

## What Say You?

Editorial by Jason B. Sizemore

After publishing nine issues of *Apex Digest*, I still struggle with the question "What type of fiction do you publish?"

I think I finally have an answer.

Our fiction can be broken out into three categories. First is the application of technology to create horrific or terrifying visions. Indeed, I would count seven of our stories this month fitting that description. Then there's the unknown creating havoc. A simplified example would be an alien invasion. The third is the expansion of the human element, be it powers of the mind or of the body. You could argue this is more magical and should be defined as fantasy, but we're not going to pass on a fantastic story due to semantics.

Now, sit back, and allow us to use the future to frighten you...

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## THE SUM OF HIS PARTS

By Kevin J. Anderson

*Lightning turns the castle tower into a silver silhouette. Energy collects in metal rods, floods into a crackling apparatus. Sparks fly from wires connected to a bandaged figure composed of cadaverous tissue assembled with thick sutures.*

*The doctor studies his creation, the mismatched parts, the thick sutures.*

*Spiderwebs of electricity flow like white-hot blood into the patchwork body, awakening the components like embers under an insistent puff of breath. The reattached hands twitch, the fingers flex. Transplanted lungs expel fetid air, unleashing a flood of memories.*

\* \* \* \*

He drew a deep breath of the open air. The snow-capped Alps framed the fragrant meadows where his sheep roamed. He preferred to be alone in the mountain vales, away from his brother Stefan and his flock; he didn't like the sound of talking. In fact, he didn't like sounds at all.

The wind spoke to him with breezes that whispered in his ears and taunted him like the hot breath of a wolf. The waving grasses hissed and rustled.

One afternoon during a thunderstorm, he huddled next to a rock, wrapping his hands around his ears, but the thunder made his head ring. The wind was all around, plucking at his clothes; gasping, wheezing, *shrieking*. He abandoned his flock, ran to his hut, and slammed the rickety door. The wind moaned through the cracks, slipping inside to get him. Plugging his ears with beeswax only amplified the sounds of his own breathing, the blood pounding inside his head. There was no escape...

When it was time for the two brothers to join their flocks and take them to market in Ingolstadt, he and Stefan climbed a pass that separated their grazing fields from the valley. His brother was lonely, loquacious, and pestered him with constant conversation, to which he received no reply. As the two hiked up the steep slope, Stefan began panting, louder and *louder*, breathing so heavily that he could not even keep up his inane patter.

The shepherd squeezed his eyes shut, but couldn't block out the sound of the awful, heaving breaths. Each loud inhalation and exhalation was like the thunder, until he could stand it no more.

He spun and wrapped his hands around Stefan's throat. His brother struggled frantically while he squeezed, but the shepherd focused only on stopping the noise, smothering it. When he let his brother's limp body tumble down the steep path, the world was peaceful for a time. A few moments of blessed silence. Then the wind picked up again.

He fled toward the valley. When the shepherd reached Ingolstadt and left his sheep in the market pen, he passed an old woman sitting in front of her candle shop. She coughed incessantly, hacking, wheezing; she spat a mouthful of phlegm into the gutter and started coughing again. The sound was like hammers pounding on his nerves. The old woman breathed and coughed and wheezed and coughed and *breathed*—until he knew he had to silence her as well.

She stood on creaking legs and tottered into the dimness of her shop, still coughing and coughing. Without hesitation, the shepherd stalked after her. She turned, no doubt thinking him a customer. Before

she could speak, before she could cough again, he wrapped his callused hands around her thin throat. His muscles were strong, and he clamped down harder and harder until her struggles stopped, and the silence came back.

When he reeled outside again, the streets of Ingolstadt were a storm of people, a constant din, far too much *noise*. He had to escape back to the high mountain meadows, but before he could run from the square, a town crier began to bellow at the top of his lungs, announcing a tax that old Baron Frankenstein had imposed. The crier's words broke through the air like cannon shot.

The shepherd wanted to scream for silence. He needed the crier's mouth to stop opening and closing, to stop spewing words. Unable to control himself, the shepherd threw himself upon the man, shutting off the breath and the voice. It took four grown men from the astonished crowd to pull him away. The crier squawked and gasped, but his throat was so damaged he could no longer speak.

After the strangler was dragged before the magistrate, he was convicted of killing the old candle-shop woman and his brother Stefan, whose raven-pecked body had been found by another shepherd. In addition, several children around Ingolstadt had disappeared over the years, and (since he was in custody) he was accused of killing them as well, though he denied that. He did not, however, deny the rest.

While the shepherd sat in his cell, the mocking wind stole through chinks in the wall and laughed at him. One blustery night, he watched the Baron's son, Victor Frankenstein, come to talk to the jowly jailer. From where he huddled sullenly in his cell, he could overhear the conversation. Victor had an edginess and a calculating intelligence. "I am here on behalf of several medical students from the University. We are woefully short of cadavers for dissection."

When the jailer's breathing quickened, it set the strangler's teeth on edge. Victor looked at the pot-bellied and splotchy-skinned jailer; distaste was clear on his face, as if he dismissed him as a potential specimen. "If we are to become physicians, we must have material with which to practice." He indicated the miserable prisoner. "This madman is penniless and without family. He will be hanged tomorrow. I would like to purchase his body afterward. At present, I have a particular need for a pair of hands and a set of lungs."

The jailer pretended to be offended. "That's highly illegal, sir!"

"But quite commonly done—as you well know." Victor pulled out a pouch of gold coins. "Perhaps this will salve your conscience?"

The jailer looked at the coins, looked at the Baron's son, then sneered at the strangler in his cell. "Done." Victor's breathing was calm with satisfaction. Outside, the wind scraped past the walls. It never stopped...

The following day, when the shepherd was brought to the gibbet in the town square, he heard the mob shouting, *breathing*.

As the rough noose tightened around his neck, the strangler realized that the loudest sound that had haunted him all his life came from air passing through his own throat from his own lungs. Every waking moment he had been forced to listen to each breath whistling in and out of his mouth and nose. Finally, that noise would cease too!

When the hangman hauled on the rope, lifting him into the air to dangle under the gibbet's crossbar, the noose squeezed off the sounds he made. All of them. The straining pulse grew to a roar in his head—and then he fell into blessed, total silence...

Until now.

\* \* \* \*

*Storm electricity floods the muscle tissue. The bandaged legs twitch, as if remembering how to run.*

*"Just nerve impulses," Victor says, checking his apparatus. The legs spasm again, trying to break free and bolt from this hellish place...*

\* \* \* \*

He loved to run. As a servant in Castle Frankenstein, he preferred being sent to town to perform errands for the old Baron. He was fleet as a deer, and his muscles sang with the satisfying ache of tired legs after a long and glorious run.

His main duties were to tend Baron Frankenstein's menagerie of exotic animals on the castle grounds: peacocks, a wildebeest, an aardvark, a spotted ocelot, even a lemur. The Baron's noble friends marveled at the private zoo, while his son Victor studied the creatures with a scientist's eye. The Baron also indulged the boys and girls from Ingolstadt who crept onto the estate to look at the animals.

The runner was a happy-go-lucky man with many flirtations, and the young women did not mind his attentions, especially the innkeeper's plump daughter. The old Baron paid his servants well enough, but coins did not stay long in the servant's purse. He cheerfully bought food, wine, and friendship for his companions, though the generosity usually went only one way.

The innkeeper's daughter chided him for his spendthrift ways, especially in the evils of gambling, but he simply laughed her off, then pinched her substantial bottom. He frequented the dicing tables, invoking the name of his master to gain special privileges or to increase his line of credit.

Unfortunately, his luck was never good, even in the best of times. Finding himself out of money and in debt, he assumed that his fellow gamers (who had been happy to accept his coin when he bought food or bottles of wine) would be sympathetic to his plight. But his supposed friends vanished like smoke, and the gambling-house proprietors demanded repayment.

Twice in the past four months, the old Baron had lectured him to be careful. "Because you work for the House of Frankenstein, you have a responsibility not to cause shame and scandal." So the servant knew he could never ask his master for a loan. Baron Frankenstein was a hard man, not unjust, but not softhearted either.

Owing so much money, the runner didn't know what he could do. Collectors had cornered him in an alley, describing in great detail what they would do; first they would tie a gag around his mouth to stifle his screams, then they would beat his boots with iron clubs until his ankles shattered. Afterward, they would slowly pull off his boots, drawing out the pain. Once his broken feet were bare, they would take a set of curved tongs stolen from the local blacksmith, and twist his toes one by one, bending them backward and up until the bones snapped. He would never run again.

He could not allow that to happen. He couldn't! Therefore, when the old Baron went off to be alone in his isolated hunting lodge deep in the forest preserve, as was his habit, the runner slipped into Castle Frankenstein. He bundled up four silver candlesticks and hurried out the servants' entrance, beyond the squawking and grunting creatures in the menagerie, and ran down the path to Ingolstadt as fast as his legs could take him.

The candlesticks were more than enough to pay his debt, but his tormentors showed no sympathy. They accepted the stolen silver and looked at him as if they knew he would gamble again, that this was only the

first theft he would be forced to commit. But they had their money, and the servant was free of his tormenters. Relieved but not at all interested in the pleasure of running, he stayed the night with the innkeeper's daughter, who did not know of his troubles. In the morning, shaky with both relief and guilt, the runner went back up to the castle, glad to have a fresh start.

When he arrived, the household staff were distraught, and young Victor Frankenstein glared at him with angry eyes. His voice was cold. "We know what you've done. Those candlesticks were my mother's heirlooms, fashioned out of the purest silver from the mines of Transylvania."

"I ... I did nothing. I didn't take them."

"You were seen!" cried the head housekeeper, her face streaked with tears. "I saw you, and so did two others!"

Victor said, "You are hereby discharged from service."

The runner stood aghast. "I will make up for it, sir. I'll pay you back. Please don't tell the Baron!"

"I am in charge while my father is away. You cannot repay this debt. You have stolen from us. You have betrayed people who trusted you. Leave Castle Frankenstein before I call the magistrate."

The runner went dejectedly to town. Hearing of his disgrace, all those who had laughed and played games with him, all those who had delighted in his generosity, now did not wish to be seen in his company. Very hungry, he begged the innkeeper's daughter for food, and she scolded him for gambling despite her warnings. She slammed the door in his face.

As he left the inn, the runner turned into a narrow, dim street where he hoped to curl up and sleep undisturbed. At first, he didn't see the shadowy man following him, but once in the alley, the stranger came close. He had sharp eyes and a broad face with a thin dueling scar on his left cheek. The man said, "I have a gift for you from Victor Frankenstein."

The runner felt a sudden irrational hope. Perhaps he was forgiven after all! Then he saw a long stiletto with an ivory hilt. With a swift jerk of his arm, the other man slashed his throat. "There, not a scratch on the rest of the body, especially the legs. Exactly as ordered."

The runner gurgled, feeling hot blood pumping onto his skin, his shirt, and the cobblestones. The assassin leaned over him with a feral smile. "Now Victor says your debt is paid."

The heels of the young runner's boots beat an erratic drumbeat on the ground. His legs stuttered, then stopped running forever.

\* \* \* \*

*The thump is faint at first, then louder. Stronger. No other sound is such a powerful symbol of life. Victor lifts his head from the bandaged chest, raising his triumphant voice to the storm. "One of the hearts is beating!"*

*Thump. The blood begins to circulate through quiet blood vessels. Thump.*

\* \* \* \*

With a loud thud, the silver smile of his sharpened axe bit deep into the trunk. Pine chips sprayed as the woodcutter swung again, using his mighty biceps. The impact rang through his hands and wrists, up to the shoulders, absorbed by a sturdy chest. His heart was pumping heavily.

His old clothes carried the healthy smell of sweat earned through hard work. The axe handle was stout

oak polished by the sweat of his palms, smoothed by years of use. His muscles ached after a day of such labor, and it was a good soreness.

Five more swift strokes, and the gouge had gone to the core. The woodcutter checked the angle, judged where the tree would fall, and struck again. Splinters flew; with a groan of wood and a whisper of scraping boughs, the pine toppled. He stood back with satisfaction, then guided the old horse and cart around fresh stumps to the site of the felled tree. With a saw and a hatchet from the cart bed, he trimmed the branches and cut the trunk into smaller pieces. He could sell the load in Ingolstadt. He would never become a rich man, but he had a cottage in the forest, food to eat, and a beautiful wife, Katarina. She was the most important part of his life.

He'd been gone from home for weeks, chopping wood in the dense and untraveled forests near Baron Frankenstein's isolated preserve. The loneliness of the forest only made the time sweeter whenever he went back to Katarina. When he was home, he liked to carve little animals out of scraps of wood. Since he and his wife had not yet been blessed with children of their own, he gave the toys to girls and boys in town. The woodcutter loved children.

As night fell, he saw the glow of a nearby fire. Wanting company, he entered a clearing where another man had stopped his wagon and built a camp. "Y-y-you are w-w-welcome to share my f-f-fire," the stranger said, his words slurred both by a severe stutter and a foreign accent. "I h-h-have vegetables, but no m-m-meat."

The woodcutter offered some smoked venison that was chewy but edible. "I can add this to the pot."

The other man was a tinker named Goran, from Budapest. His wagon was full of oddities, pots, tools, trinkets, and five cages of birds (three doves, two songbirds). A gray wolf circled the campsite, making the woodcutter uneasy. Goran introduced it as his pet, named Odin after a Norse god.

As they ate their stew, the woodcutter talked wistfully of Katarina. "I met her in Ingolstadt, a dark-haired beauty. Her eyes are the color of roasted chestnuts, her lips as full as fresh berries, and they taste as sweet when I kiss them. I don't understand how such a beautiful woman could have married a man like me. But one does not spit in the face of good fortune."

"N-n-no, my friend," said Goran.

The lonesome woodcutter inspected the tinker's wares, hoping to find a special treasure for Katarina. His eyes settled on a fabulous gold medallion etched with a wide-armed cross and trimmed with ruby and sapphire chips. Making up his mind, he went to his cart, where he had two stout axes, both of the finest manufacture. They had served him well. He gripped the wooden handle of his best one, lifted it from the cart, and stepped toward the tinker. "I can trade you this for the medallion. To give to Katarina. It's not gold, but made of sweat and wood and iron."

The tinker smiled but shook his head. "N-n-not for s-s-sale. A special k-k-keepsake." Goran explained with halting sentences that a kind priest had recently given him the jeweled cross as a reward for driving off a robber in the woods. The tinker could never part with his treasure.

Downcast, the woodcutter returned his axe to the cart. He knew that the forest was not safe from highwaymen and assassins.

While the wolf prowled around the campsite, the woodcutter slept, dreaming of Katarina. He wished he could find some way to show her how much he loved her. The quiet cottage life did not suit a fancy woman like her. While he was away, Katarina spent most of her time in Ingolstadt with her best friend Greta. He didn't begrudge her that. He wanted his wife to be happy...

After he and Goran parted company, he spent two more weeks cutting and piling wood that he would sell throughout the winter. When he returned home at last, calling Katarina's name, the empty cottage only answered with silence. It took him only a moment to guess that she had gone to stay with Greta in town.

Grinning, he decided to surprise her. His horse pulled the loaded cart down the rutted trail into Ingolstadt, where he sold his load of wood in the square. He ignored the jeers and catcalls from the gibbet, where a mad strangler was being hung. Earlier, there had been a beheading, but the woodcutter didn't care about such spectacles. He used the money to buy all the supplies they needed and found he had enough left over to purchase some sweet pastries he could share with Katarina.

He tied the old horse and the now-empty cart in front of the half-timbered town home where Greta and her husband lived. With a spring in his step, he went to the door, surprised that the windows were shuttered even in the warm afternoon.

As he approached the loose shutters, he heard laughter, muttered conversation, and the sounds of exertion, groans, a gasp. His brow furrowed as he identified Katarina's sweet-husky voice and Greta's musical timbre—and the thin nasal voice of Greta's husband. He heard rhythmic sounds, heavy breathing, a wooden bed frame creaking under strain.

The woodcutter's blood ran cold as he peered through a crack. He saw a crowd of arms and legs on the bed, naked flesh, a patchwork of intertwined bodies. He recognized both Greta and Katarina cavorting with a lean man, Greta's husband. He had long dark hair, a wide face, feral eyes and a thin dueling scar that traced his left cheek. His lips were drawn back in a smile so deep it was almost a grimace. In the candlelight, all three were sweaty and panting, as if they'd been exerting themselves for some time. By the coordinated way they moved together, shifted positions and pleased each other, they seemed quite well practiced at their ménage a trois.

The woodcutter couldn't feel his arms or his hands, the muscles that had ached from swinging the axe and lifting heavy wood. He realized he wasn't breathing. Before he could tear his gaze away, he saw something else; next to the candle on the fine lacquered nightstand lay the beautiful cross medallion fringed with sparkling chips of sapphire and ruby. Two weeks ago, the tinker had refused to sell it to *him*, but somehow Greta's husband had gotten it.

The woodcutter's heart dissolved, leaving only a cold vacuum in his chest. Conscious, rational thoughts vanished with an inaudible pop. He walked leadenly back to his cart, where he selected his sharpest and stoutest axe. He lifted it in one well-muscled arm; for good measure, he took the second axe in his left hand. Holding both, he strode back to the door.

With a single blow, he smashed the latch and the crossbar. Sparks and splinters flew. He kicked the ruined door inward, then stepped inside, raising both axes.

The two women scrambled backward on the crowded bed. With just a flicker of his conscious mind, the woodcutter realized how beautiful Katarina was; her pale skin flushed, her dark and sweaty hair thrown back behind her shoulders. Her lips—yes, as red and full as fresh berries—were now open in a faltering scream.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

Greta's husband sprang off the straw mattress and into a crouch, not caring that he was naked. He grabbed a long ivory-handled stiletto from the nightstand, knocking the medallion aside in his haste.

Katarina and Greta continued to cry out as the woodcutter waded forward, one axe in each hand. As he swung them, their sharp silver smiles whistled through the air. Greta's husband danced with the knife, twirling the tip in the air as if performing some sort of embroidery. He seemed as familiar with his stiletto as he was in fornicating with Katarina. He didn't even seem afraid.

But the woodcutter had no need for knife play. Without finesse, he swung his axe, and a single blow severed the man's forearm, which fell to the wooden floor, fingers still clutching the knife. A second broad sweep decapitated him more cleanly than he deserved. The head fell to the floor, eerily undamaged, and rolled so that the wide-open eyes could watch the rest of the spectacle.

Then the woodcutter turned his axes upon the two women until they were no more than red kindling.

Drenched in blood, he stood with both axes leaning against him. His muscles ached as they did after a day of hard work, and it was a good soreness.

The screams had drawn a horrified crowd, many from the strangler's hanging. The woodcutter did not resist as the constable and the town guards came to arrest him. He did not explain his horrific actions, though the answer was obvious for anyone who could piece together the myriad of body parts.

He did not speak a word in his own defense. In fact, he never uttered another sentence throughout his trial, sentencing, and swift execution.

\* \* \* \*

*Bandages shroud the broad, firm face. Victor touches the creation's head like a lover's caress, placing both hands on the stranger's cheeks, one of which is marred by a thin scar from a knife fight.*

*"Can you hear me? Are you there?" he says in a voice full of hope.*

\* \* \* \*

His head hurt from sharing one-too-many bottles of wine the night before, and the thin scar on his cheek throbbed again, as it often did ... but if the wine and fine food kept Greta and her friend Katarina happy, he would gladly pay the price.

The thrill of the crowd in the town square buoyed him up. Two executions in a single day! He was particularly interested in the beheading of the foolish stuttering tinker. He stood close to the block, one woman on each arm, all three of them watching with intent amusement.

The mad strangler's hanging would take place later in the day, but by that time, he expected that the two lovely women would be entertaining him in bed, enjoying their good fortune. Life was fine.

More than a simple cutpurse or highwayman, he took any job that paid well enough. He was known in local taverns as a man who could accomplish difficult tasks that must remain quiet, eliminating debtors, traitors, spies ... even rich old uncles who needed to die so families could have their inheritance. Recently, Victor Frankenstein had hired him to slit the throat of a servant who had stolen some family silver to pay off a gambling debt. In his work, he had been cut in knife fights, slashed in the face, even endured the pain of a lead musket ball in his ribs. Thus, the ache of a hangover was nothing.

He had a fondness for good wine and brandy, dice and cards, stylish clothes, and especially women. Greta was as lusty as he was, and both of their appetites extended to her friend Katarina as well. For appearances, Greta's friend had married an unlettered and oafish woodcutter who was gone most of the time. Doting on Katarina, the oaf gave her trinkets that were small in comparison to what Greta's husband provided.



A month ago, as a masked highwayman, he had waylaid a plump and red-faced priest who carried a jeweled medallion among his treasures as he traveled through the forest. The medallion would have fetched an excellent price, but before the highwayman could complete his robbery, a meddling tinker and his pet wolf had come upon them and driven the robber away. Some days later, dressed as a fine dandy, he encountered the tinker again and learned that the red-faced priest had *given* the stuttering foreigner his medallion out of gratitude!

Incensed and wanting it for himself, the now-undisguised highwayman tried to buy the medallion for Katarina and Greta, who were both with him. They ogled the treasure on the tinker's cart, but the stuttering idiot wouldn't part with it. So, they had gone back to Ingolstadt with a concocted story. Weeping, Greta reported that the stranger had stolen her dear aunt's jeweled cross, and then raped her and her friend. The constable and town guard rushed out to arrest the tinker straightaway.

Once the medallion had been "returned" to them, and the tinker got the punishment he deserved, Greta and Katarina went back home with the handsome highwayman, where they all engaged in an afternoon of celebration. Everything was going so well.

No one had expected Katarina's husband to find them, or his axes to be so swift.

After his head fell to the floor, the highwayman's vision faded swiftly. He couldn't feel his body, which lay much too far away. Thoughts, and blood, drained out of him.

\* \* \* \*

*Once the second heart begins to beat, the creation is close, very close to real life. Another jolt, and the muscle clenches, pumps, stutters to life. Stutters...*

*The memories flow smoothly, without the logjam of words that had always caught in his throat.*

\* \* \* \*

As a tinker, he loved to make pieces fit together, to fix things that were broken. He owned a wagon full of pots, pans, prisms, swatches of bright cloth, and assorted treasures from foreign lands. Though alone, he had animal friends to keep him company. He whistled to his caged doves and songbirds; his pet wolf followed the cart like a dog. None of them cared about his stutter.

Once, he and his wolf had driven off an evil highwayman who was trying to rob a priest on the forest road. In gratitude, the kindly priest had given the tinker a jeweled cross medallion, one of the tinker's most prized possessions. Not long ago a muscular woodcutter wanted to buy it as a gift for his beloved wife. Another insistent would-be customer was a well-dressed man with a dueling scar; the man was accompanied by his wife and her friend (both of whom clung to him so adoringly it wasn't clear which was the wife and which was her friend). With halting, tangled words he tried to sell them something else, but the three had stalked angrily down the road.

A day later, to his astonishment, the constable and a group of guards came to arrest him. Sensing danger, the pet wolf attacked, trying to defend his master—and the guards shot the beast dead. The tinker wailed in grief for Odin, unable to find words in any language.

He was thrown into jail, appalled to learn that the scar-faced man and his two female companions had accused the tinker of stealing the medallion *from them*; both the wife and her friend wrung their hands and swore that the tinker had raped them. His denials were vehement, though inarticulate. With growing terror, his stutter became worse.

Distraught parents, including the town's blacksmith, came forward to point fingers of blame, suggesting that the stranger must be responsible for Ingolstadt's missing children. A baby had vanished only the day

before, and ten other young sons and daughters had disappeared in as many years. A mad strangler had also been recently accused of the crimes, though no one truly believed him to be the criminal. Now, despite the fact that the tinker could not possibly have been in the area for that amount of time, the poor man was a convenient scapegoat. Once someone in the crowd voiced the suspicion, many others took up the cry.

Since he had been seen talking to birds and consorting with a wolf, the tinker was convicted as a warlock. He had stolen a holy artifact, no doubt to be used in some satanic ritual (which must involve the blood of the babies or innocent children). The townspeople demanded that he be burned at the stake. The loudest voice came from the blacksmith's young apprentice, whose family had perished in a forest fire years before. The boy seemed hungry to smell the smoke of burning flesh.

Oddly enough, Victor Frankenstein begged for mercy. "Ingolstadt is a civilized town and should not bow to superstitions." But the crowd wanted some medieval touch of justice for such heinous crimes, and they already had an upcoming hanging. Very reasonable and persuasive, the Baron's son suggested, "Perhaps the headsman's axe should be brought out of retirement? The chopping block could be set up in the town square, as in olden days."

This sated the bloodlust of the people. And so the old executioner's axe was sharpened by the vengeful blacksmith, who fervently believed the tinker had stolen and killed his daughter Maria.

Hands tied behind his back, the falsely accused tinker was brought out and forced to his knees. As his neck was stretched across the bloodstained block, his frantic gaze caught a last glimpse of one man in the crowd. Victor Frankenstein looked intensely interested, a scientist studying a specimen. The tinker felt the ripple of a completely different kind of fear. Why was the Baron's son looking at him so hungrily?

Because the headsman's axe was razor sharp, and the cut exceedingly swift, the flash of pain seemed as gentle as a feather. The stutter of his heartbeat stopped.

\* \* \* \*

*Victor checks the machines, adjusts the electrical flow, then hurries back. He presses down on the cloth windings of the sturdy chest. "Live!" he shouts, as if the dead parts will hear him and obey his command.*

*"Live!"*

*Victor hammers his fist down on the sternum. The torso is thick, muscular, like a suit of armor around the two implanted hearts ... a blacksmith's chest.*

\* \* \* \*

His broad chest was always smeared with soot and smoke from the forge, his hair singed from sparks and cinders. His arms were strong from pounding on an anvil, pumping the bellows.

He had a good wife and fine children, whom he loved more than anything else. But his oldest daughter, Maria, had disappeared a year ago while picking mushrooms in the woods. Many boys and girls had vanished around Ingolstadt—yesterday, even a baby had gone missing! When Maria had been lost, the blacksmith and his wife spent agonized days combing the hills, calling the girl's name, praying for her safety ... and then, resigned, weeping for her soul.

To fill the emptiness, the blacksmith adopted a new apprentice, an orphan boy whose parents were killed in a forest fire. Though the boy worked hard in the smithy, no one else's son could make up for the lost Maria.

A traveling tinker had been arrested and charged with the crimes. The blacksmith and his wife were both convinced he had abducted their little girl. Even next to the blistering heat of the forge, the blacksmith shuddered to imagine the things the stuttering foreigner must have done to Maria...

Sparks flew from the grinding wheel as he sharpened the headsman's axe. The monstrous criminal would pay the price the following day. The bitter but unsatisfying taste of vengeance bubbled like bile in the blacksmith's throat.

He closed his eyes, quoted scripture to himself, and prayed for forgiveness. His wife often came to sit with him in the smithy, to comfort him by reading aloud from the Bible while the apprentice boy continued the daily work, hovering close to the blazing fire.

Lately, instead of words of consolation, he was more interested in stories of demons, how the darkness of Satan was a shadow over the land—such as the rituals the guilty tinker no doubt performed with the blood of children while his wolf, his demon familiar, watched.

The blacksmith could not get Maria's musical laughter out of his head. She had loved to ride on her father's broad shoulders as he walked down the streets. She had played with other children, plucking flowers from the meadows, even running up to Castle Frankenstein where the old Baron showed them the exotic animals in his menagerie.

Now she was gone. The damned tinker had done terrible things to her!

When the blacksmith saw the fiery forge and the sparks flying from the grinding wheel, he thought of Hell's inferno where this razor-sharp axe would send the evil tinker. He intended to stand so close to the chopping block that the hot and satisfying blood would splash onto his face.

Finished, he lifted the sharpened axe from the wheel, but it seemed very heavy all of a sudden. The blacksmith tried to stand. His apprentice came closer, looking worried.

Though his chest and arms were strong, the blacksmith's heart was weak. The thudding sounded hollow in his chest, the slowing blood flow faded to a faint roar in his ears. He found himself falling. As the executioner's axe dropped to the ground, his last thoughts were of his wife, his daughters. How would they survive without him?

Then he clung to the vision of lost Maria, her large blue eyes, her laughter. He collapsed dead to the smithy floor, unable to watch the execution after all.

\* \* \* \*

*At last, with the bandages removed, the dull yellow eyes open. The lids flutter, the transplanted eyes flick from side to side, seeing the grandeur of the lightning storm outside, the frenzied apparatus in the laboratory. Flashes, sparks, little fires.*

\* \* \* \*

He liked to stare into the flickering flames and watch the hungry elemental spirit devour wood. His eyes had an unhealthy yellow tinge, as if part of the fire's glow hovered there.

He had lived with his family in a cottage near old Baron Frankenstein's hunting preserve. The summer was dry, and a lightning strike started a nearby fire, which raged in the night. He awoke, smelling bitter greenwood smoke in the air, then crept outside to watch the swift fire come like a marching army. He went far from his house, to a high rock outcropping where he could sit and watch. The hypnotic flames enraptured him so that he did not even think about his family trapped inside the cottage as the fire engulfed it. He had never seen the house look so beautiful, so bright and cheery and ablaze.

Then the flames curled in a different direction—maybe the wind changed, or maybe the fire simply chose to avoid him. When the villagers found him later, they considered it a miracle that the boy had survived, while his family was overcome by smoke.

Though an orphan, he was old enough to be taken in as the blacksmith's apprentice, where he loved to toil near the blazing heat of the forge. When he pumped the bellows, he made the heat blossom like a flower. He was accepted by the blacksmith and his family, who were grieving over their missing daughter. They thought they understood the boy's "loss."

The young apprentice went alone into the forest—an excuse to build secret fires, some of which (not unintentionally) got out of hand. One of his blazes nearly burned down the Baron's hunting lodge.

