit dripping from his lips onto my face.

I kick at the snow and ice as I struggle to get away.

The creature that was a man, grins, then laughs a raspy sound of horror. With a step, it swipes at me.

With a shriek, I get to my feet and run. The silence of ice shatters under the weight of my breathing and pounding feet.

But the growling and laughter fade. I glance behind. It's gone. Keeping watch for the monster to attack, I try to brush snow off my skin, hoping to rid myself of the despairing cold. But the chill remains in the layer of white frozen to my skin. I fear it won't ever leave.

Howls and shrieks and roars of who knows what snap and drift from everywhere. More monsters?

I don't belong here.

What kind of man...the words eat at the edges of my smoky memories.

"What do I care about them? They mean nothing. It's all about me."

The words crawl through the icy wasteland. Who was that? Sounded like me. Words I once said.

"My deals. My success is all that matters."

My life. Full of business. Full of money and smart choices. And family. I did everything for them. Pain shoots through my fingers. I look at my hands, and, with sharp creaks and pops, the snow falls away. And my skin does too. My hands hang from my wrists, knuckles swollen and fingers crooked. Not human hands.

"No." I shove my hands in my armpits and run. "No. I'm a man. I'm not a monster." I scream the phrase into the white, which swallows it.

"I'm not a monster." But my hands. They'll change back...once I make it out.

What kind of man...

Hundreds of figures dot the horizon. Bent and twisted. They scream. They groan. They snarl. I keep running. Because I don't belong here. I have to get out.

Eyes watch me. Red. Yellow. Black.

Long arms reach for me as I pass. Hairy. Scaled. Scarred.

But I'm not like them.

Some huddle on the ground, heads bowed and skeletal arms wrapped around their bony knees. Blood splatters over the white and drips from teeth and talons.

I shouldn't be here.

Wind stirs, a breeze that becomes a gust. Icy needles stab at my legs, tearing away my pants. Nice pants. Pants I paid good money for.

"Not a dime more."

My voice again, harsh and cold, like the landscape.

"Because it's mine, that's why."

My wife. My kids. A burden. But I loved them. Didn't I? Or did it look good to have a family as I worked my way up the corporate ladder?

My pants reduced to tatters, the wind slices the skin from my legs. Though there's no pain, I cry at the gashes and blackened flesh that's revealed.

No. This isn't me. It's not real. Once I get out...once I reach my reward...

But the words from the past haunt me. My words. Whispers nip at my ears. I wave them away. I was a good man.

I stagger through the snow on legs that creak and crack, fighting what happens. Holding onto who I am.

What kind of man...

A roar shakes the ground. Massive beasts thunder over the ice, which splits and cries. They strike at each other, leaving trails of blood.

I sink to the snow, huddling into a quivering ball. "I'm not like them. I was a good businessman. I had everything I wanted. I lived a good life."

Crying drifts on the breeze. My kids' tears.

"Grow up. I pay the bills around here. And I'm not paying for some stupid ice-skating lessons."

My wife's sobbing.

"Get off the floor. I didn't hit you that hard."

Slurred and angry, my words cut through the din of the stampede around me. Claws rake through the ice. Bodies that stink of rot and hatred close in, trapping me with myself.

What kind of man...

Tails whip my arms. Spikes jab my body, piercing what is left of me. Shrieking and bellowing, the horde passes.

I sit in the snow, as who I thought I was breaks and falls away.

And leaves the truth, one I denied, one that lurked underneath my pressed suits and charming smile.

Stomach hollow, my ribs stick out like all the sharp words I ever said. Thorns cover my arms. My tongue slides over jagged teeth.

I won't ever find the golden gates.

Monsters don't go to Heaven



Kathleen Palm haunts her 100 year old farmhouse in rural Indiana with her husband, two teenagers, four cats, and a dog. For the last 15 years, she's been writing the creepy, fantastical, and weird and has had several short stories published. "The Path" appears in Burial Day's Gothic Blue Book VI: A Krampus Carol and "Freckles" is in Bloody Red Nose: Fifteen Fears of a Clown. Find her on Twitter @KathleenPalm, watching scary movies in the dark, blogging at The Midnight Society, or lost in the Twilight Zone.

The Madness Of The White Lands

L. Reed Walton



20 July 1846

Dearest Martha,

I hope this missive finds you in good health and spirits. Receipt of your letter has warmed me more thoroughly than my seal-skin coat. That very garment I wear as I now as I write, and will return with me to England. It may be that I leave my sanity behind on these shores, but I relinquish judgement of it to you, and to God.

