

What Say You
Editorial by Jason B Sizemore

Welcome to our tenth issue! People tell me that this issue is something of a milestone. But for me, it was business as usual, collecting some of the best short fiction the genre has to offer.

Yet, I can't help but take a moment to reflect on the past two and a half years. The ups—Stoker nomination, publishing some of my favorite writing icons, love and adoration of peers (okay ... still working on that one). The downs—evil computer problems, subscription resellers, the USPS. It's been a crazy, adrenaline filled ride the whole way, and I'm hooked on it.

This issue highlights six fiction writers who are carrying the torch onward for horror and science fiction. So let's kick up our heels and allow them to guide us through another fine release of *Apex Digest*.

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Bad Sushi by Cherie Priest

A master of southern gothic horror, Cherie Priest has seen her career skyrocket in the past few years. Her first book (Tor) titled *Four and Twenty Blackbirds* has been a critical and commercial success. The second book of her “Eden Moore” trilogy, *Wings to the Kingdom*, was just released—with the third slated for 2007. She also has a limited edition novella available from Subterranean Press titled *Dreadful Skin* and she appears in the Apex featured writer anthology *Aegri Somnia*. A popular blogger, you can find her daily musings at cmpriest.livejournal.com.

Baku's hand shook.

In it, he held a pinch of wasabi, preparing to leave it as a peaked green dollop beside a damp pile of flesh-colored ginger. But something stopped him from finishing the dish. He hesitated, even though his fellow chef slapped the kitchen bell once, twice, a third time—and his own orders were backing up.

The waitress flashed Baku a frown.

Some small fact was wiggling around in his expansive memory. Some ancient recollection was fighting its way forward. In the back of his sinuses, he felt a tickle of sulfur. The kitchen in Sonada's smelled like soy sauce, and sizzling oil, and frying rice; but Baku also detected rotten eggs.

He smeared the glob of gritty paste onto the rectangular plate before him, and he pushed the neatly-sliced sushi rolls up into the pick-up window. The hot yellow smell grew stronger in his nose, but he could work through it. All it took was a little concentration.

He reached for his knives. The next slip in the queue called for a California roll, a tuna roll, and a salmon roll. Seaweed. Rice. Fish meat, in slick, soft slabs. He wrapped it all expertly, without thinking. He sliced the rolls without crushing them and slid them onto the plate.

That's why Sonada's kept Baku, despite his age. He told them he was seventy, but that was a lie by eight years—an untruth offered because his employers were afraid he was too old to work. But American Social Security wasn't enough, and the work at the restaurant wasn't so hard. The hours were not so long. The other men who cut the fish were young, but they treated him with respect. He was from their parents' homeland, after all.

The other workers were all born Americans. They didn't have to take the test or say the pledge, one hand over their hearts.

Baku didn't hold it against them, and the others didn't hold his original nationality against him. They might have, if they'd known the uniform he'd once worn. They might have looked at him differently, these young citizens, if they'd known how frantically he'd fired, and how he'd aimed for all the bright blue eyes.

There it was again. The sulfur. Baku had tripped over a G.I.'s body as he staggered towards the beach at Cape Esperance, but he hadn't thought much of it. He'd been preoccupied at the time—thinking only of meeting the secret transport that would take him the hell out of Guadalcanal. The Emperor had declared the island a lost cause, and an evacuation had been arranged.

It had happened under cover of night. The transport had been a crushing rush of thirteen thousand brown-eyed men clamoring for the military ferry. The night had reeked of gunpowder, and body odor, and sulfur, and blood.

Baku thought again of the last dead American he'd seen on Guadalcanal, the man's immobile body just beginning to stink in the sunset. If someone had told him, back in 1942, that in sixty years he'd be serving

the dead American's grandchildren sushi rolls ... Baku would have never believed it.

He looked at the next slip of lined white and green paper.

Shrimp rolls. More tuna.

Concentrate.

He breathed in the clean, sparse scent of the seafood—so faint it was almost undetectable. If it smelled like more than salt and the ocean, then it was going rotten. There were guidelines, of course, about how cold it must be kept and how it must be stored—but the old chef didn't need to watch any thermometers or check any dates. He knew when the meat was good. He knew what it would taste like, lying on top of the rice, and dipped lightly in a small puddle of soy sauce.

One order after another, he prepared them. His knives flashed, and his fingers pulled the sticky rice into bundles. His indefatigable wrists jerked and lurched from counter to bowl to chopping block to plate.

Eventually, with enough repetition and enough concentration, the remembered eggy nastiness left his head.

When his shift was over, he removed his apron and washed his knives. This was a small ritual that he indulged in each night. It was a closing habit, like a bedtime story he might tell himself after the supper rush.

He dried the knives each in turn, slipping them into a cloth pouch that he rolled up and carried home. The knives belonged to him, and they were a condition of his employment. They were good knives, made of German steel by a company that had folded ages before. And Baku would work with no others.

At home that night, he lay in bed and tried to remember what had brought on the flashback. Usually there was some concrete reason—an old military uniform, a glimpse of ribbon that looked like a war medal, or a Memorial Day parade.

What had brought back the island?

At home in bed, it was safe to speculate. At home, in the small apartment with the threadbare curtains and the clean kitchen, it was all right to let his mind wander.

* * * *

Sixty years ago there was a war and he was a young man. He was in the Emperor's army and he went to the South Pacific, and there was an island. The Americans dug in there and forced the Japanese troops to retreat.

Under cover of darkness they fled. They sneaked away at night, from the point at Cape Esperance. Personnel boats had been waiting. "There were thirteen-thousand of us," he said to himself in his native tongue. "And we evacuated in the middle of the night, while the Americans slept."

The water had been black and it had been calm, as calm as the ocean ever was. Hushed, hushed, and hushed, the soldiers slogged into the water to meet the transports. In haste and in extreme caution, they had boarded the boats in packs and rows. They had huddled down on the slat seats and listened to the furtive cacophony of oars and small propellers.

He seemed to recall a panic—not his own. Another man, someone badly hurt, in mind and body. The man had stood up in the boat and tried to call out. His nearest neighbor tackled him, pulled him back down into his seat, but the ruckus unsettled the small craft.

Baku was sitting on the outside rail, one of the last men crammed aboard.

When the boat lunged, he lost his balance. Over the side he toppled, and into the water. It was like falling into ink, with a riptide. Fear was halted by the fierce wetness, and his instincts were all but exhausted by days of battle. He thought to float, though. He tried to right himself, and to roll out of the fetal suspension.

And something had stopped him—hard.

Even after sixty years, the memory of it shocked him—the way the thing had grabbed him by the ankle. The thing that seized him felt like a living cable made of steel. It coiled itself around his leg, one loop, two loops, working its way to a tighter grip with the skill of a python and the strength of something much, much larger.

Inside Baku's vest he carried a bayonet blade made of carbon steel. It was sharp enough to cut paper without tearing it. It was strong enough to hold his weight.

His first thought and first fear was that this was a strange new weapon devised by the Americans; but his second thought and subsequent fear was that this was no weapon at all, but a creature.

There was sentience and insistence in the way the thing squeezed and tugged. He curled his body up to pull his hand and his knife closer to the clutching, grasping thing.

And because he was running out of air, he arched his elbow up and tightened his leather-tough wrists. They'd been taut and dense with muscle even then, when he was young. He'd grown up beside the ocean, cutting the fish every day, all day, until the Emperor had called for his service and he'd taken up a gun instead.

So it was with strength and certainty that he brought the knife down into the thing that held his leg.

It convulsed. It twitched, and Baku stabbed again. The water went warmer around his ankle, and the terrible grip slackened. Again. A second time, and a third. In desperation, he began to saw, unafraid that he would hit his own flesh, and unaware of the jagged injury when he did.

By then the air was so low and he was so frightened, he might have cut off his whole leg in pursuit of escape ... but it proved unnecessary. After several heroic hacks Baku all but severed the living lasso; and at that moment, one of his fellow soldiers got a handful of the back of his shirt.

Human hands pulled him up, and out, and over—back into the boat. A faint and final tug at his leg went nearly unnoticed as the last of the thing stretched, split, and tore.

On the floor of the boat Baku gasped and floundered like a freshly caught fish. The other soldiers covered him with their hands, hushing him. Always hushing. The Americans might hear.

He shook and shook, and shook some more—taking comfort in the circle of faces that covered him from above and shut out the star-spangled sky. At last he breathed and the breath was not hard-won.

But he did not feel safe.

Around his leg the leftovers clung. He unwound the ropy flesh from his own quivering limb and let the dismembered coil fall to the boat bottom, where it twitched, flopped, and lay still.

"What is it?" someone asked. "What is it?" the call was echoed around the boat in quiet voices.

No one wanted to touch it, so no one did until the next day.

Baku stared down at the thing and wondered what it had once belonged to. All he had to judge it by was the lone, partial tentacle, and it did not tell him much. It was a sickly greenish brown and it came with a smell to match—as if it were made of old dung, spoiled crab meat, and salt; and suction pads lined one side, with thorny-looking spines on the other. He did not remember the bite of the spines, but his leg wore the results.

"What is it?" the question came again from one of his fellow soldiers, who poked at the leavings of the peculiar predator with the end of his gun.

"I don't know. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

"Never."

Never before that night had he seen anything like the tentacle. It represented no squid or octopus that Baku knew, and he had been born into a family that had fed itself from the water for generations. Baku thought he had seen everything the ocean had to offer, even from the bottom-most depths where the fish had blind-white eyes, and the sand was as fine as flour.

But he'd never seen a thing like that, and he would never forget it. The scars on his legs would remind him for the rest of his life, even when he was an old man, and living in America, and lying in bed on a cool spring night ... half dozing and half staring at the ceiling fan that slowly churned the air above him.

And it was that smell, and that remembered texture of stubborn rubber, that had reminded him of the sulfur stench at Guadalcanal.

Twice in his life now, he had breathed that nasty, tangy odor and felt a tough cord of flesh resist the push of his knife.

His stomach turned.

* * * *

The next day at work, Baku wondered if the store manager had noticed anything strange about the sushi. He asked him, "Are we getting different meat now? It seemed different yesterday, when I was cutting it for the crab rolls."

The manager frowned, and then smiled. "I think I know what you mean. We have a new vendor for some of the fish. It's a company from New England, and they carry a different stock from the gulf coast company. But they come with very good references, and they cost less money than the others, too. They distribute out of a warehouse downtown, by the pier at Manufacturer's Row."

"I see."

"Was there a problem with the fish that you noticed?"

Baku was torn.

He did not want to complain; he never liked to complain. The manager was happy with the new vendor, and there was little that was specific to complain about. What would he say? That the octopus meat reminded him of war?