Later, he was the loudest voice demanding that a tinker, convicted of being a warlock, be burned at the stake. The apprentice wanted to see a person tied to an upright log, the flames consuming clothes and flesh. He was furious when Victor Frankenstein insisted that the man be beheaded instead. Why did the Baron's son have to meddle? The fire would have been so glorious, a spectacle he could have remembered for the rest of his life!

It was either irony, or divine justice, that the vengeful blacksmith had died while sharpening the headsman's axe. Now, the apprentice did not know his future. He was too young to work the forge himself, and he feared the distraught widow would sell the business and turn him out into the streets.

The future did not concern him. The apprentice saw one way to make everything right. On the night after the tinker's head was chopped off, he lit a flaming brand from the blacksmith's forge and set the smithy building on fire.

But that was only a start. He went to the jail and then the magistrate's home, setting them alight as well. It was sure to be the greatest fire in the history of Ingolstadt. The apprentice made no attempt to hide what he was doing. While the alarms rang and people rushed out to help douse the fire, angry men chased after him.

The arsonist ran. One of them shot him in the back with a musket, and the ball lodged just beneath his shoulder blade. The pursuers were coming closer, shouting for his blood, carrying torches as they hunted him down. He staggered into the Baron's hunting preserve, until he reached a swollen, fast-flowing stream. He tried to cross it, but he was too weak. When he stepped into the icy, rushing water, he could barely keep his footing.

The pursuing mob shot at him again. Another musket ball shattered his leg, and he fell into the water. As he was swept downstream, he caught a glimpse of Ingolstadt and the smoke rising into the air. He hoped his fire would burn for a long time.

His head was dunked under the fast current, and he couldn't breathe. As the musket shots drained the life's blood out of him, the apprentice gulped frigid water, praying for fire, yet the spark within him was extinguished. The darkness was cold and wet, but finally his eyes saw a spark again, lights, life.

\* \* \* \*

*The mosaic of a monster is alive, functioning, but without a mind it does not truly live.*

*Victor attaches an electrode, unleashes a flood of condensed lightning. A sharp shock pours into the head, like a musket touching off a flash of gunpowder, the last surge of memories. A mind adrift, separate. Thoughts run like raindrops down an uneven pane of glass.*

\* \* \* \*

Despite his wealth and bloodline, he had never been a strong man, the runt of the litter. His younger brothers—even his sister—spurned him, though the noble title was his by birthright. Years ago, as a boy, he had turned his feelings of inferiority against small animals—secretly killing cats, clubbing puppies. The young, helpless ones were the most gratifying.

Copying the more eccentric European nobles, he had purchased exotic animals from foreign lands, darkest Africa, South Sea islands, the Americas. He kept a menagerie on his estate, and though the miserable creatures did not live long, he replaced them with other specimens as fast as they died. His son Victor delighted in having so many dissection subjects for his medical studies.

The Baron's fondness for strange animals made him popular among the children. Generous and benevolent, he would let them stare at the creatures, even pet the tame ones.

Most of the time he could control his urges. Most of the time.

And when it became imperative that he follow his obsession, he had a special private hunting lodge deep in his forest preserve with secure doors and stout shutters. After he lured the children out to the cabin, just like in the story of Hansel and Gretel, he would lock them in so he could have his way with them over and over; then he would kill them and bury them out in the forest.

All the servants at Castle Frankenstein were familiar with their master's habit of slipping off for solitude. No mere peasant would dare to accuse, or even suspect, Baron Heinrich Frankenstein. A wandering band of gypsies or a suspicious stranger could always be blamed for the latest disappearance. Over the years, many were arrested; a shepherd had been hanged and a tinker had been beheaded that very day, both accused of the same crime, providing a convenient excuse for the little “lamb” he had just stolen.

Back at the Castle, he regularly told the cook to prepare veal, suckling pig, a fine tender lamb, or fresh kid spitted over a fire. Innocence seemed to give the flesh a better flavor. Thus, once a new idea had occurred to him, he couldn't drive it out of his head. What might be the taste of another sort of tender flesh?

Only two days ago, he had wandered the streets of Ingolstadt in a filthy disguise, until he saw the chance to snatch an infant, still breast-fed. After roasting all day over a slow fire, the flesh would be succulent, better than veal.

Now, as the forest darkened around the hunting lodge, the Baron was glad to be away. The meat was still on the spit over the fire, almost ready for an evening feast, when he heard the shouts of searchers outside, musket shots. From the window of his cabin, he looked down the steep slopes to Ingolstadt. The city itself seemed to be on fire!

Alarmed, the Baron went to the door and threw it open just as the constable and six guards rushed up the path. “My Lord Baron, beware! There is an arsonist in these woods. We are hunting him—”

Then the constable saw what was on the fire. One of the guards cried out in horror before he began to retch. The old Baron could not slam the door quickly enough...

Locked in the jail—the same cell that had held a strangler only two days before—the Baron confessed. Despite his admission, the torturers still wanted to break his arms and scourge him. The townspeople howled for his blood, ready to lynch the old Baron, and only a contingent of guards reluctantly prevented them from doing so. His noble rank would not save him. The magistrate had no choice but to sentence him to death by a slow garrote in the public square.

Victor—now the new Baron Frankenstein—came to see him. Oddly, the intense young man showed no

revulsion at his father's crimes, no greed for the position of power he now held. He looked at the older man clinically, as if he was already making plans.

Victor turned to the jailer. "It is a pity what my father has done. He always had such a fine mind."

\* \* \* \*

*The beating hearts grow stronger. "He's alive!" Victor cries. "Alive!"*

*The yellow eyes are open, the patchwork body twitches and trembles. Victor unwinds the gauze to reveal the scars on cadaverous flesh. He unstraps the restraints binding the arms and legs. The creature is awake now, aware.*

*"I made you. You will be greater than the sum of your parts!" He looks at his creation with pride. "Can you hear me? Do you know who you are?"*

*Yes, the pieced-together man knows who he is. The hands and lungs of a strangler, the legs of a thief, the head of a hired assassin, the torso of a vengeful blacksmith, the eyes of an arsonist, one heart from an axe murderer and the other from a wrongly executed man, the mind of a child molester and baby killer.*

\* \* \* \*

*Voices clamor through him, so many identities roiling in a single body. Fusing the cacophony into a consensus, he remembers the Bible he read in his blacksmith persona, a particular verse from the Gospel of Mark. The other converging memories and lives know it as well, and they all agree.*

*His voice crackles out like a dry wind. Victor, face shining with perspiration, leans closer to hear.*

*"My name is Legion," the creation says. "For we are many."*

*He grabs Victor's throat with the hand of a strangler. With all the lives inside him, he finds it very easy to squeeze.*

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

Kevin J. Anderson on the origin of THE SUM OF HIS PARTS...

*"When I began working with Dean Koontz on our novel, FRANKENSTEIN: PRODIGAL SON, I developed a lot of fictional "background" of the famous monster, brief biographies of all the various criminals that made up his component parts. During the actual writing of the book, Dean wanted to keep the focus entirely in the present with very little extraneous background or flashbacks. However, I felt that all those little vignettes could be "stitched together" into a very interesting story, and Dean gave me permission to use the material as a standalone piece."*

**Katherine Sparrow** is a social worker who lives in Seattle. Her writing drifts between the shores of science fiction, young adult, and fantasy. She's sold stories to the *Glorifying Terrorism* anthology, Cleis Press, and *Son and Foe*. She was also a finalist in the *Writer's of the Future* content and attended the Clarion West Workshop in 2005.

**The End of Crazy**  
**By Katherine Sparrow**

Allison sucked in the cigarette smoke all around her and closed her eyes. She hated doing this, but it was

required. She spoke as quickly as she could, not looking at any of the people in the circle.

"Hi, I'm Allison. I started hearing voices when I was sixteen after I was raped by my brother. I used to hear them constantly. I saw things too; none of the meds helped. Cops scared me a lot. I used to bite people and threaten them with knives. I used to take babies that I thought were mine. I refused to take Sanify at first; I was sure it was poison, but a social worker convinced me it could make all the bad stuff stop. I have been sane for five years now." Allison took in another ashy breath and stared at the floor. They're just words, don't think about them, don't remember, don't let it touch you.

She said flatly, "Everything's terrific now that there's a cure. I thank Sanify every day for the end of Schizophrenia."

"Thank you, Allison!" everyone at the Beyond Schizophrenia support group said.

Her hand slid into her jacket to check, again, that the package was still there, hidden. It was.

The man next to Allison started talking. He held onto his own shaky hands. The cure didn't take away the shakes, the night terrors, the anger, or the mood swings. It just made you not crazy: not psychotic. There was a look to everyone in the room—an invisible uniform—that marked them. They were all too skinny, jittery, rotten-toothed and ill-fitting in their skin. It was like 'I used to be crazy' was psychically tattooed on them, along with all the scars and real tattoos.

The wolfish eyes of the psychiatrists watched the shaky man speak, and for his sake, Allison hoped he wouldn't mess up. People who didn't say the right thing ... there were all kinds of stories floating around about what happened to them. Crazy stories.

Allison sat through the twenty-minute speech on the importance of never missing the Sanify shots for your own health and safety. The meeting ended with everyone putting one hand towards the center of the room and saying, "Sanity's for everyone, Sanify's for me!"

The slow bus ride home was full of noisy high school kids. A drunk sat next to Allison and kept leaning against her, then apologizing. She was two days late for her Sanify shot, and it made her nervous.

If all goes well, she thought, I'll go to the clinic and get it tonight. She watched the rain roll off the greasy windows, and gazed at the gray sky beyond.

Allison climbed the four floors to her apartment; the elevator had broken down a year ago. Let the formerly mentally ill hoof it, they need the exercise, she could almost hear the public housing manager say. *They're cured, why are they still here?* he seemed to think but would never say out loud.

Flip was making pancakes and the microwave dinged just as Allison came in. She took out the hot plastic strawberry syrup bottle and put it on their small table, then flopped down on a chair. The mirror from the hallway door was angled so she could see both herself and Flip. Both of them were really thin these days; he with his short black hair and fine native-Macah looks, she with short, red hair and freckles everywhere. Allison studied her young-old face in the mirror—thirty-two, but she looked older.

After the cure, they had left each other and tried to return to their families. But no one knew them anymore. No one wanted them, except each other. Flip and Allison, two people who didn't look like they belonged together, unless you could see from the inside.

"Hey, you," she said.

"Hi, how was your meeting?"

"I love Sanify and every wonderful thing it's done for my life, exclamation point, exclamation point," Allison said. "I'm so glad I don't see Nazis anymore, now I just see assholes."

Flip held the tip of his tongue between his teeth as he put down the rubber spatula. He walked behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Did you buy it?"

"Yeah." She patted the package in her coat pocket.

"Can you take the test right away? Or do you have to wait?"

"I can do it now."

His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Go do it, then. You want some flapjacks? I'll have a whole stack of them ready for you."

"I want some Flipjacks."

He grinned at her, worry not far beneath his madrone-brown eyes. Two people playing at being fine.

Allison sat on the toilet and peed on the tip of the pregnancy test. She waited for a plus or minus to emerge, to tell her what her life was going to be about.

"Pancakes are ready!" Flip yelled to her, a question in his voice, *Do you know yet?* She came out of the bathroom and sat down at their table. Alison stared at the dingy, cracked wall beyond Flip, their small kitchen painted an ugly green, and the frayed wall-to-wall carpet on the floor. Not much, but it was hers. More than she had ever had before. Flip sat across from her and tried to look strong. Allison cut into the pancakes and put a big bite in her mouth. If I don't say it—before I say it, it isn't true, she thought. She swallowed the pancake and told herself that was stupid—magical thinking. Crazy thinking.

"Well?"

"Yep."

Flip nodded his head and stared at her serious as stone. What did he see? Allison always saw two images of him, superimposed upon each other—the sane Flip, and the crazy one. The earnest, trying-to-be-strong Flip, and the tattooed-neck, manic-eyed Flip. He whistled as he breathed in, then out, the pitch changing with his breath.

Allison slathered her pancakes in margarine and red syrup, then felt sick as she looked at the food and pushed it away. She bit at a stray flap of skin around her thumb's cuticle until she drew blood.

"How did it happen?" Flip asked.

"You were there."

"I mean..."

"The depo-provera's not 100%. Neither is your pill," Allison said.

"We can't keep it. We can't get rid of it. What are you going to do?" The stoic facade fell off his face, and he looked like he was going to cry.

Allison stabbed at her pancake and pretended she was cutting skin. "Thanks, Flip, I hadn't thought about it. It hasn't been running in an endless loop over and over in my head that I signed five hundred legal documents saying I wouldn't have kids if I took Sanify. Or that abortion is totally illegal. Thanks for



pointing out how screwed I am."

"We are. I'm with you. It's not our fault. They can't blame us ... If we go to them they can't blame us," Flip said.

"Right, just like cops never beat you up for being a crazy Indian. They've never arrested us for being homeless, or locked us up for being psychotic. Why would they blame us now?" Allison held a scream inside of her. Violence was not normal. Rage was not normal. She filled her mouth with pancake to keep it inside of her.

"I'm sorry. I'm here, Allison. I'm right here with you." Flip had a bad look to him. Allison remembered all the times when he had burned himself, back when he was crazy. When she would yell at him, and later she would find cigarette burns on his body. That had been part of the attraction, hadn't it? She didn't even have to cut Flip. He hurt himself for her all on his own.

No, that couldn't happen now. There was no insanity. Everything was fine now.

"I'm sorry, Flip. It's too much. I don't have any answers. I don't know what the Sanify would do to a baby, and I don't know what would happen if I stopped taking it. There are so many weird stories out there about what happens if you stop. I don't know where to get an abortion where it's not some Christian front trying to catch people like me. I don't want to go to jail. Jeez, things were going so good," Allison said.

"No they weren't. We've been getting by, pretending we know how to live like normal people, but it's so empty," Flip said.

His words hurt. Allison hated the truth in them. She put her hands over her face and pressed on her eyelids.

Flip leaned across the table and said, "Something has been coming toward us for a long time. Now something is here, that's all."

"That's crazy talk."

"Crazy is over, Allison. Whatever is coming, it's not crazy. Something new. If this wasn't complicated, what would you do? Pretend we're normal for a second." He looked at her like she might hurt him. Not with knives, the other kind of hurt.

"Tell me what you would want, first."

He shook his head and wouldn't answer.

"Fine. I'd keep it," Allison said.

That made him smile. "You would? Me too. We could be real good parents, Allison. We could have so much love."

"But it's not simple," she said.

"People disappear all the time. We could. It's not so hard."

"But without Sanify? What'll happen?" she asked.

"It's a cure," Flip said. "Everyone knows that."

"People can die when they stop taking it. All those papers we signed said so."

"That's just the pharmaceutical company tricking us into taking it forever. We've both heard stories."

"But it's not gone. I can feel the schizophrenia, not that far away. Can't you?" Allison stood up and began pacing. She hadn't meant to tell anyone that.

"Our brain scans are normal, Allison. There's no more schizophrenia. It'll be fine if we stop taking Sanify."

"Like all the times we stopped taking meds in the past? That was fine?"

"This is different. Maybe we'll be better than fine. I've heard stories."

"Crazy people always tell crazy stories. That's nothing new."

The telephone rang. Paranoia coursed through Allison that their apartment was under surveillance.

Flip answered it, spoke haltingly, and then hung up.

"That was a social worker. She's going to stop by today."

"Why? Does she know? You think this place is bugged?" she asked, hating herself for the question.

"Probably," Flip said.

"No, that's paranoid," Allison said. Her head hurt.

"I think we should go." *Go*. Flip said. Allison heard a faint echo to his words, even though his mouth wasn't moving.

"Where?"

"Remember that time, that old school?" *School?* his voice echoed again.

"Not there. Anywhere but there." They had been off their meds when they found the old school—lost in the darkness and lost in their heads. When the mental health counselors had found them, they were close to starvation.

"It won't be like before. It can't be." *Can't be*.

A blip of a police car sounded outside.

Cops: the blue Nazis who stick needles into you, Allison thought automatically. No. They're just cops. Don't think like that, she ordered herself.

Flip went to the window and looked out. "They're coming inside. We've got to go, if we're going. Are we, Allison? It's your decision, but if we're going to, we should go now." *Now*.

The echo of his voice made Allison feel jumpy. There are hundreds of people in this building. The cops could be here for anyone, she thought. Another part of her—a part that felt like it was running downhill too fast and couldn't do anything but run faster to keep from falling—told her to go.

"Okay, let's go," Allison whispered. Electricity ran up and down her spine.

Flip grabbed their cash and a big bag of potato chips. Allison threw some clothes for both of them into her backpack, all the while listening for a knock on the door. They left their apartment and walked down

the hallway. The fluorescent lights buzzed and crackled overhead.

A door opened and Allison stifled a cry. Old Maude stuck out her head and said, “Where you off to, Jane and Rock?” Maude had known them before Sanify, and could never remember their real names.

Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester—the names burned through Allison. The paranoid, delusional woman with the depressed and suicidal boyfriend. That's who they had been. Who were they going to become? They ran down the urine-stained stairs. Their feet hit the concrete steps hard, and Allison was gasping for breath by the time they made it to the lobby.

Two cops in blue stood in front of the elevator, pushing the up button and looking irritated.

Don't turn around, don't notice us, Allison willed as she and Flip walked as quietly as they could toward the front door.

One of their radios hissed and a male voice asked, “Have you secured the girl yet?” *Yet?*

“Almost. We're in the building now,” *Now*, one of the cops said.

They made it to the front door and pushed it open. A gust of cool air and rain hit them. Don't turn around, don't look to see if they are following, she ordered herself as they stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Flip's hand slipped into Allison's and he squeezed hard. “Don't run, not yet,” *Not yet*, Flip whispered. They walked quickly to the corner, then turned and ran like kids playing tag—fast and hard. A couple of blocks later, they stopped and looked behind them. No one followed.

*Were the cops even there for us, or are we being delusional?* Allison wondered.

They took a bus, then walked to the abandoned school on the edge of the city just before sunset. Like she remembered, it was made from red bricks that looked like blood. Tall grass surrounded it beyond a chain link and razor-wire fence. Allison stood in front of the “No Trespassing” sign and wanted to be anywhere else.

Flip kicked at the fence as they circled the hill. He found a place where it was loose enough to crawl under. All the doors were padlocked with heavy silver locks, except for one in the back. Flip tried to turn the handle, but it was locked from the inside. He hit it twice with his open palm.

“We can sleep out in the grass,” Allison said. “I'd like that.”

The door popped open a few inches and a white girl—chubby, pierced eyebrow, probably about twenty—looked out behind a chain lock.

“Hey, can we crash here?” Flip asked. *Crash here.*

Allison heard the echo again.

“What's the magic word?” *Word?* the girl said. Her eyes scanned the grasses behind them, then she looked at Flip. “Hey, what are you?” *Are you?*

“Native.” *Native.*

“Cool. Power to your people. I'm Veronica. I'm totally into Indian rights.” *Rights.* She unchained the door and let them into a wide, dark hallway with ceilings obliterated by darkness. Allison had a memory of being chased, of being lost here.

Veronica bolted the door behind them. It took Allison a moment for her eyes to adjust and see the gray forms in the hallway. They walked into an old schoolroom. Fingers of sunlight reached through the gaps in the boarded up windows.

"Mi escuela es tu escuela. How'd you hear about us?" *Us?* Veronica asked.

"We were here before. Seven years ago," *Ago*, Flip said.

"We've been here six months," the girl said. "We love it, and the cops have no idea we're here." *We're here.*

"Good," Allison said.

Along one wall of the schoolroom was a gas camping stove, an ice cooler, and some jugs of water. Dirty kids, just past adolescence, sat on the ground in a circle.

"This is Spaz, Makeshift, Kendra, Tony the Tiger, Ali, and Blunt." *Blunt.*

"Hi, I'm—"

"She's Jane, I'm Rock," *Rock*, Flip said.

Allison shivered all over. She felt like everything bad was coming back towards them, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

"You hungry? We've got spaghetti." *Spaghetti.*

Allison and Flip sat down on the floor as Veronica brought them food. The kids told funny stories with a gentleness that seemed too sweet for their age, like maybe they'd had bad childhoods, and were making up for it now.

After dinner, Veronica grabbed a flashlight and a bunch of blankets. She took them up a wide creaky staircase and down a dark hallway to an empty schoolroom. There were holes in the floor where wood had rotted through—dark pocks that looked like wounds as the flashlight bounced over them.

"Thank you," Allison said. It was the first time she could remember someone being nice to her without being paid for it.

"No worries." *Worries.*

"You okay?" *Okay?* Flip asked when they were alone.

"I don't know. We can't go back, can we? This is the only decision, isn't it? For the baby?" Allison said. "We didn't just leave because we're mentally ill, did we?"

"Nope," Flip rubbed his warm hand over her flat belly. "Our baby's going to be so beautiful, and we're never going to let anything bad happen to her." *To her.*

The next day was Allison's third day of missing Sanify, and Flip's second. It felt like walking over a cliff. Falling and where would they land?

There were changes for both of them in the following weeks. The echoes of people's words grew more and more tangled up with their spoken words, and Allison felt confused most of the time. At first just the end of sentences were garbled, then the middle, then all the way through. She had to listen very carefully to catch what they were saying. Flip's body was hot all the time, like he had a fever. They both felt

clearer, less in a haze than they had been. "Like clouds lifting off my soul," Flip said.

The changes worried Allison and excited Flip.

What was strangest of all to Allison was that the kids befriended her and Flip. They fed them with their dumpster food and didn't ask why Flip and Allison never left the school. They would play cards, or read books out loud on the roof, or talk politics and never think to exclude Allison and Flip. It made Allison think that someday she and Flip could leave the school and no one would know they were formerly mentally ill. Allison felt herself relaxing as days passed and nothing bad happened. It seemed like Flip was right—schizophrenia was over, and they were becoming free.

On a sunny day Flip and Allison laid out on the wide flat roof of the school—all the kids were at an immigrant-rights protest—and stared up at the puffy white cotton ball clouds overhead.

Allison wore an old, soft sweatshirt that Veronica had given her. She held Flip's hand and traced patterns on his palm with her ring finger.

"It's like an invisible pain is gone. I was so used to it, but now it's gone ... I feel good, normal," Allison said. She pointed at a cloud and said, "Wolves."

The cloud twisted and turned into a more definite shape of wolves. She pointed at another one, "Baby."

Flip laughed as the cloud grew more distinctly baby-like. *Our baby will be just as fat.* "Our baby will be just as fat."

That was new—hearing the words before he said them. Weird, but not schizophrenia weird.

*We should talk.* A beat later, Flip said, "We should talk."

"About what?" She didn't want to.

*Our future.* "Our future."

"I want to talk about names. I want you to give our baby a real Indian name. Something with a lot of syllables."

Flip put his hand on her belly. *We need to have some kind of plan. We need to leave Seattle, I think. They'll be looking for us.* Allison had a moment to think before Flip spoke the words out loud.

"I need to rest. Maybe we can stay here until the baby comes, then head up to Canada? We can cross the border in the woods." The second after the words left her mouth, Allison wished she had not mentioned the woods, the place of her hallucinations. A cloud—the wolf cloud—settled across the sun and it grew colder.

*Okay, but we should plan for our future,* Flip said, only his words didn't repeat out loud. A deep male voice laughed instead. Allison looked around, but there was no one there.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

*Yes.* Again, there was no repeat. Allison looked at Flip. Blood poured from his nose all over his face. His eyes moved back and forth, watching something dart across the sky that Allison couldn't see. The wolf cloud slowly seemed to be moving toward them.

"Flip! Get up, come on!" She dragged him to his feet, then took him down the staircase, down and down, running in dim light, their feet squeaking against the worn wooden steps. Above them she heard

footsteps clunk on the roof. Clean him up in the bathroom, nose bleeds always look bad, it's nothing, it's fine, she told herself. We're both fine.

Flip's hand grew slippery in hers, and he had trouble keeping up. He stumbled and almost fell down the stairs before catching himself.

"Flip?" In the dimness she saw he was bleeding from cuts up and down his arms.

When had that happened? "Flip, you can't start cutting on yourself again." Allison tried to not scream at him.

*I didn't*, he thought. From above them Allison heard laughter and a pounding of footsteps. They ran down the hallway at the bottom of the stairs. Allison left Flip in a schoolroom as she ran to the bathroom for toilet paper. As soon as she let go of him, he started screaming—a double scream with his echo and voice combined.

It made it hard to think. Is this real? Allison wondered, as she grabbed a roll of toilet paper and turned back for him.

"Run! Hide!" A little girl suddenly standing in the bathroom's doorway yelled. The child had long black hair and moon eyes. "Mom, they're coming for us, run!"

Allison felt herself collapsing inward. I know what this is, Allison thought. *Psychosis*. It did nothing to shake off her growing terror.

She pushed passed the unreal girl and ran back into the hallway. Someone cruel—someone not there—laughed. The sound echoed and bounced off the walls. Allison waited for the laughing man to show himself.

*Allison?* Flip called from down the hallway, fear and pain laced into his thoughts. *Allison, please?*

She ran toward him. Three *thwumps* came from his schoolroom, and flames flickered out of the doorway. A writhing figure in flames danced out of the room, and Flip's thoughts filled her. *Help me! Help me! I'm burning!*

The figure fell, and Flip screamed. The cruel laughter grew closer. She couldn't see anyone, but Allison knew who it was—a blue Nazi.

The little girl ran at her and said, "Run! They'll find us, Mom. Come on!"

Allison turned from Flip's burning form. She scooped the girl into her arms and ran into the dark cavern of the old school. She ran and ran, but didn't come to any walls. Of course not, this isn't real, she thought. Flip's fine. I'm fine. The darkness around her went from grey to complete blackness. Flip's screams died behind her. The ground she walked on grew softer, and the air around her colder and cleaner. Allison held the unreal girl tight to her body and was glad she was not alone. The girl breathed onto her neck and it was calming.

*Is this my child? How did she get here?* Allison wondered. She was heavy but Allison didn't put her down. The mindlessness of holding her and walking kept some of her fear away. Her eyes burned with the darkness, trying to see anything at all. There was nothing. It all felt so real.

A twig snapped just behind her, then fingers grabbed onto her hair and pulled her backwards. Allison fell onto her back, and her girl was wrenched away from her.

"Mommy?"

A torch erupted in the darkness and Allison saw three blue Nazis standing over her. They were all the same height, wore the same police uniform, and had identical faces. They looked like her brother—fair skinned, straight nosed, and hard mouthed with blond hair poking out beneath their hats.

*It's not real.*

They tied her hands and legs to the ground, spread-eagling her with ropes and stakes. Allison saw one of them make faces at the girl he clutched in his hands. She squirmed and tried to get free. The smell of pine, wet earth, and her bitter body odor filled the air.

*None of this is real.*

One of the blue Nazis took out long silvery scissors from his holster and cut the clothes off her body. Allison shivered.

Another pulled out a long syringe with a fat needle from his pocket and jabbed it into her breast. It sucked at her tissue and flesh, slowly filling with a thick orange-brown liquid. Allison screamed and tried to get free, but her bonds did not loosen, no matter how hard she pulled at them. Allison breathed in gulps of air as he pulled the syringe out of her. He put the syringe's tip near his lips and squirted the liquid into his mouth. Allison closed her eyes.

*Not real.*

"Delicious," the blue Nazi murmured.

She opened her eyes.

Her liquid dribbled down his face. The other two laughed. Allison saw that the girl was gone.

They stuck another syringe deep into her thigh. It sucked away her essence; sinew, nerves, muscle and marrow.

Allison focused on the green branches that flickered with torch light above her. They stabbed her with the syringes up and down her body, arguing with soft grunty voices, "There? Delicious, painful, yes." "No there, better, yes, hurt, hurt."

It went on and on. Prick, suck, drink.

A crow landed on the branches above her and stared at her with calculating eyes.

*Carnage? Not yet. Soon, she heard it think before it flew away.*

A wolf lingered at the edge of the torch's light. Allison raised her head and watched him. He had no thoughts, only a deep hunger. Prick, suck, drink.

"Her neck."

"Her foot."

"Her cheek. Yes, there."

Hours and hours passed, but it stayed dark out. The torch did not burn down. Needles poked into her deeper and deeper, taking more of her away.

Then she heard a voice cutting through the night. *Jane? Allison?* “Jane? Allison?” Flip said, then screamed.

It was a trap. They wanted her to want him, so that they could take that away from her too. Except, the blue Nazi's looked worried as they drew near her with their syringe.

*Allison!* Flip thought. She heard him groaning.

Out of desperation to find Flip, she turned and faced the closest Nazi. She *really* looked at him. In all her years of hallucinating, Allison had never met their gaze. She'd never been able to stare down her worst fear. The Nazi's face was plain, blank, and held a hunger to hurt her.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

*Allison? Help me!* Flip thought.

The Nazi sneered and raised his syringe. Allison didn't look away, though she wanted to, and his face started to change. It began to grow fainter and transparent. Like wisps of smoke held together for a moment then dissipating, his face began unraveling. He sank to the ground and like some old melting witch, he collapsed into himself. Allison faced the next one, who was at her side instantly. He pulled out knives from his belt loop. Her gaze unmade him, and he squealed as he disappeared from her nightmare. The third blue Nazi turned and ran into the woods.

*Allison, please? It's so hot.*

She tried to go to Flip, to find him in the woods, but ropes still held her down.

*No*, she thought, and focused her mind on them. They loosened, then dissolved away from her ankles and wrists. Everywhere she looked, the woods grew sparser, branches lost their leaves, and grass withered away into the ground. The torch flickered, then went out. Allison sat in complete blackness.

Then, as her eyes adjusted, she saw a glow coming through a doorway. She sat up, naked and sore, and saw that she was in one of the classrooms. Her body oozed blood from all her sores. She touched one. It was real. The glow flickered in the doorway.

