

ROGUE WORLDS



OUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED

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The advertisement features a dark red, textured background with a torn paper effect at the bottom. At the top, the word "SIMULACRUM" is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below it, the subtitle "THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION" is written in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters. In the center, three magazine covers are displayed in a fan-like arrangement. The leftmost cover is dark and features the text "First Anniversary Issue". The middle cover shows a character in a blue and white suit. The rightmost cover shows a character in a blue and white suit. Below the magazine covers, a dark rectangular box with a decorative border contains the text "THE NEXT EVOLUTION IN SPECULATIVE FICTION" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. At the bottom of the advertisement, the text "DOWNLOAD A FREE SAMPLE ISSUE TODAY" is written in red, bold, sans-serif capital letters, and below that, the URL "WWW.SPECIFICWORLD.COM/SIMULACRUM.HTML" is written in white, sans-serif capital letters.

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OUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED



It's been one helluva ride over the last three years editing *Rogue Worlds* but all good things must come to an end. This isn't our last issue but our days are numbered. Issue #13 will be our last in this format. I've enjoyed editing the magazine and hopefully the two thousand plus subscribers have enjoyed the magazine as well.

I have a lot people to thank - mainly all the contributors that supported the magazine over the years. Without them the magazine wouldn't have lasted this long. So a deep appreciation goes out to them.

The good news is *Rogue Worlds* will continue as a twice yearly print anthology starting in 2006 (at least that's the plan for now). And *Simulacrum: The Magazine Of Speculative Transformation* will take *Rogue Worlds* place as SpecFicWorld.com's featured magazine.

Simulacrum is edited by the Lynne Jamneck, and if you haven't tried out an issue you can still download one for free at www.specficworld.com/simulacrum.html. Issue # 7 features fiction by Theodora Goss, D. Harlan Wilson, Catherine Lundoff, Philip Reyth, Kimberly Nguyen, K.C Antonis and A.R. Yngve. Poetry by Kristine Ong Muslim. Artwork by Aleksi Briclot. Special interview with Carina Gonzales, assistant editor of *Realms of Fantasy Magazine* [if you write speculative fiction you don't want to miss this interview].

The final issue of *Rogue Worlds* will be out late January featuring last year's winners of SpecFicWorld.com's Annual Speculative Fiction Contest.

Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

AN OLD AND DEADLY JONES

BY E.J. BURCH

To Samuel Cain's way of thinking there was nothing like a southern port, especially an old one. On the surface they were all Spanish moss and live oaks and grey brick, full of southern gentility and modern bustle.

The surface didn't matter much though. It was the things that lay underneath that interested Cain, not because he was of that sort of bent, but because he couldn't help it. Fate or God or whatever ruled his life had decreed that he would see what others missed. Sometimes that was a good thing. Most of the time it wasn't.

On this town's under belly Cain saw a toxic mixture of aristocratic pride, old and festering sin, plain old witch craft, modern paganism and voodoo.

On another night he might have been moved to explore, but not tonight. Tonight he had to make a living. He did that with his key board and his companion Dagmar Anderson.

Dag stood off to his right and a bit in front of him. She held her viola at her side and smiled at an enthusiastic if modest crowd. Occasionally she waved one hand at them as if wishing them well on their trip home.

It was two in the morning. They had just finished their last curtain call. Soon they would be headed to an all night diner for a bite to eat. After that they would return to the grey hound they had converted into a tour bus to sleep away the rest of the morning.

After Anderson had convinced the gathered throng that there would be no more music they began to file away. All save one. He stood at the front of the stage with his hands in his pockets.

He wore a checkered flannel shirt over a black t shirt. A baseball cap hawking some farm implement or another rested atop his shaggy head. And he scratched at a wire like beard with one hand while he cast furtive glances about the club.

He was uncomfortable. Well he should have been. This club wasn't his kind of place. There was no juke box; no bud light, no confederate flags and no one present gave a damn whether Roy Orbison was country rock, country or rock.

Cain smiled and wondered how the hell this man's girl friend had talked him into coming to this gig. But soon the smile turned to a frown. The man had no girl friend. There was no one anywhere near him. He was alone, and he was staring up at Dagmar Anderson.

That didn't bother Cain so much. He stared at Anderson too. She was a lovely woman. She had also been an all American soccer player before she tore up an Achilles tendon.

She had developed a fascination for the marital arts while she was rehabbing the injury. If the fellow in the silly hat wanted to become more familiar with her than she wished he would find himself hurt for his trouble. When the bouncers and Cain joined the fray he would find himself hurt worse.

Still Cain watched him. His attention did not go unrewarded. "Y'all," the man held up one hand and shook it at Dagmar. "I need to talk with you."

Dag didn't notice him. She was storing her viola away. The owner of the club had stepped onto the stage and was babbling at her too.

The man turned his attention to Cain. “Could I talk with y’all?”

Whoever he was, he wasn’t exclusively interested in Anderson. Which proved his eye sight wasn’t what it should be. Cain stepped away from his key board. “What do you need, boss?”

The man frowned. “Damn, you got an accent.”

“You and I are from the same sort of town.”

“You don’t look it.”

That was true enough. Cain wore a dark collarless shirt and a pair of dark jeans. He had let his hair go long and his beard streak with grey. A child hood difficulty had cost him one eye. He covered the empty socket with a patch, “Can’t judge a book and all that.”

The man glanced about as if he had been followed. “I need to talk with you in private.”

Cain motioned at him with one hand. “C’mon up. I warn you. I’m not big on secrets, especially when they belong to other people.”

“It ain’t that it’s secret. It’s just that when people hear what I say they think I’m crazy.”

Cain didn’t reply, but he knew from personal experience that most people who sounded crazy were. “What do you say?” Some weren’t though. Which was as good a reason as any to hear bubba out.

“My wife is cheating on me.”

That didn’t sound crazy to Cain. But it didn’t sound real interesting either. “I’m not sure I can help you with that.”

“She’s cheating on me with a ghost.”

That was right up Cain’s alley.



There is only one all night diner. Cain knew the assertion seemed specious, but he was willing to stand by it no matter the amount of empirical evidence to the contrary.

Being a musician, whose hours were inverted, he had eaten in thousands of the damn things and couldn't tell any of them apart. The all had the same waitress with the same bouffant hair do, the same seedy looking cook, the same clientele (who looked every bit as dangerous as the cook), the same décor and the same menus.

Logic dictated that they were all the same place. They just happened to be magically transported to the town where he was working on a particular night.

He had explained the theory to Dagmar Anderson more than once. Each time she had given him that dewy bewildered look and patted him. After that she murmured. "It's okay dear. I think it's just a thought disorder, but if it persists will get you some help."

He didn't bother to share it with Ned Paulsen, but Paulsen was too tied up in his own trouble to listen.

Paulsen had pulled his wallet out and shown them a picture of his betrothed after they ordered. Now he was telling Cain and Anderson about his trouble.

Anderson listened to him closely. When he was finished she would ask questions. Cain hadn't said much of anything. He probably wouldn't.

"At first I didn't think much of it. Darla always had a fascination with that kind of stuff. She still has her ouiji board, and she keeps tarot cards and stuff like that. I just figured it was a hobby you know. We all got them, you know."

Cain knew. His was baseball, or it had been until the players started looking like comic book heroes on super sized maxi pack steroids. If he wanted to see baseball now he watched ESPN classic. He guessed that made him an old fart in training.

Of course none of that had anything to do with Paulsen. Fortunately, the lovely and talented Dagmar Anderson was looking after him. “When did you think your wife had become more serious about the occult?”

“She had been seeing spiritualists. That was nothing new, I didn’t like it much but I didn’t argue about it either. Hell, she lets me rebuild stock cars and race them out at the track. I can let her spend a little money at a palm reader’s. But a couple of weeks ago one of the palm readers she’s been seeing arranges for her and a couple other people to spend some time at a house that’s supposed to be haunted.”

Anderson raised an eyebrow. “How much did they have to pay?”

Paulsen shook his head. “Damn palm reader is a blood sucker. I’m still working over time to make up for all we paid her, but that ain’t the point. The point is Darla and a couple of other women went over to this haunted house. No big deal right? Except now Darla is acting crazier than an out house mouse.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing she won’t let me touch her. Which is sort of unusual. We only been married a couple of years. We ain’t got to the don’t touch stage yet. Stranger still, she suddenly hated everything she had liked before.”

Anderson blushed. “Mr. Paulsen I didn’t mean to be personal.”

Paulsen’s eyes grew to the size of saucers. “No, I ain’t talking about that. I mean regular things. One of the reasons we hit it off is we liked the same type of music.”

Cain remembered how uncomfortable Paulsen had looked back at the club. “It’s not the type of music we play.”

Paulsen shook his head. “No offense, but I never went in for,” he paused and thought a moment, “what the hell is that stuff you play?”

Anderson laughed a warm and dewy laugh. “Sam calls it retro Goth.”

Paulsen stared at her blankly. “Did you invent it?”

“No, it’s been a round a while, and in truth I’m not sure it has a proper name. The best known band to practice it was a group called Dead Can Dance.”

“Sorry,” the waitress arrived with their food. Paulsen began to paw at his Phillie cheese steak. “I’ve been dealing with dead stuff too much lately.”

Anderson laughed again. Cain’s jaw set. She had stopped laughing at his jokes long ago. For a moment he wondered how embarrassing it would be to lose his gorgeous and sophisticated girl friend to a man that watched NASCAR. “How did your wife’s tastes change Mr. Paulsen?”

“Call me Ned.’ Ned took a bite of his sandwich. “Suddenly she began to listen to public radio and watch PBS. It was enough to make me scream.”

Anderson turned to Cain. “Sounds like you dear.”

“My aversion is to All Things Considered and The Morning Edition.”

“Nahh, if it was just the news I could tune it out.” Paulsen replied. “It’s the damn music. She plays it all hours of the day. She wouldn’t eat the same things she ate before, either. I can’t get her to go to Burger King.”

Anderson shrugged. “People aren’t static creatures Ned, maybe she’s just changing.”

“But then her voice began to change...”

Cain cut Paulsen off. “How?”

“Sometimes it would go deeper and get real husky. At first I thought she was just screwing with me, but she ain’t.”

Cain pushed his food aside. “Did her affect change?”

“Hunh?”

“Her facial expression.” Anderson explained.

“You damn right it did. It turned hard and mean. She didn’t look like herself at all.”

“Has she threatened you?”

“No, but this morning she told me I got to leave the house. She says she’s found somebody else.”

“Who?”

“That’s the hell of it. I asked. She said he was dead.”

Cain thought for a moment. Paulsen had a problem, but it didn’t necessarily have to be supernatural. His wife could be crazy. Still, the way he claimed her voice and her expressions changed interested him. Maybe it was worth meeting Darla. “How did you get my name Ned?”

After Darla booted me out of the house I called the palm reader. She told me about you.

“Palm reader?” Dag Anderson looked confused.

“Yeah, her name is Miss Leelee.”

Anderson looked at Cain. “You never told me about any palm readers.”

Cain smiled. Calling Leelee a palm reader was like calling a hundred and fifty millimeter howitzer a pellet rifle. “You never asked.” He turned back to Paulsen. “Did Leelee tell you anything else?”

“No she hung up after that.”

If Leelee thought it was worth Cain’s time it was worth Cain’s time. “Have you called the cops?”

Paulsen shook his head. “I can’t call them.”