In a fortnight, the ship that will bear me around Boothia Felix and onward to points west will pull anchor. In advance of that date, I will endeavour to write of my time under Captain John Rae. Though I shudder to revisit those occurrences, their memory weighs heavy upon my shoulders and presses at the seams of my mind. I beg you permit me my un-burdening here, after which I will speak of it no more.

The ship H.M.S. *Albert Fine* discharged us at Repulse Bay on 5 July, whereupon Capt. Rae led us into the settlement called *Talur-yuak*. The people there are called *Inuit*, and our captain is much respected among them, for he speaks well their language and has adopted their manner of survival in this ice-bound land. On the strength of this goodwill, he

procured for us all native vestments, which are warmer by far than the woollens of Royal Navy issue. We also were taught to fashion snow-shoes in the *Inuit* fashion which, when strapped to his boots, allow a man to walk atop the snow as a water-beetle upon a river.

The Far North offers abundant wonder, my dear, as it gives terror in equal measure.

Perhaps it was your intent to ready me for the terrors ahead when you secreted in my rucksack "The Modern Prometheus," the novel by Mrs. M. W. Shelley. Her words proved great diversion on many a night, before the fantasies therein were revealed as prophecy. Regrettably, I cannot now bear the sight of the book, or to touch its pages.

Leaving *Talur-yuak*, we travelled north-east for two days to a nameless cluster of snow-huts, which the Inuit call *iglu*. I could by then manage a few words of the language, which thoroughly amused our hosts. I find they are people of great ingenuity and given to generousness and mirth.

From them, the captain requisitioned strings of salted fish, after whose purpose I enquired, for surely we would have fresh along the coast. According to the elders, he replied, the peninsula's eastern-most waterway was impassable, and that points north would best be reached over-land.

We might have had a tranquil parting from that place had not those same elders offered an unnerving gift the eve of our departure. *White man's bones*, the captain translated, upon receiving the small hide sack.

As I looked upon the jumble of dry remains, I dared not speak my observations aloud. There, written upon the bones were marks of unspeakable savagery. Not the furrows of tooth or claw, but regular, deliberate knife-marks. The man to whom these bones belonged had been *carved*, just as a ham-hock or roast. Had I needed further proof of depravity, it could be found in the smaller bones, which were broken and emptied, sure as one cracks a chicken bone for its marrow.

This unfortunate victim, the captain reasoned, must have belonged to John Franklin's vanished crew. I knew the tale, but was loath to imagine anyone so desperate as to consume the bodies of his mates. Rather, a flame of hope kindled in my breast that some might still survive in the blighted expanse of Boothia and that we might return them to civilisation.

God cannot but forgive that which man does *in extremis*.

What I would discover on our fateful route fed that flame, then extinguished it. Yes, a remnant of Franklin's crew lives on, but as a thing most uncivil...one that cannot rightly be called *man*.

The following day, we ventured forth, navigating by the ever-present sun. Here, it does not sink in summertime but instead remains suspended above the horizon, taunting those who are accustomed to the night.

It may astonish you, Martha, that to which a man grows accustomed in short order, for soon I hardly felt the chill. It was not for warmth but *slumber* that I sorely lacked, as throughout the false night my sleep was often shattered by tremendous groans and howls. Oftentimes I felt as if I slept on a battlefield of dying men, and like Ulysses, I yearned to stop up my ears to it.

Yet unlike the Sirens' cries, these sounds were *earthly* by their nature. The ice below our feet was not of one piece but many, further sundered in the spare warmth of Arctic summer. The grinding of these great frozen islands against one another produced the moaning.

After five days' travel, we came upon a promontory marked with two cairns, under which were said to lie crewmen of the *Erebus*, Franklin's flagship. There the captain bade us make camp and give a few moments' solemn recognition of their sacrifice.

I enquired of him whether we might also inter the unnamed bones, to which he replied they would be ferried back to England. I only understood later that he meant to bring home a tangible record of the atrocities to which starvation had driven ordinary men.

Evening saw us gathered by the stones, where Seaman Millford drew out his fiddle. Alas, the cold had so badly buckled the wood that it would produce nothing more than a quivering wail under his bow. The men were much perturbed by the sound. Millford regretfully stowed the instrument, and instead we made a recitation of the Lord's Prayer while Capt. Rae laid a cross between the cairns.