*Allison. Hurry*, Flip begged.

She crawled toward the doorway. “Flip? Where are you?”

He lay on the far end of the hallway, surrounded by red-black embers. He twisted on the ground and groaned. The sight of him made Allison stand up and run to him, no matter her legs were riddled with syringe wounds. As she grew near him, she saw his whole body was a mess of burns.

She knew this was real, because it was not something she would ever imagine. Her hallucinations always took place in the woods. A half-dozen steps away from him, a blistering heat stopped her. The air was so hot around him that she smelled her hair starting to burn.

"Flip, you've got to make this stop," she told him. "You've got to make it go away."

*Can't, the fire is everywhere, and it's not real. It's just in my head*, he thought. *Just like before.*

Allison remembered all his scars from cigarette burns.



"No Flip. It's not like before. It's real, so you have to stop it. You're burning yourself. Crazy's over, like you said. Now, I guess..." Her mind groped for a reason to what was happening. "Now our illness is out in the real world."

*You're not real*, he thought.

She took a step toward him. If I can reach him, and hold him, he'll come out of this, she thought.

A fiery hawk screamed and reared its head up. No, it was a pile of papers, spinning through the air toward her, full of flame. Allison stepped back and it fell to the ground. She stared at it, but her attention did not dissipate it. She stepped forward again, and debris on the ground drew together into a larger bird-golem. She stepped back.

"Flip, I can't help you. You've got to make it stop."

He turned his head to look at her, and his hand caught on fire. He screamed, but only on the inside. Just as she could hear his thoughts, Allison could feel him weaken.

"You have to look at it straight on. You have to face it!" she said.

*Can't. It's inside of me.*

Allison felt a new presence enter the room, traveling from outside the school. She felt someone's essence reach out and study her.

*Who are you?* she asked in her mind, unsure if this was another hallucination.

*Run! They made me track you. They're coming for you. Imprison you. Run, hide, or they'll use you, like they use me,* a frantic voice spoke inside of Allison.

*Are you real?* she thought.

*I'm a telepath, like you. I used to be paranoid. Now, after Sanify, I can hear everyone's thoughts, just like you. The government will take you, use you. Run, stay free. We're almost to your school now. Leave. Join the resistance. Don't get caught.* His message carried a desperate, frenetic energy to it that sent adrenalin pumping through Allison.

She heard the sounds of rubber tires squealing on the road outside of the school. Tree branches grew down from the ceiling and reached toward her. She banished them with a glance.

"Flip, we've got to go now. You've got to let me come near you!" It seemed impossible that she could carry him. She could barely stand on her own. But he was too burned to move.

She ran into the heat. Flames shot up in a circle around Flip's body. Allison jumped toward Flip, her skin on fire and burning. A blast of fire flung her backwards.

Flip screamed. The sound pierced her mind and her ears. He convulsed on the ground, wrapped in fire.

*You have to leave now. They're deciding the best way to capture you,* the urgent and strange voice said to her. *They will put collars on you and own you like a dog.*

"Flip, we've got to—"

*I know, I heard him to. It's not real. But if it is Allison, you've got to go,* Flip's voice said faintly inside of her.

"I can't leave you, Flip. You're my only good thing."

*Save yourself. I'll be fine.*

Allison caught the wry humor mixed into the sadness in his thoughts. It was so Flip-like.

Allison heard a chainsaw start up outside.

*Please, the voice begged her. We're cutting into the fence. You have to leave.*

"I can't leave you, Flip," she said, even as she knew she would; even as she turned and ran down the hallway, naked, burnt, and bleeding. She ran out the back of the school, under the fence, and into the blackness of night.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

### **The Gunslinger of Chelem**

**By Lavie Tidhar**

The dream called him to it, sucked him into a maelstrom of swirling colours, hand-drawn clouds, feet stamping, hands clapping, the sound of a siren, the smell of hot mustard, egg yolks, dust devils, the hint of a kiss, a high, yellow sun, sands spreading in the distance, houses made of wood.

High noon. The sun erased all shadows. He stood in the heart of a town, of the kind that appeared in old Westerns. A clock-tower, the hands standing at a minute to twelve. One-storey houses. One long main street: a bank, a bar, a church, a horse trader, a gun shop. In the corner, the prosperous front of the coffin-builder.

Quiet. The town was deserted, a ghost town. Or maybe, he thought, maybe they're all hiding.

He discovered a pair of guns on his hips. He tried them, one after the other. They were like additional fingers in his hands. He was *fast*.

Of course.

He remembered now. He practised drawing them and smiled.

He was the best of the best.

And then he saw him.

The gunslinger stood with his back to the clock-tower. A wide-brimmed hat shaded his face. The hands of the clock moved towards the hour, touched it together—

They both drew their guns but there was only one shot.

The dream spat him out, wiped him out, threw him out to a maelstrom of swirling darkness, chalk-marks, clapping hands, a whistle, the taste of blood; at last, the taste of nothing.

\* \* \* \*

Chelem."

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"Near Yokne'am."

"Was."

"What?"

"Was. Where Yokne'am was."

"For your information, the Society for Bringing Back Yokne'am employs several people with the capacity for Deep Dre—"

"Who?"

"Aharoni."

"Aharoni? The city won't last five minutes and it would be populated by snails. Or bats."

"Shimshon."

"Not capable of dreaming even *one* whole street."

"Anyway."

"Yes."

"We want you to go there."

"To Yokne'am?"

"To Chelem."

"Where is it?"

"Near Yokne'am—"

\* \* \* \*

Raphael woke up. The alarming clock swore at him in Russian.

Alarm, he thought. *Alarm* clock.

The crock began to make the sound of ten newborn babies being eaten simultaneously.

*Clock*, damn it, he thought, and finally heard the normal ring.

Yokne'am, he thought. And then—Chelem.

Where is it?

Coffee. He pulled himself towards the kitchen.

Over the course of the night, the espresso machine had turned into a chicken and had just laid a brown egg.

He took the egg. It had no shell. He tasted it carefully, shrugged and ate it whole.

The cigarette pack, he thought. On the table.

When he approached the pack turned into a lizard and moved away with a cough.

"I was going to quit anyhow," he said to the air. The air ignored him.

A pat on the chicken's back produced another egg, and he took it with him on his way out.

Sum it up for me," Raphael said. He didn't feel so well. The singing birds had almost disappeared to the corners of his eyes and their song—an *a capella* rendition of "The Sea of Wheat"—had faded to a whisper.

"His name's Stephen Cohen," Michal said. Michal drove. Raphael sat in the passenger seat, equipped with dark shades and a headache.

"American?"

"The parents made *Aliyah*."

"Can you turn down the music?" Raphael said.

Michal turned her head to him, began to smile, changed her mind and returned her eyes to the road. "The radio isn't on."

"Oy."

"Do you want a pill?"

"What have you got?"

"Something that'd wake you up."

He dry-swallowed the pill. It had a bitter, not entirely unpleasant taste. The birds disappeared. Silence settled on the world.

Raphael *liked* silence. Raphael liked to sleep, and to dream. Raphael liked his job at the REM, but silence wasn't usually a fact of life at the unit. Silence was a thing of luxury, reserved for those regular policemen who only ever dealt with routine murders, robbery and theft, blackmail and kidnapping that were the waking world's natural lot.

He liked his job, but for those days when he had to get out of bed, get dressed, drink coffee, wear dark shades, take those energy pills of Michal's and go to some damned place in the middle of nowhere.  
*Before* noon.

"So what did he do?" he said now. "What could be so important that I have to get up for it? My range—"

"Your range isn't enough," Michal said. "You need to be physically close."

"What are you trying to tell me?" Raphael said, and he smiled.

"Don't start," Michal said.

They drove in silence.

"So what did he do?" Raphael said.

"Didn't you see?"

"What?"

"The dream. Before you woke up."

He tried to remember. Fragments came back to him, became at last a whole memory. The town, the hour, the sun. The gunslinger.

The shot, and then ... nothing.

"He doesn't just shoot people," Raphael said.

"No."

"He's *good*," Raphael said. "The town itself wasn't too detailed, more like a blueprint for a building than a building itself, but the *focus* was extraordinary. Even from a distance, even second-hand, you can feel it. He built that dream carefully, and he has enough power to hold it there. Who are the people he shoots?"

"You won't believe it," Michal said.

Outside, the view was green; trees and square, blooming fields. A pterodactyl circled high overhead, became suddenly a yellow plastic duck, and disappeared. Raphael cursed all the people who overslept. Apart from him, of course. For him it was *work*.

"He lives somewhere near where Yokne'am used to be. He called the place Chelem. The town exists even when he's awake. You could say he is stuck in the dream. And in the dream, he's the best gunfighter there ever was. Better than Billy the Kid, better than Doc Holliday, better than Jesse James, better than—"

"I get it," Raphael said. "He's good. *Nu*?" It occurred to him that Michal was becoming a little too enthusiastic about her subject.

"So people come to *him*. You understand? They come from all over the country. All over the *world*. He's killed more than thirty people so far—at least those we know of. They come to challenge him. Gunfighters. People egg each other on in the pub—let's see you take on the gunslinger of Chelem."

"*The gunslinger of Chelem*?" Raphael said. "Who came up with that name?"

"The papers," Michal said, "Cohen just doesn't sound the same."

"So what do you want me to do, exactly? Fight him? A stand-off at high noon with guns drawn?"

Michal smiled and stopped the car. "I knew you'd understand." She opened the door and got out of the car. Outside, the green had turned to desert.

"We're there."

\* \* \* \*

Raphael napped. It is a thing different from sleep.

Raphael napped and dreamed of graves. Chelem's cemetery spread out before him. Chelem's cemetery was wide. Spacious. It had *personality*.

It had more than thirty graves.

He approached the gravedigger, a short, bald man who lacked distinct facial features. His voice was a kind of faded memory of the way people spoke in the old westerns.

"You work here long?"

"All the time," the gravedigger said.

"And at night?"

The gravedigger shrugged. "Night?"

The place that is always one minute from high noon...

"Anyone ever leave here and not through the cemetery?"

The gravedigger shook his head. His movements, too, were limited, Raphael saw. Shoulders, head. The hands either digging or resting. "Never."

"He's good, then?"

"He's invincible."

Raphael woke up. No cemetery. No gravedigger. The desert remained.

How do you beat someone like that? The rules of the dream were the gunslinger's rules. You couldn't change the dream and give Raphael, say, a machine gun. Or a cannon. Or a bullet-resistant body. The dream was Stephen Cohen's dream, the gunslinger of Chelem's dream.

The rules. There was only one way to fight the gunslinger. At high noon, in the town square, by the clock-tower. Guns drawn.

And then he began to think. There was a way. Maybe. He thought of the old films.

He went and talked to Michal. She was looking into the distance, into the desert, towards the town. She had a dreamy look in her eyes.

"Michal!"

She shook her head, stood up, and opened the camp bed above the sand for him. Raphael sighed. He hated going into the field.

He climbed into bed and curled up in the blanket. "Where's Teddy?"

"What?" Michal said.

"Teddy," Raphael said. "Where's Teddy!"

Michal sighed, said, "Hold on." Looked in the back seat of the car and brought out a teddy bear with one eye missing.

"There's Teddy," Michal said, but Raphael no longer heard, nor did he see her look towards the town, sigh again and begin stepping towards Chelem, leaving light footprints in the sand, two heavy guns around her waist.

Raphael, instead, fell asleep. His sleep was immediate, and deep.

He slept, and in his sleep he dreamed.

\* \* \* \*

The Man With No Name walked in the desert. He wore a dusty poncho, and a wide-brimmed hat covered his face. He had been in the desert for a long time. He was searching for the gunslinger. He and the gunslinger had met in the past. The gunslinger had killed the Man With No Name's sweetheart. If he ever had a name it was buried deep in the past. The Man With No Name planned to leave the gunslinger himself buried in the past. He had been searching for him for a long time. And now he had found him.

The town was before him. A wooden sign that creaked in the wind said 'Chelem'.

He passed through the open gate. Main Street spread out before him. He saw a lone figure, a scared old man who approached him and began to timidly measure him from head to toe.

Measure him for a coffin.

The Man With No Name laughed, and he put a coin into the man's hand and walked towards the square. The clock at the top of the tower showed a minute to twelve. The sun was high in the sky. There was no shade.

The gunslinger waited for him in the square. The Man With No Name stepped towards him and stopped in the distance.

A firing distance.

"You!" said the gunslinger. "You can't!"

"By the rules," Raphael said, and the Man With No Name repeated his words aloud.

"I assume you're good," the gunslinger said, and he was talking now directly to Raphael.

"The best," Raphael said through the man he had dreamed into being.

"Then it would be an honour for me to kill both you *and* him," the gunslinger said.

The Man With No Name smiled and chewed on an unlit cigar. "You can try," Raphael said, "but no one beats Eastwood."

The second hand ticked, ticked, ticked again ... was that sweat on the gunslinger's face?

The hand moved.

Tick.

Tick.

"Wait," the gunslinger said.

The hand had stopped. One second to noon.

The Man With No Name looked at the gunslinger and spat on the ground.

"Interesting," Raphael said, "but the whole nature of your dream is in the passing of these seconds towards the fight. You can't stop the clock forever."

"If you shoot me," the gunslinger said, and now it was *his* turn to smile, "I'll kill *her*."

The whistle of an approaching train sounded in the distance, and rail tracks appeared in the middle of Main Street and passed through the square. On the track, tied to the rails, was Michal.

\* \* \* \*

"What are you doing here?" Raphael shouted.

"She can't speak," the gunslinger said, "her mouth is gagged." He shrugged. "She tried to challenge me to a fight. They always do. The women especially. I thought that instead of killing her I could use her as insurance. Against you."

"So what happens now?" Raphael said. The Man With No Name moved impatiently. Let me handle this, he seemed to say.

"Now?" the gunslinger said. "The train is on its way here. Can you see it, coming towards us? In a short while—a very short while—it will arrive. I'll be able to control the time element until then. Until a second before it hits your girlfriend. In the last second, the clock will strike twelve, and then ... you can try killing me, or try saving your sweetheart. And if you try to shoot me now, I'll shoot her."

"Colleague," Raphael said.

"What?"

"Colleague, not girlfriend. Or sweetheart."

"Not in this dream," the gunslinger said.

The smoke from the train appeared above the houses. Raphael looked towards the train. The Man With No Name pulled a matchbox out of his poncho and lit his cigar.

"The choice's yours," the gunslinger said.

The Man With No Name smiled, and threw the burning match on the ground.

"I'm going to kill you," the Man With No Name said. "Then she and I will ride together towards the sunset."

"You haven't got a horse," the gunslinger said.

"There will be a horse waiting for us around the corner. As soon as I've killed you."

"And an orchestra, too, I'm sure."

"Of course."

"Don't try anything stupid," the gunslinger said. His hand shook. Something burned at the Man With No Name's back. The match had lit a small line of gunpowder that moved away in the direction he had come from. Heat, growing. The train on its way, so close now, one more moment and it will hit—

The Man With No Name smiled—

A loud explosion sounded as the barrel of gunpowder he had left behind caught fire—

The train rose in the air—

And fell on the coffin maker's shop—



There was the sound of a shot.

The Man With No Name fell to the ground. His hand examined the round hole in the poncho. A tired, wondering expression appeared on his face, as he lay still on the sand.

In the silence, the only sound was Michal's cries. "Raphael!" she shouted. "Raphael!"

The time was one minute past twelve.

Something moved.

"Raphael!"

The Man With No Name sat up. He shook his head and opened the poncho. Underneath was a block of metal. He untied it and let it fall to the ground. He looked towards the clock-tower.

The gunslinger was lying on his back below the tower. He didn't move. When he approached him, the Man With No Name saw the small, neat hole between the gunslinger's eyes.

The Man With No Name shook his head, turned, and went to Michal. He untied her and helped her stand.

She looked at him admiringly. "I never imagined..." she said. "Not even in my most intimate dreams, that the day will come when you ... when I ... together..."

"Michal," Raphael said, "I, too ... I have, feelings..."

"Raphael," Michal said.

"Yes?"

"I'm grateful and everything, but, do you mind...?"

"What?"

"Leaving us alone?"

"Come with me," the Man With No Name said. He took Michal's hand in his and led her behind the corner. A black horse waited for them there. The Man With No Name helped Michal onto the horse and then climbed on its back himself. Michal hugged his waist and he led the horse, slowly and with confidence, through Main Street, where people had begun to gather, and to look at them, and to whisper, and point, and finally smile.

Michal and the Man With No Name rode into the desert, towards the setting sun.

The orchestra played.

\* \* \* \*

Raphael woke up and felt as though he had swallowed a frog.

He hated it when that happened to him. He didn't know why he dreamed of frogs. He hated frogs.

He sat up. He was in the car, in the back seat. Michal was driving. She was whistling an old, familiar tune. *The end of the dream*, he thought, and then, *Ennio Morricone*. Pain blossomed in his head.

Then he remembered the rest. The headache grew. "Michal," he croaked, then swallowed the frog and

burped. That was better.

"Raphael."

"About what I said ... in the context of the dream ... I just wanted to say, I wasn't serious, you know?"

"What?" Michal said. She had a dreamy look in her eyes. Again. "Fine."

"Oh," Raphael said. "Good."

"Yes," Michal said. "It was."

In the end Raphael had to look for the pills on his own.

\* \* \* \*

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### **Locked In** **By Mary Robinette Kowal**

As the ventilator pushed air into his lungs, Samuel savored the brine from the sea. He pretended that he controlled his breathing, but that was as much a fantasy as adjusting his wheelchair. He'd lost his last voluntary ability to Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis a year ago.

For a moment, his nurse's hand interrupted his field of vision. She pushed down on his eyelids so he could blink.

"Dad!" Jacob's voice startled Samuel, but he couldn't flinch. "I found a brain to computer interface that might work."

The need to smile burned inside Samuel, going nowhere.

Jacob looked at the nurse. "May I take him in?"

"Five more minutes. He likes watching the sun slip over the edge."

No. Forget the instructions that he'd given when he could still communicate. He wanted to see this thing his son had brought.

The sun seemed to push the horizon away. Inside his mind, Samuel beat against the wall. Go!

His body took regular breaths.

His heart beat, unconcerned with his thoughts.

His nurse touched his eyelids. Blinked.

Finally, the sun vanished and she wheeled him inside. In the living room, his wife and son stood at a computer. Samuel imagined kissing Madelaine and whispering, "I love you."

"This is the BioDym 3000. It's helped other families like ours." Jacob placed a mesh cap on Samuel's head and connected an umbilical cable to the computer. "It uses biofeedback to allow communication."

A red ball glowed in the middle of the monitor. "Think about making the ball go up or down. Up means *yes*, down means *no*. Got it?"

Yes. Oh God. Samuel strained, imagining the muscles in his arms standing out. The ball moved up.

Madelaine voiced the delight trapped inside Samuel.

"Can you move it down?" Jacob asked.

Again, Samuel focused on the ball and pushed, wanting to grunt with effort.

The ball fell.

Madelaine wrapped her arms around him, weeping. "I knew you were still in there."

He wanted to make the ball rise to answer her, but couldn't focus past his joy.

Jacob cleared his throat. "We have some questions. Is that okay?"

How long had it been since he could answer a question? Of course it was okay.

The ball rose.

"Are you happy?"

He loved his wife. He loved watching the sunset and seeing Jacob every day. Up!

The ball sank.

No. He hadn't wanted that. Samuel thought, *up*, but the ball didn't move.

"Do you want to live?"

The ball sank on its own.

Madelaine squeezed his hand. "Do you mean that?"

The ball rose.

No! His body took slow breaths as he tried to force the ball down.

Nothing.

While he wrestled, knowing the ball wouldn't move, Madelaine wept and ran out of the room.

Jacob looked at the nurse. "Give us a moment?"

The nurse nodded and left the room.

"I tried everything, Dad." Jacob fished a remote control out of his pocket. "I know you wouldn't want to live, locked in like this." He held up the remote and pushed.

The ball went down.

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**Projector**  
**By Daniel LeMoal**

There is no such thing as a *hit man* in The Pegs. There are undercover police officers putting the sting on bitter husbands and wives before they cash in on life insurance. There are liars and lowlifes trying to make a quick and lasting impression on other criminals. And then there are people like me.

I'm not a bad person. But I *am* a drug addict. I've spent most of my adult life taking money and never paying it back; it's one of the few things I've ever been good at. But somehow, I always knew the business end of running an addiction would bite me in the ass. I'd end up in jail. Or worse.

Somewhere along the way, I made the mistake of borrowing money from a man by the name of Napur Nospharrat. Nospharrat routinely loans out five hundred dollars to losers like me and considers it a hidden investment. Looking back, I would have been better off robbing fuel depots.

Here's the thing: when a man like Nospharrat calls you on your cell at 2 a.m. and says that he has a job for you—and then asks how your mother and father are doing—you realize that you have been bought—body and soul. Make no mistake: I've burned my parents for years. I've stolen their money, their car, and even my mom's few pieces of jewelry. But I still love them, in my own marginal way.

"Are you crying, Andy?" Nospharrat asks, his voice sounding low, rich, and well rested. I'm surprised to find I still have a few tears left in the tank, or maybe it's because the last of the Ursa Major ran out hours ago. I look around my mold-encrusted hotel room and watch the walls push in towards me. Nospharrat is everywhere.

"Don't be afraid," he continues. "This is a good opportunity. If you do this favor for me, I'll freeze the interest and cut your principal in half."

This means nothing to me. I can't keep ten dollars in my pocket for more than fifteen minutes; that other two hundred fifty might as well be \$2.5 million. But maybe I can earn my family a few weeks of living.

"All right. I'm in," I say, feeling the first pang of withdrawal in my guts. "Just tell me what you want done."

"No. You and I don't talk ever again. Get in the car downstairs and you'll meet with middle management."

"Thank you, Mr. Nospharrat."

"And one more thing, leave your cellular and wallet in the hotel room."

I stare at the curtains as the wind pulls them out the open window. I could easily make the jump; it's only

a second-story room. But to be honest, I don't care one way or the other anymore.

Mainly for my parents, I write a quick note and shove it in the waistband of my boxers:

*My name was Andrew Jessop. I was 26 years old.*

\* \* \* \*

I half-stumble down to the lobby and promptly get collared by Stokes, a low-level meathead that Nospharrat keeps on the payroll. Like every other associate of Nospharrat's, Stokes looks like he's just walked out of a boardroom. I haven't met one piranha yet who doesn't like to play dress up.

"Cotton Andy," Stokes grins, leading me through the front doors by the collar of my T-shirt. "What's new?"

"Lay off," I snap, pulling out of Stokes's grasp. "I already told him I would do it."

"And your word's as good as fucking gold, right Andy?"

"I'm not stupid," I say. "It's not like there's anywhere to run."

"If you weren't stupid, neither one of us would be here," Stokes says. Yawning, he points me towards a taxi.

When I get into the vehicle—a Zulooc 350—I find myself in a car full of people like me. There's Albert, a runny-nosed "cub" who is a complete write-off. He won't be alive come two months from now. Greenway, by contrast, is in it for the long haul. He's probably at least ten years older than me, hiding a perpetual smirk under an overgrown mustache. Audrey, the last member of our little band, is a hard one to peg. She's young. There are still braces on her teeth and she's managed to keep most of her looks. Her bright green eyes are hidden by a massive layer of black eye shadow and stringy brown bangs. But she has that non-committal stare that's all too familiar. Six months? Six years? Hard to tell when she'll check out.

The thing with Ursa Major is that you know it'll end up killing you. Some might drop out early, but there is the chance—if you're lucky—that you'll get a good ten years or so. All you have to do is maintain your balance. I was good at that. Binge if you must, but make sure to eat often. Sleep and shit at least twice a month. I was able to churn out the bulk of the CGI for two Northern Star movies under that simple formula. Of course, after seven months I was unemployable: in full psychosis and headed for the first of many crashes.

Once a bearhead loses their job, they usually take up other hobbies to consume their hyper-productivity. Mine was storyboarding—not on a computer of course, that was sold off ages ago—but by hand, on any shred of scrap paper I could find. My planned animated opus didn't have a real title yet. I just called it *Untitled Ursa Major Project*. I still remember the day when I stared at my accumulated storyboards completely straight, fresh out of rehab. Each drawing was a precise mini-masterpiece, a shining example of the bear's autistic perfection; but if there was a story in the collective whole, it was lost on me. I tried for days to figure out what the drawings meant, before I finally relapsed.

\* \* \* \*

Stokes gets behind the wheel and crams the rest of us in the backseat, like he's taking his kids to the movies. He elevates the Zulooc into a glide and drives straight from the Boons to the lower-lying flood districts, flying by endless streets of river silt and water-damaged stilt-houses. It all looks like wet cardboard to me. The withdrawal is coming on full force now, so I close my eyes and concentrate on trying not to vomit.

Audrey is the first one to get edgy, tiring of our seemingly endless tour of the city's lowlights.

"So what exactly are we supposed to be doing, then?" she says, her voice implying the bearhead's usual threat: *you wouldn't like me if I was bored.*

"Wrong W," Stokes says. From my vantage point in the back seat, he's just a set of teeth floating in the rearview mirror. "Not what—who. Who, in this case, is Bob Keeney."

At this point, Stokes may as well be speaking Japanese. A string of drool oozes from Albert's lips. If you listened closely, you might be able to hear the faint buzz of four brains trying to connect the dots.

"You want us to kill somebody?" Greenway finally sputters through his mustache, the smirk gone now.

"Good guess," Stokes says. "And the answer is yes. Keeney's a projector, an employee of ours who went AWOL."

A projector. That explains why Nospharrat wanted four druggies for this assignment. The only brain a projector can't play with is one that's already fried.

Stokes hands me a small slip of paper with an address (White Horizon Apartments, Room 519) and a shiny new cellular phone. He also passes around a small photo, a headshot of Keeney, I assume. Keeney doesn't make much of an impression. He has the sort of face that would try to sell you insurance. By the time I've passed the photo over to Greenway, I've already forgotten what he looks like.

"Is he a 360?" I ask.

"That's not important," Stokes lies.

When it comes to dealing with projectors, that's all that matters. There are plenty of low-rez types who can hit you with the odd hallucination for a few minutes. But a true 360 can pull a whole city block of people into a full-blown movie. A projector can't read your mind. They don't have to. You're going to read theirs, and that's just all there is to it.

"Why are we killing him?" Albert asks.

"That's not your problem," Stokes says. "All you need to know is that he walked out on an exclusive contract with Mr. Nospharrat. End of story."

"I don't want to kill anybody. Can't we just beat the shit out of him or something?" Albert says to Stokes, obviously still confused about the nature of our employment. I cringe and shrink down in my seat, seconds before Stokes turns around and punches Albert square in the face. Despite the blood spurting out of his nose, the blow doesn't appear to have registered in Albert's brain.

"Just do what everybody else is doing and you'll be fine," Greenway says, obviously feeling sorry for the kid.

"Fucking druggies ... real nice vibe we've got going on in here now," Stokes complains to himself, before snapping out of it. "Never mind that. The good news is that you're all going to get nice and wet before we send you in. Compliments of Mr. Nospharrat."

Despite the fact I'm sick and scared out of my mind, I feel a lurid grin of anticipation spreading across my face. Which says a lot about why I ended up here in the first place.

\* \* \* \*

We make a pit stop at a Chitalian restaurant, the kind that's always closed. Definitely one of Nospharrat's many properties. Stokes orders us a round of beers and promptly seats himself at another table for a midnight snack.

"Eat well, you elitist fuck," Greenway mumbles, glaring over at Stokes, while Albert stuffs a paper napkin into his nostrils to stop his nosebleed.

I have to admit that Greenway is low class, even by druggie standards (I guess I'm a bit of an elitist myself). But he's funny. He has a dozen different theories as to why Nospharrat is using projectors. One is that Nospharrat needs at least three to help run his warehouse on the north end. A quick illusion makeover can patch a banged up prostitute in seconds.

"He might not even be using actual humans in that place," Greenway says, obviously troubled by the thought that's just crashed into his brain. "Maybe he has the place filled with farm animals ... or mannequins ... or has the johns doing each other. Nobody'd know the difference..."

And then he starts talking about the convenience of using a projector in the fast-paced world of narcotics. Place a projector adjacent to the buy area and you could sell a suitcase full of flour for a million. Most traffickers get a junkie to test the product on site. With a few well-placed hallucinations, no one would be the wiser. Other budding entrepreneurs run strings of shooting galleries on nothing but projectors and placebos.

"These are vile times," Greenway says to himself, shivering. "They should shoot every last projector in the head. Or give them all a lobotomy at the very least. Public safety and all of that."

"Too much money to be made," I tell Greenway. "C'mon, are you telling me you wouldn't drop a few dollars for a nice, clean hallucination?"

"That's what drugs are for," Greenway laughs, exposing a mouthful of half-rotten teeth.

Disgusted, I turn away and look at Audrey, who's slumped halfway under the table.

"He's going to kill us," she says, glancing over at Stokes.

"Not yet," I say. "Not when Nospharrat can still fuck us for a while longer."

Stokes seems to sense the negative mood from our table. He pushes his chow mien away and strides over to us.

"All right kids, it's time for your medicine," he says, emptying a small pill bottle onto the table. Eight small, white tablets roll out. "Take two each."

"What is this?" I ask Stokes, as I separate out two pills with an index finger.

"Meet your new Major," Stokes says. "Just swallow them. We've got a schedule here."

"I don't swallow the Major," Greenway complains. "I smoke him."

"Greenway," Stokes says, suddenly grabbing him by the shoulder. "If you don't take those pills *now*, you'll be smoking the corner of this table."

Stokes gets his point across. Greenway complies by licking his two pills directly off the table, like some anteater from the world's sickest zoo.

Audrey breaks the stifling silence at the table with several involuntary squeaks. Her pills are already long

gone, and her eyes are starting to pop like a manga heroine.