Cain frowned, “Why not?”

“When I was young I had some trouble. I was using real bad and was stealing to feed my habit. I picked up a couple of burglaries. The cops in this town all know me, and they would laugh their ass off if I had to call them to ask for help. Hell, it’s how I met Darla. While I was on probation I had to do some rehab. She still is.”

Anderson raised an eyebrow, “Cocaine?”

Paulsen shook his head. “Heroin, she’s backslid a time or two, but she’s doing better now. She’ll be off probation soon.”

That explained a lot. Cain had wondered why Paulsen, a two hundred pound red neck, hadn’t shoved his wife flat of her ass and told her he wasn’t leaving his own damned house.

He couldn’t afford to. If he hurt her in the tussle and the cops showed up they would press charges. With two prior felonies on his record he wouldn’t be likely to see the light of day if he was convicted.

“That explains that.” Cain finished his coffee and Anderson swallowed the last of her chef salad.

“Listen,” Paulsen had eaten all he wanted of his sandwich and pushed it aside. “Just because I’m a convicted felon don’t mean anything. I’m a mechanic, now. I work every day. I can pay you.”

Anderson looked at Cain. Cain nodded solemnly. Anderson turned back to Paulsen. “We don’t take money for this sort of thing, Ned.”

“You’ll help me?”

“If we can.” Cain climbed out of the booth and dug in his pocket for a couple of dollars. “Honey I’ll get the tip if you’ll get the meal.”

Anderson looked at Cain as if he had crawled from beneath a long dead carcass. “You don’t have any money.”

Cain shrugged. “Well, we did go by that music store this afternoon, and you’ve always been better with money than I.”

Anderson controlled her considerable temper, but only by inches. “Sam, when we first met I thought it charming when you pointed out that I was better at certain things than you. I’m not charmed any more.”

Cain gave Anderson a bawdy wink. “I’ve always admitted that I was a man of limited abilities. I’m only good at two things. One of them happens to be music.”

Anderson crawled out of the booth and headed for the cash register. “You’re not nearly as good at the other thing as you think you are.”

Paulsen watched her go. “That’s how Darla was acting before she ran me off.”

Cain headed for the front door. “Well, Ned you know what they say. Women are only good for one thing, stew.”

Paulsen laughed at that, but Cain was making a point. “Ned, there are other women. Are you sure this is going to be worth the trouble.”

Paulsen looked him dead in the eye. “There are other women, I guess, but there was only one that was willing to marry me.”

It wasn’t a love sonnet but it made perfect sense to Cain. He held the door open for Paulsen and kept it open for Anderson. After she had stepped by him he joined her on the side walk, and got a nasty surprise.

The surprise was a kid. He looked to be no more than sixteen. He wore a hood that covered his head but not his face, a baggy sweat shirt and an even baggier pair of pants.

More importantly, he held a thirty two caliber revolver. He pointed that directly at Ned Paulsen’s chest.

Paulsen, to his credit, had the wherewithal to say. “Now hold on. Don’t get excited. I’m willing to give you all the money I got.”

The kid laughed at him. “Perhaps I don’t want your money. Perhaps I do not like you.”

Another would have been more worried about the gun than the reply, but the way the kid talked set off an alarm inside of Cain’s skull.

He stepped forward, latched an arm about Anderson’s waist and tossed her out the way. Then he shoved Paulsen aside and faced the kid.

When he did he came face to face with a man dressed in eighteenth century finery complete with waist coat and top hat.

Cain grinned. “You really out to move on, man. Your world died the second Lincoln decided he had taken all he was going to take from you peckerwood jerks.”

The Rhett Butler look alike didn’t like that even a little bit. He pulled the trigger.

Cain had feared he might and had reached for him, but he was too late. The gun went off just as he touched the kid’s wrist.

There was a searing pain on the top of his right shoulder and an impact that made his knees go weak. Then he toppled backwards.

The man in the waist coat loomed over him and waved the gun at him, but before he pulled the trigger Dag Anderson crashed into him like a missile.

He staggered backwards and tried to shove the gun in her ribs, but Anderson was stronger than she looked and had the advantage of surprise.

She hooked on foot behind his left leg and pushed at him for all she was worth. He tripped over her leg and crashed to the side walk. Before he rolled to one side she grabbed at the gun.

After she had locked both hands about it she twisted his wrist into an awkward position and yanked at the gun with all her strength.

The man in the waist coat cried out, except this time his voice was high pitched and raspy like a scared kid's.

Anderson yanked the gun out of his hand and kicked him so hard Cain winced. When he tried to get up she kicked him again, harder than she had before.

The man in the waist coat tumbled into the gutter between the curb and an old pick up truck. After that he dissolved away like a special effect in a Spielberg movie and left a confused sixteen year old gang banger in his wake.

"Goddamn," the kid howled, "God fucking damn, what the hell is all this?" Then he rolled over and began clawing his way up the side of the pickup truck.

Anderson tossed the gun aside and stepped towards him with her fists raised. Cain recognized the look on her face. That kid was in for some serious hurt if some one didn't stop her.

So he stopped her. "Dag, let him go."

Anderson whiled about and stared down at Cain. For a moment she looked relieved. After that she looked amazed. "Are you out of you mind?"

"Lord knows I have been." Cain managed to sit up, "but I'm not now. Let him go."

The kid worked his way to his feet and dashed off into the darkness like a rabbit on amphetamines.

Anderson knelt and touched Cain's injured shoulder with gentle fingers. After she had swallowed a sob she said. "Sam, that little bastard deserves to be in prison."

"Maybe, but not for this, the kid was possessed."



The police report would be very simple. Attempted robbery, one suspect, black male, fnu lnu, no description. Needless to say an arrest would ever be made. That was fine by Cain. Whatever else the kid deserved he didn't deserve to get locked up for this.

The doctor at the emergency room stitched him a bit and slapped a bandage over the wound. It had been a superficial thing, and though it would hurt like seven hells it wouldn't plague him long.

One of the nurses had made noises about keeping him over night, but hospital administration pointed out that Cain had that super cheap sort of insurance that will get you inside a doctor's office without actually paying for anything. After that they cut him loose.

That was okay. Cain didn't want to stay anyway. He had things to do. When he and Anderson stepped out of the emergency room Paulsen was waiting on him. He looked tired. Cain was wired seven ways from Sunday.

Paulsen looked at him with tired eyes. "You okay?"

"Never mind me. Tell me about the house."

"What house?"

"The house where your wife went to commune with the other side." Cain put on his best palm reader in the middle of a séance expression and did a cheap imitation of Rod Serling.

Paulsen looked at Anderson. "How much morphine did they give him?"

Anderson shook her head. "None, they used a local. The wound isn't serious. As Doc used to say on Gun Smoke, they just creased him."

Anderson wasn't old enough to remember Gun Smoke. Cain was. "Yet another reason to spit upon TV land."

Paulsen looked bewildered. Anderson grinned. "Samuel always gets wired when he has a ghost to duel with."

"You weren't wired when I first talked with you."

"Until I saw the ghost I assumed you were a lying redneck in a stupid hat."

"I liked you better when you weren't wired."

Cain led them into the hospital parking lot. "If you knew me better you wouldn't like me ever. Now tell me about the dammed house."

Paulsen grimaced. Anderson frowned. "Se didn't tell you about it?"

"No, she told me. I wasn't listening."

Anderson turned to Cain. "I'm told some men are that way."

Cain barely hid a smile. "I'm sorry dear. You were saying?"

Anderson resisted the urge to drop Cain with an over hand right. "Do you know where the house is?"

"No." Paulsen replied.

Anderson paused. "I'm stumped."

Paulsen shook his head. "I don't think the house matters a damn. I think what we need to do is find Darla."

Cain shook his head. "No, we don't. Ned, you have to trust me on this. You can't tell your doctor how to practice medicine. You can't tell me how to do this."

Paulsen didn't like that even a little, but he didn't have any idea what else to do, either. "So what do I do?"

"Go get a hotel. Get some sleep and watch some t.v."

"I got to be at work in the morning."

“No you don’t. You don’t need to be any where that Darla can find you. Go to a hotel and stay there. Stay the hell away from your wife.”

“Darla ain’t got nothing to do with a drugged out kid.”

“Sure she does,” Cain replied. “That kid was possessed. Ghosts don’t flit about the earth like euro trash. They travel inside people. That ghost got out of its house and into a inner city kid because some one carried him there. That some one could only be Darla. Stay away from her.”

“Goddamn,” Paulsen hadn’t thought of that.

Cain gripped at Paulsen’s elbow with his good hand. “Promise you’ll stay away from her, Ned.”

Paulsen nodded woodenly. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Promise Ned.”

Paulsen nodded. Not because he trusted Cain but because he couldn’t think of anything else to do. “I promise.”

“Good, go get some sleep. Call us when you find a hotel room. Dag will give you our cell number.”

After Paulsen had wandered away Cain turned to Anderson. She opened her mouth as if she was going to say something but Cain didn’t let her speak.

He looped his good arm about her gently and pulled her against him. Then he kissed her. She kissed him back and when they were finished she laid her head on his shoulder. “You should be more careful.” Her voice soft and damp like grass in the morning.

Cain towed her out of the glare of the parking lot’s lights and sank into a darkened corner. He buried his face in the nape of her neck. Now that Paulsen was gone he could put his brave façade aside and be himself. “I love you.”

“If Paulsen had died I would have been upset. Anderson’s voice trembled. “If you had died...”

Cain pulled Anderson closer. It was a strange thing. If the ghost had killed him Anderson would have been distraught beyond words. If he hadn't pushed Paulsen out of the way and faced the ghost himself Anderson would not love him half as much. "I want to go back to the palace."

The palace was the grey hound they had converted into a mobile home. Anderson cupped the side of her face with one hand and smiled at him. "I'll call a cab."

She would have to. The ambulance had brought them to the hospital. Paulsen had followed in his truck. The palace was still parked near the club where they had performed. "I don't suppose we'll be able to sleep in."

"No," Cain shook his head. "I want to get an early start. We're going to see Leelee tomorrow."



Miss Leelee's house stood in a section of town the 82nd airborne wouldn't have patrolled at night.

It was small and neat, though, and its yard was well tended. A garish sign next to the street proclaimed Miss Leelee a medium, seer, advisor and palm reader. Cain knew her as the woman that threw him a life preserver when he was sinking like a stone.

It was seven thirty when he knocked on her door. There was no answer. Dagmar Anderson searched the neighborhood nervously. He pounded at the door again.

"Sam, I don't like it here." Anderson was as tough as she was lovely. There was no one else on earth Cain would trust more with his back, but she had been raised in yuppie Ville with the two car garage and the guest room.

She was not enjoying her look at life's other side. Cain tried to reassure her. "Don't worry love. We're perfectly safe. We're between shifts."

"What?" Anderson didn't sound reassured.

Cain pounded at the door again. "All the late night dope dealers have wrapped up and toddled off to bed. All the early evening dope dealers are hitting their snooze button. The joint won't star jumping again till one or two this afternoon."

"What about the early morning dope dealers?"

"No such thing." Cain stopped pounding at the door and cupped his hands in front of his face, "Oh c'mon Leelee. Wake up all ready. You're too damned old to be nursing a hang over."

That struck a nerve. Someone stirred inside of the house, none to gracefully either. There was a muffled crash followed by louder crashes near the front door.

Anderson looked relieved and puzzled at the same time. "How do you know so much about the ghetto?"