"No," he said. "No problem. I only noticed the change, that's all." And he went back to work, keeping his eyes open for more of the mysterious meat.

He found it in the squid, and in the crab. It lurked amid the pale bits of ordinary fish and seafood,

suspicious landmines of a funny smell and a texture that drove him to distraction.

Baku watched for the new vendor and saw him one day driving up in a big white truck with a large “A” painted on the side. He couldn't make out the company's name; it was printed in a small, elaborate script that was difficult to read. The man who drove the truck was a tall, thin fellow shaped like an egg roll. His skin was doughy and hairless.

When he moved the chilled packages of sealed, wrapped food on the dolly, he moved with strength but without hurry. He walked like a sea lion, with a gently lumbering gait—as if he might be more comfortable swimming than walking.

His big, round eyes stared straight ahead as he made his deliveries. He didn't speak to anyone that Baku ever saw, and when he was handed a pen to sign for deliveries, he looked at it blankly before applying it to the proper forms.

"I think he's challenged," the Sonada's manager said. "Mentally challenged, you know. Poor man."

"Poor man," Baku agreed. He watched him get into his truck and drive away. He would be back on Tuesday with more plastic-wrapped boxes that emitted fogged condensed air in tiny clouds around their corners.

And meanwhile, business boomed.

Every night the restaurant was a little more packed, with a few more patrons. Every night the till rang longer, and the receipts stacked higher on the spike beside the register. Every night the waitresses ran themselves more ragged and collected more tips.

By Saturday, Sonada's was managing twice its volume from the week before. By Sunday, people were lined out the door and around the side of the building. It did not matter how long they were told to wait.

They waited. They were learning an unnatural patience.

Baku took on more hours, even though the manager told him it was not necessary. A new chef was hired to help with the added burden and another would have been helpful, but the kitchen would hold no more workers.

Baku insisted on the extra time. He wanted to see for himself, and to watch the other men who cut the sushi rolls and steamed the sticky rice. He wanted to see if they saw it too—the funny, pale meat the color of a pickle's insides. But if anyone noticed that something was out of order, no one spoke about it. If something was different, something must be good—because business had never been better.

And the old chef knew that one way or another, the strange meat was bringing the customers in.

Even though Sonada's served a broad variety of Asian food, no one ever ordered fried rice anymore, or sesame chicken. Egg rolls had all but vanished from the menu, and Baku couldn't remember the last time beef was required for a dish.

Everyone wanted the sushi, and Baku knew why.

And he knew that something was happening to the regular patrons, the ones who came every night. From the kitchen window that overlooked the lobby he saw them return for supper like clockwork, and with every meal they took, they were changed.

They ate faster, and walked slower. They talked less.

Baku began to stay longer in the kitchen and rush hurriedly to the bus stop at night.

* * * *

Baku paused his unending slicing, cutting, scooping and scraping to use the washroom. He closed the door behind him and sighed into the quiet. For the first time all evening, he was alone—or so he thought.

All the stall doors were open bar the one at the farthest end of the blue-tiled room, which was closed only a little way. From within it, someone flushed.

Out of politeness, Baku pretended not to see that the gentleman had left the door ajar. He stepped to the nearest sink and washed his hands. He covered them with runny pink soap and took his time building lather, then rinsing under the steamy tap water. He relished the heat.

The kitchen had become so cold in the last week since the grills were rarely working and the air conditioner was running full-blast. Instead of sporadic warmth from the stoves, the refrigerator door was incessantly opened and closed—bringing fresh meat for the sushi rolls. The chefs handled cold meat, seaweed, and sticky rice for six hours at a time.

His knuckles never thawed.

But while he stood there, warming his fingers beneath the gushing stream, he noticed that the restroom's other occupant was behaving strangely. From within the stall with the half-closed door the sound of repeated flushing foamed its way into the tiled room.

Dampness crept up the sole of Baku's shoe. Water puddled on the floor around his feet. He flipped the sink's chrome lever down, shutting off the water.

He listened.

The toilet's denouement was interrupted before the plumbing could finish its cycle and another flush gurgled. A fresh tide of water spilled out from under the door. It smelled like blue detergent and wet paper.

Baku craned his neck to the right, leaning until he could see the square of space between the soggy floor and the bottom of the stall. Filthy gray sneakers stood ankle-deep in overflow. The laces were untied; they floated like the hair of a drowning victim.

"Hello?" Baku called softly. He did not want a response. "Can I help you with something, sir?" His English was heavy, but he was careful with his pronunciation.

He took a cautious step forward, and that small shuffle cleared nearly half the distance between him and the stall door. He took a second step, but he made that one even tinier than the first, and he put out his hand.

The tips of his fingers quivered, as they tapped against the painted metal door. He tried to ask, "Sir, are you all right?" But the words barely whispered out of his throat.

A groan answered him without offering specifics.

He pushed the door. It crept open.

He found himself staring at a man's hunched back and a sweaty patch of shirt between his shoulder blades. The shirt itself was the beige kind that comes with an embroidered nametag made in dark blue thread. When the man at the toilet turned around, Baku read that the tag said "Peter," but he'd guessed

that much already. He knew the shirt. It was the uniform worn by the man who drove the delivery truck each Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday.

Peter's eyes were blank and watery. They were no more alive than olives in a jar.

The deliveryman seemed to know that his peculiar ritual was being questioned, and he did not care for the interruption. With another petulant groan he half lunged, half fell forward.

Baku recoiled, pulling the door closed with his retreat.

Peter was thwarted. Perhaps it was only his innate imbecility that made him linger so long with the slim obstacle, but it bought the old chef time to run.

He slipped first, falling knee-down with a splash, but catching himself on the sink and rising to flee. Back into the hall and past the ice machine he stumbled, rubbing at his knee and shaking from the encounter. It had been too strange, too stupidly sinister. At the far end of the dining area a big round clock declared the time. For a moment he was relieved. He needed to go home, and if the clock could be believed, he had less than an hour remaining on his shift.

But his relief dissolved as quickly as it had blossomed. The scene beneath the clock was no more reassuring than the one in the bathroom.

Dozens of people were eating in silence, staring down at their plates or their forks. They gazed with the same bland olive eyes, not at each other but at the food. The waitresses and the one lone male waiter lurked by the kitchen window without talking. The cash register did not ring.

Where was the manager? He'd been in and out for days, more out than in. The assistant manager, then. Anyone, really—anyone who was capable of sustaining convincing eye contact would suffice.

Into the kitchen Baku ducked, anticipating an oasis of ordinary people.

He was disappointed. The cooks stood in pockets of inattentive shoe-gazing, except for the two who had made their way back into the refrigerator. From within its chilly depths, Baku heard the sounds of sloppy gnawing.

Was he the only one who'd not been eating the sushi?

Baku searched desperately for a pair of eyes to meet his, but he found none. He turned just in time to hear the bathroom door creak open. Peter moaned as he made his way into the corridor and then began a slow charge towards the chef.

The grunting, guttural call drew the attention of the customers and the kitchen staff. They turned to see Peter, and then turned to see the object of his attention. All faces aimed themselves at Baku.

Two nearby customers came forward. They didn't rise from their seats or fold their napkins, and they didn't put down their forks. Together they stood, knocking their chairs backwards and crashing their thighs against the table, rocking it back and forth. The woman raised her hand and opened her mouth as if she meant to speak, but only warm air and half-chewed sushi fell out from between her lips. Her dinner companion managed a louder sound—like an inflatable ball being squeezed flat—and the low, flatulent cry roused the remaining customers and the kitchen staff alike. In a clumsy wave, they all stumbled towards Baku.

On the counter, he spied the folded roll of his fine German knives. He fired one hand out to snag it; he tucked it under his arm and pushed the glass door with his elbow.

Behind him the crowd rallied, but it was a slow rally that was impeded by everything in its path. The sushi-poisoned people were single-minded to the point of losing all sense. Chairs thwarted them. Counters baffled them.

Baku hurried.

Outside the sky was growing dark with a too-early dusk brought on by a cloudy almost-storm. He tumbled into the parking lot and pulled the door shut behind his back.

The bus stop was empty.

The chef froze. He always rode the bus home. Every night. Rain or shine he waited under the small shelter at the corner.

Over his shoulder he watched the masses swarm behind the windows, pushing their hands through the blinds and slapping their palms against the glass. They were slow, but they wouldn't give him time to wait for the 9:30 bus to the downtown terminal.

He crushed at his knives, taking comfort from their strength wrapped inside the cloth. His knuckles curled around them, and flexed.

As a young man he'd confronted the ocean with nets and hooks, drawing out food and earning his livelihood. Then he'd been called as a soldier, and he'd fought for his country, and to serve his Emperor. In the years that followed he had put away his bayonet and had taken up the knives of a cook; he had set aside the uniform of war and put on an apron.

But knives like these could be weapons, too.

"I am not too old," he breathed. Behind him, a dozen pairs of hands slapped at the windows, rattling the blinds. Shoulders pummeled at the doors, and the strained puff of a pneumatic hinge told Baku they were coming.

"I am not too old to work. Not too old to cut fish. I am *not* too old to fight."

Peter's delivery vehicle sat open in the parking lot's loading zone. The refrigerated trailer compartment hung open, one door creaking back and forth in the pre-storm breeze. A faint briny smell wafted forth.

Baku limped to the trailer door and took a deep breath of the tepid air. The contents within were beginning to turn.

He slammed the metal door shut and climbed into the cab. He set his knives down on the passenger's seat and closed his own door just as the first wave of angry patrons breached the restaurant door.

At first, he saw no keys; he checked the ignition, and the glove box. But when he checked the visor a spare set tumbled down into his lap. He selected the engine key without a tremor and plugged it into the slot. The engine gagged to life and with a tug of the gearshift, the vehicle rolled forward—pushing aside a pair of restaurant patrons, and knocking a third beneath the van's grille. Baku did not even check to see them in the rearview mirror.

Downtown, to Manufacturer's Row. That's where the manager had said the new meat came from. That's where Baku would go.

He roughly knew the way, but driving was something he'd forgotten about years before. Busses were cheap to ride, and cars were expensive to maintain. The van was tall and top-heavy. It reacted slowly,

like a boat. It swayed around corners and hesitated before stopping, or starting, or accelerating.

The streets were more empty than not. The roads were mostly clear and Baku wished it were otherwise. All the asphalt looked wet to him, shining under the streetlamps. Every corner promised a sliding danger. But the van stayed upright, and Baku's inexpert handling bothered no one.

He arrived at the distribution center and parked on the street in front of a sign that said "Loading Zone." He half climbed, half fell out of the cab and let the door hang open. So what if it was noted and reported? Let the authorities come. Let them find him and ask why he had forced his way into the big old building.