"Is it good?" Albert asks her.

"It's not the bear, but whatever it is, it's real," she says, getting flushed and pink. "Not very strong though."

Once we're convinced that the lab rats are going to live (to be honest, I think we only wait about 30 seconds), Albert and I swallow our pills. Audrey's right, the drugs are weak, but they do the job. As we leave the restaurant, the concrete fizzes and glows in the rain.

"Nothing like tonic for the troops," Stokes winks, before he shoves us all back into our death cab.

\* \* \* \*

Forest Green is a misnomer. It is an endless suburb of white high-rises and grey condos, all competing for the minimalist equivalent of absolute zero. Home to software grunts and accountants who will never own real estate, despite their relative successes. But it beats living in the mold and mud.

Stokes gets us past the gates by flashing a knowing smile to the lone guard. The gate road leads us through an architect's rendition of a petrified forest. Between the cement branches I catch a glimpse of a broken-antlered deer, staring back at us with the soulless eyes of a statue. This lone stab at architectural flavor quickly gives way to the usual strip mall banks and grocery stores, and eventually block upon block of apartment buildings.

There was a time when this was all I ever wanted—a Forest Green apartment, a girlfriend, and some disposable income. I was willing to cut corners to get it. Just like half the people living out here right now—muscling out the employment competition with brain stimulants, sleep nullifiers, personality amplifiers, and whatever the next breakthrough in personal-achievement pharmaceuticals might be.

The popular theory is that two generations of pill-popping proletariat produced the first generation of projectors. Some might argue that was the only positive side effect of the endless line of "office enhancers." But I suppose that really depends on what projector you talk to: the one who's making a decent living in the streets or the poor soul who's locked up in a government laboratory or sanitarium. For all we know, Bob Keeney might just be another projector who finally lost his mind.

Within minutes, Stokes stops the Zulooc beside a sound barrier wall that's veined with artificial creepers. He hauls a briefcase out from under his seat and gives us our first look at the artillery: four simple stubguns (probably kept under a remote safety, if Stokes values his life) and several slim metal tubes.

"Here's how this is going to work," he says. "The best strategy is to simply get into his unit and take him out immediately. Don't waste time mouthing off or trying scare him. Get a couple of good body shots in with the stubs, and then..."

Pausing, Stokes reaches under his seat again, this time handing Greenway a small vibrasaw and backpack.

"What the fuck is that for?" Greenway says.

"Mr. Nospharrat wants the head and hands," Stokes says quietly. "He wants to set an example in case anybody else gets ideas about going AWOL."

Greenway releases a deep, rattled sigh, but I can't tell if he's upset or not. He simply packs away the vibrasaw and looks out the window.



"What if Keeney isn't alone?" I ask. "He might have hired out protection."

"Then you use these." Stokes grins, holding up one of the slim metal tubes. "Defib grenade. It'll drop everyone in the place. I'll get the signal on my cell if any of you pull a pin."

"The defibs are a last resort," Greenway says, trying to make serious eye contact with each of us. "I've already had two heart attacks, and I'm not exactly crazy about getting another jolt with one of these."

"What were you expecting, a company medical plan?" Stokes barks. "Use the defibs or take your chances in a shootout. But just know that if you fuck this up, there's some things that are a whole lot worse than dying."

With that bit of motivational therapy, Stokes hands us our weapons. In about two seconds, Audrey is pulling the trigger on her stubgun, trying to shoot Stokes through the back of his car seat.

"Haha, that's cute—stupid but cute," Stokes laughs, as Audrey continues to pull the trigger to no effect. "Those safeties aren't coming off until you get inside. But trust me, I'll remember this the next time I check in on your kids."

Audrey breaks down hard, but we manage to get her out of the car without further drama. Stokes points us toward a dog park that lies at the foot of Keeney's apartment tower. Even though it's the middle of summer, all of the trees are stripped of leaves, as though the entire park has been sprayed with napalm. It looks like nobody's bothered to pick up after their dog either.

"I'm heading to the end of the block," Stokes calls out the car window. "I'll keep in touch with our intel in the building. If the situation changes, I'll call you."

"And once it's done?" I ask.

"Punch the preprogrammed number on your cell and give me confirmation," Stokes says. "Then you get to go home. Sorry, but you'll have to find your own limo ride back."

"What about your souvenirs?" Greenway says, holding up the empty backpack.

"Give it to the gentleman in unit 623," Stokes says. "He knows where to send it."

With that, the Zulooc veers away from us. We reach the park and take cover behind a half-dead oak, peering up at the lights emanating from Keeney's fifth floor window. Allegedly, it's the only occupied unit on the entire floor.

"Shit, he's seen us already," Albert hisses, and crouches down.

Up on the fifth floor, a solitary shadow leans against the living room windowsill. With Keeney's face just a blank shadow, it feels like an all-knowing, hidden eye is taking in everything at once—the skyline, the dog park, and the half-assed firing squad lying in wait.

"Even if he does see us, he isn't running," Greenway notes, snuffling.

Just then, another, much larger shadow disrupts the glow from the apartment window. A sumo-sized figure emerges, wrapping a thick set of arms around the smaller human form.

"Shit! Who's that then?" I say, as the two shadows appear to gently dance to unheard music. "Stokes said this guy was supposed to be alone."

"Well, call Stokes up and tell him his intel man is on drugs too," Greenway says.

I look across the park to the end of the block; of course, the Zulooc is nowhere to be seen. As I hit the speed dial on the cellular, the first smack of nervousness hits my system. Stokes picks up on the first ring.

"There'd better be a good reason for this call," Stokes's voice crackles. "I know there's no bloody way you've got to the projector already."

"Where the hell have you disappeared to?" I say. "I thought you were waiting at the end of the block."

"I just turned your safeties off," he says. "Blame Mom-of-the-Year. She's made me paranoid."

"Forget that! Are you sure Keeney's alone up there?" As I say this, the larger shadow lumbers out of view; the smaller form seems to have simply vanished. "From down here, we're seeing at least two people moving around in that apartment."

"I just talked with 623 a minute ago. He's kept a wired eye on that door for days. Keeney's alone."

"623 is sleeping on the job. Something's not right up there."

"You're armed and ready for this. I don't care if there's one person or twenty up there. Get it done!"

I wait too long before answering. What Stokes says next isn't worth repeating, other than to say he reminds me exactly where I stand in life. Audrey takes one look at my face and knows the score.

"God, let's finish this and get out of here," she says, pulling her hood down over her eyes.

Albert, however, isn't budging. He sits down at the base of the tree and shakes his head. "We need to call this off. Keeney's obviously hired out protection, or he's in our heads."

"You keep missing the point," I snap. "If we don't get popped upstairs, Nospharrat will still have our heads by the end of the night. Either way we're history."

"And what about my brother? What about your kids, Audrey?" Albert says. "What's Nospharrat going to do to them when we're gone?"

Of course, no one has the answer. Greenway stares at the backpack and chokes out a withered sob. I realize with sudden vehemence how much I hate these people. Nothing's worse than staring into a mirror and seeing yourself just as you are.

\* \* \* \*

They must be in a hurry to rent rooms at the White Horizon. The hallways shine with fresh white latex and someone has even made sure all of the fluorescents are working. Industrial orange air-freshener has asserted military control over the usual apartment-related odors. But other than that the building is barren: no wall of fire, no pit of cobras, or any other hallucination to scare us away. For some reason that depresses me almost as much as anything else.

We take the stairs. The exertion pumps more of the drugs through our veins, and by the time we hit the fifth floor landing, the mood has become considerably less humane. When we reach the door of unit 519, we're nothing more than four rats: cornered, agitated, and ready to bare our teeth.

"Shoot everything that moves," Greenway mutters from behind us. I aim my stubgun at the bolt lock and pull the trigger. The first pulse ruptures the lock and doorknob with ease, while the second cracks the entire door in half. Albert kicks the remains inward and we go storming through the gap. Waving my weapon in an arc in front of me, I scramble into the bedroom. Other than a bare mattress, it's completely empty.

"Nothing?" Greenway asks, as he appears in the bedroom doorway.

"No! No!" I pant with fear and confusion.

"Bathroom's empty too," Albert reports.

We reconvene in the living room and exchange puzzled glances for a few minutes. Other than some leather furniture, the unit looks un-lived in. It's certainly free of sumo-sized bodyguards.

Suddenly, Greenway raises his stubgun to the wall.

"Give me a fucking break," he growls, aiming at a set of eyeballs floating in the floral wallpaper. "You're going to need better camouflage than that."

A man-sized section of wallpaper walks toward us, its arms held high above its head. With a slight ripple, the floral pattern disappears and a shivering, naked Bob Keeney materializes before us.

"Okay, okay. I won't try anything else," he says in a weak voice. Keeney looks like he hasn't had a meal in a long time. Still, he has enough bravado to size us up for another moment. "You know, a mind's a terrible thing to waste. I could have put on quite a show for you."

"Trust me, you're a little late with the anti-drug speech," I say. "Who's in here with you?"

"I'm alone," Keeney says, lowering his voice. "But we have to get out of here ... now."

"Enough," Greenway says, brandishing his stubgun. "We saw somebody else in here. Or was that another magic trick?"

"That's ... my son." As Keeney says this, he involuntarily folds to his knees and starts crying.

"Where is he?" Greenway shouts, getting more manic by the second.

"You won't see him now," Keeney says. "He's scared. But please, lower your voice."

"He fucking should be scared," Greenway says, shoving the stubgun against Keeney's forehead. "Tell him to get out here now!"

Keeney almost starts to laugh.

"No, no. He won't. He's just a baby."

At this point, Albert flinches and points to the black sofa, where the decaying body of woman, bloated and blue, has suddenly appeared. Long dead, by the looks of it; the straps of her nightdress cut into her inflated arms like parcel cord. All at once, the smell of death floods the room. Greenway doesn't take this development very well.

"Now what the fuck is this shit?" he shouts. "Enough of the smoke and mirrors."

"I'm not doing it," Keeney moans. "It's him. I've been trapped here for days and days and days."

Albert's throwing up now, while Audrey simply backs out of the living room. Me, I can't take my eyes off her. A rusted stain covers the lower half of her nightgown, and her hands are frozen in a reaching out position. God wants me to see this up close. I deserve it.

"Make it disappear," Greenway commands, pushing Keeney's head against the wall with the barrel of his

stubgun.

"I can't, she's real," Keeney stammers. "That's my wife."

"Why'd you kill her?" Greenway asks.

"I didn't do it," Keeney cries hoarsely. "He did."

"Shoot him, Greenway," Audrey shouts from the hallway. "Stop talking to him and just do it."

"He came weeks early," Keeney continues. "We just weren't ready. He was hungry all the time."

Finally, Greenway has had enough. He points his stubgun at Keeney's legs and pulls the trigger. Keeney's thin knees fold backward and he's writhing on the floor.

"Hyaaaagh..." Keeney's screaming now, trying to grab onto Greenway's pant leg. Greenway pulls back, like he's shaking off ants, then he kicks Keeney three or four times in the head.

That's when the room goes white hot, and it feels like my eardrums are shredding inside my skull:

**EE ...** and everyone falls to the floor, and I see that Greenway has wet himself, and I suppose I probably have too and

**EE ...** it stops for a brief moment, and all you can hear is the sound of five scared people, in agony.

"He's not going to let us leave," Keeney moans in defeat, just before his head disappears in a cloud of red vapor. Greenway keeps pulling the trigger on his stubgun, destroying most of Keeney and the firewall behind him.

"Greenway! No!" I yell, and the high-pitched shriek starts again:

**EE ...** and I start to feel my stomach swell. I twist on the floor and see Audrey behind me, her eyes rolling up into the back of her head, the pin of her defib grenade hanging loosely from her index finger. In seconds, a thick pulse of electricity cuts through the room, taking out the lights and my consciousness with it.

\* \* \* \*

I'm back in Keeney's bedroom when I wake up, gagged and hogtied. Audrey's beside me, also bound and gagged, her eyes large and streaming with tears. I turn to my right just in time to see the top of Greenway's head being blown off. No sound of discharge, of course, just the click of Stokes's finger and the wet impact.

"Fucking druggies," Stokes says, wiping the barrel of his gun on the mattress. "Real nice vibe we've got going on here now."

I roll over and see that Albert is already gone. Audrey starts shaking and screaming as Stokes shoves his gun into my neck.

"The thing is, the head and the hands were important," Stokes says. "They were part of an overall public relations message that needed to be sent. To the next projector who might decide to run out on his job just to play house."

Stokes spits on the rug, as if making a parting shot at Bob Keeney and his failed domestic dream.

"You should all know by now: if you go against Mr. Nospharrat's wishes, he punishes you." Raising his gun to my forehead, he continues, "You have nobody but yourself to blame."

"No, please," I start blubbering, even though neither Stokes nor Audrey can probably understand a word I'm saying. "Greenway did it. I couldn't stop him..."

But Stokes freezes, his face taking on a puzzled expression. He drops his gun and grabs his chest with both hands. In seconds, his face and neck have inflated to twice their normal size, but he does not explode. Instead, he hovers to the ceiling and hangs there, like a captured helium balloon. With a small shudder, Stokes groans and half of his insides spill out of his mouth.

That's when the boy finally decides to show himself. The defib pulse should have killed a small child; there's no way around it. Unless he was hiding in the bathtub, or made himself ... disappear. But inexplicably, there he is, sitting quietly at the edge of the bed.

"He's only a baby," Audrey cries, having worked her gag off.

Whatever his name is (if Keeney and his wife even had time to name him), he's the smallest baby I've ever seen; a dried piece of umbilical chord sticks up from his belly like a small horn. His skin is clean and white like only babies' skin can be. But his eyes look very, very old.

"Oh, my little boy," Audrey starts cooing, half out of her mind. I cringe and wait for him to scream again, but Audrey's voice seems to have a calming effect. The baby smiles and starts to grow in size, getting fatter and happier until he almost fills the room entirely. The world starts to hum:

**MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM** ... and I feel a flood of relief coming over me, even as Audrey's eyes close and her skin starts to turn blue. I stare into his toothless smile, which is still almost as bright as the sun.

"I'm ready," I tell him, as I remember what happiness feels like: having someone hold you and knowing that it will never, ever fade away.

\* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \*

**William F. Nolan** has eighty-two books to his credit and has had work selected for over 300 anthologies and textbooks. His most famous work, *Logan's Run*—a global bestseller, a major MGM film, and a CBS television series—is now in pre-production as a remake from Warner Brothers and will be directed by Bryan Singer.

Read more about this legendary writer at [www.williamfnolan.com](http://www.williamfnolan.com).

**At the 24-Hour**  
**By William F. Nolan**

It was midnight on a Saturday when Allen entered the 24-Hour Coffee Shop. He was very hungry. Had not eaten for three days. His stomach rumbled, demanding food.

"What'll it be?" asked the waitress. Her name was Joyce. In her early twenties. Thin, plain-faced, with no figure.

"Just coffee," said Allen. "Black."

"Only kind we got," said Joyce. Her tired voice resonated with the long hours of her night shift. "Want cream or sugar—you put 'em in."

"Never use them," said Allen. "They're really not healthy."

"And I'll bet you don't smoke either."

"Right. Gave up cigarettes in senior high. My lungs are pink as a babe's."

"You sound proud of yourself."

"I am indeed. I have very strong willpower."

She set the cup of steaming coffee down on the counter in front of him. "So you're a health nut?"

He smiled. "No, I just believe in proper care of one's body. I work out, take supplements, walk a lot. Never get the flu."

"Goody for you," said Joyce.

"I haven't seen you in here before," said Allen, wrapping his hands around the cup to warm them. It was rather chilly this time of year.

"I'm new to California," she told him. "Came down from Oregon last week. Sign in the window said they needed a waitress, so..."

"How do you like L.A.?"

"I like the weather. No snow or ice." She shook her head, pushing back a loose strand of hair. "No more Oregon winters for this gal. No sireee."

"What did you do in Oregon?"

"Went to school. And froze my rosy butt, if you'll pardon the French."

Allen ignored the harmless vulgarity.

"I come in here often, late at night," he said.

She nodded. "Like a vampire, huh?"

He grinned at her. "Do vampires come here late at night?"

Joyce returned the grin. "None that I've seen so far."

"My name is Allen," he said. "And I'm not a vampire. I sell real estate."

"Hi," she said, "I'm Joyce."

They shook hands.

"You must make a bundle, selling real estate."

"It's a good living," said Allen.

She sighed. "Anything else I can do for you? Sandwich ... cake ... slice 'a pie?"

"No, I'm fine with the coffee." His stomach rumbled.

"You live around here?" she asked him.

"Yes, I do," said Allen. "I live in the San Fernando Valley. Thousand Oaks."

"I know where that is," Joyce said. "Got a cousin who lives in Thousand Oaks. Been meaning to run out and visit her."

She scrubbed idly at the counter top. "Kind of far from home aren't ya—way out here in Northridge?"

"It's a longish drive," admitted Allen, "but I don't mind."

He didn't tell her *why* he came here. For the college kids. From Cal State Northridge. Young. Strong-bodied. In the prime of life. They liked to hang out at the 24-Hour on Saturday nights. In fact, two of them were sitting in the booth directly behind Allen. Two boys. Early twenties. Full of life and laughter. Allen enjoyed their banter and loud voices.

At forty-five, his youth was gone. Here, in the 24-Hour, he was able to recapture a part of it.

"I read this graphic novel about Batman," the shorter of the two students declared. He was reed-slim, with an uncombed mop of red hair. "All about how Ole Bats comes out of retirement after ten years to battle these freakin' mutants that are causing bad shit to happen in Gotham City."

His companion, blond and overweight with ruddy cheeks, was duly impressed. "Awesome."

"Old Bats gets into this humongous fight with the Joker."

"Joker's a cool dude."

"Sticks a dart in one of his eyes and then breaks his back."

"Awesome."

A silence. Then...

"Hey, dude, you know what creeps me out?" the lean, red-headed boy asked of his blond companion.

"What?"

"Watching these candy-ass phonies from Washington spouting about war on TV. They suck."

"All politicians suck," said the blond.

"Yeah, when I graduate I'm going into social work. Make the world a better place."

"The world sucks," said the straw-haired boy.

They were digging heartily into plates of pancakes drenched in syrup.

"Breakfast at midnight," said the redhead. "Way to go."

"Way to go," echoed the blond.

Allen was enjoying their talk. Ah, to be young again, with everything in life ahead of you.

"Sure you don't want anything to eat?" asked Joyce, breaking into his thoughts. "You look kind of hungry."

Allen's stomach growled. He smiled, shaking his head. "Nope. Just the coffee." He took a long swallow.

"Suit yourself," said Joyce, moving on down the counter to wait on another customer.

When the two college boys had finished their pancakes, they left the booth, paid the cashier, and headed for the parking lot.

Clearing their table, Joyce groaned. "Lousy seventy-five cents! Some tip!"

Allen left her a dollar, paid the cashier for his coffee, and headed for the door.

"Have a good night," Joyce called after him, smiling warmly.

"I intend to," Allen replied, smiling back at her. If she wasn't so flat-chested, then maybe...

In the parking lot the thick darkness was diminished by four tall sodium-vapor lights mounted on iron poles. They cast a pale yellow luminescence over the cracked asphalt.

The two boys were about to climb into a blue Honda Passport when Allen hailed them.

"Hey, fellas! Which way you headed?"

"Burbank," said the redhead. "Why you askin'?"

"I need a ride."

The blond peered at him. "Where to?"

"Burbank Airport," said Allen. "I've got a flight out tonight, and my car won't start. Dead battery. I need to catch the redeye into Chicago."

"What about your car?" asked the blond.

"I'll phone the Auto Club from the airport. Have my car towed. I can pick it up when I get back from Chicago."

The two boys looked at one another, shrugged.

"I guess it'll be okay," said the redhead. The blond nodded.

Allen visually checked out the lot. Deserted. No one in sight.

"Get in," said the blond, opening the passenger door.

"Funny thing," said the redhead, as he walked around the Honda to the driver's side. "Us going to Burbank and you flying out of there. What if we were headed for Pasadena?"

"Then I'd be out of luck," said Allen.

The blond stared at him. "Are you legit, mister?"

Allen grabbed him by the throat and banged his head sharply against the driver's side window, shattering it with the force of the blow. The blond fell to the asphalt, unconscious, bleeding from cuts on his cheeks and forehead.

"What the fuck!" shouted his companion, racing around the car toward Allen, hands balled into fists.

Allen met him with a wicked kick in the stomach. The redhead doubled over, retching.

Allen reached into the Honda's glove compartment, found a heavy metal flashlight, and slammed it across



the boy's skull. After that, the redhead didn't move.

Allen's stomach growled. God, he was *so* hungry!

He removed a small bottle of chloroform from his coat and poured the liquid on two white surgical pads. He placed a pad over each boy's mouth and nose.

"Sleep well," said Allen.

He took a rope which he'd wound around his waist, and tied up both boys.

He'd lied to Joyce. He didn't live in Thousand Oaks; his true home was Aantar III in the Alpha Cluster, far from this solar system. He'd still be on Aantar had it not been for the Earthship that had landed there a fortnight ago with its crew of humans.

Allen and his friends at the Grand Feast, he had acquired an overwhelming taste for human flesh. A trip to Earth, which teemed with edible humans, seemed a logical step.

\* \* \* \*

As he stood looking down at the unconscious bodies, Allen regretted that they were both males. Females were more satisfying. Their full, young breasts offered delicious fare. But, on this particular night, he was far too hungry to care.

His stomach grumbled.

Time to eat.

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Jeremy tells us that the following story is inspired, in part, by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

**Pyramus and Thisbe**  
**By Jeremy Adam Smith**

**I. Cooking Meat, Baking Bread, Garlic**

It is told among the exanimate that Pyramus stole into the port of Eusapia undetected by the confraternity that guards the city. Entering the narrow streets through the Arsenal Gate, Pyramus saw a sky unlike any he had seen before. In the vault overhead, a sunset lit the underbellies of the clouds vermillion. Music and laughter played through the stucco homes, mingling with the lap of water against stone. Standing alone on one of the viaducts that crisscrossed the city, Pyramus smelled cooking meat, baking bread, garlic. Humans, he realized for the first time, are creatures of pleasure, their bodies yearning to be caressed.

He walked all that first night, sleepless, as are all machines. The floating city, which had appeared so serenely young at first sight, aged as he walked. All the piers seemed to sag and the walls to lean, so that the water's plangent lapping took on a more sinister cast, like that of a tongue licking a cube of sugar until it is gone. In the hour before dawn, when fishmongers called in the market and awnings opened, Pyramus

saw what appeared to be a human skeleton in the shadows of an alleyway. He approached, but the bones seemed to melt away in the alley's chiaroscuro. Pyramus shrugged, a gesture he'd written into the behavioral subroutine of his human guise. Even machines may be tricked by accidents of light and darkness.

## **II. Baleful Chambers, Secret Passageways**

Of course, at that time, no city in the solar system was more inclined than Eusapia to enjoy life. Because its citizens loved Eusapia so much, they had built a mirror image of their city beneath the first—so Pyramus had heard—to serve as a destination for their dead. Hearing the tales of Eusapia's beauty—whose passing exiles and the exanimate alike now lament—Pyramus had formed a desire to see with his own optical units the city's peaceful waters and elegant galleries. Powerful among his kind and proud in his thinking, the android's desire to see the city was only increased by Eusapia's embargo against activated intelligence.

On the morning after that first night, Pyramus saw Thisbe sitting in a café on the Via Vittoria, a porcelain cup raised to her lips. She is well-remembered by those who tell the story. Her face had the strength of carved wood but its skin was white as vellum. Her hair and the irises of her eyes were of a hue that seemed darker than black. Pyramus sent a yellow rose to her table, and she, liking the fleshly mask that concealed his true face, invited him to sit with her. At the table Pyramus read her eyes as human beings read the sky, fashioning constellations from the patterns of light he found there. New to the mechanics of love, he did not yet understand that Thisbe's eyes were not windows but mirrors.

The two strolled down the street through the stalls of the bazaar, where Thisbe purchased a lavender scarf and paper cone of roasted chestnuts. As they walked, Pyramus pretended to eat the chestnuts, leaving a trail of burst shells along the cobblestones. That evening they rode the bottle-green vaporetto along the city's Grand Canal and watery byways, surrounded by many strangers as they conversed.

From the gunnel, Thisbe pointed to an ivory line of colonnades arrayed along the canal. "There I played when I was a girl, with my friend Fabrizia. My family lived nearby on the Palazzo Pisani."

"What did you play?"

"I was sometimes a unicorn, occasionally a dolphin, often a mermaid!" As she said the name of each creature, Thisbe gestured and wiggled with imaginary hooves and fins. "For many minutes at a time I truly believed that I was a dolphin, and that Fabrizia was a mermaid. Sometimes, as I would sit at my harpsichord lessons or do my chores, I felt myself suddenly and secretly change, becoming again some far-fetched animal."

"It sounds to me like a wonderful childhood."

"Oh, no," said Thisbe. "I was always afraid. Just as I concealed many beasts within myself, so I assumed that others did the same. I feared that at any moment, my papa might be transformed into a mindlessly ferocious griffin, or my tutors into monstrous ants. I imagined that behind the doors of the cathedral where we played—" she pointed back to the diminishing spires and colonnades "—were concealed baleful chambers and secret passageways, where a cabal of griffins and mermaids conspired against me."

Pyramus feigned a deep breath while he searched for a similar story to share. "When I was new to creation, I did not imagine myself to be anything but what I was. I looked up, however, at the planets and stars—true celestial bodies, not the imitation lights of the Eusapian vault—and yearned to travel among them. I wanted those isles in the sky to be united in the body of my memory. I wanted and I still want the entire universe to be a part of myself."

"Such a quest will take an eternity," she said.

"Do you fear an everlasting life?"

"No," she said. "I look forward to it, as do all Eusapians."

He stared at her. Though his argentic eyes reflected only the lights on the water, behind them Pyramus surrendered to sympathy for Thisbe's mortal plight. "Like you, I had fears that grew from my fantasies," he said. "In my imagination I saw the universe expanding and all things in creation moving further apart from each other, and I grew old in the distances between objects. I did not die, but as time stretched I grew tired, knowing that everything around me would perish."

Thisbe leaned against the white handrail, the wind gusting as the boat curved around Santa Marta. "It sounds to me as though you are the one who fears the prospect of perpetual life," she said; her black hair was cast across her face like a shadow.

"Perhaps," replied Pyramus. He touched her cool, dry hand with his own and then brushed the hair from her face. "It is also possible, Thisbe, that I love life too much."

### **III. The Sky of a Hundred Hulls**

In the days and nights that followed, Pyramus found within himself the capacity for pleasure—both giving and receiving it—that had previously lain dormant in his psyche. It was as though the metal beneath his skin had melted to organs and bones, the mantle of flesh absorbing and transforming what it concealed. His disguise was so complete that even in greatest intimacy Thisbe did not guess.

How was it, then, that Pyramus was eventually detected? Those who tell this story do not know. Perhaps a mechanical gesture betrayed him to some loyal citizen of Eusapia. Possibly he stepped within the field of some device whose power he did not anticipate.

It is known that when the agents of the confraternity burst into the room Pyramus and Thisbe had come to share, the two lovers flew apart to either side of the Corinthian bed.

"What is this?" Thisbe demanded. A prima donna of the city's opera and every bit as proud as Pyramus, she did not hide her nakedness. Had Pyramus and Thisbe been given more time together, we may suppose, surely the weight of one's haughtiness would have borne down on the other.

"Madame," said the first brother, eyes concealed beneath the shadow of a scarlet hood, "perhaps you are not aware—or perhaps you are—but the one you lie with is a Jinnee."

She laughed. "You cannot expect me to believe that! Look at him. He is a man and nothing else."

The brother drew a weapon from his robe and flame flashed from the nozzle. Thisbe did not scream but covered her eyes with her hands. Faster than any human could, Pyramus fled to the balcony overlooking the city's Grand Canal. The flame creased the air and caught him there between the French doors, devouring the flesh until only metal remained. A dervish of black smoke filled the balcony.

How well we know the fear and hatred of our people for the unborn! In such moments as when the façades we know crumble, then fear does its work. We must therefore pity Thisbe as a breeze cleared the smoke and revealed a lustrous white figure crouching among the balusters, its violet optical units searching her darker-than-black eyes. All reason left her face and she dashed from the bed to the balcony, as Pyramus had a moment before. He opened his metal arms as if to receive her, but she leaped past him and over the balustrade, down into the Grand Canal. No machine can ever forget anything, and so Pyramus must still remember the reverberation of her body shattering on the surface below.

He jumped after her, the weapons of the confraternity slashing after him, crashing down into the dun-colored water, sinking to the debris-scattered bottom. He recovered himself and stood gazing around. Schools of fish hung like mirror shards in the auroral waters and green algae covered every rock and wall.

Thisbe, her body cruciform, was already ascending to the surface. The eyes that had been mirrors were now walls. Pyramus fled along the canal floor beneath the sky of a hundred hulls. He pulled a grate from the brecciated wall and retreated into the algae-lined tunnel behind it. Foolishly, Pyramus waited for death to come. Hours passed, but he did not die. He would never die.

\* \* \* \*

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#### **IV. Message for Cordelia**

That night he roamed the canal floors until he found, in the submerged foundation of a palace, an underwater grotto that he could enter through the eyes or open mouth of a face carved in the stone. The eyes of the face were wide with what he supposed was terror; the mouth formed the oval of a scream. Inside, the walls of the small rotunda were lined with pilasters and entablatures whose friezes depicted a myriad of birds sailing through the solar system. Swimming up to the level of the frieze. Pyramus traced an albatross perched atop Mercury. Sparrows nested in the planetoids between Mars and Jupiter and, at the solar reaches, hummingbirds flitted among the cometary masses of the Oort cloud. The grotto was very still and yet somehow Pyramus expected something to be born there. It seemed to him like a replica of the universe at some cosmic Precambrian point, swathed in nebulae and still gravid with stars.