In my least rational hours, I cannot help but believe it was the unhallowed melody of the mutilated fiddle alongside the haunted complaint of the ice which conjured death into our midst.

MacKeever, on watch, first spotted the figure in the hazy distance, and shouted to alert us. He brought a wretched thing shambling into camp, gaunt as a coat-tree and draped in a motley of Naval and Inuit garments. The stranger's face was like candle-wax in both hue and texture. No brows did he have to speak of, nor any but sparse hair upon his unprotected crown. His eyes lay sunken in pools of shadow, but for two diamond-like flecks imbued with animal cunning.

I confess, Martha, at first I was put in mind not of a Navy man but of the mad Doctor Frankenstein in Shelley's novel, marooned and purblind in Arctic vastness.

He moved with great effort, dragging one leg behind. As he approached, step by laborious step, I understood why MacKeever kept well clear, for the interloper reeked of carrion.

Capt. Rae came forward to hail him and ask his name.

The stranger did not offer it at once, enquiring instead after our business on the promontory—as if he had staked claim to the untrammelled land.

To a man, we shrank back at the foulness of his breath, his jagged teeth.

The captain responded, cautiously, that our purpose was exploration, and again asked his name.

“I am called Adam,” said he, and I marked this at once an untruth. A guise, I thought, as *Adam* in the Hebrew tongue is merely the word for man.

“Are you wounded, sir?” asked the captain. “Perhaps our doctor may assist.”

Despite my healer’s oath, I confess my reluctance to approach this creature.

He first drew himself upright, as if in affront at the idea, but exhaustion made him sway on his feet.

“Come,” I bade him, reluctant. “Let me have a look.” Before beginning my examination, I wound a cloth around my face, a pretence to feeling chilled but in truth to mitigate the stench.

Seemingly inoculated to the cold, Adam shed his outer garment. Bending with some difficulty, he tugged up his trouser-leg.

I could fain comprehend the sight. From the knee upward, his leg was pallid and hairless, but darker below it, with more copious hair and a foot gnarled from confinement in too small a boot. Enjoining the two halves was a line of stitching, which tugged at the ragged flesh to either side. It soon became clear what I beheld was not a wound poorly mended, but an amputation. More horrifying: my realisation that the affixed limb *had belonged to another man altogether*.

“Beg pardon for its condition, sir,” said this hideous patch-work man, sounding not the least abashed.

“I must remove it at once,” I cried. “Else risk your very life.”

To my surprise, he shook his head emphatically and bent again to stroke the limb, affectionate. “It is only hunger,” he said. “It behaves better on a full belly.”

Even then, curiosity surmounted dread, for I raised my lantern in the liminal near-dusk and peered closer. By some heretical science, the dead limb pulsed with a life it should not have possessed. The toes twitched, blood moved in the veins.

"Then, ah, we'll have food," I stammered. Struggling upright, I called for Halbert to bring salt cod and rum.

No sooner did Adam have the meat in his fists than he tore into it with unnatural vigour, swallowing each mouth-full whole. His satisfaction soon ebbed, though, and his hand flew to his throat as if he choked. He stood and tossed his meal away in disgust. Not a moment later, it spewed forth from his gullet upon the ice, now spotted with scabrous clots of blood.

"You mean to poison me!" he cried and knocked free the proffered flask of rum. Taking hold instead of Halbert's arm, he threw himself upon the man, tumbling them together to the frozen ground.

The poor lad gave one terrible cry before Adam sunk teeth into his throat and tore it free with an awful rending sound.

As he raised his head, I discerned a soulless glimmer in the pits of his eyes, the bloody gristle in his mouth dripping dark upon white snow.

Now Capt. Rae was alert to our peril, and as Adam descended again upon his prey, the captain shed his gloves and drew his pistol. It seemed as if I myself could feel the cold burn of metal on my skin.

"Stand clear, Doctor!" he cried and tried to fire. But no powder ignited; the cold prevented it.

From behind a sledge came Millford, wielding his ruined instrument as a cudgel. He swung, but the blood-sated fiend slid away, serpent-quick. True to his claim, he had regained strength by his profane feast.

Then a great roar rent the glacial silence. At last, the captain had fired! I turned to see Adam driven backward, one knobbed hand clutching a powder-blackened wound. I hoped he would fall, but hope deserted me as he drew away the hand from his bloodless breast and held it aloft with a mocking laugh.