"In my youth I was a terrible drug abuser."

"I thought you were hooked on prescription stuff."

"I was hooked on anything I could lay my hands on."

Anderson almost smiled. "Every day you make me happier I chose you."

"It's what I live for."

Leelee finished unlocking all her dead bolts. After that she yanked her door open. "Goddamn," she didn't bother with the Jamaican accent she used when she was entertaining paying customers. "You better hope you the goddamn police, cause if you ain't I'm going to kill your ass."

It was not an idle threat. Leelee was waving a nine millimeter semi automatic about.

Dag Anderson's eyes grew to the size of saucers. She took a step forward, but Cain restrained her with his good hand and grinned at Leelee. "Too late love, some one all ready tried."

Leelee nearly dropped the gun. "Goddamn," she squealed, "Goddamn." Then leaned into Cain and kissed him on the cheek.

Cain wrapped his arm about her and kissed her back. "Of all the names I heard yesterday I liked hearing yours the most."

Leelee towed him inside her house and held the door for Anderson. Then she pushed it closed behind then.

She was a small woman who had gone a little soft about the middle with obsidian skin and darker eyes. There were streaks of grey in her hair and she wore an expensive robe.

The inside of the house suited her. It was garish, full of bright reds and hot pinks, but it wasn't cheap either. Leelee was doing all right.

"Let me look at you. She turned on a lamp near the front door and studied Cain. "You're getting grey."

Cain let that pass. "Leelee, why didn't you tell me you had moved out to the coast? I'm here all the time. We could see each other three or four times a year."

Leelee shook her head. "When god wants us to talk he will put us together."

Cain had never understood how Leelee, who cursed like a sailor and fervently believed in ghosts, could also be a devout Baptist, but she was. "When did you get a phone?"

"Couple of years ago, I had to. My customers like to call to make appointments, but I keep a long distance block on it." She laid the gun on the end table that held the lamp, and turned to Anderson. "Who's this?"

"My girl friend."

Leelee gave Anderson a look that could only be called sympathetic. “Honey, do you know what you’re doing.”

“I ask myself the same thing every day.” Anderson never batted an eye.

Leelee nodded at her. “It ain’t gonna get no better.” Then she turned towards the kitchen. “C’mon I’ll make some toast and eggs.”

“Great,” Cain followed her. “You got any coffee.”

“No I got gin though.”

Anderson frowned, “Gin?”

“Yeah,” Cain nodded. “You put the eggs in it. It cooks them.”

Leelee’s kitchen was small and brightly colored. The big trash can near the counter was filled with liquor bottles.

Cain studied the can. “Party last night?”

“Me and some friends had some cocktails.”

Cain would have made disapproving noises and asked about Leelee’s health, but there was precious little point in that. A little gin wasn’t going to kill Leelee. Cain wasn’t sure anything was going to kill Leelee. He knew for a fact she had been kicking around the Carolinas as far back as the 1870s and suspected she had been around much longer than that. That was a question for another time, though. “The redneck you sent my way mentioned your name.”

Leelee pulled a bottle of beefeaters from an over head cabinet and poured it in a blender. Then she hustled over to the refrigerator and grabbed a carton of eggs. “I hoped he would.”

“How did you know I was in town?”

Leelee nodded to the local paper. It was lying on the counter near the fridge and opened to the entertainment section. The local music page listed his name and Anderson’s. “I check the papers. I know every time you pass through.”

Cain laughed. “Leelee why don’t you come see me?”

“You don’t play gospel. I don’t come listen. You ever get right with god?”

Cain shrugged. “I try not to bother him if I can help it. I figure he’s busy.”

Leelee cracked a hand full of eggs in the blender. Then she went back to the fridge in search of tomato juice, lemon and peppers, “Lying bastard.”

Anderson leaned against the frame of the kitchen door. To Cain she looked like a little kid on the play ground that had been left out of the other kid’s games, lonely and sad. “How long have you two known each other?”

Leelee, in addition to her other strengths, had always been a fine judge of people. She saw it too. She motioned Anderson over and hugged her. “If you love him I love you. He’s my white son.”

Cain blushed and grinned from ear to ear. “We’ve known each other since I was eighteen. I was doing my second stint in a mental institution in Columbia. Leelee’s other son Rufus was working there. He figured the things I was seeing were more than just my imagination and had Leelee come see me. She was the first person to tell me I wasn’t insane. Set me on the road to becoming all I am today.”

Leelee grimaced. “Don’t say it all that Goddmaned loud. It ain’t anything to be that proud of.”

Anderson laughed at that and for the first time the tension that had filled her when they arrived melted away.

She had decided to like Leelee.

That made Cain happy. Still, there was business to attend too. “We’ll talk about the old days, good and bad in a second. Right now I want to hear what you know about the white boy you sent my way.”

“I only talked with him on the phone.” Leelee returned to her blender. “If I had to guess I would say he was a Merle Haggard fan.”

Cain nodded, “Oh yeah.”

“Christ,” Leelee shook her head sadly. “How the hell you people conquered a continent, enslaved all of us and dominated the world is beyond me.”

Cain nodded. “I’ve never been able to figure it out. If you don’t know about Paulsen maybe you can tell me about his wife.”

Leelee ran the blender for a few seconds. “That’s an easier question. She’s a round little girl with a ghost Jones. I just figured she liked to scare herself, but there’s more to it than that.”

“How you figure?”

Leelee poured them all a glass full of break fast. “He wouldn’t want her if that was all there was to it.”

Cain took a sip. “The ghost?”

“I don’t know his name. We were never introduced, but he hung around the Simpson place. I don’t think he lived there. I get the feeling he was a visitor that passed there.”

Anderson frowned. “You’ve seen his spirit.”

“I sensed him.” Leelee replied, “But I never spoke with him.”

“Then how do you know he lived at the house?”

“I worked there.”

“When?” Anderson took a sip of her drink as well, but more to be polite than anything else.

“After the war.” Leelee nearly drained her glass.

That one puzzled Anderson. She thought the house where Darla met the ghost had been a ruin. “Gulf war?”

Cain laughed, “Civil.” Then he took a long pull off his own glass. “I haven’t had one of these since I went off to make my own way in the world.”

“You don’t know what you been missing.” Leelee replied. “Its sort of fucked up though.”

“What” Dagmar Anderson was unfamiliar with Leelee speak and having a hard time following along.

“I wouldn’t have taken that little woman out there if I had known he was going to stir around. I knew he was there, but he hadn’t made a move in years and years. I’m wondering what she did to wake him up.”

That made sense. A lot of people that were fascinated with the macabre had some sense of the other world, not enough to see things plainly, but enough to grasp ambiences. A house with an inactive ghost was a perfect place to take people who had the feel without the sight. They would sense just enough to get a spooked without actually noticing what was going on.

But if Leelee was to be believed, and Cain knew from personal experience that only a fool disbelieved Leelee, something had awakened this particular sprit and sent him on a tear.

“He wasn’t living there when you worked there?” Cain asked.

Leelee shook her head. “But he’s from that time period. I could feel that. I left the place in sixty five. He showed up later.”

“Did he come out to play while Darla was visiting?”

“No,” Leelee shook her head. “If he had I would have stripped his ass and left him a rotten gust of wind. Darla went back later.”

Anderson understood that. “She wanted him.”

“That she did.” Leelee nodded. “You find out why and you’ll know what to do next.”

Cain sipped at his drink. “You got a feel for how dangerous he is.”

Leelee frowned. “Nasty I’d say. You’ll need to be careful. Or maybe you could just let it go.”

Cain raised his injured arm. “He tried to kill me.”

“Actually,” Anderson interjected, “he was trying to kill Paulsen. Sam got in the way.”

Leelee pursed her lips. “You want me to come along?”

Cain finished his drink. “What sort of son would I be if I let you do that?”

“What are you going to do?” Leelee poured herself another drink.

When the library opens I’m going to visit the local archives and see what I can find out about the Simpson place. But the library won’t open till nine thirty. I figure the three of us can have one hell of a visit before then.”



It took some digging, almost twelve hours of digging to be exact. That was when they came across the photographs.

They were made by a traveling photographer, and had long ago been stuffed inside a diary written by Sara Middleborough Simpson, the youngest daughter of Marcy and Edward Simpson, and the last Simpson to live in the house called The Old Simpson Place.

The pictures had been made late in eighteen sixty seven just after Leelee had moved on to greener pastures. Five people stood on the porch of the big house.

Two were children, Sara and her younger brother Robert. Three were adults. The first two were Marcy and Edward, Sara’s parents.

The final grown up was Simon Lucius Middleborough. Sara’s Uncle and the man that had tried to kill Cain the night before.

The picture was not great. It had faded about the edges and gone grainy. Everyone's features were blurred, but the crucible of the previous night had burned Simon's features into Cain's mind.

Not only that the man in the picture felt like the man who had possessed the kid with the gun, felt like him inside and out.

According to Sara's diary Simon was from Mississippi. He had served with General Johnson in Northern Georgia during the Civil War. He had been wounded just outside of Atlanta and was never the same after words.

After the war he had tried to sell dry goods, but suffered a series of financial reverses. After that he came to live with his sister and brother in law.

It hadn't worked out. Edward never liked Simon much. He liked him less when he began to run up big pharmacy bills in town.

Things culminated a few months after Simon moved in. He went into town for dinner and a play. He never returned. Edward went into town early the next morning and found he had fallen ill. He brought him back to the farm but Simon never recovered. He was not yet twenty five when he died.

"That's him isn't it?" Cain hadn't said anything but Dagmar Anderson knew. She could tell by the way he dragged his thumb over Simon's likeness.

Cain nodded. "Am I so obvious?"

Anderson smiled. "Its not like you slipped off into a trance or anything."

Cain never would. Trances were a pretense designed to fleece the unwary. People in Cain's field saw the shadows where the dead dwelled as clearly as they saw the sun and the moon. They didn't need to slip in and out of consciousness to do it. "Now the question is why?"

"Why what?"

“Why now and why Darla? He was silent for so long. Why rouse himself now, and why attach himself to Paulsen’s wife. What did he see in her? What does she see in him?”

Anderson shrugged. “Maybe she reminds him of someone. He was a young man...”

Anderson didn’t need to complete the thought. Cain was way ahead of her. Perhaps Darla reminded him of a woman he had known. Perhaps he pined for time lost and things denied him.

It was a compelling thought, but it was wrong. Cain was certain of that. This, whatever the hell it was, didn’t have any romance in it. No, there was something in the way that Simon Middleborough had died, something familiar and unsettling. But of course all of that was supposition of the rankest sort.

There was only one way to sort all of this out. “We have to find Darla.”



If anyone would know where Darla was it would be Paulsen, and he had called that morning to inform them he had holed up in a Ramada Inn out by I-92. So they went to the Ramada Inn.

They hadn’t found what they had expected to find. When they knocked on Paulsen’s door there was no answer. Neither was so naive to figure he had stepped out for a second and would return. They informed hotel security. Hotel security opened the door.

They found Paulsen inside in a pool of his own blood. He had been stabbed in the back a half dozen times. He wasn’t wearing much of anything other than a towel.

They waited for the police to show up and chatted with them as all good citizens must, but there wasn’t much Cain could tell

them, and there wasn't anything the cops could tell Cain that he didn't all ready know or couldn't guess.

There was one little tidbit that caught everyone's attention, though. Paulsen had a stash. Not enough to light up the world, but enough to give him and a paramour a pleasant buzz.