As time passed, Pyramus began scrounging the cast-offs of the city, sculpting them into images of Thisbe. One such Thisbe, was constructed entirely of variegated metal rings, twirled on a rope like a ballerina, toes pointed and arms raised above her head. Another cut from driftglass seemed lost in a moment of corporeal rapture. As Pyramus built his Thisbes and watched Eusapia from its foundations, the impression he'd formed of the city on that first night deepened. The face behind the mask of serenity emerged as lassitude. The tattered whole of Eusapia seemed to be sinking into its own canals.

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From one month to the next, his creations grew greener with algae. This reverie lasted until one evening he ventured to the surface seeking a particular carnelian glass. Ascending a cobblestoned slope slick with rain, he crept across a piazza to a glass shop he'd robbed twice before. Pyramus carefully removed a window and climbed inside. He wore a stolen scarlet robe of the confraternity, which concealed his mechanical appearance.

Standing in the moonlight of the workshop, Pyramus found that he was not alone. An old man slept, slumped in a corner chair, caged in bars of moonlight from the jalousies. The old man did not wake up at the racket of his entrance, so Pyramus felt no concern as he sought the glass in the cubbies where it was stored.

"Who is there?" the old man suddenly croaked.

"Only a visitor, old man," said Pyramus. "I've come for glass, but I'm afraid that I cannot pay for it. I will leave if you ask me to."

"That voice, like wind resonating within a bronze bucket. Are you a ghost?"

Pyramus realized that the old man, whose irises were like two pearls in the moonlight, could not see him at all.

"Yes," said Pyramus, feeling it safer to call himself a dead human than a living machine.

The old man smiled and pulled his chair closer to where Pyramus stood. "Wonderful. Did you cross over under the Pagode just this evening?"

"Yes, I did."

"What was your name when you were alive?"

"Pyramus."

"That's an unusual name; I do not think I've ever known anyone named Pyramus, and I've known almost everyone in Eusapia. You must have died a very long time ago. My own name is Calvino."

"Greetings, Calvino."

"Tell me something, Pyramus, about the underworld. Have you ever met my wife, Cordelia, there on the other side of the river?"

"Cordelia? Yes, I know Cordelia. She speaks of you often."

"Does she miss me, then?"

"Yes, she sits at the edge of the river and waits for you. I passed her on my way to your city."

Calvino lowered his head. "She waits for me," he said, and then burst into laughter. He stood, raising his arms, and his laughter fell off into choking, arms circling in the air.

"She waits for me, does she?" he said. "Could you tell her something for me?"

"Of course."

"Tell that old witch I'm glad she's dead, and that life's been better without her. Tell her that when I get to the underworld—and it shouldn't be long now—that I plan to look up Mireille, a fine woman who knew how to treat a man, whom I should have married instead of her. Tell Cordelia that I won't need her nagging and her pity in the underworld."

He paused. "Could you do that for me?"

"Yes, Calvino, I will."

"Thanks so much." The old man collapsed back into his chair with a shallow wheeze and folded his hands in his lap. "I am glad to have encountered a ghost instead of one of the unborn," he said. "It's rumored that a Jinnee lurks in the canals of the city and ventures out to frighten little girls."

"Really? I find it difficult to credit such tales."

"Oh, there's nothing to believe in, really. The Jinn are a creation of the science we left behind." Calvino lowered his voice to a raspy whisper. "My father, however, claimed that the unborn could serve as intermediaries between the city below and the city above, and that's why the Brothers banished them from fair Eusapia. Couldn't stand the competition!" He laughed again. "You're dead," he said, "so I don't see any harm in revealing this to you."

"Thank you for your confidence. May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Could you tell me how to get to the Pagode from here? I seem to have lost my way."

"No sense of direction, eh? Start at the Campo di Confraternita on the Grand Canal..." Calvinò gave Pyramus the directions.

"Thank you, Calvinò," said Pyramus, "I will now take my leave."

"Wait, Pyramus," Calvinò called, as the android swung a leg through the window frame. "If you braved the river to enter the city of the living, you should at least get what you came for. Take the glass you want, no charge. I know that the dead have no money. And please, leave through the door this time. I insist upon it."

Pyramus withdrew his leg but did not accept the glass. He did not return to the grotto that had been a shield against the city and his grief. If Thisbe could be found in the necropolis of Eusapia, then Pyramus would go there. As far as any of the exanimate know, his sculptures still stand in the grotto—lifeless, unseen.

## **V. The Three Noses of Cerberus**

Still disguised in the scarlet robe of a brother, Pyramus followed Calvinò's path from the Campo di Confraternita to the Pagode. He surmounted the high, crenellated wall without difficulty and found himself standing in an elegant parterre dominated by a temple whose façade was formed as an enormous human face, flower-festooned and vine-crossed, its mouth a gilded arch. If the face of Pyramus' grotto seemed gripped with terror, this one seemed almost to guffaw.

Pyramus crossed through the arch into the nave of the temple. He heard voices behind the altar.

"That was bloody awful," said one.

"It gets worse every year," said another. "The city grows less pious by the day."

"One day, mark me, the funerals will turn to riots," said a third.

"Until that day," said the first brother, "we have our duty."

"Yes, let's dispose of this one and get some sleep."

Pyramus heard footsteps, a heavy thud, and a door slam. Then silence.

He stole behind the altar, where he found a curving stairwell. It unfurled into a chamber below, a dim circular room dominated by unfamiliar and archaic machinery. Behind the tessellated walls, he heard rushing water.

As Pyramus skulked in the dusky shadows at the foot of the stairs, he saw three brothers, their hoods thrown back, standing in a circle around a corpse. They had severed the head and placed it into a transparent sphere. The beheaded man had a handsome face, still young, with thick, black hair and high cheekbones. A second sphere sat next to the head, hollow but viridescent. In one rack along the far wall there sat a row of a dozen silver human skulls.

One brother removed a note from the coffin that sat in the center of the room. "He wants to be a famed actor in the underworld," he said, reading it. The three of them laughed.

Not waiting to see what would appear in that second shimmering sphere, Pyramus retreated back up the

stairs and found a passageway that curved above the chamber and then down a second stairway.

Pyramus stepped through a portal into a fulgurite cavern. A fast-moving river cut through the cavern, flowing into and out of the tunnel that was as dark as Thisbe's hair. Hundreds of sickles of light creased the cavern's glassy ceiling, flickering.

Pyramus approached the river and stood on its terraced earthen banks. As he gazed down into water, a shadow took shape in its depths. He stepped away. The shadow grew subtle and swelled to the surface. Three canine heads emerged from the water, and Pyramus retreated from the banks to the wall. As he did so, the whole metal blackness of the canine's body stood in the water and then on the banks, its ears brushing the top of the cavern, six violet eyes fixed upon Pyramus' hooded form.

"You resemble one of the confraternity," began the middle head, "but you do not smell like one of them," finished the head on the right.

"Don't I?"

"No," said the left head. The middle one growled, lips peeling back over rows of sharp teeth.

"What does my scent reveal?" Pyramus stepped away from the wall, drawing near the dog.

"That you have traveled from beyond Neptune," said the first head, "but lived in the gutters of fair Eusapia," said the second, "and then walked amid the brothers," said the third.

"It's all true. You possess a highly perceptive nose."

"In fact, interloper, we have three noses," said the first head.

"Dog, may I ask you how one gains entrance to the underworld?"

"Is that what brings you to the river?" said the second.

"Yes. On the other side I seek my true love Thisbe."

"Your true love? We suppose that in your travels you must have gathered that among the living that only members of the confraternity are permitted to enter the city of the dead," said the third head while the first one snapped at the air.

"So I have gathered."

"Why then should we allow one such as you to pass into the dead city we protect?"

Pyramus removed his hood, revealing his violet eyes. "According to your confraternity, I am not among the living," he said. "Surely this is sufficient cause to let me pass."

The three-headed dog rose up on all fours and stalked the android on the wide bank in an incrementally tightening gyre, growls rippling from head to head. "Do you want to know what we are, Jinnee?" it asked.

"Of course. I am interested in the essence of all things."

"We are what divide the living from the dead," said each head in turn. "When the barriers between the two realms began to fall on Earth, the founders departed for Neptune and hid the two cities of Eusapia in its sky. The people of Eusapia came here to escape one such as you, abomination."

The three heads leered at Pyramus. The teeth, he saw, were formed of stalagmites and stalactites of diamond, each mouth an icy, glittering cave.

"Are you not an abomination yourself?" said Pyramus.

The three heads reared up as one and roared across the glassy ceiling. As the roar died, Pyramus realized that the dog had been laughing.

"An abomination? Us?" it said. "Our form does not in the least resemble yours."

"My shell is of metal, as is yours. Like your own, my eyes glow violet and perceive heat as well as light. Do you breathe in the water or on land?"

"We have no need of breath."

"Nor do I. Do you sleep?"

"We must be ever vigilant."

"As must I. Neither of us knows what sleep is, do we? Nor do we know what it means to forget."

The first head lowered between the shoulders. "It is true," it said. "I remember all who have ever passed this way. I wish it were not so. My head grows heavier with each moment..."

"Fool!" snapped the third head. "Why do you listen to this outrage? Do you not see that he is trying to trick us?"

"Do not speak to me that way!" said the first. "Too long have I tolerated your imperial barking!"

"Brothers!" said the middle head, rearing up above its counterparts. "Do not bicker, please, in front of the interloper!"

Taking advantage of the momentary diversion of the argument, Pyramus darted between the dog's legs and plunged into the rushing green river. He tumbled end over end through the water. Carried deeper by an irresistible current, Pyramus saw the dog's three-headed shadow blur and diminish and disappear behind him. The water stilled and seemed to freeze. Pyramus had the sense of tumbling once again, and yet he remained at rest. The invisible antipodes of down and up exchanged places. Colors took shape above him. A paddle dipped down and he passed under the narrow cloud of a boat's hull.

## **VII. The Spirit of Thisbe**

Pyramus waited until the following night to leave the canal. When he finally climbed granite steps cut into the side of a pier, he found a city that was strangely reminiscent of the one he'd left. Yet nothing grew or swam in the Eusapia of the dead—indeed, there was little atmosphere to support the lives of plants or fish. As on the moon from whence Pyramus had come, vibrations traveled slowly through the thin air, leaving it a city of odd echoes and silences.

Perhaps only his machine ears could have heard the aria. He followed it, sung in a weirdly hollow voice, along the canals and over the bridges of the hushed and vacant nighttime, until he saw a lone figure garbed in a long saffron cloak standing at the parapet of the Grand Canal. He could not see the face, but he knew the voice—wintry though it was—as that of Thisbe. Pyramus approached, not daring to speak, knowing fear for the first time in his long life. As he reached for her shoulder, the artificial dawn broke over the buildings and the night collapsed into shadows that grew jagged in the new light. She turned at his touch.



"Pyramus!" she cried.

Pyramus drew back. Beneath the hood he saw a silver skull, its jaws opening and closing, mechanical as a museum clock. "My love, my unicorn, my griffin!" said the skull. "I have waited for you here, knowing that you would seek me out." The eyes, darker than black, which had so entranced Pyramus that morning on the Via Vittoria, were gone. Two small red stars twinkled in the sockets that now faced him.

The spirit of Thisbe saw Pyramus cringe and, misunderstanding his gesture, said, "I forgive you, darling." She flung back the hood and twirled around in her saffron robes. "See me now! I am as metal as you are. I could not live with the thought of having lain with you, but now that I am dead, nothing stands between us."

Daybreak stained the pilasters and pediments crimson. Hundreds of metallic voices rose in aubade, straining through the sparse medium. As Thisbe reached out with her phalanges to touch Pyramus' nacreous metal face, he fled past her. A thousand doors opened as he ran. From them streamed a parade of skeletons draped in different styles of multihued robes, filling the streets and alleyways with bobbing hoary skulls and the clatter of metal bones. The necropolis kept changing as he ran, growing younger, becoming less and less like the city above it. Through the teeming lanes and past the gaudy façades, there was no hint of the rot Pyramus had found in living Eusapia. Dead children ran through the piazzas, dressed in costumes of the Sixth Crusade. Violinists played on rooftops, laughing with every muffled note. Acrobats tumbled through streets and over viaducts. Though there were no natural birds, convection-carried bright-feathered kites improved upon them.

Pyramus ran through the day until he found the littoral reaches of the city, which lay against the curve of the dome itself. Glittering waves stretched off to a far horizon, equivalent to Neptune's instead of Earth's, where the orange sun sat low over the long ocean. The sky-makers had done their work well: every new sunset was different from the one before.

### **VIII. The Recitations of the Exanimate**

Here ends the story of Pyramus, for he grew derelict in the Arsenal at the edge of the city. Though living Eusapia has long since sunk into itself, he still haunts the dead manufactories of the Arsenal. The confraternity no longer looks for him, although Thisbe does. He must hear her arias as she searches among the listing carracks and boom cranes. One inimitable sunset succeeds another, although those who tell the story suspect that they all look the same to the android. Remembering him, we may suppose that Pyramus believes that he lives in a dream from which he cannot wake. It is not Eusapia that imprisons him, but his own thoughts.

For the exanimate citizens of Eusapia—and as we speak there are, alas, no others—Pyramus' exile is a kind of performance. Nothing in the necropolis is prized more highly. While the living Eusapia fled care as well as change, the necropolis still seethes with invention and restless beauty. Many of the dead take extravagant new names and professions. The necropolis is crowded with aerialists, generals, alchemists, duelists, and terpsichoreans, and permeated with the recitations of artists and dandies, which begin with first aubade and end only at the final nocturne. To be sure, all the mundane trades of living Eusapia are practiced underground, often to little effect—fishermen, for example, mechanically troll the waterways with their nets, which come up empty every day. The stalls of the fish markets stand barren, although exanimate customers still arrive to haggle over the price of fish that are not there. To those customers, and to Pyramus and Thisbe, the necropolis is hell. To those of us who tell their stories, however, it is heaven.

Since 2001, **Bev Vincent** has been a contributing editor with *Cemetery Dance* magazine. His first book, *The Road to the Dark Tower*, an authorized companion to Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series, was published by New American Library in 2004 and was nominated for a Bram Stoker Award. He co-edited *The Illustrated Stephen King Trivia Book* with Brian Freeman for Cemetery Dance Publications.

He's published over forty short stories in magazines and anthologies, including *Cemetery Dance*, *All Hallows*, *From the Borderlands*, *Doctor Who: Destination Prague*, *Blue Religion* (edited by Michael Connelly), *Corpse Blossoms*, *Shivers II & IV*, and *Dark Wisdom*. You can visit Bev on the web at [www.BevVincent.com](http://www.BevVincent.com).

"Sufficiently Advanced" was the winner of the 2006 Apex Halloween Short Fiction Contest.

**sufficiently advanced**  
**By Bev Vincent**

The first native materialized beside Henry shortly after he clambered out the escape hatch of the *Odyssey*. The craft had crashed in a grassy field not far from what appeared to be a primitive village.

Until he'd expended the last of the fuel for the navigational thrusters, Henry had hoped to maintain a controlled descent all the way to the planet's surface. After tumbling the last several hundred feet, the *Odyssey* lay in ruins behind him. No amount of effort or material was going to make the shuttle airworthy again. He felt fortunate to have escaped the crash with only a few bruises, ringing ears, mild disorientation, and a nasty cut above his right eyebrow.

Henry was so preoccupied with checking his body for injuries, he didn't immediately notice the aboriginal person—a term he'd been taught in sensitivity training. He jumped with surprise when he looked up from his inspection and saw the man staring at him from a few feet away.

When the second abo popped out of thin air next to the first, Henry gasped. Now he understood why he hadn't heard the first man approach. Unless he was delusional, these people were either capable of teleportation or of making themselves invisible. He had witnessed many strange things during his travels but nothing like this.

The men said nothing, merely stood with folded arms, looking at him. Henry's spacesuit made folding his arms uncomfortable, so he just stared back. Both men were dark-skinned and wore strands of colorful beads around their necks. They reminded Henry of pictures he'd seen of Zulus: bare-chested and barefoot, wearing what looked like flaps of rawhide around their waists. They weren't carrying spears, nor did they have bones piercing their noses, but they looked vaguely feral. He hoped they weren't cannibals. Given the state of his ship, he was stuck here. The distress signal he'd triggered before entering the planet's gravitational field wouldn't reach Earth for hours and it would be weeks or months before anyone could respond. He didn't relish playing Charlton Heston on the planet of the teleporting savages in the interim.

Simply raising his arm to check the gauges on his wrist was enough to make him wince. He might not have broken any bones, but he sure as hell hurt all over. At least the atmosphere was breathable. If it hadn't been, he would have lasted only as long as his air supply.

Clenching his teeth to hold back any groans that might frighten the natives, he released the seal on his helmet. Air hissed. The natives frowned and jabbered at each other in an unintelligible lingo. He inhaled slowly—the only familiar aroma he detected was smoke—and tucked the helmet under his arm. He held out his hands, palms forward, in what he hoped was a universal gesture for them to remain calm.

One of the men tugged the helmet from Henry and scrutinized it. When he noticed his reflection in the

faceplate, he peered at it, making exaggerated faces. After a moment he grinned and showed it to his partner. They jabbered some more, then the first abo wagged his fingers in the air and the helmet vanished.

"Hey, I need that," Henry said, taken aback by what he had just witnessed.

The two men frowned. They conferred for a minute, glancing occasionally in his direction.

"I didn't mean to yell, if that's what you're going on about," he said.

The first native pointed his index finger at Henry and twirled it in a small circle. Henry's inner ears tingled and his throat itched.

"What was that?"

"You understand us now?" the finger-twirling abo asked.

"How did you do that?"

The man shrugged. "I am Kamir. This is Jelvin."

Henry wasn't sure about shaking hands. "Henry," he said.

"Come," Jelvin said. "We will see to your injury and get you food."

"I still don't see how you—" he started. Kamir grabbed his gloved hand and they were suddenly somewhere else. "Holy gods," Henry said. His body felt like it was made of foam. Then, gravity and mass reasserted themselves and normal feeling returned to his body. They were standing in the middle of a circle of logs in the village he'd spotted during the last, dizzying seconds of uncontrolled descent. "That's unbelievable."

"What?" Jelvin asked.

"The way you zip from place to place."

Kamir wagged his finger in the air again. "No, it's working properly," he said to Jelvin. "We don't understand."

"If I need to get from here to there," Henry said, pointing to the ground in front of him and then to a spot near a tree, "I have to move my legs and walk."

Kamir grinned. "You are primitive, then?"

"I wouldn't exactly..." He stopped. It wasn't the time to debate who was more advanced than whom. Unless these guys had some other interesting tricks up their metaphorical sleeves, he was going to be here a while.

Though smoke plumes wafted from the chimneys of several of the wooden huts, the village looked abandoned. "Where is everyone else? Are you alone?"

"We are not used to strangers falling from the sky," Jelvin said. "We were sent to greet you. The others will be here soon."

"Can the others tele—?"

He didn't get a chance to finish his question. Static electricity and ozone filled the air around him. A moment later, the village was full of people, adults and children alike, who gathered around him in a ragged circle. A small boy ran up and tugged on his leg. The next thing Henry realized, he was dressed only in his shorts and t-shirt. His spacesuit hung from a nearby tree branch. His helmet was on the ground beneath.

"Did he do that?"

Kamir shrugged and looked at Jelvin with raised eyes. Jelvin shook his head.

"Marcanda will see to your injury," Kamir said. He indicated a young woman sitting on a tree-stump seat in front of one of the huts. When he reached for Henry's hand, Henry flinched.

"I'll walk, if you don't mind."

"Of course."

Marcanda had long dark hair tied back with a leather strip. She wore a colorful skirt that reminded Henry of the South Pacific, and nothing else. He tried his best to be polite and keep his eyes averted from her pert breasts, but the way they swayed when she rose to greet him challenged his resolve.

"I'm Henry." He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "They said you would..."

She dipped her hand into a wooden bowl that hadn't been there the moment before, and moved closer. Her body heat radiated against him like a furnace. Her dark oval eyes widened and her pupils dilated when she reached out to run a finger over the gash in his brow.

Henry tried to speak, but the words died in his throat as the blanket of her warmth made itself felt. He flinched and raised his hand to his forehead. The place she had touched suddenly grew hot. "Hey!" His probing fingers found no trace of his injury. He swallowed. "How'd you do that? Magic?"

"I simply healed you," Marcanda said.

The heat dissipated throughout his body like adrenaline. The aches in his muscles vanished. "Wow," he said, stretching his arms. "That felt nice. Could Kamir or Jelvin have healed me, too?"

Marcanda's smile was enigmatic. "Of course, but why would you want them to? Unless you prefer—"

"No, no—not at all."

"Are you outcast?"

"Huh?"

"We know people live across the mountains. We have seen their smoke. Did your people put you in that container and hurl you over the mountains? Is that why you fell from the sky?"

Henry's gaze had dropped momentarily to Marcanda's chest, so he wasn't paying close attention to her words. When he realized she was waiting for a response, he blushed. "No, I came from up there. From another planet."

"I do not know that word."

"It's what we're standing on." Her brow remained furrowed. "This big lump of rock." He stomped on the ground and swept his arms around to indicate their surroundings. "All of it. There are other places like

this up there, circling other suns.” In case she didn't know that word either, he pointed at the glowing yellow mass in the sky.

"You must have injured your head in the fall," Marcanda said. "I will prepare another potion."

"You've never seen the people across the mountains?"

She shook her head. Her breasts bobbed.

"Couldn't you just ... wrinkle your noses and zap yourselves over there?"

She laughed. "Of course. But why would we? We have everything we need here."

"Everyone can cast spells?"

"We do not understand why you cannot. You breathe like we do." Her long fingers touched the bare skin of his thigh and slid up to his crotch. "Your body reacts the same way as any other man's. Are the rest of your people over there similarly impaired?"

Pleasant as Marcanda's intimate touch was, Henry couldn't think with her hand on his groin. He eased back and tried to will his body to settle down.

"Like I said, I came from another planet."

"Up there," Marcanda said.

"Right."

"From where the rains come."

"Beyond that. From where the light and the darkness come. From the stars."

Marcanda considered this for a minute, then she put her hand over her mouth and giggled. Her alluring body swayed, but Henry felt his muscles tightening at her reaction. She took him by the hand. An eye-blink later they were standing amid the other villagers again.

"Stop doing that," Henry said.

"He says he comes from the source of light and darkness," Marcanda announced.

The villagers burst into laughter. Henry's ears burned with humiliation.

"He must have been seriously injured," Marcanda said. "We will gather together and cast a healing. The harm must be grave for him to believe such a thing."

"Do you see that?" Henry said, pointing at the smoldering ruins in the distance. "That is a ... spaceship." He was going to call it an escape shuttle, but he didn't want to explain how he'd been forced to abandon his shipmates. He didn't want to think about how they were probably all dead now and drifting forever onward inside their hollow metal casket. "It brought me here from far, far away. My home circles a different sun. Out there." He pointed to the clouds.

No one laughed this time. They muttered among themselves and nodded gravely. Three villagers gathered around a cauldron that hung over a raging fire and added things Henry didn't recognize. *Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble*, he thought.

"I'm not from across the mountains," he said.

They didn't appear to be listening any more. They had dismissed him as a raving lunatic. They added more ingredients to the boiling water. Henry hoped their recipe didn't include him.

"I can show you." He marched over to the tree and rummaged through his spacesuit pockets until he found his portable computer. He shook it near his ear to reassure himself it hadn't been damaged in the crash, then brought it back and stood next to Kamir and Jelvin. "Look at this."

Marcanda approached from behind and stared over his shoulder. Henry felt her body brush against his. Steeling himself against untoward thoughts, he powered up the computer. With a few thumb strokes, he pulled up the encyclopedia and started a video about space travel.

"This is a rocket-powered spaceship taking off from my home world. Here is my ship, orbiting our moon. We're called astronauts." He flipped to another video and tilted the display so everyone could see it. "These are my crewmates. That's the captain." Was *the captain*, he thought. By now, the radiation leak would have killed everyone aboard the ship. And Henry would be dead, too, if he hadn't been on an EVA repairing a broken sensor.

"People like these will come here from my planet one day soon to pick me up." He looked up when he sensed Kamir and Jelvin moving away from him. Behind him, Marcanda hissed.

"Witchcraft," Kamir said.

"What?"

"Release those people at once," Jelvin said. His tone was low and threatening.

"What people? These? No, you don't understand. This is just a recording. A video."

"He has captured spirits within this device," Kamir announced to the others.

A groan arose from the villagers. The sky seemed to grow darker.

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"He is a witch," Marcanda said. She had teleported several yards away from him. Her arms were crossed protectively across her chest. "A conjurer. He steals souls."

"Wait! I can explain. This is just a computer. There are no souls in—"

Something crashed into the back of his head. Pain and a brilliant sun of light flashed through his mind. Then everything went black.

When he awoke, it was night. His head throbbed. His spine was stiff and his shoulders were pulled back uncomfortably. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he realized he was tied to something. The ground beneath his feet was uneven and unstable.

A flame flickered nearby. In its glow, he saw the villagers gathered around him. Marcanda was holding a torch. "Nature does not abide a witch to live," she said, and thrust the flaming tip into the kindling at the base of the mound to which he was staked.

As the fire took hold, smoke burned his eyes. He tried to make them understand, but they wouldn't listen

to his explanations. He couldn't help thinking that his crewmates had gotten the better end of the deal. At least they had died quickly aboard their spaceship. He was the unfortunate one—the one who escaped.

**Rob D. Smith** (noirsouth.blogspot.com) lives and writes in Louisville, KY. Although he graduated from U of L with a degree in Fine Arts, writing is how he conjures images now. “Don't Show Your Teeth” is his first published short story.

**Don't Show Your Teeth**  
**By Rob D. Smith**

It took us half a day of down-cycle to reach the Central Community Supply Node on Acula O.C., but it was worth it to Perri. We could have been drinking hard ones with the crew or watching relays of the games or just grabbing some extra nap time. But we spent almost ten terran hours transferring between cramped maxivators loaded with angry, sweating worker drones (not that we weren't drones ourselves) just off work-cycle. Now he held the shipment we had come for in upraised palms and declared it glorious.

"It's a *paking* pair of monster teeth."

"Correct," said Perri.

"I rode with you for this? Work sucked this week, man. I needed some recov."

I shook out the Parliament Journal text from my flexi-reader, rolled it tightly, and smacked him on the back of the head. He almost dropped his purchase.

"Nik! Be careful." He shuffled away from me after regaining his balance.

"It's encased in plastacrete, you wuss."

"But it's priceless. The original dental appendage for Milton Xavier in 'Night Driven.' Notice the classic Nosferatu fang style."

Inside the clear block of plastacrete, it looked like a dental retainer relic with two sharp buck-teeth. The only thing scary about the teeth was the green bacterial buildup on the mouth piece.

"How did you afford it?" We didn't make a fortune working on the fabrication crew. A nice living wage, but few benefits.

"With collectors, it's all about the barter system. I had something he needed and he had something I wanted."

His glossy eyes told me his statement rang false. He *needed* those teeth. I nudged him in the direction of the nearest maxivator. It would be the first of nine before we were back on the Jakarta Platform.

"I'm not coming back when you trade those chompers for some anime toy from your childhood."

"I still watch anime. But this is my last acquisition. Promise," he said, as we reached the long line of people waiting for the next ride.

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The intense odor of burning plastic. It smelt like the time I left the wrong cookware in the microheater. I adjusted my bed tube angle thirty degrees to upright and unfastened my resting belt.

In the small corner workstation, Perri sat bent over, furiously working on something. His back to me, a hidden light source outlined his hunched body with an eerie halo. Ah, the burning odor came from there.

"Perri?"

He swiveled on his stool. "Hey, big guy. I didn't mean to wake you. Even disconnected the fire detector."

I could see half a block of plastacrete. He had used a miniature arc laser to slice through the 'crete.

He spun in a circle on his stool. "Notice anything different about me?"

"We've got to be at work in a few T-hours."

His spinning had revealed the other side of the 'crete block. It was empty. When I looked up to Perri, he was smiling with sharp bucky teeth.

"Take that nasty thing out."

He waved me away. "I washed them off. It's cool." He bent over and inspected them in a small stationary mirror. "I'm thinking about wearing them to work."

"If you wear that *may dom* thing to work, find a new partner. I would rather work with Norton than be seen with you and those *paking* teeth."

He removed the teeth, placed them on the table and came over to me. "Sorry, okay? I'm just playing around. I can't believe you hate my teeth more than Norton."

I nodded. "Just ratchet it down a notch. I'm going to get some sleep."

"Sure. I'm just going to clean up and get some rest myself."

I was almost asleep when I heard a sucking slurp and knew he was wearing the teeth again.

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Acula Orbital City was an enormous satellite hub. Long-range logistics had it connecting with Brava O.C. or Ceylon O.C., depending on which crew worked faster, east or west. Crews worked non-stop, cycle after cycle, adding on to the city. People needed housing and corporations needed factories. Neither could come without additional room, so we fabricated more space for living, for creating, for consuming, but there would never be enough. Soon there would be north and south crews as well.

I ate my mid-meal in a makeshift break area under the side conveyor system. It was lit well enough. Every place seemed to have just the right amount of light while retaining enough shadows for people to feel comfortable. Norton sat at the far end of the break area eating a cheese wrap that stank beyond endurance. Kaydee appeared out of some shadows and sat her lunch down next to mine.

"How come you aren't chatting with Norton, your new partner?" She unpacked her food, benzo balls and fresh greens with a cold chai to drink.

"His food stinks." I bit into my wheat wafers, mashing them to bits.