"A lamp!" McKeever cried. "Set it alight!"

The first mate stepped to, his lantern-flame high. With a shriek, the thing that had once been a man sank clawed fingers into Halbert's corpse and scuttled away, leaving the glass to burst upon the bare ground. Behind its flare, the creature disappeared, and soon the flame guttered and died.

We gathered in a circle, facing outward with all lamps burning until the crepuscular gloom lifted. In heavy silence, we returned southward to the nameless village, and then to *Talur-yuak*. The captain chose to stay in Boothia but entrusted to me the sack of bones and one more artefact, a coat in whose collar is embroidered the name *John Hopcroft*.

I know not if Adam was Hopcroft. Whatever he may have been, the taste of human flesh and the madness of the white land made of him a depraved mirror to Shelley's noble Creature. Perhaps such is the fate of man in this place; I shall not remain to discover it.

Faithfully,

Your William



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Like Father, Like Son

Micah Castle



Children's laughter and the pitter-patter of feet across the sidewalk echo through the Halloween night. I wish I could be their age again, be in their shoes than mine. When I was about their age I hadn't gone out to collect candy, hadn't run up doorsteps riddled with ghouls and ghosts, witches and jack-o-lanterns, orange-and-black streamers and spiderwebs; I was agreeing to something I didn't understand... Why did my father enlist his thirteen-year-old son into his work? Didn't he consider that a kid shouldn't be involved with all this mess? But it's not all his fault, since I'm still doing it fifteen years later, long after his death.

Every day I wonder why I continue: maybe because it's the only thing I've ever known? Maybe it's being comfortable with the routine? Maybe I don't like change? Maybe I don't want change?

"Who knows?" I mutter to the shriveled failure in the grave before dumping dirt over his opaque eyes and gray hair. This isn't something my father showed me how to do. I'm the first to bury anything in our backyard. Lucky me.

I cover the failure until his yellowed mummy costume can't be seen, and the loose earth protrudes over the grassy rim.

I glance over my shoulder at the fence. No one's peeking, no one's interested tonight. All too busy giving treats or tricks.

I toss the shovel aside after patting the dirt down and go inside.

There's knocking at the front door. I grab the bowl of candy from the kitchen table and stride down the hallway, passing faded Halloween decorations, and sit down in the chair standing before the door. I snatch the ghoulish mask from under the seat and slide it on.

Have to look the part.

I open the door. A kid wearing a brown furry costume with a plastic werewolf mask quickly raises a burlap sack that's already heavy with sweets.

My stomach churns as I drop a few chocolates into his bag, and say: "Awesome costume," then: "Would you like some more?"

I hold the bile in my throat as he nods, push it down as I escort him inside, down the hallway, to the cellar door. I'm beyond my body, the house, so far away I can't watch myself repeat the yearly actions that are so ingrained into me that I can't even reason why I don't just stop. I have to; I must. Like father, like son.

Down the wooden stairs into the already lit cellar, to the small room off the side littered with heaps of old candy. He runs into the room, and my mask hides the welling tears as I follow.

Soon, the Wolfman's eyes are already opaque and his skin paling. His mask lies in a pile with the others below the stairs. I finagle with tubes and wiring in the middle of the room, surrounded by the banks of batteries that are kids. Have to make sure everything's connected, make sure there's no kinks, make sure the damn Fissure is being fed properly.

I look over my shoulder at the looming crack in the far wall. The intelligible symbols encircling it still make no damn sense. The Fissure reminds me of my father. Always watching over me, ensuring the task is finished. The symbols around the indent I sit in are also annoying, as though I was given instructions from a different planet.

Pressure builds in my temples, and my face warms.

I cast aside the wires and tubes, wipe away the sweat.

“What the hell do you want?” I shout at the thing beyond the Fissure, the thing my father claimed dwelled there and was only waiting. “What are you, even? Why haven’t you awoken yet?”

I stand, hands clenched. Now I’m no longer screaming at the wall, but myself: “Why the hell am I still doing this bullshit?” I turn towards the stairs, stop. My legs lead. I try to move forward but I can’t take a step. There’s still work to be done.

I sit back down, return where I left off.

“Why am I such an idiot? A daddy’s boy?”

No kinks, move onto the tubes.

“How haven’t I been arrested yet? It’s been almost twenty years...”

Tubes are good, too.

I drop everything and now, I go upstairs.