The cops figured Paulsen had got lonely since his wife tossed his ass and had invited over as professional love broker for an evening of recreation. A dispute over pricing had followed.

Cain wasn't so sure. Not because he had any great faith in Paulsen. Paulsen was a man and Cain knew first hand what rotten bastards they were, but because it didn't feel right.

If Paulsen had wanted to use he wouldn't have brought the stuff back to his hotel room. He had been around the block enough to know that cops can search hotel rooms to hell and back without worrying about all those nifty technicalities that protect citizens from search in their own home. Moreover, the only woman Paulsen would have wanted to meet was Darla.

The forensics team was still prowling about the hotel when Cain said his good byes to the detective that had been assigned to the case.

When they were back in the parking lot he turned to Dag. "We need to find Darla."

Anderson's eyes were red rimmed. She looked tired and sick. Cain didn't blame her. Death would do that to you. "Paulsen didn't hang around to tell you what had happened did he?"

Cain grinned. "No he had long since moved on by the time we arrived. Leelee would say he had taken his reward."

"Which was?"

"I don't know. I don't believe he went to hell, but I'm not such a Pollyanna that I believe he went to heaven either."

"He had to go somewhere."

“Maybe, but who says you ever have to arrive?”

“What?” Anderson didn’t pretend to understand.

“No one ever arrives at a final destination in life. There’s always another hill, another challenge, another job. Why should death be different? It’s not a place it’s a process.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Haven’t a clue. It just sounds good when I say it.”

Anderson turned the conversation back to Darla. “Darla killed him.”

“I can’t see where it would be anyone else.”

“Why kill him now?”

“Same reason they tried to kill him outside of the diner last night. He was in the way.”

“In the way of what.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it’s something profound. Maybe it’s not. We won’t know for sure till we find Darla.”

Anderson crossed her arms and looked up at the sky. The stint at the library and their time with the police had chewed the day up and spit it out.

The sun had bled its last and dropped into the west. The night had darkened the sky. There was no moon, but there were plenty of stars. None of them seemed to care much about her or Cain or Paulsen. “How will we find her?”

“Back to Leelee’s neighborhood.”

“Tonight?” Anderson liked Leelee, but she didn’t like her neighborhood even a little. Going there at night made her tense.

“Oh yeah.”

“Maybe we could just call.”

Cain shook his head. “We’re not going to see Leelee.”

“Then why go back?” Anderson’s voice took on an edge. Cain and his inscrutable psychic act were wearing damn thin.

“That’s where we’ll find Darla.” Anderson opened her mouth but Cain interrupted. “She won’t be going back to talk with Leelee. She’ll be going back to celebrate.”

“I didn’t see any four star restaurants there.”

Cain grinned at that. “That’s not Darla’s idea of a good time. Simon’s either.”



An old feeling led him there, and it had nothing to do with any psychic ability. It was, instead, a memory of times past. Before he understood the visions he saw and the things he heard. A time when he medicated himself to turn off the back ground noise.

He had spent a lot of his time in neighborhoods like this then. Buying and taking things that would have killed him if he hadn’t given them up. And though he hadn’t been down this road in a long time he still knew where it led.

This one led to a place called a shot house. The rest of the world would call it a tavern without a pouring license. What the folks that drank at this one called it he had no idea. He didn’t care either.

He settled on it because it seemed the most likely place to find the woman he was looking for, and because the cab driver had decided tip or not he would drive no further in this neighborhood after dark.

Dag Anderson understood how the cabbie had felt. “Sam we need to get the hell out of here.”

They stood under a forlorn oak in the weed strewn play ground of a decaying school. Across the street the shot house was in full swing.

“Not yet, Darla hasn’t made an appearance.”

“How could you possibly know she will?”

“I don’t,” Cain admitted, “but it seems pretty likely. She and Simon just managed to kill the only man they figured could louse up their love fest. They’re bound to enjoy the night.”

“How could they enjoy it here?”

Cain laughed. “They’re addicts dear. This is their kind of place.”

“Darla was in rehab.”

“So was Jerry Garcia.” Cain replied. “She’ll show up here or some place like this before the night is out. I’m guessing it’ll be here.”

“How the hell could you possibly know that?” Anderson sounded like a woman struggling with her temper.

Cain decided he had better soothe her before she hurt him. “I’ve known Leelee all my adult life. She charges a fair price, not enough to force Ned Paulsen into over time. Darla did something else with the extra money.” Cain paused and stroked his chin. “And of all the palm readers she could pick. She picks one that lives in this neighborhood. Gee, what a coincidence.”

Before Anderson could reply a car drove up. It was one of those peppy little girly sports cars with the spoilers and the partially tinted windows.

It was the kind of vehicle no grown man would be caught dead in. No black person would take seriously and no dope dealer would touch with a ten foot pole.

It was the kind of thing little red neck women loved to drive while they played their Alan Jackson CDS at full volume. Most certainly a Darla would follow.

One did. She looked like her picture except shorter and rounder. Her hair was short and her face was pale. Her hair was bleached blonde. She wore a Bocephus t-shirt and a pair of

dungarees. From the way she staggered when she climbed out of the car Cain guessed this had not been her first stop.

Anderson saw her too. “Well, I’ll be damned. Is that her.”

Darla turned and scanned the street. When she did she looked almost directly at Cain. Instantly she disappeared and was replaced by a thin man dressed in a waist coat and wearing a top hat.

His face was long and thin and his side burns ridiculously long. He carried himself like a man who thought he had accomplished a hell of a lot more than he, in fact, had.

“Its her.”

“What do we do now?”

Cain stepped out of the shadows. “I have a chat with Darla. You stay here.”

Anderson laughed at that. “No, seriously, what do we do now.”

Cain didn’t bother to repeat himself. There was no point. Anderson was going to do what she was going to do. He couldn’t stop her. Besides she was as good in a brawl as most men he had known, as certainly as good as anyone her size. He would be glad to have her along.

By the time he had hurried out of the play ground and into the street Darla had turned about and started for the house. She hadn’t noticed him.

But the brother that sat next to the front door of the shot house had. He cradled a forty five automatic in one hand, and he watched Cain him very closely.

Cain had a problem. The dude with the pistol was there to make sure no one started trouble. Cain was there start trouble, and Cain was unarmed. A bit of strategy was in order.

“Goddamnit bitch,” Cain howled at full volume. “I told you to stay your ass at home didn’t I?”

Darla wheeled about as if some one had shoved a pin in her. Left to her own devices she would have just stared at Cain as if he was out of his mind, but Simon was inside of her and he remembered Cain quite vividly.

She turned to run. But years of inactivity had left her soft and slow. Cain covered the distance between them in three strides and latched onto her shoulder and whirled her about.

“Mama told me to stay away from your broad ass, but I wouldn’t do it. No, hell no, I wouldn’t listen.”

Simon tried to take a swing at him but Darla’s body deserted him. Cain stepped away from the punch easily and grabbed her by the back of her collar.

The brother with the gun pushed himself out of his chair. “She yours white boy?”

Cain nodded, “God help me.”

The brother frowned. “I don’t give a shit what happens between you. But it ain’t gonna happen here.”

He didn’t have to say it twice. “I hear you.” Cain dragged Darla back towards the car.

Then she stabbed him. It was the same knife she had used on Paulsen. She had buried it in her pocket book, as much to make certain no one screwed with her, as to hide it away from the police.

She pulled it out while Cain was placating the dude with the shot gun and drove it into his shoulder.

He saw her move out of the corner of his eyes and flinched away from her. Not enough to make her miss but enough that she didn’t hit him solid. Still the knife bit into him and drew blood and hurt like hell.

He staggered backwards cursing. She drove the knife at him again. A voice that wasn’t quite Darla’s hissed. “I’ve decided I hate you more than the cretin she was married too.”

Cain managed to block the thrust before it slammed into him but the blade cut a scar along his forearm for his trouble.

He fell back another step and Darla came on. She was searching for a opening to drive the knife home when Dag tackled her.

Dag drove her to the ground and pinned the hand that held the knife to the ground. Then she drove her index finger and her forefinger into the base of Darla's throat where her chest met her neck.

When Dag's hand slammed into her wind pipe most of the fight went out of Darla. So did Simon Middleborough. He melted away as if he had never been. Darla dropped the knife.

Cain whirled on his heel and searched the darkness like a man who had lost something very important.

Ghosts were tied to a locus, a thing that focused their energy and kept them on this plain. It was usually something that had been important to them in life. Some times its was an inanimate object, sometimes it was a part of their old body.

Wherever it was they stayed near it. Cain guessed Darla had it, but that didn't mean Middleborough had to stay inside of her. He could slip into another body just as easily. The body would just have to be near by.

Cain turned about once more. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Anderson raise her fist. "He's not in there any more, love."

"Where is he?"

"Looking for another host."

Anderson's eyes grew large, "The man with the gun."

She didn't have to repeat herself. Cain threw himself across her and covered his head just as the pistol went off.

They lucked out. Stepping into the new body disoriented Middleborough. His first shot was high, but he hadn't given up.

While Cain scrambled off Dag the dude with the gun stepped into the yard. Then he began to stalk towards them. Simon Middleborough smiled at them out of his eyes.

Cain turned to Darla. "Where is it, Darla?"

Darla didn't reply. "Search her Dag. Search her fast." Cain said between clenched teeth. Then he charged Middleborough and his new host.

Middleborough, raised in another time and subject to different mores, had not expected that. He had expected that Cain would protect Anderson, perhaps even allow himself to be killed so that she might escape.

Instead Cain, knowing Darla was no match for Anderson, raced towards Middleborough like an out of control car. Then he tackled him.

Middleborough managed to squeeze off another round just as Cain slammed into him, but Cain's shoulder hit his elbow and drove the gun towards the sky. The bullet soared off into the heavens harmlessly, and Middleborough fell backwards. Then Cain landed across him and swiped the gun out of his grasp with his good hand.

Cain watched the gun tumble away from them. But before he could throw himself upon it, Middleborough stuck his feet in his chest and pushed him away.

Cain rolled over as best he could with one arm and scrambled for the gun. Middleborough dove atop him...

Dag Anderson didn't understand many of the things Cain saw, but she understood what a locus was, and how important it was to a ghost. Knowing that, she rifled through Darla's clothes with a passion Cain assumed she reserved for him. Moments later she pulled a bottle from beneath the big woman's shirt.

It was thick, little bottle, stained black by time and bearing decorations that had gone out of style years and years past. It was twined about Darla's neck by a length of string.

Anderson grabbed it with one hand and ripped it free. Then she turned and screamed at Cain. "I got it, I think."

Cain felt Middleborough roll over him like a tidal wave and reach for the gun. "Break it." He howled. "Break it."

Anderson scrambled to her feet and rifled the bottle into the sidewalk with all her strength. It burst apart and the brother crawling all over Cain went limp. Then he muttered "Goddamn, Goddamn."

Cain rolled from under him and grabbed the gun. After he had popped its clip free he turned back to the brother. "You okay?"

"Goddamn," he whispered. "Goddamn, there was a spirit inside me."

Cain nodded. "I know. He's gone now." He handed the brother the empty gun. "Listen," he said. "You were never here, all right. You and I have never met. This only concerns me and that fat white girl, okay?"

The brother, not knowing what else to do, nodded uncertainly and scrambled to his feet. Then he staggered back towards the house without asking for his clip.