At first he thought this as a whim, but then he began to wish it like a prayer. "Let them come." In his arm there was a pain, and in his chest there was an uncomfortable tightness from the way he breathed too hard. "Let them bring their guns. I might need help."

From a sliver of light, Baku saw the front door was ajar.

Baku put his face against the crack and leaned on his cheekbone, trying to see inside. The space was not enough to peep through, but the opening was big enough to emit an atrocious smell. He lifted his arm and buried his nose in the crook of his elbow.

He wedged his shoulder against the heavy slab of the door and pushed. The bottom edge of the sagging door grated on the concrete floor; rusty hinges shrieked their objections.

Within, the odor might have been overpowering to someone unaccustomed to the smell of saltwater, fish, and the rot of the ocean. It was bad enough for Baku.

Two steps sideways, around the crotchety door, and he was inside.

His shoes slipped and caught. The floor was soaked with something more viscous than saline, more seaweed-brown than clear. He locked his knees and stepped with care. He shivered.

The facility was cold, but not cold enough to freeze his breath. Not quite. Industrial refrigerators with bolted doors flanked one wall, and indoor cranes were parked haphazardly around the room. There were four doors—one set of double doors indicated a corridor or hall. A glance through the other three suggested office space; a copy room, a lunch room with tables, and two gleaming vending machines.

Somewhere behind the double doors a rhythmic clanking beat a metal mantra. There was also a mechanical hum, a smoother hum. Finally there was a lumpy buzz like the sound of an out-of-balance conveyor belt.

In his hand, Baku's fist squeezed tightly around his roll of knives.

He unclenched his fingers and opened the roll across his palm. It would do him no good to bring them all sheathed, but he could not hold or wield more than two.

So for his right hand, he chose a long, slim blade with a flexible edge made to filet large fish. For his left, he selected a thicker, heavier knife—one whose power came from its weight. The remaining knives he wrapped up, tied, and left the bundle by the door.

"I will collect you on the way out," he told them.

Baku crept on toward the double doors, pushing tentatively at them.

They swayed and parted easily, and the ambient noise jumped from a background tremor to a sharper

throb.

The stink swelled too, but he hadn't vomited yet and he didn't intend to, so Baku forced the warning bile back to whence it had come. He would go towards the smell. He would go towards the busy machines and into the almost frigid interior. His plan was simple, but big: he would turn the building off.

All of it. Every robot, light, and refrigerator. He would break the machines if he had to, and deface every inch of the warehouse if it came to that, but he hoped it might not. He understood that there would be a fuse box or a power main.

As a last resort, he might find a dry place to start a fire.

On he went, and the farther his explorations took him, the more he doubted that a match would find a receptive place to spark.

Dank coldness seeped up through his shoes and his feet dragged splashing wakes along the floor. He slipped, and stretched out an arm to steady himself, leaning his knuckles on the plaster. The walls themselves were wet, too. He wiped the back of his hand on his pants. It left a trail of slime.

The clank of the machines pounded harder, and with it the accompanying smell insinuated itself into every pore, every living orifice of Baku's body, into every fold of his clothing.

Into the heart of the warehouse he walked—one knife in each hand—until he reached the end of the corridor that opened into a larger space—one filled with sharp-angled machines reaching from the floor to the ceiling. Rows of belts on rollers shifted frosty boxes back and forth across the room from trucks to chilled storage. Along the wall were eight loading points with trucks docked and open, ready to receive shipments and disperse them.

He searched for a point of commonality, or for some easy spot where all these things must come together for power. Nothing looked immediately promising, so he used his eyes to follow the cables on the ceiling, and he likewise traced the cords along the floor. Both sets of lines seemed to follow the same path—out into a secondary hallway.

Baku shuffled sideways and slithered with caution along the wall and towards the portal where the electric lines all pointed.

Once through the portal, Baku found himself at the top of a flight of stairs. Low-power emergency lights illuminated the corridor in murky yellow patches.

It would have to be enough.

When he strained to listen, Baku thought he detected footsteps, or maybe even voices below. He tiptoed towards them, keeping his back snugly against the stair rail, holding his precious knives at the ready.

Baku hesitated on the bottom stair, hidden in the shadows, reluctant to take the final step that would put him firmly in the downstairs room. There in the basement the sad little emergency lights were too few and far between to give any real illumination. The humidity, and the chill, and the spotty darkness made the entire downstairs area feel like night at the bottom of a swimming pool—a pool full of sharks.

A creature with a blank, white face and midnight-black, lidless eyes emerged from inside an open freezer. It was Sonada's manager, or what was left of him.

"You," the thing accused.

Baku did not recoil or retreat. He flexed his fingers around the knife handles and took the last step down into the basement.

"You would not eat the sushi with us. Why?" The store manager was terribly changed without and within; even his voice was barely recognizable. He spoke as if he were talking around a mouthful of seaweed.

Baku circled around towards the manager, not crossing the floor directly but staying with his back to the wall wherever it was possible. The closer he got to the manager, the slower he crept until he halted altogether. The space between them was perhaps two yards.

"Have you come now for the feast?" the manager slurred.

Baku was not listening. It took too much effort to determine where one word ended and the next began. The message didn't matter anyway. There was nothing the manager could have said that would have changed Baku's mind or mission.

Beside the freezer with its billowing clouds of icy mist there was a fuse box. The box was old-fashioned; there were big glass knobs the size of biscuits and connected to wiring that was frayed and thick like shoelaces. It might or might not be the heart of the building's electrical system, but at least it might somehow be connected to the rest. Perhaps, if Baku wrenched the fuses out, there would be a chance that he could short out the whole building and bring the operation to a halt. He'd seen it in an American movie he had watched once, late at night when he couldn't sleep.

If he could stop the electricity for even an hour—he could throw open the refrigerators and freezers and let the seafood thaw. Let it rot. Let it spoil here, at the source.

The manager kept talking. "This is the new way of things. He is coming, for the whole world."

"So this is where it starts?" Baku spoke to distract the manager. He took a sideways shuffle and brought himself closer to the manager, to the freezer, to the fuse box.

"No. We are not the first."

Baku came closer. A few feet. A hobbled scuffing of his toes. He did not lower the knives, but the manager did not seem to notice.

"Tell me about this. Explain this to me. I don't understand it."

"Yes," the manager gurgled. "Like this." And he turned as if to gesture into the freezer, as if what was inside would explain it all.

Baku jumped then, closing the gap between them. Baku was slowed with age, but whatever had changed the manager made him slower than his knife-wielding chef.

Baku pushed then, with the back of his arm and the weight of his shoulder, and he shoved the manager inside the freezer. The door was a foot thick and it closed with a hiss and a click. Only if he listened very hard could Baku hear the angry protests from within. He pressed his head against the cool metal door and felt on the other side a fury of muted pounding.

When he was comfortable believing that the manager would not be able to interfere, he removed his ear from the door. He turned his attention again to the fuse box, regarding it thoughtfully.

Then, one after the other, the fuzzy white pods of light were extinguished and the basement fell into perfect blackness. The heavy thing that struck Baku in the chest was unseen, unheard, but definitely felt.

The shock sent him reeling against the freezer door. He slammed against it and slid to his knees. He caught himself by jabbing his knives into the concrete floor, using them to keep himself from falling further.

Somewhere nearby the thing regrouped with a sound like slithering sandbags. Baku's ear told him that it must be huge—but was this an illusion of the darkness, of the echoing acoustics? He did not know if the thing could see him, and he did not know what it was, only that it was powerful and deadly.

On the other side of the room Baku's assailant was stretching, lashing, and reaching, and so was Baku. He flattened his chest against the wall and leaned against it as he tried to rise, climbing with the knives, scraping them against the cement blocks, scraping off flecks and strips of paint that fluttered down into his hair and settled on his eyelashes.

A loud clank and a grating thunk told Baku that his knives had hit something besides concrete. He reached and thrust the knife again. He must be close to the fuse box; he'd only been a few feet away when the lights went out.

The thudding flump that accompanied his opponent's movement sounded louder behind Baku as he struggled to stand, to stab. Something jagged and rough caught at his right hand. A warm gush soaked his wrist and he dropped that knife. With slippery fingers he felt knobs and what might have been the edge of a slim steel door panel. He reached for it using it to haul himself up, but the little hinges popped under his weight and he fell back down to his knees. The light metal slab fell to the floor with a clank of finality.

The monstrous unseen thing lashed out. One fat, foul-smelling limb crashed forward, smacking Baku's thighs, sweeping his legs out from underneath him. He toppled and landed face-down. His bleeding right hand grazed the dropped knife, but he couldn't grasp it. Holding the remaining blade horizontally in his left hand, Baku locked his wrist. When the creature attacked again, Baku sliced sideways. A splash of something more gruesome than blood or tar hit Baku on the side of the face.

He used his shoulder to wipe away what he could. The rest he ignored. The wet and bloody fingers of his right hand curled and fastened themselves on a small shelf above his head.

The thing whipped its bulk back and forth but it was not badly hurt. It gathered itself together again, somewhere off in the corner. If Baku could trust his ears, it was shifting its attack, preparing to come from the side. He rotated his left wrist, moving the knife into vertical position within his grip. He opened and closed his fingers around it. To his left, he heard the thing coming again.

Baku peered up into the darkness over his head where he knew the fuse box hung open. The creature scooted forward. Baku hauled himself up and swung the fine German steel hard, with all the weight he could put behind it. It landed once, twice, and there was a splintering and a sparking. Plastic shattered, or maybe it was glass. Shards of debris rained down.

One great limb crushed against Baku and wrapped itself around his torso, ready to crush, ready to break. The man could not breathe; there in the monster's grip he felt the thing coil itself like a boa constrictor, slow but wickedly dense.

In the center of the room the beast's bulk shuddered unhappily as it shifted, and shuffled, and skidded. The appendage that squeezed Baku was only one part of a terrible whole.

Before his breath ran out, before his hands grew weak from lost blood and fear, Baku took one more stab with his good hand. The heavy butcher's blade did not bear downward this time, but upward and back—and the fuse box detonated with a splattering torrent of fire and light.

For two or three seconds Baku's eyes remained open.

And in those seconds he marveled at what he saw, but could never have described. Above and beyond the thunderous explosion of light in his head, the rumbling machines ceased their toil.

The current from the box was such that the old man could not release the knife, and the creature could not release its hold on the old man. As the energy coursed between them, Baku's heart lay suddenly quiet in his chest, too stunned to continue beating. He marveled, briefly, before he died, how electricity follows the quickest path from heaven to earth and how it passes with pleasure through those things that stand in water.

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Interview with Cherie Priest

Three hit novels. A nice fat contract with Tor. Lead story in *Apex Digest*. Yes, things are looking good for this mistress of gothic horror.