"Posit that. He's King Stank himself." She wiped the table of my wheat rampage. "You ought to go back with Perri."



"He still wearing those *paking* teeth?"

"It's harmless fun, Nik. Can't you see that?"

She was on a diplomatic mission, I understood that, but she hadn't seen the ancient saliva dripping from Perri's teeth. No amount of hot water or anti-bac detergent would clean off that infectious gunk. Made me sick just thinking of it in Perri's mouth, next to his tongue.

"He's not acting right. I won't work with someone like that. It's unsafe. And as soon as my transfer comes in, I won't live with one either."

Thinking of the teeth made my stomach heave, and I lost my appetite. I wadded up the remainder of my lunch and tossed it into the recycle chute.

"Let's go, Norton."

"*Somebody's* not acting right for sure," Kaydee muttered between bites, as we left.

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I sensed a new smell in our refurbished cabin vent system that brought back an old memory. Back when I was on planet, I'd frequented the Wangenheim District where vendors and merchants of all kinds had pushed their legal and illegal wares.

My favorite area was always the street carts in the Farmers Market where they offered grilled food of all sorts. Once I purchased a chicken kabob with a cream curry dip. Feeling closed in, I retreated to the alley behind the market to enjoy my meal in peace. A brick wall separated me from the food court. As I bit into my tasty charred chicken, an unfamiliar aroma distracted me.

A nose can find a path as well as the eye can, and my nose led my eyes to a thin, sherbet-green stream snaking out of a drain in the brick wall. I couldn't tell exactly what it was so I leaned closer, exhaled, and took a deep breath. Within seconds, I was on my knees having vomited until I was dry-heaving. Once I was able to catch my breath, I had run away, leaving my meal behind.

Now, here, that same smell blanketed our room. And it came from my roommate's bed tube. He wore the teeth in his sleep because I'd mentioned something about burning them up on reentry if I found them lying around.

I stood next to him. At the sixty-degree resting angle, his face was positioned just right for access. I unfastened his resting belt, positioned his arms by his side and cinched the belt, effectively trapping his arms. I pried apart his lips, where those two sharp teeth gleamed a 'hello'. The teeth didn't bother me. It was the filthy green bacteria I could see glowing in the dark that blackened my soul.

Perri roused. He mumbled something.

"I thought you washed them." I grabbed the edges of the mouth guard and yanked.

"Noommpph!"

They popped free like a boot from mud. I fell to the ground. He fought the bed restraints but couldn't get himself loose.

"It's mine!" Neon green spittle splattered his lips.

"For your own good—" In my rage, I squeezed the monster teeth hard. The buck fangs sliced my palm. I

could feel the bacteria ooze into my bloodstream, course through my veins.

"Out! Get it out!" I was burning with fever—that fast. Too late, I dropped the teeth.

"Nik, calm down. It's okay." Perri looked afraid for me.

"Just let me out. I can help you."

I smelled it all over him. His teeth. That back alley with the putrid green rivulet. None of it would wash out. I bent over, picked the teeth up and walked over to him. I put the teeth where they belonged. And bit. And bit. 'Til all of his green spilled out.

Geoffrey Girard has penned dark fantasy and horror tales for such anthologies as *Writers of the Future* (he was a 2003 winner) and the recent *Damned Nation*. His first book, *Tales of the Jersey Devil*, a collection of thirteen stories based on the legendary monster, was published by Middle Atlantic Press in 2005 and *Tales of the Atlantic Pirates*—YES, they fight zombies!—set sail last summer. Two more *Tales Of...* books will arrive in 2007. Geoffrey was born in Germany, shaped in New Jersey and is currently teaching high school students in Ohio about Ray Bradbury and Shakespeare. You can find out more online at [www.GeoffreyGirard.com](http://www.GeoffreyGirard.com).

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**Cain XP11: The Voice of Thy Brother's Blood**  
**By Geoffrey Girard**

This boy was every boy.

The standard-model boy. T-shirt, jeans. Straight bangs falling over a rounded face. Big brown eyes. The fixed playful grin of a pirate. Plato's Eternal-Form boy. Ten years old, legs too long, deep summer tan. Fidgeting in his chair. An iPod slung around his neck for later.

He'd raped his first victim with a metal bar wrenched from the bed frame, then carefully positioned the body and the inserted bar for her family to find. Another dead woman, he'd bitten off both nipples before strangling her with a pair of stockings that'd been pulled so tightly around her neck, they'd cut down to the bone.

He'd done all these things. This boy.

Theodore.

Done more, actually, according to his summary file.

Or his DNA had.

Becker had not yet made any distinction between the two. And, he wasn't so sure the two men standing behind him had either.

"Phase One, where Applications still does most of its research, is only restricted therapeutic cloning," Dr. Erdman, the division head, continued. "What you'd call 'stem-cell research.'" His voice remained distant and flat, and Becker wondered if the man might still be in shock. Based on what he'd seen earlier in the Activity Center, it would have been understandable. "These subjects were part of Phase Two."

From behind the two-way mirror, Becker looked over the rest of the boys sitting in the room.

*Snips and snails and puppy dog tails.*

Sitting beside the first was another they'd tagged as Jerry. Fifteen years old, the file read. His former self enjoyed intercourse with dead girls and fastening the bodies with copper wires for electrical shock experiments, which he meticulously documented and photographed. He'd kept breasts as souvenir paperweights. His former self had been executed ten years ago.

Another teen named Dean watched TV from the couch. Twenty-seven bodies were uncovered on "his" property back in '73. After authorities found the torture room.

The last, Andrei, had committed fifty-three murders in the Ukraine, according to the sheet. Even Becker found the number unsettling. *The Rostov Ripper*. Preferred method was to cut away the eyes and then casually eat the uterus after his victim couldn't "see him" anymore. This boy was a recent addition, no more than eight.

"Where do you get all the DNA?" Becker asked.

The second doctor, a stout man built like a Tolkien dwarf and introduced as Mohlenbrock, actually chuckled. "Where *don't* you?" he said. "Archived evidence. Autopsy samples. We had Gacy's brain here on loan for months. Hair on old brushes and clothes bought from family members. Hell, some of these guys are still alive, and they just sign over the stuff."

"We bought some of Gacy's on e-Bay," Dr. Erdman added.

"Is this legal?" Becker asked, his eyes still on the boys.

"Is *what* legal, Captain?"

There was just a touch of forewarning in the geneticist's voice, and Becker turned.

"Cloning humans," he said.

"It is, actually," Erdman replied. "For now. Though some states have recently prohibited the practice, the federal government, as yet, has not."

"I just assumed."

"Most do."

"I also thought we were at least ten, maybe twenty years from ... from *this*."

"So does Congress." The doctor pulled off his glasses to wipe them with his tie. "For those in Washington who know better, the biotech lobby has become rather substantial in the last fifteen years."

Becker studied the first boy again.

*Theodore/12*, the file and photo read.

A clone.

The genetic carbon copy of another human being.

And not just any human being, Becker reminded himself. Developed in some lab for the scientific goal of

isolating, understanding and curing violent human behavior, this boy was the genetic offspring of a known killer. A name even Becker recognized, although he could never remember if it was the good-looking guy out west or the one who dressed like a clown.

Ted Bundy.

This kid's DNA had history. This DNA had celebrity status.

This DNA had killed.

Considering the boy's face, Becker decided, Bundy was the good-looking guy. Considering the file, he was a monster.

Becker looked for something in the kid's eyes, anything that revealed the kind of person who'd slowly and rhythmically beat a young woman to death with a piece of plywood while masturbating with his free hand. He saw nothing but a ten-year-old boy and the partial ghost of his own reflection in the glass.

"How do you keep them here?"

"DSTI has a private school on premises. Their adoptive parents, employees of DSTI, naturally, have enrolled their sons here."

Becker rescanned the file.

BD: June 10, 1996 SCNT: January 1, 1996

IMP: January 10, 1996 FH: N300

"What's SCNT, Doctor?"

"Somatic cell nuclear transfer. IMP is embryo implant. FH is the female host. Look, Captain." The doctor shuffled his feet behind him. "Perhaps this was a mistake. We thought it might be easier for you to understand the rest if—"

"No," Becker stopped him. "This was helpful, thank you." He turned from the two-way mirror and resorted the folder. "And the six who escaped..." He reread the "parent gene" names, having only half-recognized two of them.

Albert Fish. Jeffrey Dahmer. Henry Lee Lucas.

*Dennis Rader. Ted Bundy. David Berkowitz.*

"I thought the kid in there was Bundy."

The doctor looked uneasy. "Theodore 12, Captain."

Becker allowed himself an extra moment to process the implication before speaking. "How many are there exactly, Doctor?"

"Most die during gestation. With respect, we'd prefer to focus on the six who are missing." Erdman reset his glasses. "Major General Durbin assures us you were the best man for this."

*In other words*, Becker thought, *none of your fucking business, soldier*. Not a unique circumstance considering he'd been Combat Applications, i.e. Special Forces, for nine years now. If there was one thing he'd learned in the 1st SFOD-Delta, it was when to shut up. For now, he'd allow his question to

remain unanswered. He held up the briefing they'd pulled together. "I'll need complete files for each of the escapees. Everything you have."

"Certainly," Erdman said. "They're being gathered for you as we speak. Psychiatric and medical reports, the—"

"And the three hostages," Becker interrupted. "Everything you have on Dr. Jacobson and the two nurses. Santos and..." he checked his notes. "Kelso."

"Of course. Human Resources will assist you in any way possible. Do you really think such information can help?"

"Do *you* really think I'd be asking if it didn't?" Becker noticed the shocked look cross Mohlenbrock's face and checked his next words. "It might help," he amended instead. "That's sometimes reason enough. Perhaps find something to point us to where they might have gone."

Erdman nodded in agreement. "Any chance our people are still alive?"

"Based on what I saw in the other room—" Becker handed Mohlenbrock back the file "—I'm not sure which answer you really want to hear right now."

Erdman stared back at him, appraising him again, Becker realized, like another one of his specimens.

"I'd like to head back to the Activity Center now," Becker said, freeing the doctor from the pressure of having to speak first again.

"Of course." Erdman lifted an arm to shepherd him from the room.

"Their meeting was scheduled?"

"First Monday of every month for this group. Our psychiatric head, Angela Corwin, and Dr. Jacobson always run the session together. Though, I didn't even think he'd make this one today."

"Why is that, Doctor?"

"Been out all last week," Erdman said. "The flu. Was working from home. Came in just today."

"How's that for luck?" Mohlenbrock asked.

Becker didn't respond.

Within the double doors, the room's walls were painted a striking light blue color that immediately reminded Becker of the Aral Sea, so the fresh dark sprays and splatters of blood were even more conspicuous than usual. Becker pretended it was coral.

Two men in light hazard suits and masks moved about the room still, gathering more evidence, snapping more pictures.

Becker followed the two doctors directly through the center and slowed to study the body splayed across the foosball table. The sheet they'd covered it with was already soaked through and Becker could perfectly make out the person beneath. A modern Shroud of Turin, still dripping over the plastic players to the field below.

"Which one is this?" he asked.

"Dylan."

Becker waited.

"Kleybold. *Columbine*."

"Right," Becker forced himself simply to accept this information as nothing more than standard intel. "And you've confirmed that's the other kid?"

The other body had been bound with network cables to the railing, which led to the second floor. Becker eyed the dark shape half hidden beneath the sheet, embossed in blood like the charcoal rubbing of an old tombstone. Standing with its arms still held outstretched like some Halloween prankster.

"Dr. Bauer," Erdman waved over one of the men in hazard suites and claimed his clipboard. Mohlenbrock excused himself and scurried through the opposite set of double doors as Erdman flipped through a few pages. "Eric Harris, yes. Eric 6. Blood and PCR tests match up."

"Have they found the skin yet?" he asked.

"No, Captain."

Becker looked down again at Kleybold and furled back the sheet. The body beneath had been flayed. Completely and immaculately. The skin cut away at every turn so that the boy, except for a few gouges out of his arm and between his toes, now looked like something out of a Michelangelo sketch book. The report suggested the other one looked exactly the same. "Why did they hate these two so much?" Becker asked.

"Is it that obvious?"

"This boy was alive when they skinned him." He looked into its lidless dark eyes. "I ... I've seen this before."

"Where was that, Captain?"

Becker ignored the question and replaced the sheet. "It's in the hands." He moved towards the Harris body. "The arms. Instantaneous rigor. Just like a drowning victim's last cadaveric spasm. These two drowned choking on their own blood."

"The others never..." The doctor followed Becker deeper into the room. "It was a mistake to have those two here. Naturally, spree killers were never the same as the others."

"Naturally," Becker hid his damning grin. "So, how do you know it's not Eric 3 or 4?"

He made sure to make it sound like a genuine question and not a challenge. The pissing contest seemed worse than usual with this lot. A bunch of Betas in ties and lab coats with delusions of Alpha-ness. *God, how I hate the twentieth century.*

Twenty-first. *Jesus.*

"Doctor?" he prompted.

"There are ways. If there's one thing we know around here ... Besides, the other Erics all terminated during gestation."

Becker looked at the doctor. *Terminated*, he mused. *These pricks speak just like we do.* "The

transmitters,” he said.

Bloody metallic pellets the size of a small pill. They'd been left on the pool table in the shape of a smiley face. The body of the psychotherapist remained sprawled just beside them, she, too, covered with a sheet.

"All subjects implanted at birth for their own safety."

Becker squatted down for a better look. "Of course."

"It appears they each cut them out right here. Over the table. We'd thought they'd carved up Eric and Dylan looking for them, but—"

"No," Becker said, "I think that bit was mostly for, what, fun? They seem to have found and cut these transmitters easily enough without that. Question for you, how'd they even know to look for them?"

Erdman just shrugged.

Becker looked about the rest of the room and took in the other signs of recent history sprinkled throughout.

The security guard brained against the steps. The torn and bloody nurses' uniforms. Crimson scrawling on the walls. Several small bodies swaddled in sheets on the floor, those students not invited, for whatever reason, to come along on the field trip. The glossy arterial spray painted in streaks across the television and X-box.

*More coral.*

What had happened here, the who and the how and the when, would take time. The tapes from the security cameras were missing. Becker turned to Erdman. "Where's Jacobson's room?"

"Right through here."

Jacobson's office proved spacious and expensive. It had also been completely destroyed. The chairs and coffee tables splintered into pieces. Cabinets emptied. Built-in shelves split and bare, the books in uneven piles on the floor. Someone had clearly tried starting a fire with some of the paperwork. Mirrors and framed pictures had been shattered into snarling shards of glass, and several computers and monitors were smashed into a hundred pieces so that the whole room now glittered beneath the harsh unnatural lighting recessed above. The large desk was covered in blood that pooled along the edges of the missing doctor's laptop.

"This the teacher's blood? The one from the stairwell."

"Mrs. Gallagher," Erdman confirmed. "Right. Damned woman would have been sixty-five next month."

"Dangerous job." Becker looked around, pointed to the swaddled cloth in the sink. "And that's the..."

"Yes."

Becker nodded, made to look about the room casually, while his mind absorbed the information. Mrs. Gallagher's entrails and uterus not ten feet away. *This is worse than Towraghondi*, he thought suddenly. *Jesus Christ, I didn't think that was even possible.*

To clear his mind, he tried focusing on the only two things in the room not completely destroyed. The fish tank, which, though tinged slightly pink with blood, was still intact with a dozen saltwater beauties floating

about.

And the framed needlepoint behind the desk. Old English lettering:

And our LORD set a mark upon Cain,

And he dwelt in the land of Nod,

*on the east of Eden.*

"He nicknamed it the 'Cain gene' early," Erdman said behind him.

Becker looked back. "Cain gene?"

"Cain and Abel."

"Got that part. You might wanna help me with the genetics."

"In essence, it's an anomaly on the XP11 strand of DNA that scientifically indicates, and potentially influences, a genetic predisposition to various degrees of aggression, rage, and violence, whose chromosomal allele travels only on the X gene." Erdman sighed. "Meaning men, who have only one X, are hereditarily predisposed to the affliction."

"The kind of men who would do something like this."

"Precisely, Captain. This. And precisely why we're trying to help such men in the future."

"Sure. What was in the fish tank?"

Dr. Erdman paused too long, deciding how to play it, and Becker let his annoyance show. Did they really think he was that stupid?

"A key," Erdman said. "But we have no idea what it goes to."

Becker nodded, made a note of it, and moved slowly across the room to look at the files strewn behind Jacobson's desk. "You guys keep daily log files," he asked, "or any way to know for sure if something's missing? This room seems even more trashed than the others. Could be hiding something."

"If I may..."

"Speak freely."

"Is this really necessary? Every minute we wait—"

"Measure twice, cut once, Doctor."

"What's that?"

"Measure twice, cut once. Something my dad always said." He picked up and sorted a stack of papers.

"Was your father an Army assassin as well, Captain?"

Becker looked up and smiled. *Christ, these guys are cocky. With the accountability in this massive fuckup, you'd think they'd just want to keep their heads down awhile.* "No," he said. "He just sells shit. Regardless, the point is, I can run outta here right now with my proverbial dick in my hand to track down six people in a world that's got some fifty-seven million square miles to play in. Or, I can do my



homework, as it were, to start narrowing the boundaries down a bit.” Becker's thoughts had turned again to Uzbekistan and the hills of northern Pakistan. “You're a smart guy, Doctor. Which course do you think affords the highest probability for success?”

"Fair enough," Erdman nodded. "I meant no disrespect."

"None taken. I also need all of Jacobson's phone and email records, as soon as possible. Any cell phones, too."

"Dr. Jacobson? May I ask why?"

"Sure." Becker set the papers on the edge of an upturned table. "Take a look at your preliminary crime scene report. Something's not there. Something that should be, based on everything else we've found."

"And what's that?" He held out the clipboard.

"Blood," Becker said. "You'd think we've got enough here, right? But we're still a little short."

"Jacobson."

"Right." Becker smiled. "Where's Jacobson's blood? Kidnapped by a pack of raving lunatics and you don't have one drop. While everyone else is slaughtered. How's that?"

"I don't know," Dr. Erdman said. "Tell me."

"How are you guys with the idea that Jacobson's the one who let them out? That this was intentional. Explains the trouble-free escape, the transmitters, the missing security tapes."

He could tell from Erdman's expression they'd considered this already. Maybe from the very beginning.

"But why?" Erdman asked. "Why would a man do something like that?"

"Who knows, Doctor. Maybe the same reason you guys do a lot of the shit you do."

"And why is that?"

"Maybe just to see what would happen."

The geneticist looked directly at him, folded his report back together. Cleared his throat. "So," he said, "what will you do now?"

Becker eyed the fish tank again.

*I'll do what I've done fifty times before, he thought, watching the cerulean and gold angelfish float through the milky strands of dissolving blood. I'll hunt them, find them and then...*

*"I'll do my job," he said.*

\* \* \* \*

Albert could not sleep again.

His head bubbled over with just too many thoughts, each idea and image leading to another as he stared up at the shadow-lined ceiling.

Quiz in Spanish. Gym first bell. Why bother getting dressed? Never understand a word the asshole teacher says anyway 'cause the guy's from Honduras or something. Don't ever go anywhere. Never even

been on a plane. Albert McCarty. Who cares? Stupid class anyway. Wetbacks should all just go home. Marian Wren and her quarter-sized nipples. Two rows back where he could watch her. Her mouth. Loved to watch her mouth. “*De dónde venéis?*” it said. “*De dónde venéis?*” Sometimes, she ran the pen along her lips and he knew what she was really thinking about. Probably had stinky breath anyway. Ashtray-breath like his lame mother. Cock tease. Heard Mike Gaffney was looking for him after school. Wanted to kick his ass or some shit. Asshole. I need a car. Go somewhere. Jacobson. Anywhere. Take Mrs. Nolan somewhere and suck on *her* nipples.

He'd already jacked off three times.

Trying to relax. To get tired.

Just want to sleep.

No more thoughts.

Had to keep busy or they just came back again. Every night. Sick of the shitty pictures in his *Gallery* magazines. The one girl had dark hair on her arms. Like an animal. Ripped those pages out and flushed 'em down the john with his stuff all over them. Sick. Freak.

Mrs. Nolan.

Right next door. No more than a hundred feet away.

He turned onto his side and looked out the window towards her. Her bedroom. She probably jerks off sometimes too, he knows. She's, like, thirty but even old people jerk off. Lies in bed and puts two deep inside. Probably tired of that dopey husband. Chris. Faggot. Bet she'd love...

Noise from the living room. Something breaking. His drunk mother stumbling over the end table again. No doubt pouring herself a last round of Jack and Diet Coke before bed. If he were lucky, she'd go straight to bed. Sometimes she'd come in and just start laying into him. Stupid shit about his grades or friends or playing *Warcraft* too much or other stupid shit. Like she was just starting shit to start shit. Drunk bitch. Just talk to Jacobson. He's got something to make it go away.

Mrs. Nolan walks around in her black thong underwear. Seen it. Just last week. When she bent over to pick up the newspaper. Just pull those panties aside and suck her nipples. Stupid virgin. I should have done that fat chick with Kevin when she was passed out. I could kill Mike Gaffney. Just shoot him in the head with the gun in mom's closet. Or Mr. Nolan. Whatever. Or me. She thinks I'm a loser anyway. Freak. Who'd fuckin' care? She would.

He'd reached into his shorts. Fourth time would ache a little but it was worth it. Pictured her beneath him with her arms over her head, tied to something. A bedpost, he guessed. Those rail things. Keeps saying 'no' but that's just because she doesn't want to take the blame when they get caught. Squirming beneath him while he's sticking her good. Sticking it in. Can't make out the face. Marion. Mrs. Nolan. Shit!

Someone standing just outside his room.

Heard the creak.

If his mom caught him again ... He remembered that ordeal well enough, she'd vanished for awhile and then come back to tease him about it for hours. He quickly pulled his hands away.

"What?" he snapped into the dark. Tried to sound tough with his heart thumping halfway out his chest.

The door opened a crack and someone's silhouette stepped into the den television's ghostly light.

Kenny? No. Too tall. Some other guy who'd come by to screw his mom. Another asshole who'd probably end up laying into him some afternoon for looking at 'im wrong.

"Who is it?" he asked, sitting up. "Who's—"

The man now stepped into his room.

Didn't make sense. Not at all. Why is *he* here?

"Dr. Jacobson?"

"Hello, Albert. I'm sorry if I scared you."

Almost as if he'd willed him here with his very thoughts like some kinda genie. The boy climbed from his bed. "I don't—"

"Nothing to fear, son," the man said, his face half lost in shadows. "Not any more. Everything's going to be fine now."

Several darker shapes moved in the living room behind him, but Albert couldn't make them out. "Where's ... where's my mom?"

"First, we need to talk," the doctor said.

"Why? Why are you here?" Albert found he'd pulled the blanket close to his chest as some childish protection. "We're not supposed to meet again for weeks. What's that?"

"This, Albert, is a folder with all the information we have about who you are." He'd taken a seat at the end of Albert's bed. Casually crossed one leg. "Who you *really* are."

"What do ... you mean, like, those tests and stuff?"

"Some of that. Bit more of where you truly come from."

"My birth parents."

"In a way." He'd lain the thick folder on the bed. "Go ahead. Have a look."

The boy reached out carefully and took the folder.

ALBERT/5.

Just inside: *Albert Henry DeSalvo*. (11/3/1931—11/25/1973), and a picture.

"Is this my dad?"

The black and white photo so very familiar.

As if he'd seen it before when he knew that he had not.

"Not exactly," the doctor smiled.

Photocopied newspaper headlines.

*'Boston Strangler Escapes From State Mental Ward,' 'Boston Strangler Murdered at Walpole Prison.'*

Pictures of old ladies.

*Anna Slesers (55), Mary Mullen (85), Nina Nichols (68), Helen Blake (65), Ida Irga (75).*

Faded shots of their dead bodies. Then, the younger ones.

*Sophie Clark (20), Patricia Bisette (23), Beverly Samans, (23), Joann Graff (23), Mary Sullivan (19).*

The Sullivan woman had gay hair but was still kind of cute. Blonde. Pretty eyes. Looked a little like Mrs. Nolan.

Albert kept reading.

How much time passed he did not know. He ignored all the noises from the other room. And Jacobson, who sat quietly watching him throughout. Eventually, he looked back up.

"Albert Desalvo." He tried the name aloud on his lips. Not McCarty, his adoptive name.

But Desalvo.

His *real* name.

"The 'Boston Strangler,'" he whispered into the darkness.

His *real* name.

The words like magic. He'd never felt...

*Better?*

The boy looked at the doctor and noticed for the first time there was blood on the man's pants. It did not change his overwhelming emotion.

Peace.

"Thank you," Albert said.

The doctor patted the boy's knee and stood. "Every person should know who they truly are," he said.

Jacobson moved towards the bedroom door and Albert trailed slowly after him. No clue where his mother was, but there were several other figures shuffling into the hall and out the front door. He wondered if they were the other students he'd sometimes met in group counseling sessions. The doctor retreated just behind them.

"What do I do now?" Albert called after them.

Jacobson did not pause or answer. He didn't need to.

As their cars backed away, Albert understood that the front door had been left wide open.

Into the night.

Where Mrs. Nolan was probably still wide awake, too.

And waiting for him.

\* \* \* \*

Jacobson's house sat alone atop a high hill in a pricier section of Haddonfield, New Jersey. Wooded, private. Old vines, new construction. The country club no more than a mile away. Aesthetic security lights glowed at every turn, the inside of the small estate remained dark. Those inside moved about only in shadows.

Becker had confirmed there were at least two men upstairs. Listened to and followed their distinct steps. Heard their muffled and clipped conversation. Could be more. He could now see their flashlights sweeping the darkness upstairs. The voices clearer. Anxious. Rushed.

Becker calmly waited for them just outside the room.

One of the voices had grown more familiar.

When the two figures stepped into the hallway, each carrying a box, he switched on his own flashlight.

One of the men actually screamed.

"Mohlenbrock?" He cast the light directly in the doctor's face.

"God damnit, Becker," he squinted into the light. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Shut up. You guys don't waste any time, do ya? Hey," he pointed his 9mm. at the other form. "You move another step and you will die. Understood? Good. Who else is in the house?"

"No one," Mohlenbrock replied, the box trembling with the shaking of his arms. Becker refocused his gun. "No one, just us. Shit," the doctor groaned. "This fucking box is heavy, Becker."

Becker put on the hall light.

The other guy was a kid. Thirty-something with a bad complexion and a worse goatee. Didn't look like any of the pictures he'd studied back at DSTI.

"Back into the other room," Becker said. "Keep a nice hold on those boxes until I say otherwise. Got it?"

The younger guy looked at Mohlenbrock, who nodded, and the two moved slowly back into the other room. An office of dark leather and more books than Becker had ever seen outside of a library. "Put the boxes down on that table. Sit down over there." He turned on the office light and switched off his flashlight. "Move." He directed with the gun.

"Just take it easy, Becker," Mohlenbrock said, sitting down with grunt. "Cut the Delta Force act for a minute, will you?"

"You guys on some kinda scavenger hunt, Mohlenbrock?" Becker flipped a hand through one of the boxes. File folders. Books. CDs. A laptop. "Myself, I'm supposed to find six genetically-mutated serial killers."

Mohlenbrock started to speak, then saw the look on Becker's face and merely waited.

"Call him," Becker said. When Mohlenbrock just sat there, Becker pulled the cell from the man's front pocket and pushed it against his chubby face. "Call him."

The doctor took the cell, selected a number. "It's me."

"Give it here." Becker took the phone. "Hey."

"What is it?" Erdman barked on the other end.

"If you guys are gonna play detective, Erdman, I'd prefer if you let me know upfront. Otherwise, it's a good way of getting one of your guys shot."

"Captain Becker." Erdman paused. "Where's Mohlenbrock?"

"Sitting here beside some other nerd and two boxes filled with evidence."

"I see."

Becker eyed the rest of the room. Didn't look as if anything had been disturbed. "I gotta admit, Doctor, our working relationship hasn't gotten off to the greatest start. I'm beginning to suspect a trust issue."

"I understand how it looks."

"So, I'm now asking myself, am I really supposed to find these guys or not? If so, continuing to hide information from me probably won't help. And, if I'm not, just tell me so I can spend three weeks looking for them at Hilton Head."

"Find them. We absolutely must find them. But ... we just, Richard Jacobson heads DSTI's entire genetics program, from Development to Applications. Applications, as you already know, is into some pretty advanced ventures and Development is light years ahead of that. Military programs are involved, and Jacobson is privy to matters and information of—"

"National security.' Got it. Look, Erdman, these boxes stay with me until I'm done with them or I walk now."

"Then walk, Captain."

Becker laughed and tossed the cell to Mohlenbrock.

\* \* \* \*

He was halfway to the Philly airport before the call came in.

"Good evening, sir," he picked up. "Always nice to hear from you."

"Like Hell," Major General Durbin laughed on the other end. "How you doing, kiddo?"

"Fine, sir. Just fine."

"Just got off the phone with our new friends."

"I can imagine. Total screw job, sir. These guys don't—"

"Pick up everything you need back at the house. I explained some things to them and the matter cleared up rather quickly. Just let 'em know when you're done with it."

"Everything?"

"Everything. I've been assured of that, and they know better than to fuck with me."

"Request more men on this one, sir. Need a full team."

"No can do. This one needs to be fast and quiet, kiddo. That's you. FOX News goes apeshit when some drunk teenager gets lost in Aruba. What do you think they'd do with this?"

*And if something goes wrong ... tough shit, kiddo. You're gone and this never happened.* Becker considered that inherent threat, even more so now with this mission, with his next words.

*But, was it really fair to doubt Durbin?*

It was Durbin, and Durbin alone, who'd come back for him in Iran. Got him out of that 'jam' when most others would have scrubbed the whole thing with a tidy M.I.A. and just left him to suffer.