"Goddamn," he muttered, "Goddamn, Goddamn."

Cain stuffed the clip in his pocket and clambered to his feet. Then he returned to Dagmar Anderson.

Anderson hugged him and stuffed her hand beneath his shirt and onto his shoulder. Her fingers came back bloody. "You've pulled the stitches loose. You're cut too." Her voice trembled.

There wasn't a lot of blood. Cain touched the scar on his arm lightly. Then he pressed his good hand against his shoulder. "I'll scar, but I'll be okay."

Anderson nodded towards the ruined bottle. “What the hell was that?”

In any other circumstance Cain wouldn't have known. In this one he was certain, “Laudanum bottle.”

Anderson shook her head. “I don't understand.”

Cain pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and scooped Darla's knife in it. “Middleborough had been wounded near Atlanta. That's how he got himself hooked on laudanum. That's why his business went belly up after the war. That's why he ran up a huge pharmacy bill here when he moved in at the Simpson place.”

“What's that got to do with Darla?”

Cain stared down at Paulsen's wife. She had rolled to one side and was sobbing. She looked puffy and used up.

“You were hooked on heroin.”

Darla just sobbed. Cain shrugged. “In Middleborough's time addictions were considered character flaws. After he died he was afraid to move, afraid he would go straight to hell. So he hung about the Simpson place. When Darla came by he felt her memories. Felt the old heroin binges. Heroin and laudanum are fairly similar. He decided they could relive old times.”

Darla rolled onto her back and tried to sit up. Cain helped her to her feet. “You liked the wild side too didn't you Darla?”

“I was still on probation,” Darla made a confession her lawyer would have been horrified to hear. “Ned sad he would turn me in if I started using again. I couldn't let him do that. We couldn't let him do that.”

Cain led Darla back towards their car. “Get in the back, Darla. We're headed for a police station.”

Darla looked at him as if he had punched her. “You're turning me in?”

“You tried to kill me.”

“I was possessed.”

True enough, but unlike the brother with the forty five, and the kid the night before Darla had been a willing participant. “Save that for your court appointed shrink.”

Darla sniffed away her tears and tried to rally. “Once you start talking about ghosts the cops are going to think you’re crazy.”

Cain grinned. “I’m going to leave the ghost bit out Darla. Besides, when the cops check the security tapes from the hotel lobby they’re going to find you aren’t they?”

Darla didn’t say much after that. That was good. Cain didn’t want to listen to her.

THE END

CJ Burch, a long time speculative fiction fan, has been writing for about five years. His stories currently appear in several anthologies at Cyber Pulp, <http://come.to/cyberpulp>. A number of these anthologies are for sale at Fictionwise. <http://www.fictionwise.com/eBooks/cyberpulpebooks.htm>.

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THE DAILY SCHISM

BY LYNN JAMNECK

Jill was tired. Tired of waiting, tired of hoping. Tired of life. Dead-end jobs that didn't even compensate for the habit she was trying to kick; girlfriends who came and went, taking what was left of her tattered self-respect with them when they left.

Today was Wednesday. Anything could happen in the middle of the week. The sun was heating up. A black-and-white NY police cruiser came drawling round the corner, its driver eyeing her suspiciously.

Kindly piss off Ms. Policewoman. She looked like that detective she had once screwed in the *Weisse Kaninchen*—a posh club Jill sometimes bartended at. Afterwards she had told the flatfoot about her community service at the AIDS center. The cop had X and dope on her, service revolver strapped to her side and badge in the back pocket of her jeans.

She was more of a freak than she ever would be a cop. It's terrible what some people do to themselves.

The cruiser passed. Jill lit a Marlboro light.

In a *whoooooshh* of sound and air he came running past her.

Jill had never seen someone wearing a white trench coat. Never mind the fact that it was made of the most luxurious-looking leather she had ever seen. He looked like a scion of reality, not real, yet very, very there -

Once, Jill's mother had sent her to a shrink. An odd-looking woman with a decidedly Jewish nose. Jill sat on the couch. It was off-green and not very comfortable.

The shrink: *Are you happy?*

Jill: *Not all the time. Not right now, for instance.*

The shrink: *What is it you want from life?*

Jill: *If I knew that, you think I'd be here?*

- And then Jill saw that, on the back of his precise, shining coat, spelled out in crudely stitched black letters were the words:

FOLLOW ME

Don't mind if I do. She grinned happily. After all, it was Wednesday, and this looked interesting.

Jill ran, struggling to keep up with the White Coat. On one occasion she thought he looked back to smile at her but she wasn't sure. Could have been a trick of the light, or a trick of her brain.

Other pedestrians seemed not to notice him, but Jill knew he was there. She could smell spanking new leather in the air as she steadily began to catch up with him.

Wait. Why now did *he* suddenly seem like a *she*?

"Look out!"

Too late.

Jill lost her footing. The White Coat was ripped from her vision and replaced by the tumbling, folding darkness beneath the street. She fell to the sound of scaffolding and shouting construction workers.

Falling, tumbling... Dropping, dipping, reducing...

She remembers thinking that she had a sudden craving for toast with...marmalade.

If she survived the fall, maybe she would stop thinking about suicide via the top of her apartment building. Her mother always did say – *'One thing you certainly don't have, Jill, is brittle bones.'*

Why would she remember that?

Why indeed, had she ever asked her mother in the first place?

And what the fuck—why was she still falling?

As if to give her perplexed mind a break, Jill felt the definite *whump!* of something against her head.

Then, nothing more.



"Wakey, wakey."

Jill opened her eyes.

"Christ, turn off the fucking spotlights, will you?"

The brilliant lights felt as if they were scorching the surface of her retinas.

Click.

Total darkness.

"Great. Is there no middle ground here?"

"Middle ground is such an iffy territory. By the way, you catch on quickly."

Footsteps. Her eyes started to grow accustomed to the dim light. A rather ordinary looking face appeared above her.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Christ."

Jill started laughing. "*You're* Christ? The Son of Man?"

"Yup."

Jill sat upright. She'd been lying on the floor. It was brown and uneventful, but clean.

"Am I to suppose we're in Heaven then?"

"No," Christ said. "We're in Hell." He scratched his beard. "I see you're confused. Ask yourself this then: Does this look at all like Heaven? See any Angels with trumpets dangling at their mouths?"

"No, but I don't see Beelzebub and his minions either."

"That's because they're upstairs."

"Upstairs?"

Christ nodded. "Yes, up top."

Jill wasn't sure whether she was dead, having one doohickey of a dream or experiencing an LSD flashback.

"Where exactly is up top?"

"You know—up." Christ pointed a finger into the air. "In the world."

"Let me get this straight. I fell down a manhole into Hell, you're Jesus Christ and the Devil is roaming around *up top*. Did he take everyone in Hell with him?"

"Yup. That's why I'm here. I have a key to the back door."

"What are you doing in Hell?"

"Looking for Lost Souls." He gave her a knowing look.

"Oh come off it. I ain't lost."

"Then who are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said."

"I'm Jill. You should know that, being the Son Of God."

Christ grabbed her by the ear. "No deary, *who are you?*"

"Let go!"

"Answers first."

"I don't know! I don't know who I am!"

He let go. "Why not?"

"Because I fry my brains on drugs—is that what you want to hear?"

ROGUE WORLDS

Christ took a tote bag from thin air. It looked sporty. "I don't want you to say anything. I just expect a simple answer to a simple question."

Jill started walking. "It's not that simple a question, you omnipotent bastard!"

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Hate to tell you, but you're going the wrong way for that."

"Don't you have to go somewhere and be vengeful?"

"That's my Father, remember? He who art in heaven."

'Smartass!'



"I had the fucking weirdest dream last night."

Jill took a sip of coffee as the waiter departed. On the other end of the café table, Jon lit a cigarette. His hair looked greasy, his skin pale. One of these days he was going to die.

"So tell me." He waited.

"I had a bit of a talk with Jesus."

"Christ."

"The very one."

Jon seemed unperturbed. "What did he say? Did he have a beard?"

"Of course he had a beard. He asked me who I was and I couldn't tell him. We were in Hell."

"What was Jesus doing in Hell?"

"Said he was looking for Lost Souls."

Jon smiled. His gums were bleeding. His teeth were loose.

"Jon is dead, Jill."

It's still happening, Jill realized. And Jon wasn't Jon anymore—he was changing. His pale skin burst like an obese man splitting his

seams, organs bubbling forth from underneath. Something smelled, but Jill couldn't decide whether it was the bacon from the open kitchen or the sizzling flesh of her best friend.

Then IT started to struggle out of the heaving mass, its claws the first to appear from the body cavity. Jill felt blood pool around her naked feet. She never wore shoes.

"My, my—you're a hot little thing. This asshole must have been some queer little fruit not to have tried the Double Backed Beast with *that* hot bod." IT threw the empty piece of skin to the floor. No one seemed to notice.

"Good day. I'm the Devil."

Jill merrily kept her cookies at bay. After all, it was just an illusion.

"Fuck off."

"Nice," IT grinned, licking its lips lasciviously. "What else did Jesus tell you?"

"Why don't you go ask him yourself."

The Devil looked at her. She felt violated. He looked at her still, and she felt like fucking the nearest thing to death.

"Have some wine." There was Shiraz. He watched her drink. She felt him breathe.

"Are you a lost soul, Jill?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"I'd like to know more than that."

"That's why you're always at the losing end—because you can't think about anything else than your dick."

Jill drained the wineglass. When she looked up, it wasn't the Devil she saw.

The White Coat.

It was *her*.

Jill was the woman in the white coat.

Jill ran out the Deli.

Jill got up and followed.

She chased herself down Fifth Avenue, past the pawn shops that sold old Fenders with broken, curling strings and cheap jewelry at Tiffany prices. Past Ground Zero where more duplicates tried in vain to catch up with themselves.

She chased through Central Park. Where the homo boys chased, the speed freaks chased and the housewives chased, all trying to catch up with themselves. Past the Brooklyn Bridge and the cemetery on the corner of Sixth and Seventh where a service was being held, attended by bereaved family members and a handful of AIDS activists and the preacher who sang the praises of a dead body.

Catch me if you can, Jill.

Sometimes she would get closer, could almost touch the familiar *flap-flop* of the leather. Then she would pull back; lag behind on purpose like she had seen the other Chasers do.

What would she do when she finally caught up with herself? What would be her choice, her final destination?

Her only hope, the thing that she desperately clung to was that middle ground—that something existed which was neither or.

Come on, I dare you. Catch me.

Jill chases.

One day she'd be ready. Soon she would have the guts.

In next to no time she would find the right hole to fall into—wall to pass through—door to unlock.

And see herself for what she really was.

THE END

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TINDER

BY L.J. BLOUNT

Tinder Box

Tinder walked the line. She always walked the line. Never daring to venture outside them, or even so much as to tinker with the thought of smearing them. She was the first one in, the first to volunteer and the last to speak out of line. In short, she was the perfect little angel who never made waves, caused trouble or fished for disappointment. So, the fact that her teacher couldn't stand her always left her wondering. It just added to the difficulties of being an eighth-grader.

The bell rang and the kids raced past her. She sat, waiting for the door to shut behind the last of the miscreants. Mrs. Hasegawa stood, staring at her over the rim of her reading glasses. Tinder rose slowly, placing her books and papers into her bag.

"Today child."