I stand in the kitchen, looking out the window above the sink. Alka seltzer sizzles in my cup. I’m waiting for something but don’t know what. The fresh mound in the backyard is barely noticeable, the older ones already covered in grass.

I want to run. I want to leap through the glass. I want to do anything and everything that could remove me from this life. But I don’t. I wait, wishing my father were still alive to at least tell me what it’s all for. By this time, he would’ve had answers, would’ve known what actually dwelled beyond the Fissure, what actually would happen once it’s awoken from the energy of those trick-or-treaters... Because I want something more than this. I want to finish and move on. I’m almost thirty and the only friend I ever had was a father who succumbed to a disease we didn’t see coming. Never knew my mother, not even her name.

Relationships? Marriage? Children? A home? Just words lost within the obsessive repetition of my routine. I pray for an end, for someone to take the reins.

The sizzling stops, and I chug the water.

The clock in the living room dings.

Finally, Halloween's over.

Upstairs, I lay in bed and idly watch *The Addams Family*. A cool breeze wafts through the open window, smelling of rain. Leaves tumble and scratch across the pavement outside. Briefly wonder if he were still here, why would I do, say? Would I be angry? Sad? Welcoming? Would there be hugs or fists? Probably a bit of both. He's still my dad after all.

I settle deeper into the bed and close my eyes.

Stones shatter, break, collapse.

I jerk awake. Lurch greets me with a moan.

"What the hell was that?" I say, groggily.

I peek out the window, nothing out of the ordinary, then get out of bed and rush downstairs. I throw open the front door. Only the walkway, the paint-peeled fence, and curled leaves strewn about on the uncut lawn. The front porch is lifeless. I slam the door and go into the kitchen, looking outside. Same as the porch.

I turn to the basement door, and my stomach knots.

There's a massive hole where the Fissure once was. Chunks of cement spill over the floor, their backside coated slimy black. Dust cakes the tubes, wiring, and containers that are now covered with frost.

"Holy shit..." I whisper. I did it. It's over. "Whatever the hell that means."

My stomach knots tighter as I move around the rocks to the hole. There's only blackness inside. A void. An abyss. I smell rotten eggs and spoiled fruit.

"Hello?" I call, my voice echoing for much longer than I anticipate. I try to recall anything my father said about what happens when it's done, but nothing surfaces.

I retrieve a flashlight from the toolbox in the corner, switch it on and cast it into the nothingness. Slick dark walls gleam underneath the light. Water drips from a craggy ceiling. The walls narrow into a tun-

nel that contains a gloom that not even the flashlight can pierce this far away.

It's been so many damn years, I don't care what it is or could be, or what may come. I don't think. I don't dwell. It's time for action, finally.

I pass through the gaping hole.

The tunnel gives way to a vast cavern with hard-packed dirt walls and a vaulted ceiling with yawning holes. Thick rune-like symbols spread across the ground.

What the hell are those?

I cautiously near the closest one, kneel. I run my hand over it. It's like touching ice. I pull my hand away, straighten, and look around once more.

Is this it? Is this what he was so desperate to have? All those years, all those kids? This empty cave and unreadable symbols? Years of bullshit I had to deal, hoping that whatever was beyond the Fissure was some sort of heaven, and this is all there is?

"Fuck him," I spit, fists shaking. His work, too.

I'm hurt and angry, and tears are on the brink of falling, but I push them down and head back the way I came. I'm met with no entrance, no tunnel, only a wall. Maybe I missed it? I search the wall to the right, then left. Nothing but hard-packed dirt.

"What the—" The ground violently shakes and I stumble back, turning, waving the light around. Cracks streak beneath me to one symbol, then zigzag to another, then another, forming a constellation.

I throw the light wildly from one spot to the next. Sweat streams under my arms, heat swelling around me. Tiny, gray nubs rise from the symbols— not nubs— fingers. Two sets from each, with absolute black nails. They dig and claw and pull. Arms. Heads. The failures. All the kids I've buried.

My knees buckle, and I fall back against the wall.

Their flesh dry and cracking, colorless blood seeping out. Their eyes no longer opaque but bottomless and empty, glinting against the flash-

light. They're dragging themselves out, reaching towards the ceiling, as though pleading with the gods. Their mouths open and speak guttural gibberish in unison.

My ears sting. My brain rattles.

I drop the flashlight and clench my head, grit my teeth. In the faint glow, they still emerge, but their bodies are endless. Where legs should be are spiraling appendages that uncurl on and on until they are towering over me, their heads touching the ceiling. They're interconnected, woven like a basket, their twirling bottoms congested.