I was delighted when Cherie accepted my offer of an interview. It's fun to talk about things such as werewolves, zombies, and killer Irish nuns.

Jason Sizemore: First, let's talk Eden Moore. She's a bit of an oddball, likes to keep a low profile, has a snootish intellectualism about her ... yet, to a reader, she's immediately likable. Describe the process of creating such a memorable protagonist?

Cherie Priest: I mashed together a friend of mine from high school, a groovy coworker, and one of my old roommates. Together, they make up Eden Moore. She looks like a combination of two of them, and thinks and talks like the third. So I guess her creative birth wasn't really very interesting ... or creative, either, for that matter.

JS: The third book of the Eden Moore series, *Not Flesh Nor Feather* (Tor), comes out in October, 2007. Are you forever finished with Eden's story, or might she appear in other works?

CP: I'm not sure. Tentatively speaking, book number three is the final book in the Eden series, but that's not to say that—should a publisher come up to me with fat sacks of cash—I wouldn't revisit the characters. I set up the ending to offer the possibility of continuing adventures, but not the promise of them. I like Eden, but I'm looking forward to writing about some other people for awhile.

JS: What can you tell us about *Not Flesh Nor Feathers* that will whet our appetites?

CP: It's got a scene in it where Eden and a friend blow up a tunnel full of zombies with industrial-grade fireworks. And if *that* doesn't whet your appetite, then you must be all dead inside. I'm just sayin'.

JS: I've just finished reading *Dreadful Skin* (Subterranean Press), a lavish collection of stories about an Irish nun named Eileen Callahan hot on the trail of her werewolf nemesis. Now let me say that you appear to have a knack for creating unique, memorable female protagonists. Do you attribute this to natural talents, a strong maternal influence while growing up, or being a bad-ass MFA graduate?

CP: Much like Eden, Eileen is based on someone I knew. She's a rough caricature of a woman I worked for at UTC while I was finishing that MA—and note the lack of an “F” in there, because there's nothing “fine” about rhetoric, apparently. So it seems like, more than anything else, I have a knack for meeting unique, memorable women.

JS: *Dreadful Skin* is anything but conventional, and my hat goes off to Bill Schafer at Subterranean Press for publishing the book. How much of a challenge was it, for instance, writing in so many different points of view in the first novella of the book, “The Wreck of the Mary Byrd?”

CP: It was a marvelous great challenge, because it was something I'd never really done before. To tell you the truth, the whole thing was a bit of an experiment. Oh, it wasn't just an exercise in masturbatory writer wankery, don't get me wrong; but there was definitely a sense that I was stretching my personal comfort zone and boundaries. As you noted above, I'd just spent three books in one woman's head, so it was a real challenge to shift gears and get inside the heads of half a dozen other people for awhile.

But it was also very satisfying, and an awful lot of fun.

JS: Your work has a strong sense of setting. One could make the argument that the city of Chattanooga,

TN, acts as a secondary character in your first two novels. Now that you've moved to the West Coast (Seattle, for all the Cherie Priest stalkers out there), do you see your future novels occurring in much colder, wetter climates?

CP: I honestly don't know yet. Since I've been in Seattle I've only begun and finished one full-length project in its entirety, a young adult project that's loosely titled *The Ado Ward*. The others I've written here (*Not Flesh Nor Feathers*, *Dreadful Skin*) were all started in Tennessee before I left; but *The Ado Ward* is set entirely in Tampa, Florida—and my next book up for Tor is also going to be set primarily in Florida.

I was born in Tampa, and I spent quite a lot of time in Florida before I moved to Tennessee. And now, even though I haven't lived in Florida for years, I've found that the chill and persistent weak drizzle of Seattle make me nostalgic for the heat and bombastic storminess of the Gulf Coast. Of course I miss Tennessee, too—it was my home for almost twelve years. But its yearly cycle of too hot/too cold/too wet/too dry always exhausted me a little.

This having been said, in another couple of years there will be a vampire novel out through Tor called *Awake Into Darkness* ... and at the moment, it lacks a setting. I might put it here in Seattle. You never know.

JS: One thing I find interesting is your hobby of urban exploration. How'd you get involved with this dangerous pastime?

CP: It's hard-coded into my DNA. My mother and her sisters are exactly the sort of women to drive past an abandoned house in the middle of nowhere, stop the car, get out, and climb through a broken window to take a look around. They liked to do this to new homes that were under construction, too. When I was a little kid, it used to embarrass me to death; but as I got older, I started joining in on the fun. So in short, it's the result of a predisposition towards intense nosiness and deep-seated narcissism. (Read: "That No Trespassing sign applies to everyone except for *me*.")

JS: You have our lead story in this issue, "Bad Sushi." Is this your ode to Lovecraft, or a reaction to some ... bad sushi?

CP: Ode to Lovecraft. I love sushi, and it's never done me wrong yet. The story's setting is based largely on a little mom-and-pop restaurant in Chattanooga where I used to eat several times a week.

JS: I'd like to hear more about two of your upcoming projects with Tor, *Fathom* and *Awake Into the Darkness*.

CP: Well, let's see ... *Fathom* is a modern fantasy—but think *Nightwatch* more than Charles DeLint. Not that there's anything at all wrong with DeLint—there most certainly is *not*, he's fantastic—but that's not what I'm shooting for with this one. It's quite dark and quite strange, and quite difficult to sum up. Suffice it to say, it's about gods and monsters ... with the occasional superhero and 18th century Spanish pirate thrown in for good measure.

Awake Into Darkness is a trashy vampire novel that's more fun than a doctor's medicine cabinet. Warring factions, political intrigue, sex, conspiracies, and unholy scientific experiments. Hurrah! [:: throws confetti ::]

JS: As a kid, what was your Saturday morning routine?

CP: Get up, get dressed up, go to church, and yawn through Sabbath School. I was raised a Seventh Day Adventist, so my Saturdays were pretty dull.

JS: Has anyone ever measured how many words per minute you speak after a stiff cup of coffee?

CP: The technology doesn't yet exist! But someone somewhere is working on it. Scientists are looking to tap me as an alternate energy source.

JS: Who are some of your favorite contemporary horror writers?

CP: Ooh ... let's see. Straightforward horror and not “other books with horror elements?” Then I'd have to say Ramsey Campbell and Joe Lansdale, they're my stand-bys. Most of the horror I read comes from an older crowd, though, or it's nonfiction. One of the most terrifying books I ever read was *Isaac's Storm* by Erik Larsen, about the Galveston hurricane in 1900. Holy crap, that one gave me nightmares.

JS: *evil grin* Give us a sampling from your first (unpublished) novel, *Who Buried the Gravedigger*.

CP: NEVAH. And you can't make me!

For more information about Cherie Priest, visit www.cheriepriest.com

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Daydreams by Lavie Tidhar

Lavie Tidhar's (www.lavietidhar.co.uk) stories have appeared in *Sci Fiction*, *Chizine*, *Postscripts*, *Dark Wisdom*, *Clarkesworld Magazine* and many others.

To Vered Tochterman

Grotesqa

Dreams that came true! How to bring back objects from a dream! How to bring the dead back to life! The *only* journal that tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth! Fulfil the potential hidden inside *you*! You *too* could control your dreams—and we'll tell you how!

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And so on.

* * * *

He leafs through the journal, feeling a little uncomfortable, the painting on the cover showing a woman with long purple hair who is wearing a metallic-looking brassier that doesn't quite cover her impressive breasts. Her hands are raised, a horrified look on her face. A bug with too many eyes rises above her, its feelers erect.

Grotesqa. He leafs ahead, it's better that way, so that the other shoppers won't be able to see the cover and so identify the kind of stuff he is reading. He skips Lior Tirosh's *Where the Waters Meet*. Tirosh's stories never do it for him. No plot.

He likes G Heshvan. He has a dry, slightly pedantic tone, but he is never dull. And the things he writes *work*—he remembers again the dream two weeks before, the one he planned with the help of the article, with a complex adventure plot where he single-handedly rescued Sweden's virginal volleyball team on an island swarming with zombies. Would be interesting to see what Heshvan has to say in part two.

But he skips the article, skips the next two stories, and reaches at last the profile of the man who is always without a surname. Raphael. Just Raphael. He begins to read the article, and the other shoppers pass by him quietly so as not to disturb him.

* * * *

In a world where dreams are out of control, one man is known as the protector of the waking world. A man whose name is a government secret, as is the exact location of his bedroom. He is known only by

his code-name: Raphael. The man who broke the Deaf Statues Conspiracy and eliminated the Frog Dreamers Network. The man who brought the REM unit—Rapid Eye Movement, The Dream Police, whatever you want to call it—to national and international acclaim. Raphael, now in his seventies, still active. We met up with him in an undisclosed location, somewhere near where Yokne'am once was...

Grotesqa: You are known all over the world as an exceptional dreamer and an untiring fighter for a stable reality.

Raphael: Thank you.

Grotesqa: Is it true that you personally know Tommy Gold, the new James Bond?

Raphael: Well, look, they said there would never be a Jewish Bond, but there you are. A few years ago I met the Broccoli family in some mass dreaming event for charity in Los Angeles, and when I heard the role was available again I called them and it is possible I mentioned Tommy, who at the time was making movies, I'm sorry to say, almost pornographic. Well, you have to make a living somehow; working for the REM isn't exactly a picnic either.

Grotesqa: What did they say?

Raphael: In those movies? There wasn't really much dialogue, you know. There was a lot of moaning involved. I didn't know if it was a *shiv'ah* or a dirty movie.

Grotesqa: The Broccoli Family.

Raphael: Ah, of course. They agreed with me that Bond needed a new face, a change of direction, something to grab the youth again, something radical. So first I said, "Forget MI5, that whole British thing hasn't worked for years, why not make him a Mossad agent?" I asked them. Besides, no Bond was truly English. And of course, Tommy is ideal for the role. They could see that straight away.

And so on.

* * * *

The man returns the journal to the shelf. He leaves the shop empty-handed and walks up the street. The siren still sounds, ensuring no one sleeps during the day, that reality will remain stable at least for the duration of business hours. He almost doesn't notice the noise. Once on the pedestrian street, he orders a coffee and sits in the shade, looking at the passers-by. He is pleased—excited, to tell the truth. Soon...

No. He needs to relax. He drinks from the coffee and lights a cigarette. That's what the government wants. For you to stay awake, awake, awake, and then sleep so heavily that you won't dream.

He drinks from the coffee and the cup melts, pours together with the coffee onto the pavement, and with it the coffee shop, the ancient waitress, the cobblestones, the sky. They pour into a black hole that grows and grows until it swallows everything.

* * * *

Raphael woke up.

The middle of the night. Darkness pouring in through the window. What was it?

What?

He was seventy. Seventy! And totally senile! And, what? A Jewish Bond?