Tinder looked up at Mrs. Hasegawa. She gave a half smile in reply to the scorn look she received. She grabbed her bag and walked from the classroom as quickly as she could.

Walking out into the hall, she glanced back at the door that was closing behind her. She didn't like to be rushed, but Mrs. Hasegawa always pushed her that way. She quickly noticed the hall was empty, which she found more than just odd. Usually there were still kids at their lockers and standing around gossiping. This day, a long empty hall flanked on either side with tall, slender drab blue lockers

greeted her. She walked, not wanting Mrs. Hasegawa's wrath as she left her classroom. Besides, she reasoned the solitude in the halls was more than welcomed. She walked home alone everyday anyway, and she hated passing by the gossips as they were usually talking about her. They would go silent and pretend to be doing something else as she would walk by. Every now and then looking out of the corner of their eyes waiting for her to pass, and once clear they would gleefully continue their lies.

She stepped out into an empty quad. Even stranger, she thought, but only in passing. She noted too that the flag had been taken down and away as well. She smiled, as the usual bantering she received in the quad from her fellow students, who seemed to be in a rush to leave class so they could wait for her in the quad and dance around her, calling her names until they got tired and ran off to do other things. She detested the other kids. They teased her about her curly hair, about the clothes she wore, about her studies and about her being the teacher's pet. If they only knew how Mrs. Hasegawa treated her when they were not around, they would think different about her being anyone's pet.

Leaving the quad she turned up Itoakai Street and headed home. She mustn't dawdle as mother would be upset if she was late. She had walked past the sixth grade wing of her school and the vacant lot adjacent, before she started to feel uncomfortable. It was in front of Mr. Takagi's soda shop that she stopped. The shop was empty, as was the street. Just like school, there was nobody around. She looked behind her, then got up on her toes and tried to look further down the sidewalk, but still she saw nothing.

She found her steps had increased. The book bag moved from side to side as her small legs carried her. For the first time, fear crept in on her. She was scared, and worried that something had happened that made all the people leave, except her and Mrs.

Hasegawa. She was running now, as her house was close. She turned off of Itoakai onto Mochi-pan Road. Her house was two-doors up from the corner. She opened the gate, not bothering to shut it behind her. She would gladly take her mother's disappointment, just to know that someone was with her.

"Momma-san!" She called, bursting through the front door in a very unlike Tinder manner. She ran into the kitchen, where her mother was every other day she came home, but not today.

"Momma-san!" She continued. She made her way up the stairs. Her feet clapping hard against the woooded steps, she stopped at the landing at the top of the steps, realizing that nothing about the house was right. The pictures along the steps were not of her and her family. The small table in the hall was missing. Their pebble tan carpet was a cherry red. She didn't move, instead she slowly backed down the stairs. She returned to the kitchen, and wondered why she hadn't noticed before. It was empty, no appliances, table or clutter from her house.

"Momma-san?"

Tinder left the house, not as she had entered, but very quietly. Her head down, she hadn't bothered to explore the rest of the house. It wasn't hers and that was a fact she could not argue.

The porch opened back up to an empty place. It was quiet, unnaturally so. The gray sky hung low, giving the impression you could reach out and touch it. She didn't know what to do, she thought about crying, but that wouldn't be like her, tears were something she very rarely entertained. But things were different now, she had no home or so it appeared. She was very much alone.

She stepped down from the porch. She scuffed at the sidewalk, just to make sure it was real. She did the same to the grass next to the sidewalk, and discovered it too _seemed_ real. Now she began to wonder, if everything seemed to be okay, then where was

everybody at? She thought for a moment, and then remembered Mrs. Hasegawa.

Tinder walked quickly from her yard to the corner, where she made the turn back down Itoakai and headed back to her school.



The empty schoolyard was eerie. The heavy gray clouds overhead seemed to hang within. It was darker than it should have been, the sun cloaked behind a blanket of gray, fearing the dread that seemed to fill the schoolyard. Tinder walked on, not making eye contact with anything around her except the ground before her.

Steps interrupted the straight gray line, a rising gray that lead to an open door. Tinder looked up from the entrance. The long hallway that was usually filled with rowdy kids spread long and empty. She entered cautiously, placing a foot into the hall, and looking about before placing the next. She wasn't suppose to be here, and knew that she would know the wrath of Mrs. Hasegawa. Could she really get mad at her though? She wondered.

"Hello?" she called out meekly. Even so, her voice carried down the long hall. She waited a moment at the school entrance but there was no reply. She ventured deeper into the hall. It seemed that the outside had crept indoors with her. The low gray sky lowered still and pushed passed her and into the hall. The lockers faded quickly behind the veil, shrinking the hall to a mere tunnel, straight and narrow. That's when she felt it, the chill that raced the length of her spine.

"Hello?" She said a little louder. It seemed though, that her words were lost in the hall, absorbed by the growing murkiness. She looked back over her shoulder, the door to the quad race away from her. The hall stretched to unreasonable lengths. "Help me," she whispered.

"Hush!"

Tinder turned quickly. She saw Mrs. Hasegawa at the end of the hall. She could make out her dress; it was the one she wore to class today. The same one she wore to class everyday. "Mrs. Hasegawa?"

"I said hush young lady!" Tinder backed up a couple of steps as Mrs. Hasegawa stormed down the hall in a huff.

It was her, Tinder could better tell now. The hem of her gray dress swung heavily above black loafers. The stick pin of a pink daisy was visible now, as were her fiery eyes. She was upset as Tinder had feared. There was something about her that was unusual, but at that moment she could not put a finger on it.

Mrs. Hasegawa was in her face in her normal record time. Having stomped her way down the hall in an echoing thunder. Her red face shone her displeasure and her voice confirmed it. "What are you doing here young lady?"

Tinder looked at her, and then it dawned on her. Mrs. Hasegawa looked younger, ten or ever twenty years perhaps. Her once graying hair shone a pleasant blonde luster. Her crow-feet eyes were smooth and her once puckered lips were full and supple. She was attractive, except for her foul disposition.

"I am waiting young lady!" Tinder looked down at her loafer, which tapped impatiently.

"I-" Tinder began. "I came back because everyone is gone."

Tinder looked up at the staring, doubtful eyes of Mrs. Hasegawa. They were so harsh and unyielding. "Of course they are." Mrs. Hasegawa snapped.

"What do you mean?" Tinder took a step back.

"Here, let me show you!" Tinder fought back, be it ever so slight as Mrs. Hasegawa grabbed her by the arm. "Don't you cause me any trouble young lady." She snapped.

"Where are you taking me?" Tinder asked as she stumbled behind Mrs. Hasegawa.

"Don't you sass me."

"Let go of me." Tinder squirmed and tried to jerk herself away.

"We are going the Mr. Hideako's office!"

Tinder didn't say another word. She just watched the fog as it engulfed the hall around her. She looked back towards the door; it too was gone, only the grayness remained.

She whipped around the corner, in Mrs. Hasegawa's tow. They were in the office, and she sat outside Mr. Hideako's office in the seat shown to her by Mrs. Hasegawa. She watched her as she stormed into Mr. Hideako's office, slamming the wood door behind her.

Tinder could hear Mrs. Hasegawa complaining about the meddlesome little girl who had a smart mouth and short temper. She didn't hear Mr. Hideako though. She looked around the office at the copies of the school paper sitting on the counter. The silver bell that sat off to the side. The drapes were drawn behind Ms. Akio's desk; her CPU showed a screensaver of a cat chasing a mouse.

She found the gray, it stood outside the office door as if waiting for permission to enter. Tinder raised her feet from the floor, wrapping her arms around them she pulled them tight to her chest.

Fading in the background was Mrs. Hasegawa who continued to rant at Mr. Hideako, or so she gathered.



Mrs. Hasegawa emerged from Mr. Hideako's office. Her furrowed brow and cinched mouth lead Tinder to believe she was quite upset. She stood before Tinder, her loafer tapping impatiently. She would find

though, Mrs. Hasegawa was not upset in the least. Rather, she was very pleased.

"Mr. Hideako says that I may find the punishment most fitting you."

Tinder did not speak; she remained in a ball on the chair.

Mrs. Hasegawa took an exaggerated step back, pointed at the door and spat at Tinder, "March!"

She didn't disagree, nor hesitate, even though she was frightened.

Her legs dropped from her chair, she pushed herself up from the hard wooden chair and did as she was told.

"March young lady." Mrs. Hasegawa stood with her arm erect and pointing. She looked like a directional signpost, pointing the way to oblivion.

Tinder looked at the gray that weighed in the entry to the office, the door she was to venture through, and she did.

The hallway, which once was lined with long, skinny lockers, much too skinny to house all the books she had, let alone hold her book bag and coat when the weather called for it. They were gone, as were the bulletin boards that reminded of upcoming events and that day's lunch. Not gone as hidden by the drab gray sky that had helped itself into the school. Not because Tinder was so frightened that she walked out into the hall with her eyes closed, because they weren't. In fact her eyes were wide, wider than they have been since this whole strange episode had begun. No, those things just weren't there anymore. At second look, neither were the banners, or the fire extinguisher that was on the wall just outside the office entrance. Nothing from school remained as she recalled. Instead, the hall was a long corridor lined with a bright yellow crown molding, atop a mauve swirl.

Tinder stumbled behind a rougher-than-should-be-allowed-shove from Mrs. Hasegawa. She looked back, Mrs. Hasegawa only scoffed and pointed down the long hall.

They walked, Mrs. Hasegawa at her heels, down the long and sometimes winding hall. It seemed to climb then slope down in a gradual grade. Tinder walked as straight as she could, but found herself stumbling to one side or the other whenever the floor became uneven. Each time Mrs. Hasegawa would give her a stiff jab, and instructed her to right herself.

She had been silent long enough. "Mrs. Hasegawa, where do you think everyone went?"

"March!"

"I am, but where do you-"

"Don't you back talk me young lady."

Tinder rubbed the pain from the back of her head. She glanced back at Mrs. Hasegawa with a quick glare of disapproval. She looked forward, still rubbing the back of her head, when she saw the door at the end of the hall. As they continued, she noted the oddity of the door. The knob was set in the middle, surrounded by a glass pane. The bottom of the door was missing and the top half was solid glass except a small strip of crimson colored wood.

"Is this where they went?" Tinder asked, stopping in front of the door.

Mrs. Hasegawa said nothing, turned the knob and opened the door.

"In," she commanded.

The room was huge. Doors lined either side of the room. Tall mahogany doors, chocolate and brooding. "Is this where everyone went?" Tinder asked curiously.

"Perhaps," was all she received in reply.

Tinder walked in further, curious and no longer afraid. She didn't know why, she couldn't explain it, but she felt comfortable. Even with Mrs. Hasegawa burning a hole in her with her slit-beady black eyes.

The low invading sky had returned, eating away at the ceiling of the room and opening Tinder to the concealed sun. She looked up, watching the hazy gray as it spread like cotton above her.

"There."

Mrs. Hasegawa's voice was cold and short. Tinder looked back at her. Her youthful face shimmered beneath the invading light, and a sense of urgency rode her stern eyes.

"You must go now!" Mrs. Hasegawa was no longer upset, but rather she seemed frightened, as if something terrible was about to happen.

Tinder looked towards the door that she was directed to. She walked there, the door opened as if it anticipated her. The small room stood before her. Tinder looked back, Mrs. Hasegawa was gone. The room was brightly lit now, but empty as the entire world had gone. Tinder entered the small room and was lost in darkness. She stayed in the room for how long she could not say. Was this her punishment, the fitting discipline that Mr. Hideako released Mrs. Hasegawa to go tend to?