Their voices rise into a shrill cacophony, and the ground surrounding them gives way, plummeting to depths I can't fathom.

Their middle unravels, revealing a void, and my father emerges like a stigma. He's missing his glasses, and his umber eyes are scarred with fissures. The clothes I buried him in are gone, and he's coated in something slick, wet.

I want to fight the longing soaring within me but can't. "Dad?" I cry out, crawling towards him. "Father?"

The ceiling begins to crumble and fall around us. Huge clumps of wet dirt and stone fall into the enormous hole.

"You did great, Charlie," all the voices say as the night sky pierces the cavern. The blinding stars are melting, streaming towards them. "You've created the Key."

I get to my feet, wipe the blood from my mouth, tears from my eyes. I can't help but want to be near him. I can't help but want to follow his words, ask for his guidance, be given direction and answers to all my questions. He was my beacon for so many years, and now he's returned.

"What do I do now, dad?"

The melting stars coalesce over their writhing frame like a layer of brilliant skin. It drains into them through crevices in-between their woven bodies, burrowing deep.

"We unlock the gate, Charlie. We wash ourselves in their glory."

The slime covering my father turns ivory, and golden light bursts from their insides.

“Whose glory?” I ask, wide-eyed despite the burning. A smile forms.

He looks up. I do, too. We watch the stars drag across the sky, pulling space like a tapestry in opposite directions, peeling apart the night. Titanic, honey-colored silhouettes appear with roving limbs and enormous eyes and unnameable things drifting in liquid or light. Even as the radiance spills into our world, I still don’t know which it is, but it doesn’t matter now.

“The Keepers, son. The Keepers.”



Micah Castle is a weird fiction and horror writer. His stories have appeared in various magazines, websites, and anthologies, and has three collections currently out. While away from the keyboard, he enjoys spending time with his wife, aimlessly spending hours hiking through the woods, playing with his animals, and can typically be found reading a book somewhere in his Pennsylvania home. Can be found on Twitter @Micah_Castle and at his website www.micahcastle.com¹

1. <http://www.micahcastle.com>

In The Woods Outside

Rowan Hill



The new girl broke her lips away from Jake's and took a deep breath in respite. It was hot inside the small car as the two young people began to mingle their bodies over the middle console. Condensation formed on the windows of the Mazda RX7, blocking their view of the outside woods but also shielding them from prying eyes. Her hand clasped the gear shift, rubbing the little red button on the back of the hard shaft.

"What's this do?" she asked as he continued to kiss the dewy skin on her neck.

Jake pulled away from the base of her throat to look down, a small grin coming over his face as she continued to stroke the shifter suggestively.

"That is the Nitrous Oxide injector for the engine," he responded and laughed at her when she frowned in confusion. He dumbed it down for her, "It makes my fast car go really fast."

The brunette's eyebrows arched in surprise. "Really fast?" she clarified as he came back down to her neck, sucking the skin hard enough to leave a hickey. He nodded and mumbled into the crook of her neck.

"Like, outrun-cops kinda fast."

His hand wandered down to the top of her loose jeans and she squirmed, grasping his head. Abruptly, the familiar sound of a branch breaking underfoot outside her passenger door caught her attention and she pushed him away to look out the foggy window.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered. He briefly glanced outside before continuing his kisses down her neck to her ill-fitted sweater. Pulling the neckline down, he was pleasantly surprised she wasn’t wearing a bra for a woman with such large breasts.

He mumbled before taking one of them in his mouth indulgently, “It’s nothing, probably a possum.”

She swiped a hand over the condensation blocking her view and ignored his fingers and mouth. “How far away is the main road? And why did we have to come so far out into these woods again?” she muttered, still searching the dark woods outside the car.

Jake broke away from the woman, slightly frustrated. When she approached him at the beginning of the night as he was leaning against his car outside the town bar, she seemed eager for a quick tumble. At first, he thought she was homeless with her baggy clothes, but she was too beautiful, too confident. She was, however, frigid. And was now using anything as an excuse. He leaned up against her headrest.

“You said you wanted privacy. No one’s going to be snooping out here.”

The young woman who introduced herself as Sarah, bit her lip in worry, still looking outside to the blurred edges of the woods. Jake smiled for a moment. Sarah said she was new to town and didn’t know anyone. He teased to her in a whisper, “You know, there is an insane asylum across this forest.”