He smiled in the darkness. Here, proof that it really was a dream.

A dream.

What did he dream about?

The man in the shop. The journal. What's a journal? Which one? He couldn't remember, and that worried him.

That man. What did he look like? There was something familiar about him. The hair? Brown? black?

No, it was gone. And that worried him.

He was supposed to remember dreams. It appeared in his job description.

He wrote down what he could remember. The notebook by the bed. The gnawed-at pen. The light of the lamp, which he had turned on. That silence, of the small hours of the night. That's why he lived without neighbours. So he wouldn't wake up to the roars of dinosaurs, or an all-out gangster war, or a crashed spaceship. People dreamed Hollywood movies, and it made him sad. He wanted to see more love dreams, more dreams without sound, for instance, or dreams in black and white about abandoned cities and silent statues.

Peaceful dreams.

Pleasant dreams.

Sweet dreams.

He fell asleep again.

* * * *

Raphael woke. Light poured in through the window. And so on.

Michal waited for him in the kitchen. She sat at the big table, a mug of coffee in front of her. A coffee for him, too. Black, three sugars.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

He drank the coffee. Michal was dressed for the field. Now what?

Michal laid some papers on the table. No. A volume of something. A newspaper? Magazine? *Focus*, Raphael. Pay attention to the little details.

"Besides," he said, remembering. "I do have a surname. And my name really *is* Raphael. It's not a secret code or something."

"What?" Michal said.

"Do you think I should change my name?" Raphael said.

Michal sighed. "Do you know this magazine?"

He pulled it towards him. A woman with purple hair and an impossible, inflated chest, threatened to crush with her foot a small bug who looked terrified. Raphael felt pity towards it. He felt that way with Michal,

sometimes.

"How to bring back objects from a dream. How to bring the dead back to life," he read. "What is this?" He looked at the table of contents. "Fiction? What's this?"

"As far as I understand," Michal said, "this is an ancient magazine, something that's been coming out for years and years, and it began as a science fiction magazine."

"What's that?" Raphael, who only ever read in order to fall asleep, asked.

"Imaginary stories about adventures in space and stuff like that," Michal said in an embarrassed tone. "You know, dragons, fairies, spaceships that crash-land on Earth, lost worlds, dinosaurs, time travel, that sort of thing."

"But that's not imaginary!" Raphael said. "Only a week ago I stopped a Martian invasion into a house in Tel Aviv, and fairies have been an ecological disaster for years now all over the coast."

"But then," Michal said patiently, "these things only appeared in print, or in people's dreams. Dreams that didn't come true."

"Daydreams," Raphael said, and giggled.

"Exactly," Michal said.

"So how come they still operate?"

"When dreams started becoming real, they changed the magazine. A professional journal, they called it. Articles about controlling your dreams, ads for devices that were meant to help with the dreaming—but they also continued with the stories."

"Why? Who reads these things?"

"Ah," Michal said. "That's exactly it."

* * * *

Dreams, it seems, are no simple matter.

Everyone dreams. But in a world where dreams come true, people want to dream of special things. They do not want to dream of the bully from school who, in any case, died of cancer thirty years ago. They don't want to dream of arguing with their partner, or shopping, or the day mother took them to the beach and it was cold.

People want to dream exciting things. They want to dream hair-raising adventures. Of princesses who need rescuing. Or princes. Or the Swedish volleyball team.

People want to dream about spaceships. Of floating in zero gravity. Of being fearsome, handsome, muscle-bound heroes. Of being telepaths. Of being special.

People want to dream, but imagination, for some, had dissipated. Taken from them gradually at school, at work, at home, until all that remained were regular, everyday, boring dreams.

People want to dream stories, with a plot, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Simple, clear stories, exciting on a basic level, appealing to the lowest common denominator.

Movies, of course, fulfil this function for the vast majority of the population.

But there are, still, stories. They exist. The people who write them live alone in cheap apartments and rundown houses. They are dreamers of another sort. Their dreams appear in print, in ink on paper, in the few shops that still sell books or magazines.

And people still buy them, and read them, and dream their way to other lives, lives that aren't theirs but become, if only for a little while, a part of their world.

And so on.

* * * *

But what's it got to do with me?" Raphael said. "With us?"

"The magazine editor claims someone is trying to assassinate her."

"Nu?"

"In her dreams."

Raphael sighed. "And is it for real or just a dream? Wait, is she still alive?"

"Yes."

"Then it's just a dream."

"Possibly," Michal said. "You'll have to decide on your own."

"But—"

"The car's outside," Michal said.

Raphael gave up the fight. As always. He, he liked to think, was the senior partner in this particular relationship. His superiors at the REM, however, made it clear that, as far as *they* were concerned, it was Michal. Go figure.

"Where are we going?" he asked, as they were driving. He was still holding the magazine in his hand. He tried not to look at the Amazonian woman on the cover.

"Ramat Yishai," Michal said.

"Where's that?"

"Does it matter?" Michal asked.

Raphael thought about it. "No."

"Then don't ask," Michal said, and the rest of the drive passed in silence.

He leafed through the magazine. How to return objects from a dream. He considered snorting, but Michal didn't usually appreciate his noises. Why would anyone want to bring back an object from a dream? Most of the time they were inaccurate, like a blueprint for a chair instead of a chair, or strange, complex, building-sized machines that did nothing, or ... anyway.

He skipped the first story—Lior Tirosh? What kind of a name was that?—and began to read, out of boredom, *The Wolfmen of Tel-Hannan*.

And fell asleep, of course.

* * * *

In the place where the famous ice-cream stand of Tel-Hannan once stood there remained only wreckage. The road passing close by had become a scarred band of devastation, and broken cars lay on their backs and rusted in the dim sun.

Raphael walked along the road. Elongated shadows extended before him.

He stepped in something. Something unpleasant.

Crap. Fresh stools, but strange. Some human, others...

He heard the howl of a wolf in the distance. It passed like a colony of bats upon the face of the sky. Darkness fell at a speed that scared him.

He searched for a weapon. An abandoned metal rod became a temporary club in his hands.

A wolf's howl sounded again, from another direction.

Closer.

Raphael stopped.

Something was wrong.

He took a deep breath, and suddenly knew: it was a dream. That ability, to recognise, first thing, that he was in a dream, that he was, if only temporarily, outside known reality, was the first condition for work in the REM.

Step one: confirm you are in a dream.

He pinched himself. "Ow."

Another howl, coming from beyond an overturned truck on his right, by the side of the road. Close by.

It's only a dream.

The wolves appeared like the ghosts of wolves, silently, immediately. All around the wrecked truck. He turned, considered running.

More wolves appeared, closing him in a circle.

Step two: if it's a nightmare, try to wake up.

He tried. He shook himself, thought himself back into his body, tried to feel the heavy eyelids, the fingers resting on his chest...

The wolves came closer, quietly. The silence scared him more than the howls. He looked at them. They had human heads.

Their teeth, however, were those of wolves.

Step three: try to change the dream.

He focused, listening to the background noise, to the way the wind moved. Small details. That was important. But here there were so many small details, and he knew that only a particularly strong dreamer could have created this place. The steps of the wolves. A lonely bird in a tree whose leaves shook in the

wind.

He concentrated ... but it was no good.

The wolves attacked.

* * * *

Raphael woke up. He breathed deeply, wiped sweat away with the hem of his shirt. Michal was leaning above him, her hand still reaching for his shoulder. "Are you all right? You became so quiet I decided to wake you up. We've arrived."

She had saved him.

They'd need to talk.

But first he needed some fresh air.

He stepped out of the car. The magazine was still in his hand. He looked at it. Stories, he thought, should all end with the sentence, "And then he woke up and it was all a dream." If he, Raphael, was a writer, he would have ended all his stories that way. The wolves almost ate him, but then he woke up and it was all just a dream. Great.

He wondered if anyone else had ever thought of that before.

"Raphael?"

He was awake, now. He looked around him. Quiet neighbourhood. A house separate from its neighbours, surrounded by wildly-growing plants. Dirty windows. Cats disappearing into the gloom.

"Varda Talit?" Michal said.

"Yes," the woman who approached them said. Raphael looked at her and tried not to show his alarm.

Varda Talit looked like a creature out of an entire nation's nightmares. Scars covered the organic part of her body. Engines noisily lifted the metal gloves that were her hands. Armour covered her stomach, its colour that of dried blood. Acid scars ran down her metallic legs. Her head was a helmet, a glass aquarium, her face hidden inside it. Transparent pipes connected her head to her body, and liquids the colour of semi-digested food passed through them. She looked like a mad scientist's lab.

"Who did this to you?" Michal asked, weakly.

"That's what I hope you'll find out," Varda Talit said. She approached Raphael and reached her hand to him in a jerked motion. The engines hummed. "Raphael, right? I hoped we could talk about an article on you for the journal. Our readers are *most* interested in your work at the REM. In fact—" and here it was possible that the hidden face behind the helmet smiled "—I myself am a fan of yours. The job you did on the Gunslinger of Chelem was a classic. A classic! A very creative solution. Our readers were very excited—in fact, one of our better writers, Lior Tirosh, even wrote a story about it. He wants to write a whole series of stories with you as the hero."

Michal smiled. Raphael didn't know what to say.

"When did the attacks start?" he asked.

"About a month ago," Varda said. "In the beginning I really thought they were just nightmares—I have quite a few of those, particularly from stories I get from beginning writers." She giggled. "Only joking. But

gradually they became more violent, sharper, and he began to appear in the dreams occasionally, to mock me."

"He?"

"He, she, I don't know. He appears as a faceless man. Sometimes he talks to me. He says he admires the journal, sometimes he sounds like some sort of fan, you know?"

Raphael didn't know. "And he caused these changes to you?"

"Gradually, yes."

"It doesn't sound like he was trying to kill you," Raphael said. "I think if he wanted to, he would have."

"And this?" Varda Talit said, pointing at herself. "You call this a life? You know I woke up one day and my helmet was full of water? And *goldfish*? Goldfish that were breeding in my head!"

"Goldfish?" Michal said.

"Breeding?" Raphael said.

"In my head," Varda Talit said.

There was a silence.

"When does he appear?"

"When I sleep."

Raphael sighed. "Yes," he said patiently, "but when?"

"Look, these days, I try to sleep as little as possible. In any case I don't have much time to sleep. You know how long it takes to run a journal?"

"Magazine," Michal whispered to him.

"Ah," Raphael, who really didn't understand the term, said. "No."

"A lot," Varda said. "So I only sleep when I don't have a choice. And at different times."

"And he always appears?"

"Very often," Varda said. "Not always. But I think he sleeps a lot. Maybe he even works as a dreamer. I don't know."

"Neither do I," Raphael said.

"So find out," Varda said. "I pay my taxes, you know?"