She heard a noise, a loud noise and felt herself lose her balance. She fell against the inner wall. She fell the other way now. Then heard a loud noise again as she stilled. She wondered aloud from inside her box, "What is happening? There was no one to reply to her question.

Light flooded the dark room that Tinder stood in. Her legs were weary and her eyes tired. Mrs. Hasegawa stood outside the

door, in the midst of the gray. She carried the same perturbed look on her face, the one she always had when she looked at her.

"You mustn't stray away anymore."

Tinder tilted her head to one side and registered a look much like a confused puppy.

"It is the third time, and you must be punished."

Tinder wondered if what she just endured was not her punishment, then what was.

"You have been bad."

Tinder walked slowly from the box and looked off past Mrs. Hasegawa at her mother. She wore the same grave look that Mrs. Hasegawa did.

Then, from the other doors emerged her classmates. Who slowly inched closer to her.

She thought to turn and hide in the small dark closet Mrs. Hasegawa had urged her to enter before. Urged her with a slight hint of compassion, as if she worried for her safety. At the moment she decided to flee it was too late. She was surrounded by her classmates, all of them stared hauntingly at her, the prism of colors all melded into one gaze of disdain.

No one spoke, but she did. "What have I done?" She asked.

Through the crowd her mother and Mrs. Hasegawa waded. Their stern eyes fixed on her. Tinder cowered at the raising of her mother's hand, "You have strayed again and put us all in danger." Her mother spat.

Tinder fell to her knees as Mrs. Hasegawa slapped her hard across her talc cheek. She looked up from the ground at her mother who only stared more harshly at her, then followed Mrs. Hasegawa's slap with a stern kick of her own.

The gray fell in on her, with a hundred hands pouring in like rain. The pain was something she hadn't felt before...

Tinder tried to run, but the other children wrestled with her, forcing her back into the circle.

The drab gray sky floated down again, consuming her into a whirlwind of nothingness. The children disappeared, their taunts drowned out by the emptiness. Tinder fell to her knees and wept.

"The baby, she cries." She heard her mother say.

"It will do her no good." Mrs. Hasegawa added.

Tinder wiped her tears, "I will be good I promise."

"You said that the last time you wandered off. And we gave you another chance, even after *she* brought you back." Her mother's voice was calculated and cruel.

Tinder sank to the ground. She lay at Mrs. Hasegawa's feet. She looked up meekly; the slit-beady eyes stared down at her coldly. She shuddered as Mrs. Hasegawa pulled a saw from behind her. Tinder moved away, before a dozen hands exploded from the gray and pawed at her, violently ripping at her clothing and flesh.

Tinder struggled against the onslaught of hungry hands that pinned her. From the ground she looked up at her mother who only shook her head in disappointment. "You always were more trouble than you were worth."

Gags filtered though the gray as Tinder sifted for air through her wanting mouth. Her mother stepped down hard on her throat as Mrs. Hasegawa knelt next to her. Tinder forced a feeble cry past her lips as Mrs. Hasegawa placed the saw on the apex of her neck.

The sound of the saw screaming through Tinder filled the large room. The sick sound of her snapping neck echoed in the empty rooms. Slowly, one by one the hands withdrew into the gray, and silence filled the large room as the last door was shut.



Light filled the room as the gray sky retreated.

"Mommy, Mommy!" A child's voice called out through the haze.

The child, a small girl, looked into the box with the embossed word

'Tinder' on its cover. She looked down at her doll without the head and wondered how such a thing could have happened.

"Mommy..."

THE END

L.J. Blount: Author of the critically acclaimed "Dark Vigil."
Learn more at <http://www.mythspinner.com>

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RAOUL

BY PATRICK SEITZ

Susan looked down at the table setting in front of her. On it had been laid forks and spoons and dishes of all ilk, indecipherable. She was T-minus two quarters and counting from graduating summa cum laude from a top-tier college, but might as well have been a crop pattern for all that it betrayed of its purpose. Running her pinky around the edge of her water glass, Susan wondered with which utensil Norman Rockwell would have gouged out his own eyes. It was by no accident that she had matriculated at the most distant university to which she had been accepted.

To her left, her 16-year-old brother Bobby was stacking his dishes to look like...something. “Disembodied breasts with laughable areolas” was the best guess Susan could make, but even that was a bit of a stretch. It was probably meant to be obscene, whatever it was. Glancing at his hands, she made a mental note not to accept any food that was passed counter-clockwise.

Susan’s mother sat across from her, face flush from the heat of the kitchen—and the martinis, and the pills—from which she had recently emerged. Her mother’s unwavering smile made her eyes look all the smaller. There was something feral and mongoloid about them. They frightened Susan in same way that photos of former First Lady Laura Bush freaked her out. They both looked like they could unhinge their jaws at a moment’s notice and pop out a hitherto prehensile set of canines.

Susan’s dad sat at the head of the table, in keeping with paternal tradition. A faint smile tugged at his lips, and Susan knew without

checking that its intensity would wax and wane with his varying ability to watch the football game being televised fifteen feet behind his wife's head in the den. She tilted her head and blinked in a reptilian manner. His smile widened. Susan thought he should have died years ago—not because he was particularly unhealthy or reckless, but because he seemed like the sort who ran out of things to do around 23. He read the obituaries a lot.

Susan risked a glance at her watch. Raoul was an hour late. Next to her, Bobby's hand began a nonchalant creep towards the edge of the table.

"Bobby!" his mother clicked. "Did you read those tracts the pastor left about self-abuse?"

"Yeah," he mumbled.

"Well, do you want to spend eternity with Satan? Maybe you'd like *him* to stroke your glans, eh?"

"That's sick," he muttered, sinking into his seat.

"It's up to you, young man," she chided. "You're either in hell with the masturbators and the Buddhists and the welfare mothers, or you're in heaven with the rest of us."

Susan made a mental note to take up Buddhism and apply for federal aid tout-suite.

"You're being too hard on the boy, Madge—" her father attempted.

"Dad said 'hard-on!'" Bobby crowed.

"Shut the fuck up, Harold," Madge replied. Susan remembered the afternoon in sixth grade when she had mustered together enough courage to ask about her mom's puzzling outbursts. "Mommy has Tourette's Syndrome," her mother had replied, patting Susan's head gently. "Why else would she swear so goddamn much?"

“Raoul is late,” Madge said, gesturing to the empty chair to Susan’s right. She stared at Susan expectantly.

“Uh...yeah. He sure is, Mom,” Susan stammered, not sure exactly what response her mother wanted.

“That’s disrespectful, dear. If he respected you, he’d be on time.”

Susan rolled her eyes. “Mom, he—”

“No, hear me out. Ann Landers wrote about it in one of her columns. Ann Landers said—”

“Ann Landers said! ‘Ann Landers said!’ Always with what Ann Landers said, Mom.” Susan groaned. “Did you know that Ann Landers *also* said that mutual masturbation was perfectly acceptable?”

“Really? Hmm...” Madge thought for a moment. “But I doubt Ann Landers would want you to manually bring a boy to climax who can’t manage to show up on time for Easter dinner.”

“*Thanksgiving* dinner, Madge—” Susan’s father corrected.

“Shut the fuck up, Harold,” Madge replied.

“Hey, Mom,” Bobby whined, “How come Susan gets to jack off her boyfriend and I have to wear the pants with the lock on ‘em, huh?” He stood partially to point at the combination lock on the front of his jeans for added effect.

“Shut the fuck up, Harold,” Madge repeated.

“I wasn’t even talking!” Harold protested. Her glare silenced any further contention.

“Calm down, Mom. I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” Susan sighed. “He was going to spend the a few days with his folks before he flew out. He probably just got caught in traffic.”

“Well, the food won’t wait, dear. I’ll reheat some for him whenever he finally arrives.”

“Fine,” Susan said.

With that, her mother disappeared into the kitchen. She returned with a bowl of mashed potatoes, and, placing it on a hot pad in front of her son, rushed away again. She would return every few seconds, her arms laden with bowls of rice pilaf, steamed vegetables, Jell-o salad, buttermilk biscuits, yams, cranberry sauce. A minute later, the table was set, with the exception of the main course. On her last trip into the kitchen, she reappeared with nothing but five wooden mallets.

“We’re having crab?” Susan asked, perplexed. “That’s a bit...unorthodox, isn’t it?”

“Not crab,” Madge beamed. “Something better. Something new!” She gave Susan a conspiratorial wink and pranced back into the kitchen. A minute later, she had returned, bearing something odd on a silver serving platter. The thing reposing in the bed of endive looked like a large crab, only with more legs. Steam rose from the joints in its chitinous blue exoskeleton. Eyestalks goggled from side to side, jellied from the heat.

“Oh my God!” Susan shrieked, digging her clenched fingers into her cheeks. “Raoul!”

“I’ll get it,” her father said, calmly standing and heading to the front door.

“No!” Susan gasped. “Raoul...he’s on that *plate!*”

“Nonsense, honey,” Madge said. “That’s dinner.”

“Dinner! *Dinner?*” Susan started breathing heavily, on the verge of hyperventilation. “Are you telling me you just went down to the store and bought him off the shelf?”

“Of course not. I found it on the front porch. I figured you had brought it back from school as an exotic surprise.”

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“You were flipping through some new cookbook last night, and there was a picture of this,” her mother said, pointing at the platter, “on the cover.”

“That’s a textbook!” Susan wailed. “I was studying for my anatomy and physiology class! That’s where I *met* him!”

“Wait a minute,” Bobby blurted. “Mom boiled your boyfriend to death for dinner?” He was grinning expectantly, as if this was shaping up to be the crowning moment of his young, degenerate life. “That’s awesome.”

“And it would explain that tiny bouquet of flowers it was carrying,” Madge said, nodding slowly.

“Maybe we should put Raoul back in the pot while we get this settled,” Harold ventured. “He’s getting cold.”

“Shut the fuck up, Harold!” she responded absentmindedly. She retreated into the kitchen for a few moments, and returned with the textbook. She held it open to a full-color montage of photos. “I’m sorry, Susan. I thought these were cooking instructions.”

“They’re autopsy photos!” Susan let her head fall onto her plate, her forehead smacking it with a resigned thud. Bobby reached over to the platter and wrenched off what he thought was the creature’s biggest leg. In all actuality, it was an appendage not of locomotion but of propagation. A stream of what looked like dark purple tapioca balls flowed out of the new gap in Raoul’s body cavity.

“What are those, honey?” Madge asked. “They look like fish eggs.”

“They *are* eggs,” Susan said, bending over to peer at them. “The males deposit them all over the place, and the females fertilize them after the fact.” She pounded the table with a fist. “That lying asshole!”

Harold looked away from the TV long enough to discover it was his daughter and not his wife who was doing the swearing, figured he probably wasn't the target of this particular tirade, and returned his attention to the game.

"What's wrong?" Madge asked.

"The eggs are only purple in sexually active males. Otherwise, they're a light pink color." Her chin wobbled dangerously. "He told me he was saving it for marriage!" Susan lost what was left of her control and ran into the kitchen, bawling.

"So," Bobby said to no one in particular, hardly able to believe his good fortune, "you're telling me that Mom boiled Susan's boyfriend to death, *and* he was cheating on her?" He nodded with satisfaction. "Yeah."