Becker knew he owed the Major General a hell of a lot more trust than that. Only problem was, Becker figured, the Major General knew it too.

"There's a key," Becker said. "I think Jacobson left it in the fish tank as some kinda clue. Guy wants to get caught. The key probably fits to his house somewhere."

"I'll make sure its there too. But Captain..."

Not 'kiddo' or 'Sting' he noticed, but something much more official. "Yes, sir."

"I'm boosting your clearance for this. Whole new ballpark now."

"Understood, sir."

"I sure hope so. 'Cause it gets ugly in a hurry."

"How ugly?"

"Hell's still uglier."

"Yes, sir."

"And there ain't no going back. Not ever."

*That I know.*

"Keep me informed, kiddo. Keep smart."

"Yes, sir," Becker said, and pulled into a gas station to turn his rental around.

The boxes were waiting for him in the empty house as the Major General had promised. And the key to Jacobson's private safe, which had already been emptied into the boxes.

Becker spent the next four hours skimming through the files and Jacobson's private diaries, watching the video CDs. By morning he had more questions than answers.

But he knew this.

If hell was uglier, it probably wasn't by much.

\* \* \* \*

When she saw the clown, she knew for sure.

Before that, it had only been a suspicion. That inimitable nervous tickle in the stomach that hints you might now be in a dangerous situation, that something 'Bad' could happen. *Could*. Not nearly enough to make you grab your two children and run screaming for the car. That'd be too embarrassing. No, not Fear. Not yet. But an emotion more akin to Nervous or Anxious.

The two cars pulled in slowly beside each other on the gravel parking lot. Both filled with kids, teenagers.

Mostly boys.

Ashley checked her watch. It was only one in the afternoon. Too soon for school to be out. Maybe the schools were off for some kind of in-service day, or the kids were college-aged. A couple looked older. Maybe they were just skipping school. God knew she'd done so a couple times in her day. It was a nice enough day for it.

But why come to a playground?

She turned back to find Cassie, her daughter, still winding through the top of the park's small wooden castle.

More kids slowly climbed from the cars.

Two girls among them. Dirty hair hung over their eyes. Both moving strangely.

Ashley absently handed Michael another pretzel stick and looked back towards where two other mothers had been having a picnic lunch with their young sons. Was overly relieved when they were still there, chatting away.

"Poc," Michael burred beside her. "Poc."

*Poc, Tik, Mop*. The ever-evolving official language of young Michael Steins, fifteen months. Words she kept in a small diary to share with him someday.

"Poc," she smiled. "Pretzel."

Michael giggled.

She started packing their things.

"Honey," she called out to Cassie. "Honey?" Wanting to get her attention without using her name. Why, she wondered, was that suddenly so important? Her daughter moving away from her deeper into the castle.

Ashley stood and moved after her.

Two of the boys had taken seats at the swings and were using their feet to twist themselves up in the chains. Another pair was wrestling atop the see-saw.

Fine, Ashley thought. Just trying to recapture some half-remembered joy of childhood. Very Holden Caulfield. They'll all be bored in five minutes. Girls are probably just stoned. She fumbled for her cell phone, half remembered she'd left it in the car. Clapped her hands. "Cassie, come on now. Time to go."

Her daughter turned. "Whyyyyy?" she whined from the top parapet, her dark pigtails hanging over her yellow dress.

"Come down now, honey. Hurry up."



Her four-year-old scrunched her face in displeasure.

Several of them looked older than teenagers. Young men.

"Come on." Ashley waved her down. Can't get up there quick enough. "I'll buy you both ice creams on the way home."

"Mikey, too!"

*Don't say his name, baby. Don't say his damned name.*

"Yes, yes. Let's go now, honey."

A horrible sound.

Van doors shutting.

She spun around.

The other table suddenly empty. The other children already somehow collected, small bags of books, toys, *McCalls* and *Pringles* already packed.

The only other SUV now backing slowly out of the parking lot. Leaving her alone.

With them.

She turned back to Cassie and almost collapsed to the ground as the whole park seemed to tilt.

She was gone.

Cassie. Her daughter.

Where once there'd been a little girl, there was now nothing.

*What do I ... dear God, this is really happening.*

Ashley moved toward the castle like a half-formed ghost.

*She's gone. She's really gone. What have these monsters done to my—*

"God!"

Her daughter appeared with a squeal at the bottom of the green tube, sliding to the end 'til her feet dangled just above the mulched ground.

"Cassie, fucking..."

"What, mommy?" She climbed off the slide.

"Nothing." Ashley fought the urge to collapse again. "I'm sorry, baby. Come on, let's go."

Yanking her back towards the picnic table.

She saw the clown then.

Standing perfectly still by the cars. A scarecrow.

Watching her. And her children.

A red suit with white frills and buttons and a matching red hat. Huge blue triangular eyes like a jack-o-lantern. Its mouth blood red and covering the entire bottom half of the face. In the shape of an enormous smile.

Now, she knew.

Scooping up the rest of their things and slinging the bag over her shoulder. Dragging Michael in one arm, pulling Cassie with the other.

"Poc," Michael said. "Poc!"

"In the car, baby. Hush now."

She looked up at the swing set, clearly saw the girl there for the first time. A woman. Her "boyfriend" slowly and mechanically pushing her swing from behind. The woman's face masked behind grimy hair, head drooped to the side. What Ashley had thought was a shirt was not. The woman was nude from the waist up. What she'd figured was a shirt's pattern was only dried blood.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

Ashley staggered forward toward her car.

Michael started crying.

"Mommy, what's wrong?"

"Shut up," she hissed, yanking her closer. "Please, baby, just..."

One of the boys laughed.

She'd reached the car.

"Pox," Michael yelped again. "Pox!"

"Pox," Ashley replied in a half-laugh that shuddered through her whole body. "Pretzels. That's right, baby."

Door half open when they finally stopped her.

One of the boys had squatted down to playfully wave a finger at Cassie. The girl's eyes were wide, her grip on Ashley's hand like a vice.

The other boy reached out and touched Ashley's mouth.

"Please..." she stammered over his fingers.

Around the back of the car, another shape moving toward them. A horrible thing made of white and red.

One she'd somehow been waiting for.

"Pox." The clown smiled at them in a grin that now filled the whole world. "Pox?"

Michael giggled.

\* \* \* \*

**2 Sep**—psychopathic subjects rated ‘J’ or greater remain lowest asymmetry scores among all offenders. During interview, subject continues to illustrate classic psychopath criteria: superficially charming, unmotivated, manipulative, inadequate sense of shame, paucity of emotions. Today, I asked the subject how he would feel if I put a gun to his face and robbed him. He said he'd find a way to escape, give me the money or perhaps fight to take the gun. When I pressed him on the issue of how he would ‘feel,’ not what he would think or do, subject had no response. MMPI scheduled for next session. CSubject's custodian contacted to increase subject's maternal neglect by 2.0 degrees, mf abuse by 1.0.

**6 Sep**—Dreams should remain banished only to night. In the sun, they are vile trespassers. They are worse. The Triazolam shots abridge REM sleep, but now they have somehow found me in the day. I could not see her face again. The warmth spilling from her insides was like a mother's blanket enfolding me. I awoke at my desk, drenched in sweat, my stomach warm and wet with my own semen. I heard from Rochester today and everything is now arranged. Mankind remains ceaselessly motivated by characteristics inherited genetically from ancestors long-buried which individual experiences of childhood can modify, inhibit, or augment, but can never truly erase. But I shall be there when he is lifted again from the earth.

**9 Sep**—Lunch with Dr. Carla Brown (Tulane), who is heading a symposium next spring and asked if I would be interested in presenting. Perhaps. Reviewed impact of common functional polymorphism in MAOA on brain structure and function. Low expression variants found on all subject's MRIs. Erdman maintains reservations on limited test group. Recorded pronounced limbic volume reductions and hyper-responsive amygdale during emotional arousal. Marked diminished reactivity of regulatory prefrontal regions compared with the high expression allele. The clearest link between genetic variation and aggression is located on the chromosome Xp11.23. This is the true mark of Cain. Xp11 is the new number of the beast.

**22 Sep**—subject's MAOA levels remain identical to DNA patron. Latest blood tests confirm sustained low serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine levels. Dogs bark as they are bred. Note to visit John and Albert at secondary environments. Voxel-based morphometry prescribed to canvass subject's brain for regional volume changes related to genotype. He requested his room be painted tan. A genuine emotional preference or mimicry of conventional exchange? He also called me ‘father’ today. Perhaps, I should never have brought him here.

**04 Oct**—It is a match, and I am filled with abundant joy. It is, as I'd always hoped it would be, comforting to find our basest traits in our forebears. It absolves us.

\* \* \* \*

Becker tossed Jacobson's journal back inside the box with the rest. Papers on something called Klinefelter's syndrome. More reports, PCR printouts from a machine Jacobson kept in his office which mapped double helix pairings he couldn't understand in the slightest. Color photos of mutilated victims. Sliced and broken. These he understood perfectly. Maps of East London from the 19th century. Old photos of Francis Tumblety, and a hoary pamphlet by the same entitled *The Kidnapping of Dr. Tumblety*. Graphs comparing oxytocin and vasopressin levels for several subjects. From the diaries, Becker had figured that subject ‘Nobody’ was Jacobson himself.

And then there were the CDs. He'd watched only two but it had been enough. Both showed surveillance video of various children being beaten and molested. Records suggested the abuse had been methodically ordered in the name of science. In one was some kid grown from the cosmic cream of Richard Ramirez, the ‘Night Stalker,’ no more than nine in the static-wizened black-and-white video while some guy came in and gave the boy a hand job. In another CD, some other kid. Some other abuser. Test Group #2.

On the inside of Jacobson's journal:

*And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.*

Why different than the other in the office? Was there something there he wasn't seeing? Or just the lifelong motivations of a broken mind.

Becker leaned into his hands and rested against the desk. It had been a long night. He'd grown too numb to think.

The Major General had been right.

There was no going back.

He flipped open his cell.

"You finished, Captain?" Dr. Erdman asked at the other end.

"*Wer mit Ungeheuern kämpft,*" he replied.

"Go on."

"Nietzsche. 'Who fights with monsters should—'"

"Beware that he, himself, does not become a monster.' Very well. May we now move back to the matter at hand?"

Becker laughed. "What the hell do you see when you look in the mirror, Erdman?"

"What most men see, Becker. Do you have the information you need now or not?"

"Maybe. Here's where I'm at. For the sake of marketable pharmaceuticals, bioengineering prospects, and potential military applications—otherwise why the hell would I be involved?—DSTI, a highly financed but little known genetics lab purposely breeds monsters. Sponsors the abuse of children ... No wait, sorry, sponsors the abuse of only half of them for the sake of environmental testing—"

"Those tests were discontinued four years ago and, officially, never happened, Captain."

"Whatever. How familiar are you with Phase Three, Doctor?"

Erdman paused on the other end. "Jacobson had plans, but we never ... DSTI rejected the proposal. Jacobson did those subject insertions on his own."

"Subject insertions.' By adopting out genetic psychopaths to unknowing parents. Putting these kids out into the real world?"

"DSTI rejected the proposal."

"How many? Mohlenbrock failed to leave the list."

"We don't know for sure. Less than a dozen. All other embryos have been accounted for. We have our own men moving out to known locations now. I'll get you the list."

"There could be as many as sixteen now. Jacobson will visit these homes. This is big time, Erdman."

"We have taken all necessary steps to assure—"

"Just get me the damn list."

He hung up and tapped his chin with the phone, thinking.

*All necessary steps.*

"Damn it," he cursed. Then he dialed.

"Kristin Romano."

"It's Becker."

Silence.

"Been awhile, I know," he said into it. "How have you been?"

"What can I do for you, Captain?" The voice of a total stranger.

*Fine. That's what I need to hear.*

"I need your help." He stood.

Her voice changed. "Have you had—"

"No, no. Nothing like that. I'm fine. You cured me, remember?"

She laughed softly. The sound so familiar, although he'd thought he'd forgotten it forever. "I'm not that good," she said, and he heard the smile in her voice. "What can I do for you?" The stranger's voice returning.

"Your doctoral work at..."

"Maryland."

"Right. Was in criminal psychology, yes? I remember you said ... you were always interested in, well, serial killers and things like that. Right?"

"Why?"

"Who's Francis Tumblety?"

"I don't know. Somewhat familiar but nothing. Who is he?"

"Shit, Tumblety. White Chapel. London. St. Louis. Maybe a serial killer in the early 19th century." Becker had moved into the hallway, slowly walking past each room.

"Okay, fine. White Chapel is where Jack the Ripper committed his crimes. Maybe he was one of the suspects. There were dozens."

"Jack the Ripper."

"Sure, hold on. What the hell's this about?"

"Nothing. I don't know."

"Articulate as always." She sighed.

Becker found the stairs leading upward. Turned on the lights.

"Yeah, okay," she said. "I've got Sugden's book right here. Francis Tumblety. He was one of the primary Jack the Ripper suspects."

"Who's Dennis Rader?" he asked.

"That's the B.T.K. killer."

"Theodore Desalvo."

"Boston Strangler. What is this? Hell week on *Jeopardy*?"

"Yes. Seems you knew these guys pretty well."

"A lasting failing of mine. Interest in the wrong men."

"I need your help, Kristin."

"Kristin? Wow ... what's the—"

"I'm in something now that's ... Maybe I just need someone I can trust, someone not Delta. Maybe someone who knows serial killers." *And maybe someone who can hold me together through this.*

"You were never a 'maybe' guy, Becker. What the hell do they got you working on now?"

Moving slowly up the steps towards the door and a darkened room. An attic of some kind.

"I can't tell you. You know that."

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"Will you help me?"

Pause.

"Kris?"

"Yes," she said.

Door opens. Flipping the light on. The bedroom upstairs. Bland and undecorated. A lone bed and some dressers. A guest room.

"I need you to gather everything you can get on these men..."

"I'm ready. Go."

"Gacy, Fish, Lucas, that Rader guy, Dahmer and Bundy. And Tumblety. I'll send you an email soon."

"Okay." Confusion in her voice.

"Thanks, Kristin."

This room painted tan. A fresh coat for sure.

"Anything else, Captain?"

Becker thought. Maybe he'd try something like ... *I'm sorry I left the way I did. What the hell have you been up to the last ten months? How's that damned husband of yours doing?* No...

"No," he said. "I gotta go anyway. Be safe." He shut the phone and put it away.

Drew his 9mm in its place.

"I won't hurt you," he said into the empty room.

Movement in the closet.

Just enough, and he turned with the sound.

"Come out," he urged. "You can come out now."

The slotted door folded open. The boy seated inside beside a wicker hamper was more than twelve years old. Blond hair. Glasses. Lanky. Familiar without the glasses, from the photos, but Becker couldn't remember which one. There hadn't been enough time. He lowered the gun.

*One down, as many as fifteen to go.*

"It's okay," Becker said. "I won't hurt you. You're alone?"

The boy nodded. No weapons that Becker could see.

"Come on out of there." He waved him forward, and eyed the rest of the room. "What you doing in there, pal?"

"Hiding."

"Not too good at it, are you?"

"Fooled those other two good enough."

Becker nodded, smiled. "I guess so. Me too for awhile, huh? Guess you're right."

"Are you gonna arrest me now? Take me back?"

"To DSTI? Is that where you live?"

He shook his head no.

"You live here, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else live here besides you and the doctor?"

"No."

"When have you been to DSTI?"

"Sometimes. At night. Tests. Tests with the other boys."

"Does anyone else at DSTI know you live here?"

"I don't think so."

"I see. Has Dr. Jacobson been back home?"

He shook his head again and finished crawling out of the closet. "No." He stood slowly. "He hasn't been back in, um, not since yesterday, I guess. You gonna arrest my—are you gonna arrest Dr. Jacobson?"

Becker shrugged. "I don't know. I need to find him, though. Him and some of the others. The other boys. When's the last time you saw Dr. Jacobson?"

"Two nights ago. He..."

"What?"

"He called me into his study and gave me that." The boy pointed to a swollen folder on the desk beside his bed. "Told me I should learn about myself. Then he left."

"I see."

"Have they been bad? The other boys?"

"Yeah," Becker said. "Actually, they have."

He waited while the boy looked away, mouth moving slightly in silent thought. "I could maybe help you." The boy said finally. "Maybe help you look for them."

"Now why would you do that?"

The boy stared at him. "So they don't do the bad things again."

Becker nodded. "Maybe so, pal, maybe so. Bet you know what they all look like, don't you? The kinds of places they talk about going? Even places Dr. Jacobson likes to go."

"Sure, I guess. You want to help them?"

"I do," Becker said. And felt good when he said it.

"That's cool."

"Yeah. I guess it is. You really sure you wanna help?" *Am I really sure I want your help?*

The boy looked around his own room. "I'm sure."

"Well, we should probably get started then. I'm done here. Why don't you throw some clothes in a bag or something, okay?"

"Okay."

"Then we can go find them."

"And bring them home?"

"If I can," Becker said. "If we can."

"Uh-huh."



Becker waited for him at the door. Watched him stuff some shirts into a black *Philadelphia Flyers* book-bag and grab his Gameboy for the road. "Ready?"

"Yup," the boy replied. "Ready."

Becker held out his hand. "I'm Becker."

The boy half smiled and shook back.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Jeffrey Dahmer."

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### **Part 1 of 4**

To be continued in our next issue...

June, 2007

### **For #9**

#### **Poppet's Left Impression~**

\* \* \* \*

Black eyed poppets offer Grim's reminders of a strange affair;

Oh, effigy in hand, *'I dare'*

Do you sleep? Third eye wide awake—

Her body lies seemingly peaceful,

Your heart too close for comfort addressed a *convulsive* shiver~

Her cold warmed hand glides down your chest *a-quiver*,

Flexing muscles spasm fear? *Excitement*—

Eyes to eyes reflect Un-rest;

What is wicked? Those following hours...

Do you speak of the ember bed?

Through a red hot iron door you were led and not blindly,

'You' smoky darkened soul~

She wears the colors—You dressed her that adorable scorpion,

Trade for trade, now all is fair in lust and battle

9 seared into your palms—  
A name she whispers, yours and yours...  
Crude doll knows a face,  
You cannot return the clock to her welcome~  
She said 'Good-bye, Good-bye'  
Curtains go down there is no view,  
She harbors a fugitive behind her breast  
That *criminal* con of cons—  
Blink a lie of innocence,  
Sadly thing of shallow breath,  
Would you disprove the woman's twisting lack of sentiment?  
Vertigo Impression sculpted a stone figure,  
He named her—  
'Poppet Within'

\* \* \* \*

Poetry by Brandy Schwan [www.apexdigest.com/grimtrixter](http://www.apexdigest.com/grimtrixter)

### **What Wouldn't Kevin J. Anderson Do? Interview by Alethea Kontis**

In the course of doing all these interviews over the past few years, I've made an interesting observation: the better I know the person I'm interviewing, the harder it is to come up with questions. Since I know lots of stuff about them already, I wouldn't ask the same sort of questions other people would ask. I would more likely ask the sort of questions that would be nobody else's business. This doesn't exactly make for a stellar interview.

Or, rather, it might make for a slightly TOO stellar interview.

I met Kevin J. Anderson (and his lovely and talented wife Rebecca Moesta) a while back—as fellow Dragon\*Con frequenters we were bound to bump into each other eventually. Kevin is both a fantastic guy and a machine, together in one neat and tidy package. He juggles other worlds (like *Star Wars*, *X-files*, *Dune*, and *Krypton*) along with his own books (like the *Saga of Seven Suns* series), the books he writes with Rebecca (the *Crystal Doors* trilogy), and other offerings like *Slan Hunter*, where he finishes the last book in SF legend A.E. van Vogt's catalog. He also keeps a MySpace page (as well as a blog and a newsletter), mentors a young man with Asperger's Syndrome, donates hundreds of books a year to charity auctions, and appears at libraries and SF conventions all over the world.

In 2006 alone he wrote and delivered over 750,000 words.

I feel like a slacker just thinking about it.

With all this stuff on a plate bigger than my house, in order to cover all of it adequately, an interview with Kevin would need to be as big as this magazine.

I had a feeling Jason was never going to let that happen.

Help! What was I going to do?

*For crying out loud*, I answered myself, *it would be easier to do an interview about what he doesn't do...*

\* \* \* \*

**Alethea Kontis:** Since you do absolutely everything on God's green earth and I have no idea where to start asking you questions, I decided to make the theme of this interview: "What Wouldn't Kevin J. Anderson Do?"

**Kevin J. Anderson:** (laughs hysterically)

**AK:** What TV show would you never watch?

**KJA:** I had a niece who got married not too long ago, and she was watching all the wedding makeover shows, and the how to plan your wedding show. In the morning, Rebecca had on the Martha Stewart Show. Those are things that I really don't need to have in my mind.

**AK:** What color would you never wear?

**KJA:** I have no fashion sense or style. I can't think of a color I would never wear. But my wife might have better opinions on that.

**AK:** What book are you exceptionally glad you did not write?

**KJA:** The book I'm glad I didn't write is the OJ Simpson *If I Did It* book.

**AK:** What sport would you never play?

**KJA:** There are a lot of sports I don't play. I was the kid with the thick glasses and the skinny arms and the clumsy gait. I was always the last to be picked for the team. I couldn't catch a ball, because I had bifocal glasses. When I lifted up my hand to catch the baseball, I would turn my head up and go to the second lens in the bifocal ... so then the lens would make the ball shift...

I'm a very active person. I climb mountains. I hike for 23 miles a day. I go swimming and snowshoeing. I do all kinds of stuff, but that's *me* doing things. I don't do team sports. I'm a freak of American society in that I don't like to watch football or basketball. I vaguely understand it, but I don't see what the excitement is.

**AK:** What superhero would you never write about?

**KJA:** When I was a kid I read *so* many comic books. I found something cool in everything, whether it was Man Thing, or Man Wolf, or Man Geek, or whatever. I loved all the different incarnations of The Green Lantern, the Flash, The Hulk—DC or Marvel—I used to read stacks of them. I have such a love of superheroes, I would be happy to write just about anything.

The great superheroes are very hard to write about—X-Men, Spiderman, or Superman because they've got such a backlog of history behind them. The fans know all 1000 issues that Superman was in or Spiderman is in.

**AK:** What difficulties did you have with the Krypton book?

**KJA:** For *The Last Days of Krypton*, the biggest difficulty was trying to tell the strongest story using as much of the Superman mythos as I could. There are so many contradictions in the universe—from all the different comic incarnations to the Christopher Reeve Superman movies to the new *Superman Returns* to the Smallville TV show—all of them have varied interpretations.

I got to pull all the things that I thought were all the coolest parts of Superman history and wrap them all together into a big story. It's a big space opera on an alien planet with a cool culture which is very almost Greco-Roman.

One of the things that people think is a strange thing about *The Last Days of Krypton*: they're all ON Krypton, so none of them has superpowers. It's a book that's about Superman, but nobody has superpowers. Nobody flies in this book. Nobody gets shot at by bank robbers who then throw guns at them at the end of it.

**AK:** What food would you never eat?

**KJA:** I live in Colorado, and I like to try just about anything. I'm a very adventurous eater. I've eaten insects on live TV, I've eaten all kinds of sushi—some I like and some I don't. It's not that I'm not willing to try them. I've had duck feet in a dim sum restaurant. I've had calf's brain. I'll try just about everything.

But in Colorado, we don't have oceans. So when you see something on the menu that says, "Rocky Mountain Oysters," it's not really oysters. It's cow testicles. I have heard they're very good, but I couldn't get up the courage to order them. I would, however, like to say I've tried them if somebody could trick me at one point so I wouldn't know what it was until after I'd eaten it.

**AK:** What country would you never visit?

**KJA:** Right now, Iraq. That would be a sure thing. Afghanistan has some very beautiful mountains, but I think I'll cross that off the list right now too. Somalia and some of the really squalid African countries I have no interest in.

I love the United States too much. I've been to most of the 50 States. I've spent time out in the Rocky Mountains, the Utah Desert, Death Valley, the Sierra Nevadas, and the Grand Canyon. I'm so much in love with all of those things and I know that I can't possibly see it all in my lifetime, so I wouldn't want to bend over backwards to go to a place I'm only half-interested in.

**AK:** Do you know what States you haven't visited?

**KJA:** I haven't been to Alaska, but I would love to. I'm sure we will go sometime in the near future. I haven't looked at the exact map and checked them off, but off the top of my head I don't believe I've ever been to Arkansas. There are some of the little New England States that I might not have been to, but I think I have. I've been briefly to Maine, in the airport and stuff, so that doesn't really count. But I have been to most of them. I want to go back to a great many of them.

**AK:** What kind of beer would you never drink?

**KJA:** I've learned my lesson on some of them. I'm not a big fan of the jalepeno-chile beers. I don't quite see the point in that. Some of the really frou frou fruit basket beers: kiwi-blackberry beer and things like that don't even sound good to me. I don't want to drink the thing that most Americans call beer. I just don't want to be anywhere close to Budweiser or Coors, or the stuff that looks like some other flat, yellow substance that I don't really want to drink.

**AK:** What kind of music would you never listen to?

**KJA:** I would never listen to things like Country & Western or show tunes. I'm not a big fan of big band era music or Rat Pack/lounge lizard stuff. I like classic rock, heavy metal, progressive rock, classical music, and movie soundtracks.

**AK:** Do you sing in the shower?

**KJA:** I plot stories in the shower.

**AK:** Is there anyplace where you would not write?

**KJA:** In a vat of acid, or a boiling cauldron. Or on the hospital bed while undergoing open-heart surgery. But those are probably the only limitations.

**AK:** Was there ever a time when you weren't writing?

**KJA:** Between the ages of one and four I don't think I was writing. But I do remember I started writing when I was five. There was never a time when I wasn't absolutely convinced that I wanted to tell stories or be a writer. Since I was five that's what I wanted to do, and my whole life has been on that track.

**AK:** What cliché would you never say?

**KJA:** I think some of the people have complained that I've used about every cliché I could probably use. There is no cliché unturned. I don't use them on purpose, but when I write I try to write something that comes naturally. I don't want people to think they're reading when they're reading my books. They're supposed to forget that there are words on the page; they should just be living the story with the characters. That means that I write in a comfortable and conversational way. If it's something I use in every day speech, it may very well crop up in my writing. Other people may see that as a cliché.

**AK:** What kind of car would you never drive?

**KJA:** A broken one. I demand that my cars actually take me where I'm trying to go.

I'm not a huge muscle car guy; I don't care what car I'm driving. I don't have any real prejudice different kinds of cars. A car is a vehicle that will take me someplace where I can go hiking.

**AK:** Who would never elect for president?

**KJA:** He's already been in office two terms.

**AK:** Have you ever had George Lucas on speed dial?

**KJA:** I've spoken with him, even met with him a couple of times, but never on speed dial.

**AK:** What movie would you never watch?

**KJA:** A George Bush musical where he sings lounge lizard songs as show tunes while eating Rocky Mountain Oysters.

**AK:** What did you never want to be when you grew up?

**KJA:** My dad was a bank president and my mom was an accountant. I never wanted to be a businessperson when I grew up. They were very successful ... it's just the thing about kids who don't want to do what their parents do. I majored in astronomy and Russian History. It really got my parents

upset.

My parents listened to Country & Western music all the time too.

**AK:** Is there any flavor of ice cream you don't care for?

**KJA:** No. At least, none that I've tasted. You can be gross and say "pickle and horseradish ice cream" or something, but I've even had garlic ice cream and it was tolerable.

**AK:** My kind of man. What genre would you never write in?

**KJA:** I tend to be like a chameleon as a writer. If I study something enough, I can get a feel for what the genre expects. At the moment, I haven't read more than a couple of romance novels—I'd have to do more research on it.

But the artsy-fartsy literary genre is the one I just couldn't do. I couldn't stomach it. I couldn't write something that was flowery prose with no plot or characters.

**AK:** Where everyone dies at the end?

**KJA:** Where everyone dies at the end, yeah.

**AK:** Is there anything you're glad you're not doing right now?

**KJA:** As much as love hiking and snowshoeing, it's snowing in Colorado right now—it's apparently very cold and windy. So at the moment I'm glad I'm not snowshoeing up on a peak. But the moment it gets to be better weather, I plan to be up there doing it.

**Look for Kevin J. Anderson in 2007:**

*Ill Wind* (w/Doug Beason)—paperback/reissue/March

*Crystal Doors #1* (w/Rebecca Moesta)—paperback/May

*Crystal Doors #2: Ocean Realm* (w/Rebecca Moesta)—hardcover/June

*Hunters of Dune* (w/Brian Herbert)—paperback/June

*Slan Hunter* (w/A.E. van Vogt)—hardcover/July

**An Interview With Liz Williams**

*Interview by Lavie Tidhar*

Liz Williams is a three-time nominee for the Philip K. Dick Award (2001, 2002, 2004) and is one of speculative fiction's most respected short form writers. A novelist, a short fiction writer, and a regular blogger, the prolific Williams has recently found time to join the editorial staff of the British genre magazine *Interzone*.

\* \* \* \*

**Lavie Tidhar:** You've emerged as one of the most interesting new novelists in the UK in recent years, but—paradoxically—your books were first published in America. How did that come about?

**Liz Williams:** I sent a proposal to an agent who was advertising in *Locus* for new clients. Her name was Shawna McCarthy and she had just left her previous agency to set up on her own. She was the first

agent I approached. She did not take me on immediately, but asked me to rewrite *Ghost Sister*. I did so, and she sold it to Bantam six weeks later, her main focus naturally being the US publishers.

**LT:** You draw a lot on cultural backgrounds we don't see a lot of in Western SF—*Nine Layers of Sky* for example is, I understand, inspired by your time in Kazakhstan—what draws you to that, and do you think the SF reading public is more open to such non-Western settings today?