Her head whipped around with wide eyes, “What? Really?”

He grinned and sidled closer, imitating a protective position, “About four miles or so from where we are right now. But don’t worry, I got you.”

Sarah continued to bite her lip, almost erotically and stared outside into the darkness. Jake looked down at the wide curves of her body once again and slipped his hand down her pants and into her plain underwear. Sarah, despite her worry for the presence outside, unconsciously moaned and her body went lax in the seat.

Another branch broke outside the car and she shot up. "There! I heard it again."

Jake sighed and pulled his hand out, this chick was not going to give it up without some kind of game. "Okay, okay I'll check it out, would that make you feel more relaxed?"

Sarah looked like she was about to say no. They should just forget about tonight and get out of the creepy woods bordering an asylum for the criminally insane. But before she could say any of that, Jake leaned off her and into his own seat, opening his door.

The performance car sat low to the ground and he swung his legs out but stayed in his car seat. Fog eerily hovered over the land in the late hour, hiding anyone who wanted to remain hidden. He suddenly wasn't sure of the wisdom of investigating imagined sounds for a quick fuck.

A strong arm abruptly came around his neck from behind, encircling it and tightening like a serpent coiling around prey. He grabbed at the arm but found it to be too strong to pry off and began to choke under the pressure. Sarah pulled the arm constricting Jake's airway back into her body and dragged him into the car for better leverage. His legs kicked the empty air and his arms flailed against the steering wheel, the horn honking sporadically. She violently jerked her forearm, assuring she was clenching his neck hard.

After a minute of the close, smothering embrace, Jake's wild fight for his life had finished. Satisfied, Sarah pushed the body out of her new car and let it tumble to the damp earth. She eyed his skinny jeans, a much better fit for her than the ones she had stolen from the clothes-line.

Sarah was just folding the naked corpse into the small trunk of the car when another young woman emerged from the forest. She eyed her cellmate's simple hospital shift, a smear of the asylum orderly's blood quite visible, and threw her old clothes to the woman who caught it deftly and without question.

"Took you a while," she said as she pulled on the jeans.

"Jealous?" Sarah replied with a smirk.

The new woman said nothing but slammed the trunk with aggressive force, making sure it hit the corpse inside. They climbed into the small car and the lovers embraced over the console. Their hot breaths melded together with full lips as the adrenaline from their escape and possibly capture still spurned through their veins. Eventually, they broke apart and Sarah's girlfriend relaxed into the passenger seat.

"Nice car," she commented, eyeing the interior with its LED-illuminated features.

Sarah turned the ignition over and listened to the loud thrum of the 6 cylinders and wiggled her eyebrows.

"It's really fast."



Rowan Hill is an author currently on hiatus as an ESL Professor and living on a volcano in Sicily. She loves writing flawed female protagonists and has found they work well in extreme environments. She has writing credits with Cemetery Gates, Kandisha Press, and Curious Blue Press. All of which can be found on her website www.writerrowanhill.com¹ and her Twitter @WriterRowanHill

1. <http://www.writerrowanhill.com>

Re-open The Schools

Bud Fugate



“Take your time Julie,” Officer Winston said as he pushed a Styrofoam cup of black coffee across the small wooden table in the interrogation room of the small neighborhood police precinct “Tell us what happened from the beginning.”

Julie was a sobbing mess, her normally perfectly styled hair was a tangled mess, her clothes were ripped and covered in blood and burn marks. Her makeup running down her young, beautiful face as she began to relay the events of the day.

“It was my first day on the job, I was supposed to be a teacher’s aide for Mr. Anderson.... Oh, Roger! Roger!” she stopped her story short and began sobbing hard, her face in her hands.

“Roger is Mr. Anderson?” Officer Johnson, Winston’s partner said from the corner of the room where he was taking notes on a small notepad. Julie nodded her head, took a sip of the black coffee and continued her story.

“I was supposed to be a teacher’s aide for Mr. Anderson. Second and Third grade, science and mathematics. I had been waiting for this moment my whole life, ever since I can remember all I wanted to be

was a teacher, I love children...oh the children..." the tears continued to stream down her face as she continued, Winston staring intently, Johnson still scribbling notes in the corner.

"I got to the school early, so early that the secretary hadn't yet shown up and the janitorial staff had to let me in the building. I was thrilled. I took all of my things to Mr. Anderson's classroom, 107 on the first floor across from the gymnasium, and started disinfecting the student's desks as per the new protocols and when I was done..."