In the kitchen, Susan's sobs had been replaced with the sounds of yanked drawers and raided cabinets. Something shattered against the kitchen floor.

"Maybe somebody should go in and check on her," Harold suggested.

"Shut the fu—no, wait," Susan's mother caught herself. "That's a good idea. Go in and comfort her."

Harold glimpsed at the screen. A minute left in the quarter.

"She'll be okay," he amended.

As Madge was about to try and enlist Bobby's help, Susan strode into the dining room. She was wearing a plastic bib around her neck, and she carried an ice-pick, a pair of lobster pliers, and an aluminum shellfish cracker. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but dry.

"Dig in," she said.

THE END

Patrick Seitz is currently finishing up an MFA in Creative Writing & Writing for the Performing Arts at UC Riverside, with an emphasis in screenwriting. He counts Richard Matheson, Frank Herbert and Neil Gaiman among his influences. Seitz also does voiceover work on the English dubs of anime releases. Please visit him at www.patrickseitz.com.

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WILD WOMEN OF TAKAZIA

BY SANDY DELUCA

They lined up in single file,
Bengal Tigers, lions and
spotted leopards;
the clock ticked and its skull face
winked at the blood-soaked lion queen
as she smacked her tongue
and pawed at pearly bones;
the smoky death pot sent ashes spiraling,
burning devil green eyes and
stinging twitching noses;
the gates opened promptly at sunset;
they leaped one by one onto the beach sand,
stretching and preening for the restless waves,
forming a circle,
graceful and dangerous,
changing with the rising moon,
fur giving way to flesh
and claws to graceful fingers;

On to the city, walking in twos,
arms linked,
growling with throaty laughter;
into an alley and up the stairs,
where they waited for the cue

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to dance before the mortal world
in satin bras and silky nylons;
allurement meant to kill

And with the sunrise
they crawled back through the gates,
satiated--
picking artists' hands
and poets' hearts from their teeth

Sandy Deluca's fiction and poetry has appeared in such places as SPACE AND TIME, THE THORNS OF NATURE ANTHOLOGY, THE DIVAS OF DARKNESS ANTHOLOGY, THE EDGE, ROGUE WORLDS, THE OCTOBER RUSH ANTHOLOGY and THE URBANITE (Where I will be the featured poet in The All Horror Issue). Her poetry chapbook BURIAL PLOT IN SAGITTARIUS was nominated for a BRAM STOKER award in 2000. She recently completed a short novel called SETTLING IN NAZARETH, a crime noir book with blends of the supernatural. She is presently at work on two other novels.

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THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT DEATH

BY NANCY BENNETT

I

Among the dim lit houses in the shadow of the mountain
the only thing moving
was the hand of death

II

I was of three minds
Like a man given three choices
on how to die.

III

Death danced in the autumn breeze
Husked leaved adorned each dying pirouette.

IV

A man and a woman
are one
A man and a woman and death
are united.

V

I do not know which to prefer
the moan of a banshee
the last death rattle
the grave digger whistling
or the silence just after.

VI

Ice filtered through the cracks
of stained glass windows
the shadow of death
crosses in the clouds
sombre is the mood as
we watch the shadow
foreshadow the funeral.

VII

Oh thin men of the cloth
why do you imagine God?
Do you not see death
whispers in the ear
of the women of your congregation?

VIII

I know death songs plenty
and lurid sacred psalms
But I also know
death is a scribe
to all we lament.

IX

When death has disappeared from sight
It leaves its mark
In the burnt grass and blackened houses.

X

for the sight of death
on his horse approaching
even those who scorn him
would sigh at his elegance.

XI

He once came to Connecticut
in a shiny black car
a fear came over him
when he rode the gas and in a flash
he thought he saw death
but it was only his own reflection
in the glass.

XII

the sands of time are shifting
and death is forever drifting.

XIII

All afternoon it seemed like night
cold winds blew
and they would blow again
and death sat outside in the cold
biding his time as the winter set in.

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ZOMBIE LOVE

BY JAMES R. CAIN

It's a charnel lie between us,
but you won't see it,
staring past me blindly,
with your disconcerting, wormy stare.
You like to hear,
the rattle of bone,
the *snicker-snack*
as the latch pops on your jack-in-a-box jaw.
Don't give me sugar platitudes -
they're naught but corpulent air
gusting from your head.

I thought I buried you,
twelve-months past,
beneath the grass and ground.
But the dead don't rest easy it seems,
'cause you staggered home
to vomit the dust of dreams
upon my bed.

Your heart is wizened
in that filthy cobweb cage.
Your touch - a razor nick.
How'd I come here?
I scream – don't know.

And so,
I stand in the kitchen,
slicing skin
muscle,
chopping bone,
serving up the last pieces of me
'Cause once I'm eaten,
I'm gone.
Ingested,
I'll finally be alone.

James R.Cain lives in Australia, has been writing since 2001 and has appeared in over 50 publications including most recently *Wicked Hollow #7*, *Lullaby Hearse #3*, *Bare Bones #4*, and the *Ghostbreakers: New Horrors*, *October Rush* and the *Grave Possessions* anthologies. His chapbook *Tear Drops* has just been put out by Whispers of Wickedness (UK) and his novel *Sisters in Evil* with Tim Curran, is due for publication in the USA (April 2005). He's editor of *Dark Animus* www.darkanimus.com, and is looking for a home for his fantasy novel.

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COLD CASE

BY DAVID BAIN

After you die,
you spend
20 years raging
at the local
police to solve
your murder.

You rampage
through the
sheriff's dreams,
scream at area
psychics, throw
diverse documents
from the town
marshal's desk
in the dark of
night. He cleans
them up in the
a.m., joking about
poltergeists, not
realizing he holds
in his hands a
complex code
containing cogent
clues which, with

some creative
thought, could
lead directly
to you. It's all
you can do.

You grow
despondent,
possess wolves
which howl
mournfully
at the moon.

In desperation,
you possess a
deer, have it
propel itself
into a patrol car
near the scene,
but no one sees
your point.

In the end,
sheer dumb
luck's your
salvation -- you're
haunting
a snoozing
hunter's dreamscape
when his dog
finds your femur.

Hours later,
you dance on
your grave
as a deputy
discovers
your skull.

And
then comes the
first really
dreadful question:
You've been awake,
wrapped in wrath,
all your afterlife,
consumed with
your cause:

What now? Your
bones are buried,
your killer is
quickly convicted,
your tale is told.
Winter's coming
fast. What now?
You see a breeze
ease through the
forest, but don't
feel it.

What now?

David Bain's stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several anthologies and magazines, including *Weird Tales*, *Dead But Dreaming*, *Dust Devil*, *Side Show: Tales of the Big Top and the Bizarre*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Bare Bone*, *Flashshots 1*, *Terminal Frights Vol. I* and *The Thorns of Nature*. He has also read "Grey Lake" for *Vacancy*, an online audiozine. An editor/partner with *Cyber-Pulp*, he has work in several of their anthologies and will be the featured poet in their new *Art of Horror* e-zine. He is also the editor of *Whispering Worlds*, a large free poetry e-book. It is available free via Bain's web site at www.geocities.com/davidbainaa.

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THE LAUGHTER OF SMALL BONES

BY ANN. K SCHWADER

Consider the laughter
of small bones just under
this fiction of grass

where living feet pass
uncaring, unknowing
of elder lives growing

in veins through a night
of maggot stars, white
& fine as the fingers

of newborn death. Linger
& listen: these voices
rise mocking as choices

unmade or avoided
for lifetimes, devoid of
the flesh to remember

that bright furtive splendor
of breathing, of being
a sunlit thing. Seeing

grass only, you wonder
too late at the sundered
earth yielding at last

to its captives, its past
clawing back towards a sun
too long denied.

Run.

Ann K. Schwader is a Wyoming native currently living in Colorado. Her poetry, fiction, and occasional reviews have appeared in the small and pro genre press since the 1980s. She is an active member of both the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) and the Horror Writers Association (HWA), as well as the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA). Her fiction and verse have received numerous Honorable Mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*.

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BOOK REVIEWS

BY JASON BRANNON

SHADOW OF THE DARK ANGEL

by Gene O'Neill

Prime Books

ISBN: 1-894815-25-4

After thoroughly enjoying Gene O'Neill's first novel, *The Burden of Indigo*, I had high hopes for his second, *Shadow of the Dark Angel*. Unlike *Indigo* which had a very strong sci-fi undercurrent, *Shadow* is more of a suspense thriller with supernatural undertones. That's not necessarily a bad thing. If nothing else, it shows just how versatile O'Neill really is, jumping from one genre to another.

The narrative is basically the story of Sam Kubiak, a hairless laundry worker, who is plagued by the voices of two very distinct entities-The Light Angel and The Dark Angel. These two characters remind me very much of the *Angel on One Shoulder, Devil on the Other* scenario depicted in cartoons and dark comedies. The Light Angel, of course, tries to steer Sam along the path of good while The Dark Angel convinces him to murder those women who tease and mistreat Sam because of his stuttering and hairless condition called alopecia. The comparison to anything cartoon, however, is gone once Sam begins to murder the women he comes in contact with, taking swatches of both head and pubic hair, which he then wears atop his own head.



Hot on Sam's trail is Katy Green, a member of the Sacramento Police Department who has been on a three month leave of absence to follow her dream of writing a novel, and Johnny Cato, her partner. Dubbed "The Green Hornet and Cato," by the media, the duo follows every clue and lead only to discover that their killer is going virtually unnoticed at every crime scene. As seen through Sam's perspective, the reason he remains unseen by any witnesses is due to the fact that he actually moves in the Dark Angel's shadow, which protects him from his enemies. Katy and Johnny still manage to find a few scant pieces of information which inevitably lead them to the laundry where Sam works. Once they narrow their suspects down and realize who the killer is, Katy finds out that she and Sam are actually connected by their past and that she's the next victim on his list.

One of the things I enjoy most about O'Neill's writing is that his villains (and I use that term loosely in this case) are never archetypal or painted in bold outlines. Despite their flaws, he always manages to make them sympathetic. O'Neill accomplished this in *The Burden of Indigo* and he accomplishes it here through the use of second person, putting the reader in Sam's mind, showing them his difficult life, going from foster home to foster home, working in a hospital laundry, enduring the constant taunts from women who are put off by his stuttering and hairlessness. O'Neill further strengthens the reader's sympathy for Sam by painting the women he murders as deplorable, cruel, and almost deserving.

Another thing that I really found intriguing about this book was the way O'Neill takes two people from similar foster home backgrounds and shows how completely different their lives turn out. Katy is a police officer fighting for good while Sam is a misunderstood murderer who is running from the law. Although I wouldn't say that this is a direct commentary on the effect

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environment has on how a person turns out, it certainly builds an argument to suggest that killers are often products of society, not creations of nature. The fact that this book makes you think without being heavy-handed is another point in its favor. That seems to be another characteristic of O'Neill's fiction (see *Burden of Indigo* for another example of this).

All in all, this is a good, solid book with great characters and a great premise. If you've never read any of Gene O'Neill's work before, you've definitely been missing out. *Shadow of the Dark Angel* is as good a place as any to start.

Recommended.

Jason Brannon is the author of over 120 published short stories, four short story collections, two novels, and three chapbooks. His writing has appeared in such diverse publications as *Dark Realms*, *The Edge*, *Wicked Hollow*, *Black Petals*, *Rogue Worlds*, and *Dark Karma*.

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