**LW:** I don't feel equipped to write a novel set in the US, as I have never lived there, and I don't think it would feel authentic. Also, so many books are set in the West and I get a bit bored with that. There are obvious issues relating to cultural appropriation and no, I don't think one can ever write from the point of view of another culture with total success. But the alternative is to play safe and I don't like doing that! Besides, I get gripped by ideas...

**LT:** Many of your books deal with issues of gender—in *Banner of Souls*, for instance, there are no males, while in *Darkland* you describe a society that heavily oppresses women. Is this something you consciously think about and try to address?

**LW:** Yes, it is. I am a feminist, and the role of women concerns me (I am one, after all). Looking at places like Afghanistan, which is where the world in *Darkland* and *Bloodmind* (coming out in February 07) is based on, one can see how quickly things can change from a relatively liberal climate to a profoundly oppressive one. I think societies like the one in "The Handmaid's Tale", for instance, are all too likely.

**LT:** You are currently writing a series for Nightshade Books, the *Inspector Chen* novels, that take place in a future Singapore and, to a large extent, in the Chinese version of the afterlife. How did that come about, and what do you particularly enjoy in writing the series?

**LW:** It's not actually in Singapore itself, but in a franchise of that city on the Chinese mainland (this was an actual idea that Singaporean government had, to make money. You can't make this stuff up!). I wanted to write something fun, and this is great fun to write. I'm also fascinated by Chinese mythology and by Hong Kong. A friend of mine used to live on a houseboat in Deep Water Bay and she went out for a bit with someone on the HK vice squad. So I know the city fairly well, and the stories just grew out of that.

**LT:** You've written mainly stand-alone novels so far—what do you find is the biggest difference in doing series? Would you consider doing another at some point?

**LW:** I like the continuity of series, and the room that they give you to expand. But my main work has been stand-alone—room in a different way, to play with ideas in many different contexts. I might do another series—we'll see what happens!

**LT:** You're a prolific short story writer (and been in quite a few Year's Bests anthologies)—how do you balance short story writing with novel writing?

**LW:** I tend to write short fiction at weekends, as a break from the novels. I like short stories, and I enjoy the instant gratification.

**LT:** Speaking of short stories, you've recently taken an editorial position with *Interzone*. How do you find being on the other side of the fence, so to speak? What is the challenge—and what is the satisfaction—of being an editor?

**LW:** I think you learn a lot from it. You get to see what works and what doesn't, and it gives you a chance to analyse why, which is always interesting. The *Interzone* team works well, I think—there's a

remarkable degree of consensus.

**LT:** Three of your books have been shortlisted for awards—two for the Philip K. Dick and one for both the Clarke and PKD awards. How important are awards to you?

**LW:** It's always great to have that recognition, but I've no particular ambitions as far as awards go. If I get one, great, if not, then it's not the end of the world. I've lost one partner to cancer and nearly lost my current partner to the same disease. That tends to put these things in perspective.

**LT:** What was, for you, the personal highlight of your writing career so far?

**LW:** Getting published in the first place. I was very pleased to be nominated for the Clarke. I'm always pleased to be in the Years' Bests and things like that. Ultimately, however, the highlight is being a professional writer.

**LT:** Finally, what is your next project? And can you tell us anything about the next Liz Williams book?

**LW:** *Bloodwind* is coming out in February 2007, and it's a sequel to *Darkland*. Next year, Tor will be publishing *Vanish*, which is partly set in a future and mainly Islamic Britain, and is about political disappearance. I'm halfway through the next Chen novel, *The Shadow Pavilion*, and the one before that, *Precious Dragon*, will be published by Night Shade this year.

## **Unspeakable Horrors: The Legacy of Darkness in the Visual Arts of Western Culture**

*By Deb Taber*

*A canvas will be beautiful, or it will not be.... Everything is wasted if the spectator flees and fails to return. And if he should come back, punctured eyes and infected wounds ... would disintegrate and beauty would never again be reconstituted. Total failure.*

### **Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre[1]**

To Sartre, horrific art was a failure on the part of the artist, and to paint or depict human suffering in a way that was beautiful rather than offensive was an even worse abomination, a betrayal of human feelings for the sake of beauty. In spite of this, artists have been depicting the anger and grief of the human condition in both harsh and beautiful ways for millennia, without any harm coming to the concept of beauty on the one hand, or on the other hand, betraying humankind for beauty's sake. So perhaps, instead, horrific art is here to stay because it actually defines beauty in one sense by presenting its opposite, and also brings to light the absence of beauty which is part of every human life, the darkness of the world in which we live.

Violence, gore, pain and fear have found a home in art for nearly as long as humans have been creating. Graphic depictions of hunt scenes and battles are nothing new, nor is dark art with fantastical leanings. Not only is dark imagery linked to the human psyche and experience, it is also closely related to the stories we tell through speech, literature and film. It expresses the feelings that words cannot always capture, and strikes each individual differently, allowing a personal experience of darkness that goes deeper than conscious thought[2].

### **The Birth of Fantasy and Shadow**

Fantasy artwork, including dark fantasy and horror, owes its roots to the religions of the world, and to the stories those religions tell. In Western civilization, Ancient Greek artists painted and sculpted their minotaurs, gorgons and angry gods with intense detail and a flair for the horrific. Pottery from the Archaic



period in Greece (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.) contains depictions such as a gorgon bare-handedly ripping apart a deer, and heroes triumphing in bloody battles against their foes. The East has its own dark artists and history, but here, let us focus on the West.

With the spread of Christianity, the tone of dark artwork often departed from depicting the fear of godlike monsters. Instead, violence was used to evoke pity and compassion for the victim in various paintings and sculptures depicting the crucifixion. The theme of triumph over enemies, be they demon or human, found new outlets in representations of the crusades, and in his never-completed sculpture, "The Gates of Hell," Auguste Rodin combined Greek and Judeo-Christian mythology on his panels depicting a variety of mythological and human forms in various states of torment and contemplation. Regardless of the specific mythology represented by these works, the underlying theme is still the same: we are human, we are vulnerable, we are afraid.

In the works noted above, the stories are the beginning, the place where art forms before it steps away into the nonverbal realms where literature cannot follow. The art is inspired by the triumphs and horrors of the culture's legends and beliefs, but the work itself creates its own story, not only retelling the events which the stories detailed, but infusing them with a raw emotion that comes from a place of visual stimulation, rather than an intellectual reaction. This visceral response viewers have to darkly themed artworks is a large part of what keeps it in demand throughout the ages, regardless of the current trends in beauty. It expresses the forbidden sides of culture, the taboos, the stories that those in power don't want to hear told.

### **Propaganda Backfires: The Birth of Best-Selling Horror**

The true marriage of dark art and literature was born by coincidence in Austria in 1463. The printing press had recently been invented, and new processes allowed for the production of cheap paper. Now, rather than meticulously hand-copying every word that was set to print, an early form of mass-production was available, and that meant books could be sold for profit.

In the late 1400's, King Matthias of Hungary had a vested interest in issuing propaganda against Prince Vlad Dracula of Wallachia. He subsidized reports of Dracula's bloodthirsty practices, as told by the monks of the monastery at Lambach, who were said to have witnessed the Wallachian prince's atrocities. By 1463, Dracula had married into the Hungarian royal family and the propaganda was no longer of political use. That didn't stop the printers from seeing a potential for profit, however.

In 1463, a man by the name of Ulrich Hans printed the first "Dracula Pamphlet" sold strictly for the readers' enjoyment (and coin), rather than with political aims in mind. Although this pamphlet has been lost, at least thirteen others are known to exist, dating from 1463 through the early 1500's. By 1499, the publishers had contrived to boost their sales with a simple strategy: pair the writings with a gory illustration of Dracula's crimes. Pamphlets printed in both 1499 and 1500 portrayed an incident popularized by King Matthias' anti-Dracula campaign. The popular woodcuts portray the Wallachian prince sitting before a field of impaled bodies while his servant in the foreground dismembers others. Dracula himself is enjoying a meal, and both he and the servant wear pleasant expressions while the bodies beyond them writhe in pain.

Of these pamphlets, Florescu and McNally write:

*"The continued publication of the sensational tales confirms the fact that the horror genre conformed to the taste of the fifteenth-century reading public. We suspect that Dracula stories, in fact, became, during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the first best-sellers on a nonreligious motif ... Sales of each [pamphlet] would have been upwards of 300 to 400 books a year."*[3]

## **Moving into the Modern**

In a strong argument against Sartre's comment on the destruction of beauty through horrific art, we have the works of H.R. Giger and other contemporary artists in the modern horror genre. Perhaps best known for his involvement with the film, "Alien," Giger's works frequently combine technological aspects with the whole or part of the human form.

Giger's art gained a strong following in the 80's in America. Our rapidly rising technology in Western culture at the time was also bringing forth a large number of dark science fiction stories voicing the fear of the roles technology might play in our lives and the personification of that technology into something malicious and destructive, bent on having its own way and sweeping the humans aside.

Giger's work, rather than keeping technology in its place—shiny and mechanical and menacing—used his talent to give an organic quality to the sheen of the machine. In his "Biomechanoids" series of works, the sensuous curves and tentacle-like architecture give his paintings an animalistic feel, while the use of light, shadow, segmentation and hard, clean lines keep them in the realm of the machine. By adding human characteristics—from parts to whole body shapes—we are fully integrated into the machine, becoming something other than human, something greater, but also something we fear.

Giger also incorporated the use of mundane objects, from German garbage chutes to standard weaponry to bathroom fixtures, into his artwork. Through his eyes, a gun becomes a "Birth Machine," a bathtub becomes a place of claustrophobic fear, and even the landscape comes alive with writhing forms.

Despite the shudders these alien scenes may draw from the viewer, those who appreciate darkness in their art would not hesitate to use the word "beautiful" to describe them. It isn't a beauty which claws the viewer's eyes out, as Sartre says; it is a beauty that draws the onlooker in, begging him to look closer, to face the frightening scenes and maybe even love them a little. What is it in these works of darkness that gives them their endurance? The answer to this may lie both in symbol and psychology.

## **The Power of Symbol: Baring the Bones of the Human Skull**

For a look at one of the most powerful images in dark artwork throughout history, let us turn to the image of the skull—particularly the human skull. This relatively simple bone structure has been used in art, both religious and secular, throughout history. One of its simplest and clearest interpretations is that it represents the finality of death. The starkness of white bone in contrast to dark eye sockets and the holes of the nose and mouth speaks to the contrast of life and death, being and not-being. There is no hope of reanimation once the body is this far gone, and until recently, no hope of identification. As such, it is the image of ourselves. When we strip away the flesh and hair, the lively eyes and expressive lips, we have an image that is simply human. Dead human. For all we know, the skull could be our own. The empty eyes look back at us, their depths unknown, but it is the teeth—the grin revealed by the lack of musculature surrounding it, that most often brings the chill.

Used to great effect in art, these bared teeth, in the human world, have double meaning. Our ancestral, animal side says they are a threat, a menacing gesture to warn off competitors for food. The bared teeth also are a smile. A grin of happiness, of enjoyment. The bared teeth of the skull carry both the threat of death and something about that joy, a grin that means the joke is on us and the dead are the only ones entitled to laugh last.

Some of the most haunting dark art takes the bare human grin out of the context of any recognizable face and into the body of something twisted, grotesque. Something of fear.

Francis Bacon's classic painting, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* is a series of three panels which morphs a vaguely human abstract figure into three different forms. The panel on the

right gives us a protruding neck and a human mouth bared in a haunting grin. Said to be based on the figure of Nazi leader Hermann Goering giving a speech[4], this panel takes that haunting symbol and uses it to tell the story of atrocity and horror that issued from such a mouth and led to the legions of haunting art that came out of that era in our history.

## **The Shadow and the Self**

More than five thousand years after the “best-selling” pamphlet of Dracula and its accompanying woodcut, dark artwork is growing in popularity and establishing a place in the art world. No longer relegated to religious contexts, dark art is taken seriously in shows that offer artists’ reactions to personal tragedies, global trauma, and the celebration of beauty in darkness.

Professionals in psychology and psychotherapy have come to recognize the value of such art, as witnessed by the growth of the expressive arts therapy field in Western culture. Carl Jung, one of the forefathers of modern psychology, had the following to say about the way man deals with his darker thoughts and impulses:

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that it is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected." [5]

Artists use their craft to bring to consciousness that “shadow” material in a way that may be very personal to them, yet which also strikes a chord in the viewer, allowing him to also recognize the parts of himself revealed in that darkness.

Another school of thought in this posits that traumatic events are stored in the area of the brain known as the amygdala, and that this area being separate from the speech centers means that conventional “talk therapy” does no good in certain cases because the amygdala can't understand that form of language.[6] It is an older part of the human mind, one which works in symbols and sensation, not in words. In cases where the trauma is buried too deeply to respond to conventional therapy work, art therapy may be the only way for people to process the events which have occurred.

The Expressionist movement fueled the art of many Holocaust survivors after World War II, allowing a less realistic approach to the human figure, which became blurred and shadowy, allowing both the artist's and the observer's unprocessed thoughts to come through. The viewer is invited to place his sympathies not only with the victims of the atrocities being committed on canvas, but also to recognize himself in the perpetrator of violent acts.[7] As artists and survivors used the techniques of their work to come to terms with the ambiguity of their feelings, so too were people who merely viewed the art able to be touched by it, and come away with a recognition of the darker side of themselves. Perhaps, as Jung says, this conscious viewing of the darker portions of the self can lead to a kind of visual catharsis, and a recognition in the viewer as well as the artist of his cruder aspects—the knowledge that he really isn't as good or kind as he might think he is or want to be. From there, it is up to the individual to choose whether or not to initiate a change in his own darker nature.

## **Creatures of the Dark**

Not all dark art comes from a place of trauma or psychotherapeutic need, but even the works which don't stem from there tend to take on the artist's view of the world, much as the language of a writer will speak to his worldview whether he addresses the topic directly or not.

Expressive arts therapist and contemporary painter Amanda Wilkening says of her painting, *Guilt* :

"I painted it as a reaction to a news story about a man whose greed led to the deaths of his whole family. It wasn't until a while after the painting was completed that I realized how much of my own 'stuff' came through." [8]

Giger recounts his own realizations more starkly, saying, "Suddenly, I became aware that art is a vital activity that keeps me from falling into madness." [9]

So if some potential viewers are driven away by the power of these works, is it, as Sartre says, a total failure?

The simple answer is no. If works which generated a visceral repulsion in the viewer were complete failures, dark art would not have survived the centuries of human creation. As much as we love our horror stories, it is often the cover art which draws us in, makes us pick up a magazine or a book and take it home. The picture reaches into our minds through our eyes, sits itself inside our living skulls and looks out, coloring our perception of the words to come.

Whether that art is the black and white print of people dying in pain by Dracula's dining table or the haunted village scene on the front cover of this magazine, dark art is with us, to give us a chill, to draw us into the unknown that we dread to explore, yet crave. The "shadow" side of all of us lies waiting. Perhaps, if we allow it to express itself through the arts, it will stay satisfied a while longer, and the culture can be healthier on the whole because of that expression. We may not be as good as we would like to think we are, but most of us aren't as bad as we could be, and art may be a part of the reason why.

### **Cited Sources**

1 from Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics*, translated by Wade Baskin, pp.61-62

2 from Robert Bly's introduction to *Shadow, Searching for the Hidden Self*, p.10

3 from *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces*, Florescu and McNally, p. 202

4 *After Auschwitz: Responses to the Holocaust n Contemporary Art*, Bohm-Duchen, p.74

5 from C.G. Jung "Psychology and Religion" (1938). In *Collected Works 11: Psychology and Religion: West and East*. p.131

6 from Robert Bly's introduction to *Shadow, Searching for the Hidden Self*, p.9

7 *After Auschwitz: Responses to the Holocaust n Contemporary Art*, Bohm-Duchen, pp. 41-45

8 Quote courtesy of the artist

9 H.R. Giger's *Retrospective: 1964-1984*, p.9

### **Kill Me Then By Alethea Kontis**

2007 has been a long time coming.

I've dubbed 2006 "The Year of the Dark-Hunter" for all the work I did on the Sherrilyn Kenyon Compendium (look for it in stores this October!). But after swimming in Sherri's brain for an entire year, living with, dreaming of, and cataloguing vampires, I was more than ready to jump back into the deep end of my own twisted psyche. I started off the year with a list of projects, a burning desire, and a blank

Word document.

It was like trying to remember how to walk.

I stared at the big white nothing on the screen for a very long time, and then I walked away from the computer. I threw myself into my day job so hard I came home every night exhausted. I initiated a complete purge and reorganization of my entire house. I caught up on my emails. I surfed message boards. I even started working out again.

You know it's bad when *going to the gym* is the lesser of evils.

About a week or two (and 2000 paltry words) into 2007, someone in the Codex Writers Group started a thread with a story about how she had accidentally been a bit too creative on one of her medical school writing assignments. It had almost gotten her into serious trouble with the department. She asked if anyone else had had similar experiences—if their love for the written word had ever caused problems for them. What followed was a spectacular slew of crazy stories.

Mine among them.

### **Ninth Grade**

After years of writing stories, notes and travelogues that friends loved and teachers didn't get, I was really looking forward to high school. Higher Education. English Honors. A place where intelligence is praised and creativity is encouraged. A place where I would finally be understood.

Oh, how wrong I was.

Ninth grade brought the indomitable Mr. Hendrick. Just to give you an idea—the quote I remember from Mr. Hendrick was, “Thoreau is right, and you are wrong.” His favorite editorial comment was the unadorned question mark, and I was the one student upon which he most often bestowed this beloved symbol. I probably should have contacted *Guinness* after receiving one red-ink-stained paper boasting thirty-three question marks—over six marks per page.

What do you do with that, I ask you?

We had to rewrite our *Member of the Wedding* paper three times, our *Raisin in the Sun* papers “had coffee spilled on them” and were never seen again, and we were forced to read *Sister Carrie*. I hated *The Sea Wolf*; it was where I learned to despise anything having to do with yeast, and the term “universal truth.” We even read some Dickens that year. Which is a shame—I might have actually enjoyed *Great Expectations* otherwise.

The only bright spots were the 5+ on my poetry portfolio (five-plusses were about as widespread as whooping cranes, but I had at the last minute added a four-page unassigned narrative poem), and the time we were given extra credit for memorizing the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony exchange.

I memorized the whole scene. It was about three pages of our Literature textbook.

[ ... *would through the airy regions stream so bright, the birds would sing and think it was not night ...* ]

At the end of that year Mr. Hendrick and I parted quietly and civilly. I was not sorry to see him go.

### **Tenth Grade**

Tenth Grade brought Mrs. Watkins—a soft, charming older woman who never understood me no matter how much I loved her. She couldn't comprehend why passages from *A Separate Peace* sparked all these abstract thoughts in my brain. If you didn't get out of the book what you were supposed to get out of the book, you weren't doing the assignment.

Cliff's Notes were a godsend. It wasn't cheating; those little yellow booklets taught me how and what the rest of the world expected me to think.

The most revealing unit was the peer editing. Historically the most evil, thankless experiment, the class broke into groups of three and anonymously co-edited three similarly anonymous papers. Let me tell you: fifteen-year-olds pull no punches. (Had we known that one of the papers we hacked to pieces was written by our Vietnamese friend for whom English was a second language, we *certainly* would have acted differently ... talk about embarrassing.) As a saving grace, Mrs. Watkins went over the papers and put her own, compassionate, *real* grade on top of the peer grade. No pressure, right?

This assignment would have made Hitler sweat.

Ever the overachiever, the paper I turned in was a thirty-five page handwritten fairy tale edited down to four typed pages with non-existent margins. My biggest fear was that I had abridged so much that the readers wouldn't be able to follow the plot. But I shouldn't have worried—my ruthless peers gave me an A.

Mrs. Watkins gave me a B-.

I was as surprised as you. And more than a little confused—if the purpose of peer editing was to successfully please my readers, then what was the problem? I knew from our experience with Trien's paper that had the grammar been an issue there would have been machete evidence right there in red and white. I was never popular enough—even among the Nerd Clique—for the grade to have been a gift, that was certain.

Baffled, I whispered an inquiry after class about the lowered grade.

"I gathered it was supposed to be a fairy tale," she said casually. "But it wasn't appropriate for children."

I may not take any of that nonsense now, but I was not one of those kids who walked around with a "Question Authority" T-shirt. Hell, at the time I was still too shy to ask for extra ketchup at the McDonald's counter (a fact with which Tom Piccirilli takes great pleasure in torturing me). There was no way I was going to put up a fight.

But my brain was screaming.

Had she never actually *read* the original Grimm's "Cinderella" ... the one where the evil stepsisters *cut off parts of their feet* to squeeze into the slipper? Or "The Goose Girl," where the disloyal maid unknowingly suggests her own punishment in the form of being placed naked into a barrel full of nails and dragged down the street by two white horses?

Apparently not.

Mr. Hendrick may have been a jerk, but at least he was well read.

Not knowing what else to do, I took the grade and waited for my life to get better.

## **Eleventh Grade**

Thanks to the luck of the draw, Mr. Hendrick decided to teach eleventh grade English Honors that year. I dreaded every moment ... and blocked out most of them.

I do remember that I read William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* that year as an independent movie tie-in project. I was amused to report that Goldman's universal truth was ironically: Life Is Not Fair.

Mr. Hendrick and I fought over whether the book was written before or after the movie. He finally ended up taking points off, probably because he thought I should have hunted down the original S. Morgenstern version instead of Goldman's "abridgement."

Our very last assignment was a poetry analysis. It wasn't even for a grade—we either got a check or a check plus. The purpose was to test our skills to see if we were ready for AP English the next year.

Because of the Advanced Placement program, there was no English Honors offered in our school in the twelfth grade. If you didn't go into AP, you had to settle for College Prep English with all the "normals."

Of course, I had already made up my mind—I had no intention of wasting my senior year stressed and overworked while reading books I didn't like and writing papers teachers hated all to exempt the easiest 4.0's in college to procure.

I may have been reticent, but I wasn't stupid.

Only four people in the class received one of Mr. Hendrick's parsimonious check-plusses. I was one of them.

Oh yes, shy girls can still be smug.

## **Twelfth Grade**

Mrs. Smith's College Prep English Class of 1993 was like one of those TV sitcoms where the nerdy chubby girl is surrounded by jocks and pretty girls who can't read. The first day, someone asked Mrs. Smith the eternal question of what we needed to do to exempt the exam. Her answer: "Don't piss me off."

Yes, ma'am. Piece of cake.

I didn't have it so easy in my other classes—my schedule was crammed full with AP Chemistry, AP European History, AP Government and Economics, and AP Calculus. I figured I'd just sit in the back and do my Calculus homework and cruise through the class without a care in the world.

Mrs. Smith sat me in the front row, right beside her desk.

I rebelled by turning in four-page papers when the minimum requirement was one, and yelling out the answers to the classroom every time she gave us a pop quiz and then left the cubicle to go smoke a cigarette or flirt with her favorite administrator.

We read *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *Canterbury Tales*. I loved them all. When I was bored in class I simply flipped around in the Literature book, enraptured with T.S. Eliot, e e cummings, and the short stories of Ray Bradbury and Roald Dahl. Sure the class was crap, but I actually had *fun*.

All the "normals" thought I was crazy ... and I let them.

(I still do.)

The only snarl Mrs. Smith and I had was during the Chaucer unit. I got back my paper to find the word “microcosm” circled, with “plagiarized?” written above it in red pen.

Microcosm was a word we had learned in our ninth grade spelling books. At least, it was a word the English Honors kids had learned. When I asked Mrs. Smith about it, she told me that there was no way I could have come up with that word all by myself; I must have seen it in the Literature book and subconsciously memorized it and stolen it for my own.

Riiiiiiight.

It's not like she was ever going to expend the energy to get me in trouble, so it was never a big deal. But I have to admit, I'm still wondering how one plagiarizes a word.

Reading it, learning it, and using it again properly ... isn't that how you learn vocabulary in the first place?

### **Graduation**

I ran into Mr. Hendrick again in the bowels of the Coliseum when everyone was lining up before graduation. Having acquired a teeny bit more gumption, I walked right up to him and said, “You know, you made me hate English.”

In retrospect, that was a horrible thing to say. Just because it was true didn't make it okay.

He came up to me later after the ceremony and apologized, but I shrugged him off. I didn't have to like English—I may have been writing since I was eight, but my parents had told me in no uncertain terms that English was not an acceptable college major. We had toured colleges up and down the eastern seaboard the summer before and I had tried to make it work, looking at journalism and mass communications and any other career path that might have had to do with the written word.

Ultimately, parental pressures and budgets decided for me. I stayed at home, worked like a madwoman, and went to the State University. I ended up majoring in chemistry, but only because I was good at it.

I dropped out of college after three years—ironically enough, after all those AP classes I had enough credits to get a degree. Technically, they call that graduating.

Funny how life works out.

I never had a proper writing class until 2003—ten years after high school—when I was accepted into Orson Scott Card's Boot Camp. Not much slimmer but oceans braver, it was all I could do not to burst out laughing when Scott instructed us all to NEVER pursue an academic English career. He maintained that kowtowing to professors and “learning” how to write was the worst thing a writer could ever do.

Mom always said that everything happens for a reason.

A universal truth if ever there was one.

So here I am—a girl who mixed up the alphabet, who brought together an international SF Legion of Superheroes to benefit victims of the worst natural disaster in history, who had the privilege of assembling a book of facts on one of the most popular paranormal romance series of all time, and who publishes silly stories about herself in a horror magazine for the Best Boss Ever.

I've taken up permanent residence outside the box, and spray paint rainbow graffiti on it in my spare time. My family is belowstairs in the genre ghetto; my misfit siblings post on a board called Shocklines, my honorary Uncle is Orson Scott Card, and my guardian angel is Andre Norton.



Even the shyness has come a long way—I now have a life goal of acquiring as many friends as humanly possible. I'm not as brave as I still could be; there I'm still a work in progress. But I *have* actually walked into a room and said, "The party can start now."

I have had to fight upstream in order to do what I'm doing right now. But I think because of that, I appreciate every aspect of my very long list of jobs. I *carpe diem, noctem*, and every hour in between. Every opportunity is a miracle. Every publication is a gift like no other.

It's a pretty amazing life.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

\* \* \* \*

Oh, bugger.

That's the end of the essay.

I guess that means I have to go finish that short story now...

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### **Artist Credits**

#### **Paul Bielaczyc**

Cover & Interior art—The Sum of His Parts

At the 24-Hour

Projector

Sufficiently Advanced—————

#### **Michael Bielaczyc**

CAIN XP11: The Voice of Thy Brother's Blood

The End of Crazy

The Gunslinger of Chelem

Pyramus and Thisbe

Don't Show Your Teeth—————

#### **Justin Stewart**

Cover Design

**Apex Parting Shot—SONOROUS**  
**By Paul Abbamondi**

*Whether it's teeming with worms or bunkered by crawlies, it's yours. You found it, stuffed awkwardly between half a hollowed tree trunk and a grouping of mossy rocks. Not entirely sure what it is, but you've got a quarter notion that it's some sort of old musical instrument, judging by all the holes. Flute or piccolo or some type of instrument you don't even know about.*

It was silver, that much you knew, for the dull gleam of it in the afternoon light brought you to it. The silver was faint and faded, with yellowish circles dirtying its body. All around, the trees were hushed, as though awaiting your next move.

Were you really going to play it?

You shake it free of nasty things, noting the blowhole at one end and several in the middle for fingers to cover. Don't worry, you're alone. You have no skill, but that doesn't matter. Really, no one's going to care if you want to play it, even just to hear a note or a badly produced whiff of air and spit.

So you wipe it clean with the end of your shirt, dirt smearing off in thin streaks. Cleaning its insides is nearly impossible, but you do your best and forget about any remaining mud or ants trapped within the thing. Yes, that's right, you forget about it. There are letters and numbers etched into its shaft, like a serial code of some sort.

EXPMNT346787.

You raise the instrument sidelong to your face, wet your lips and blow, timidly at first, then with all you have.

Nothing.

Not a sound besides your sputtering breath, a bit short at that.

You check the instrument over again, turning it in your hands and holding it up in the light as if that might do something. There doesn't seem to be any noticeable cracks or breaks. You try again, now determined to produce a sound.

Nothing.

You hold out the instrument before you, wondering why you wasted your time on such a broken thing. No wonder it's been left out in the woods. Junk, certainly.

Then you hear it. Faint, at first, but increasing in volume, like the slow beat of a drum, tapping at the inside of your chest. It thumps and pounds, then drones on in an unnerving fashion. You whirl, wondering where the sound is coming from, or rather, where it is heading.

Off in the distance, beyond your vision, a dark blur rushes toward you, unshapely yet massive. It appears to be hairy with long necks, or arms or legs or branches protruding from its center mainframe. Now there are things thumping to the dirt around you, falling from trees and the sky. Squirrels, birds, bugs, leaves. All dead and still, some hitting you as they come down, others dropping hard to the earthen floor.

The growling grows louder. You can almost taste it, a burning sensation of ash and stale bread, or bile twice swallowed. But you cannot see it. Something is moving—charging—but it's too fast for your eyes to focus on. You think you see a gleaming ring of silver around its neck, maybe with holes in it. Maybe even an amber light blinking away, as if to proclaim: *danger, danger.*

What do you do?

You run, of course, sprinting with all the might in your legs, ever knowing that you're just a human and that thing is certainly not, and that before long, it'll catch up with you. It heard its call, some sonorous sound bringing it forth, stirring it from the shadows. What happens when it catches up with you, though, is a mystery, one you'd rather not fathom.

And so you run, without sound.

\* \* \* \*

**Paul Abbamondi** reads and writes speculative fiction compulsively. His short stories have appeared in *Shimmer* and *Aberrant Dreams*, among other fine publications. Visit his blog at [wistfulwritings.blogspot.com](http://wistfulwritings.blogspot.com).

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