"Really?" Raphael said.

Varda looked like someone—something?—who wanted to hit him. Michal intervened. "Raphael, should I make the bed?"

"What?" He looked at her with clouded eyes. The previous dream still disturbed him. "Yes," he said without enthusiasm. "And Teddy."

"Teddy?" Varda said suspiciously. "What is the meaning of Teddy?"

"It helps him sleep," Michal whispered.

She moved towards the car. Raphael joined her. "Michal," he said, "earlier, when I slept? He tried to attack me."

"He? Who?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

"And what happened?"

"You woke me up. The nightmare I was in ... I couldn't change it."

Michal stopped. "You're saying he's that strong?"

"And close," Raphael said. "Very close."

Michal reached into the car and came back with a handgun the size of a small cannon. The gun was silver and alien-looking, like an illustration from the magazine—or journal—Raphael was still holding. The gun was a present from Raphael, an object he had found in the dream of someone who, he now realised, must have been a science fiction fan. Or whatever that stuff was called.

"Could you find him?"

"I can try."

Michal waved the gun. Raphael blinked.

"Shall I prepare the emergency equipment?" Michal said.

Raphael nodded. Michal looked worried.

Rightly so, he thought.

She prepared the field-bed for him. The teddy bear, missing one eye, waited for him with its head on the pillow. Raphael stretched out on the bed, *Grotesqa* still in his hands.

"Wait," Michal said. She hooked him up to the equipment. It measured his heart rate, the amount of sweat, the small, unseen movements of his muscles. The equipment would tell Michal if Raphael was in trouble. If he found himself in a nightmare, and it was too horrible, and there was a need to wake him, fast.

"Ready," Michal said.

Raphael sighed and closed his eyes. He began counting to ten. Not sheep. He hated falling asleep with sheep. Raphael counted numbers. Numbers had no smell.

One.

Two.

Thhhhhh ... three.

Fou ... rrr.

And fell asleep.

* * * *

The planet was purple. So was the sun it orbited. It was purple in the way only something that broadcast combined rays of red and blue light could be. It was purple like the clothes of aristocracy, purple like cheap prose.

Raphael was scared of it.

Not of the sun. Not exactly.

Raphael was afraid of the colour.

The fear came and went in waves of terror.

The fear had a name.

Porphyrophobia.

The fear of the colour purple.

Raphael's spaceship circled the planet in orbit. Large windows were cut into the body of the ship. There was nowhere for Raphael to escape. The purple surrounded him, pressed on him, tightened around him.

The purple planet.

It's only a dream, he thought. I am currently lying on a field-bed in Ramat Yishai (where is that?) outside a gloomy house where a magazine (a journal?) is edited, and Michal is beside me.

The purple hurt him, penetrated his eyes.

I'm not really scared of the colour purple, he thought. There's no such thing, porphyrophobia.

"Yes there is," said the purple man. "You can check in the encyclopaedia."

He looked at the purple man. The purple man stood before him. There was indeed a book in his hand. An encyclopaedia. But it, too, was purple. He couldn't look at it.

"I believe you," he said. He couldn't see the purple man's face. Couldn't stand the colour of his skin.

"Racist," the purple man said.

Raphael shook his head. "Who are you?" he said.

The purple man laughed. To Raphael's surprise, he didn't have a loud, crazy laugh as of a typical villain. In dreams of this kind, he sort of expected the villain character. Instead, the purple man had a pleasant, friendly laugh, as if they were both good friends and Raphael had just told a joke they both knew well and always laughed at.

There was something familiar about that laugh.

"Me?" the purple man said. "I'm from another dream."

"Do I know you?" Raphael asked.

"I know you," the purple man said.

"*The Passion Knights of the Purple Planet*," Raphael said. "That's from the magazine. I saw it. It's only a story."

"A journal," the purple man said. "And what are stories if not dreams? You idiot."

"What do you want?" Raphael asked. He was beginning to get annoyed. And when he was annoyed, the fear of the colour purple dissipated, a little.

"To kill you."

Of course. Raphael almost sighed. *So* predictable.

"I waited for you," the purple man said. "I've been waiting for so long."

"Varda Talit," Raphael said. Now he was really annoyed. He looked at the purple man and this time didn't look away. He could almost see his face. "You used her as bait? To bring me here?"

"Good," the purple man said. "You're not as stupid as you look."

He smiled, and now Raphael could finally see his face.

And took an involuntary step back.

And took hold of himself.

He stepped toward the purple man, his hands reaching forward. It will end here, and now, he thought.

And woke up.

* * * *

Michal!"

"What?"

"Why did you wake me?"

"Don't shout," Michal said.

"I'm not shouting," Raphael said.

"You're shouting."

"I'm not shouting!"

Silence.

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

He sat up in bed. The emergency equipment, he thought. That was the danger of using it. Raphael unhooked himself and stood up.

"He's here," he said.

"Where?" Michal asked, and waved her gun again.

"I don't know," Raphael said. "But he's close."

He thought again about the dreamer. Unlike the Gunslinger of Chelem, whom he'd once fought, the current dreamer did not change reality. He acted within the dreams themselves, under a localized field. Apart from in Varda Talit's case...

"Did you check the neighbours?"

"Yes," Michal said. "But there's nobody home. Most of them work in Haifa, as it turns out."

"Is that close to here?"

Michal sighed.

Raphael stretched. "Where's Varda?"

"Inside," Michal said. "She said she wasn't feeling too well."

"And you let her go?"

"Don't shout!" Michal said.

Raphael stepped towards the house. The door had stayed open and he went inside.

A large, gloomy house. Messy. An old boot was leaning against the wall. Moth-eaten slippers left footprints in the dust. Posters depicting strange alien creatures were hanging on the walls.

He wandered between the rooms. Piles of bound magazines in one. Silver, rusting machinery in another. Dream machines, he thought. In the third room he found the editor.

She was slumped against the wall. Sleeping pills were scattered around her. Her body shook, changed in small unpleasant ways. Feelers suddenly emerged from the front of her head.

"She's turning into a bug," Michal said, behind him, and made him jump.

"You shouldn't have let her go," Raphael said.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Michal said in a sarcastic voice, "but I don't exactly have the authority to arrest her for being tired."

"She wasn't tired," Raphael said, gesturing at the pills. "She wanted to see the battle between us. Or maybe..." he sank into thought.

"You don't think..." Michal said.

"What?"

"That she did this to herself?"

Raphael looked at Varda Talit. Thick black hair began to form around her legs, and a solid, opaque armour appeared over her stomach. "No."

Stockholm Syndrome, he thought. "Prisoners sometimes develop an emotional dependency on their jailers."

"You think she cooperated with the dreamer?" Michal said.

"I think she didn't have a choice," Raphael said. "He used her to bring me here. Michal, does this house have a basement?"

"I don't know," Michal said, and a second, earthly gun appeared as if by magic in her hand, "but I'm going to find out."

Raphael remained alone with Varda Talit's sleeping body. He knew Michal wouldn't find a basement. He knew the dreamer. Knew him well. Were he the dreamer, he would have dreamed himself a hiding place. He'd sleep inside the dream, in a place safe from reality. That was the problem with dreams, he thought. Like stories, they represented an escape from reality. A refusal to acknowledge the real world. The problem with stories, he thought, was that they had to obey something called a plot. They must have a beginning, a middle and an end, a clear arc, and the hero needed to walk the streets of the dream with a map in his hands, joining the dots until reaching the ending that had been written for him.

What was the third story? He still held the journal. *War in Zero-G*, by Vladimir Teva. What a name, he thought.

The rule of three. Three books in a trilogy, three acts in a play, three parts to a story. The dreamer, he knew, waited for him in the dream. And the dream would be the third story. Something in space, with laser guns, death rays, monstrous aliens that would lie in wait in the corridors of a ship that looked like a gothic cathedral.

Time to change the dream, he thought. Time to raise the screen on the third act. Time to reach the end.

He was, after all, the hero.

Trouble was, he was also the villain.

* * * *

Raphael sat on the floor and leaned with his back to the wall. Opposite him, Varda Talit continued to change. Bug eyes appeared in her head. Her feelers shook.

Raphael closed his eyes. Reality disappeared. He fell asleep...

And woke up.

He stood. Varda Talit remained in the corner of the room. The sun, as it does, streamed in through the window.

He turned to the open door.

"You changed the dream," Raphael said.

"Yes," Raphael said. He looked at himself. I know you, he thought. But you're *old*.

"Pity," Raphael said, and coughed. He had a heavy, sickly cough. "I hoped to kill you like a hero. In a suitable place. Not here, in the middle of nowhere."

"Ramat Yishai," Raphael said, and nodded. "It's not nowhere."

"Really?" Raphael said. "So where is it?"

"Here," he answered himself. "Here and now, and that's all that matters."

Raphael attacked him then. Anger twisted his old face. His fists turned into metal hammers, but Raphael

raised his hands and a shield appeared and blocked the attack.

"Enough," he said. He concentrated. In the corner, the bug turned gradually into a human-looking Varda Talit. The scars disappeared, and with them the feelers, the helmet, the pipes. She had a pleasant face, and purple hair that shone in the sunlight. Her eyes opened, and she looked at them. At Raphael. At Raphael.

"You?" she said.

Raphael looked at her, his old face filled with pain. "Me," he said. "Because of you."

"But what did I do?" Varda said.

"That dream," Raphael said, remembering. "It was your dream, not mine."

"What dream?" Varda Talit said.

"In a world where dreams are out of control, one man is known as the protector of the waking world. A man whose name is a government secret, as is the exact location of his bedroom. He is known only by his code-name: Raphael. That was you. You brought him—me—into the waking world."

"I don't remember," Varda said, and her eyes filled with wonder.

"I remember," the old Raphael said, with hate. "I was already retired. Finally, I had some peace. I slept, and when I didn't sleep, I napped. And when I didn't nap, I daydreamed."

"Daydreams," Raphael said, and for some reason giggled.

"Exactly," said the old Raphael. His shoulders were stooped. The look in his eyes said the fight was already over. "And then she brought me back. Because of her magazine. In her dream. There was only one way out of here."

"Me," Raphael said.

"Yes," Raphael said. "You. I could have replaced you, taken your place. Returned to reality."

"And what would have happened to me?" Raphael asked. But he already knew the answer.

"You?" the old Raphael said. And then he sighed. "Who can say I was the dream and you the reality? Am I an old man dreaming he was young, or a young man dreaming he is old?"

"Chuang Tzu," Raphael said, and nodded.

"Who would have been able to tell?" the old Raphael said, and shrugged.

"Me," said a new, familiar voice, and there was a gunshot. Raphael fell to the floor. His body became a cloud of smoke and dissipated.