"About what time was this?" Officer Johnson interrupted from the corner, not looking up from his notes.

"About...uhm...7:30? I guess?"

"Go on..." Officer Winston said giving a cold glare back to Officer Johnson who still hadn't taken his eyes off his notes.

"When I was done, I went to the principal's office to talk to Mr. Doreen to inform her I was there and you know, I knew there was something off about Doreen from the moment I met her..."

"Off?" Again, Office Johnson asked a clarifying question from the back of the room.

"Yeah, she had this creepy look in her eye...but I could never imagine..." the story collapsed again as Julie couldn't hold back from crying, "THEY ARE JUST KIDS DAMNIT," she yelled as she pounded her still handcuffed hands on the table.

"Please continue..."

"Ok...uhm...well...I was disinfecting the desks and....no.... hmmm...where was I?"

"You had just met Doreen."

"Ah yes. I met with Doreen and she gave me my badge and the access code to the door so I wouldn't have to bother the janitor anymore. She also gave me a pamphlet about the COVID-19 safety measures, you know? Wear a mask, socially distance in the hallways, disinfect, disinfect, disinfect. When the teachers take lunch, since we're older and more vulnerable, we were to do so off-premises. I went back to Mr. An-

derson's classroom and I met him, he is...was...I'm sorry," She paused again, this time trying to hold back her tears "He was a kind man, and we went to the front doors to welcome the kids back to school. They were so happy and ready to learn. You should have seen their faces! They were so happy! And they hugged their parents and said good-bye....and goddamnit, the parents don't know, do they? Did you tell the parents what they were doing?"

"Please calm down miss" Officer Winston reached his hand across the table placing his hand on hers and encouraged her to continue "Tell us about how the fire started"

Julie took a moment to compose herself. She paused, cried a little, winced, cried again and then took a big deep breath in and exhaled out slowly to continue her story.

"We were supposed to take our lunch of premises the pamphlet said, but I figured 'Hey, I'm 22, I'm young and healthy COVID shouldn't impact me like the older teachers' so I decided to take a stroll around the school grounds and soak in my new environment and that's when..." she shuddered and the tears began to stream down her face, "and that's when I saw what they were doing to the kindergarteners"

"You mean, what you think you saw?" Officer Johnson interjected again earning another glare from Officer Winston.

"I know what I saw goddamnit!" Julie screamed as she bashed her hands on the table, Officer Winston reach across the table but the comment set her off. "They had them sedated, on the cots in the play area and they...they...they were taking blood or something from them, I don't know they had all these tubes and wires hooked up to the kids, and...they're just kids and...and...and...and I was going to run to the office to tell Doreen what was going but I saw her, I fucking saw her in the room with a needle taking whatever they took from the kids and injecting it into herself. So, I did the only thing I could think of to save those kids...I started a fire in the hallway and pulled the alarms."

"You started a fire? To save the kids? From their teachers who were..." Officer Johnson looked down at his notes "Taking their blood or something and injecting it into themselves?"

"Yes...Yes!" She shrieked louder as she reached across the table grabbing Officer Winston's hands and staring into his eyes looking for mercy. "I didn't think the fire would get out of control like it did and I didn't know the kindergarteners wouldn't wake up, I swear. Please! You gotta believe me!"

Officer Winston pulled his hand from her as she collapsed on the table in a heap, sobbing and moaning. He raised two fingers motioning for his partner to come closer. He turned his head and whispered under his breath just loud enough for Julie to overhear.

"She knows too much, make sure she doesn't make it in the morning, she can't speak publicly. Make sure it looks like an accident."

As Officer Johnson nodded in approval, he closed his notepad and made his way towards the now howling young woman and dragged her out of the room and into the hallway. Officer Winston remained at the interrogation table and finished her coffee.



Bud is a father of 4 and a lifelong horror fan. When he's not driving his wife crazy by making her sit through an 80's horror movie with a \$3 budget, he's deep in a YouTube rabbit hole looking at the next wild conspiracy theory. Find him on Twitter @budfugate and at www.letterboxd.com/budfugate

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Finally, thank you to you dear reader. Thank you for taking the time to read the words of eighteen tremendously talented writers. We hope you enjoyed their stories as much as we did. We aim to publish Issue II in July 2021 and hope you'll join us again for more dark and dangerous tales.

Hellishly yours,
The Hellhound Editors
Emma Ormond and Jimmy Nicol