Michal entered the room. The silver gun was held tightly in her hand. "Are we done here?"

Raphael looked at her and felt sad, and a little scared. "How could you?" he said. "You killed me."

"Raphael," Michal said.

"What?"

"Raphael," Michal said.

"What?"

"Raphael!" Michal said.

Raphael woke up.

* * * *

Before they left, Raphael granted *Grotesqa* an exclusive interview. Varda Talit was ecstatic. Raphael wished her well, and then they left.

On their way back, he and Michal drove without speaking. From time to time Raphael looked at her, sideways, and immediately turned his head back to the window.

She shot me, he thought. She killed him. How could she?

Equally, he knew it was his fault. He had shaped the last dream, and he had put Michal into it. He knew what she would do. REM teams always had two partners, but only one dreamer.

Somebody had to do the dirty work.

Somebody had to live in the real world.

He sat back in his seat and sighed. He looked at the journal open in his lap and turned to the first story. Lior Tirosh. Varda had recommended him. He shrugged and began to read.

It would be interesting, he thought, if it turns out at the end that everything was just a dream.

In the sky above them a dragon passed, blew pink fire, and turned towards the sea. White clouds wore night caps. Raphael smiled to himself and turned the page.

And so on.

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Memories of the Knacker's Yard by Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey lives in Yorkshire, England, and so far has sold thirty-odd stories to various magazines and anthologies. His recent work includes four short stories published in *Asimov's* in 2006, of which "Silence in Florence" was picked up for *Year's Best Science Fiction #12* edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, and a fantasy novella entitled "Strawberry Thief" in an upcoming issue of *Weird Tales*.

Another day, another corpse. This guy had been good-looking before someone worked him over. Now he had big, livid bruises on his head and upper body, cigarette burns on the cheeks and eyelids, and the usual wide slash across the throat.

"How long have we had this one?" I asked, shivering in the morgue's chill.

"Two days," the white-coat guy said. I didn't know his name. I try to remember the lab people and support staff, but turnover's too high. This line of work burns people out faster than a crematorium on overtime.

"Why did you leave it that long?" I said, annoyed. "Waiting for the killer to turn himself in?"

"We were waiting for the ghost to show up," he said.

I shook my head in disgust. "Look, when someone's been murdered, they want us on the case. If their ghost doesn't turn up in twenty-four hours, that's because it can't."

That was the problem. If a ghost complains that it's just been murdered, it can help us by describing the killer, or at least telling us about its enemies. Investigating a murder without a ghost is much harder. The slashing was the third this month, all without ghosts, and the eighth this year. Or was it the ninth?

Hell, when you lose count of the corpses, you know you're losing.

Back upstairs, I took a swig of stale coffee to warm myself up. Then I grabbed an ancient black raincoat that looked as if a tramp had slept in it for a month, and I rifled through my pockets to remove any police identification. *Malcolm Chenier, Detective-Inspector*. The old ID photo mocked me with its full head of hair and blue optimistic eyes. When I posed for that picture, I'd never fired a weapon except on the shooting range. I hefted my gun now, wondering whether I'd need the firepower, and decided to play it safe and bring it along. I didn't debate for more than a second, remembering the corpse in the morgue. Two days was too long—I had to rush.

It was a windy afternoon; the plastic bags snagged in the courtyard's dead trees rustled and billowed like fledgling kites. The overcast sky promised rain. I put my shades on and started walking.

I could have taken a car, but not all the way. Past the wasteland of 'For Sale' and 'To Let' signs, the road became cratered with potholes and choked with rubble. The spooks keep Ghost Town unfit for the living. The buildings are all wrecked, burnt-out shells; the streets are full of festering garbage. Ahead I saw dense black smoke, and I coughed as fumes caught in my throat. The ghosts were burning toxic waste again.

Not themselves, of course. They hired people to do that. Ghosts don't have much, but they do have money. Nowadays you *can* take it with you.

If you ever had it in the first place.

Through my shades I saw spooks hanging around like bored teenagers. Some of them had brought their grave markers here, now that cemeteries were obsolete, and they sat on their gravestones, sizing me up

with hungry, jaded eyes. As I walked down the road nicknamed Death Row, a haunt of young ghosts heard the *click, click* of living footsteps and swarmed me. My breath frosted, white vapour in the air, and my skin chilled in the ectoplasmic embrace. I stopped, trying not to flinch as the haunt writhed around me. Two of them wore sharp suits and expensive shoes; another was naked. The others were translucent wisps, fading ghosts who would soon be eaten by the stronger.

"Wooh!" The naked spook thrust his arm into my skull, as if scooping out my brain. The crawling sensation made me shudder, but the ghost couldn't hurt me.

Well, probably not.

The other spooks danced and gibbered, trying to get a rise out of me. They knew I could see them, because I wore ghost-glasses. Shades to see shades. Ain't technology grand?

"Very scary, boys," I said. "You should be in showbiz."

"I *was* in showbiz," said one of the sharp-dressed ghosts.

A lot of them say things like that. Death's a great opportunity to reinvent yourself. Before the others could spin me their obits, I cut in.

"Anyone new around? Just been murdered, last couple of days?"

The victim's ghost might have been too traumatised to report its murder at the station. If, instead, it had gravitated to Ghost Town, these boys would know about it. Word gets around, especially about slashings—fresh pickings.

The showbiz guy shrugged: a boneless ripple in pale wisps of aura. "Friend of yours?"

I nodded. It's best not to admit being a cop in Ghost Town. Even dead people are criminals nowadays.

The haunt all giggled, an unearthly cackling that raised goose-pimples along my arms. "You won't see him again," said Mr Showbiz. "Not whole, anyway."

"You might find some pieces," said the naked ghost.

They thought this would horrify me. It did, the first time, but I've seen a lot since then. More than these fresh young ghosts, anyway. I could scare *them*, if I wanted.

"In the Yard, is he?" I asked in a bored voice.

"Yeah," said the showbiz ghost, sullenly.

I'd expected that, but the confirmation helped. I started walking again, heading for the Knacker's Yard. The haunt, desperate for distraction, drifted along with me.

"Got any thrills?"

"Talents?"

"Love?"

I ignored the spooks and kept going. I felt sorry for them, but I didn't want to get drawn in. I was in a hurry, and they had all the time in the world. Sometimes to end a conversation you just have to walk away.

And even that doesn't always work. I had to step carefully in the ruined road, and the writhing ghosts kept blocking my view. They whirled around me, faster and faster, a carousel of restless death.

"Give us your mind—"

"Your memories—"

"Your soul—"

Annoyed, I took the shades off. The spooks disappeared. I still felt the chill of their presence, and I heard a faint whisper, "You'll be back...."

No, I won't, I thought as I walked on. When I die, I won't end up in Ghost Town. I hate coming here for an afternoon, never mind eternity.

Trouble is, the alternatives are all worse.

* * * *

I picked my way along the streets, avoiding broken glass, oil slicks, and rusty barbed wire. After a while I reached a ruined hotel. Skeletal walls embraced the sky, their once-white paint flaking in the wind, stained with the soot of trash fires. In the old lobby, two bouncers—living, looming, muscle-bound specimens—stood by the stairway to the basement. I was surprised to see only breathers, until I remembered I'd taken off my shades. I put them back on, and saw another figure, the senior doorman. His face was the dusty grey of cold ashes.

Ghosts run the Knacker's Yard.

"Toll," said the doorman.

You have to pay with a piece of yourself—or someone else—just to get in.

When I was a kid, my parents made me take piano lessons. I stuck at it for five years, until I discovered girls and under-age drinking. Even then, not knowing what I was going to be when I grew up, I knew that *pianist* was about as likely as *astronaut*. I figured the lessons were pointless.

I was wrong. Although I've never touched a piano since, the lessons come in useful, occasionally.

The doorman held out a smoke-grey, almost transparent hand. I tapped the left earpiece of my shades, concentrated on those long-ago piano lessons, and wrenched them out of my head. The doorman's withered fingers snatched at the morsel. He popped it in his mouth and swallowed.

"Tinkle fucking tinkle," he sneered. "I hate musicians."

Piano lessons aren't much good to a ghost who can't touch the keys. But plenty of breathers prefer to buy someone else's lessons rather than put in the hard work themselves. That way you can practise for five years in an afternoon.

The bouncers stood aside for me. "Is Charley around?" I asked.

The doorman shrugged. "I haven't seen him lately. Maybe he's faded." He grinned like a skull. "Why don't you look for him on the racks?"

I turned away, trying to look unfazed by the blow. I was sad to hear that Charley had disappeared, yet I could do nothing for him. There's little anyone can do for the dead.

Charley and I used to go running together; I gave it up when he died from a heart attack after a personal best in the half-marathon. He was my contact at the Yard. Without him, I'd have to make like a customer. Hell, I'd have to buy my piano lessons back if I wanted to keep them. Charley normally slipped me the toll when it turned up downstairs. He let me riffle through the racks, too. Without his help, this was going to be a whole lot trickier.

I walked down towards the basement, careful not to slip on the frayed, slimy carpet. Before I reached the bottom I stopped, then glanced around to make sure no-one saw me hold a small glass bottle to my left ear. I touched my shades.

I took a deep breath of frigid air, and thought about my job. The endless procession of corpses. The dumb burglars, the drunks and nutters, the smug fraudsters you can't touch. The sour, overstewed coffee in the station canteen. Ten years of paperwork, so mind-numbing that if you catch a dealer you're tempted to bypass procedure and force-feed him his own wares until he chokes. Coping with all the crimes and killings, trying to keep head above water, and being pulled off the case whenever there's a bomb scare, a dole riot or a politician going walkabout. They say a woman's work is never done, but try being a policeman. As fast as you clean the scum off the streets, the gutter fills up faster.

Popping all that into the bottle took a real weight off my mind. Instantly, I felt younger, stronger, and as if I'd had a decent night's sleep this month. I smiled—how long since I'd done that?—and put the bottle away. A tiny evaporating thought said, *Remember....* Usually Charley reminded me to reintegrate afterward, but without him—

I'd just have to manage. I couldn't avoid this; transfers always created leakage and residues. While I looked for evidence, a trace of me would backwash. And if the Yard's customers got the taste of cop, I'd never make it upstairs alive.

Or dead.

I went on, shivering. It was cold as a penguin's supper down here. The inhabitants of Ghost Town didn't need central heating, and their crowding auras froze my flesh like a blizzard. Many spooks had crisply defined shapes, as if newly dead or well fed; others were blurred and translucent. The ghosts flitted back and forth, roaming the basement's grubby corridors. This was their shopping mall, restaurant, and drug den, all in one. Breathing customers were tolerated, but not welcomed.

The spooks didn't bother to move out of my way. As I barged through them, my skin crawling, they stared at me with unfriendly eyes. Was that the natural resentment of the dead for the living, or something more? It occurred to me that if Charley had been eaten, any of these ghosts might have swallowed his mind, his memories. Anyone here could recognise me.

I walked faster until I reached a door stippled with mould. The ghosts just floated through the door, but I had to knock.

Another of the Yard's underling breathers opened the door. He wore a white shirt and black tie, like a waiter at an uptown restaurant, and I half-expected him to offer me a wine list. The recollections of many vintage wines and drunken evenings would be here somewhere. *Everything* was here somewhere.

The room stretched back and back, the walls glittering like Santa's grotto. The sparkle came from reflections of the harsh strip-lights upon thousands and thousands of tiny bottles racked from floor to ceiling. Ghosts crowded round the racks, sampling the contents, giggling, cursing, and sighing. At the far wall, a crush of spooks gorged on the memories of love affairs and sexual encounters. Other shelves contained anything from sporting triumphs to childhood fun with sand-castles.

On previous visits I'd joined the browsing throng, and Charley had steered me to likely bottles. But now I'd have to ask. I turned to the waiter flunky.

"What would Sir like today?" he inquired.

"Murder," I said.

"The murders are on shelves fifteen to seventeen—or eighteen if you want to be the victim."

"I'm looking for something special."

He smiled. "Gunshot, poison, strangling?"

"Slasher."

"Ah, a connoisseur. There's nothing like the spurt of blood, the choking cough, the victim's frantic gasps for breath.... I believe we have several fine specimens." He paused.

I paid him the browsing fee. "I want the fresh stuff," I said.

The waiter sorted through the merchandise and passed me two bottles. "These are the latest in."

I sat on a grimy couch, then poured the first bottle into my head.

My husband shouted, "Get me a fucking drink." I crept downstairs, my face throbbing with fresh bruises. In the kitchen I found a can of beer but didn't open it. Instead, I opened the cutlery drawer and grabbed a carving knife. It felt heavy in my hand, and the buzz of the fridge roared in my ears. I climbed the stairs—

I refocused my vision onto the endless shelves around me. "I'm bored with domestics," I said to the waiter. I put that memory back and swigged the other.

Thwack. I saw blood trickle from the new gash, just below the cigarette burns on the pretty-boy cheekbone. I dropped the putter.

"Maybe I should try the nine-iron," I said. "Or the driver. What do you think?"

The guy's eyes were closed. He was unconscious—or faking it. I reached into my golf bag and took out a random club. It was the sand-wedge. What the hell. I walked round and addressed the guy's left side. *Thwack.*

Prince Charming didn't scream or even twitch. This was getting boring. The cigarettes had been fun—it was a shame I'd run out—but now it was time to finish the guy. I exchanged the golf club for my knife.

I made a couple of practice cuts on his face, enjoying the smooth incisions as I tested the knife's sharpness. Then, digging deep into the flesh, I slashed right across his throat. The wound gaped like a moist red orifice. Blood puddled at either side.

Damn. It was running off the edge of the newspaper I'd put down, and soaking into the carpet—

I struggled to surface from the memory, blinking away afterimages of blood. "I'll keep this one," I said.

Then I saw that the waiter had gone. A ghost stood in front of me. She had filmy scraps of clothes on a blurred body, as if she were fading. Yet, as I looked, her hair grew long, then short again. Her breasts flattened and vanished. A beard sprouted on the ghost's chin, then diminished into stubble and

unfashionably long sideburns. The new face smiled.

"Charley?" I said.

"Hi there," said the ghost. "How's things?"

I shrugged. "Same as ever." No nearer to catching the killer, but I didn't want to say that out loud. Not here.

And not to Charley. Not now. "What's happened to you?" I asked.

"I was thinning," he said. "And I didn't want to end up in bottles, or any of the quack sanctuaries. So a few of us with the same problem—"

"A composite," I said.

"Yeah. Meet Rob, Duncan, Stephanie, and Grace."

As he named the others, the ghost flickered into different shapes. Then Charley returned, with a fuzzy outline. I tried not to wince at the sight. If the spook hadn't finalised its new form—if the fading fragments hadn't coalesced—then the composite was unhealthy, to say the least. It hadn't even settled on a joint name.

"Hello everyone," I said, doing my best not to make it sound like *goodbye*.

"Can I get you anything?" asked Charley. As he gestured to the shelves, he saw his blurred arm. He tried to focus, and acquired small hands with silver nail varnish. His hair shimmered as if uncertain of its colour.

"I've got what I came for," I said. "I'll leave the money here." I stood up, and placed the purchase fee on the couch.

"Is that everything you need?"

It wasn't. I'd intended to get the victim's memories in case they contained a clue. But now I had to leave straight away. My friend, Charley, was only one fifth of the ghost standing before me. The other four weren't my friends at all, yet they shared the composite memory. They knew who I was. Right now I couldn't remember why that was a problem, but I knew it was bad—very bad.

"Yes, it's fine," I said. "Good to see you again. Hope the integration works out for you."

I moved to the door. As I brushed past the phantom, its form shifted again. Breasts this time, and short dark hair.

"So long, Charley," I said, stressing the name. I was probably safe while his personality had the helm. But the composite looked so unstable that Charley might submerge at any moment.

I left the Memory Hall and hurried to the stairway. As I climbed I expected a hullabaloo behind me, but I heard only the eerie silence of a crowd of ghosts.

The bouncers loomed at the top of the stairs. "Come back soon," said one.

"Dead or alive," said the other, grinning.

Taking this as a threat, I reached into my coat and grasped my gun. But the pair moved aside and let me walk through the abandoned lobby. I barely restrained myself from running.

Back outside, rain pounded onto the rubbish-strewn road. I savoured the stinging drops on my face and hair, proof that I still had a body, that I wasn't a ghost just yet. The blustery wind felt fresh and clean after the unnatural cold of the spook-filled basement.

Foul weather soon loses its charm when you're on the wrong side of double glazing. I walked away from the ruined hotel until I found a sheltered corner by a tangle of concrete slabs. I made sure I could see the lobby entrance in case anyone followed me. Although I had made it out, I didn't feel safe. The encounter had unnerved me.

Poor Charley. Soon his composite would fall apart, triggering a feeding frenzy on the Knacker's Yard floor. Eaten, Charley would evaporate, all his traits and memories scattered among the inhabitants of Ghost Town.

I could only mourn him. "Rest in peace," I whispered, my eyes welling up. I remembered the days we used to go jogging, then drinking—all the weight we lost in exercise we put back on in bar snacks. He liked his ale; now he'd no longer miss it.

The sharpening wind whirled scraps of paper like a presentiment of snow. The day had faded into gloomy twilight. No street lights shone—the ghosts preferred darkness. I couldn't stay here much longer, peering into the dusk while gusts of rain soaked into my hair and dripped down my neck.

I wished I'd got the murder victim's memories, if only to save his relatives from having to trawl the Yard for any relic of him. I wondered which bottles he'd ended up in. The Yard has many shops. Budding musicians and novelists visit the Skills hall. When exams approach, students flock to Knowledge. As for Feelings, let's just say there's always a market for true love. And all the fake kinds, too.

This was the killer's motive—murdering people so their ghosts could be captured, broken up, and sold in the Knacker's Yard.

And the slashings themselves were valuable. I reckoned the killer tortured the victims to spice up the memories and get a higher price. Selling the killings also removed the evidence from his head. If he were picked up for a traffic offence, he wouldn't want murder on his conscience.

For months I'd rushed to the Yard after every killing, buying up the memories to search for clues. Now I sifted through the latest again, reliving the cigarette burns, the golf clubs, the throat slash. The memory was brief and focused, with no hint of identity or location. I felt someone's presence, a shadowy figure waiting for the kill. There were other associations too—cross-references to the rest of the killer's mind—but I couldn't pin anything down. You know when you try to remember something, and it's on the tip of your tongue? It was frustrating as all hell.

I hated having the murder in my mind. It turned my stomach, as if I had personally tortured and killed the victim. And I worried that if I kept the killing in my memory too long, it might infect me. I might start thinking I'd really done it and feel the urge to confess.

Or I might get a taste for it.

Best to take the memory out and put it away with the rest. I searched my pocket for the other murders and found two bottles. What was in the extra one?

After some thought, I dimly recalled using it. I realised that the bottle contained my own memories, my police memories. Normally Charley reminded me to put them back in.

I lifted the bottle to the earpiece of my shades, then hesitated. I'd done all this before, with no success.

Maybe those memories, that mindset, had been the problem.

I had to stop thinking like a cop and start thinking like the killer.

To do that, I'd have to ingest all the other murders. I loathed the prospect. The slashings had been bad enough individually, but experiencing all at once would be nightmarish.

And yet, if I didn't try it, this would just go on and on. More corpses. More profits for the Knacker's Yard. More futile hunts for the killer.

I put myself back in my pocket, and absorbed all the murders.

The deaths flooded my brain in a montage of beatings, slashings, and blood. Guys who screamed, guys who struggled, guys who tried to bribe me. Old women, fat women, and pretty girls who lost their looks real quick. My knife grew jaded, but to me it was fresh every time.

I almost retched. I felt dazed under the onslaught. The screams, the smell of burnt flesh, the carpet cleaning bills—

That was a clue. I could ring round carpet-cleaning companies, download their databases and look for repeat customers. But I had no enthusiasm for that now. Routine police work was too slow, too uncertain, too fucking boring. No, I wanted leakage. I had so many of the killer's memories that I hoped their associations might coalesce into ... something. Anything.

I walked back to the ruined hotel and stood near the exit from the Knacker's Yard. I imagined that I'd just come out, having sold someone's ghost for scrap, together with my own memory of the killing. I'd done this almost a dozen times. And from here—

I started walking, not thinking about my direction, letting my feet carry me. They knew the way. Whistling, I strode past the familiar looted shops and derelict houses. Rain thudded on the rusty shells of burnt-out cars.

As the evening darkened, more ghosts appeared on the street. A young woman approached me, carrying a wizened baby.

"Hey, mister—spare us a thought?"

"Fuck off and die," I said. "Oh, you're already dead. Then just fuck off."

But the spooks wouldn't leave me alone. A gang of them mobbed me. "Bleeding breathers—"

"—this is Ghost Town—"

"—you shouldn't be here unless you're *dead*—"

"—we can arrange that—"

I stopped and addressed the haunt. "You want me to call the Knackerman?"

The ghosts drew back, huddling together, the rain falling through their hazy figures.

"Because I can arrange that. I can arrange for you all to end up in bottles." I fished in my inside pocket and drew one out. "You want to try this on for size? Come on, who wants to be first?"

They fled. I kept walking, leaving the spooks behind. As I reached the edge of Ghost Town I heard

traffic and footsteps and beggars shouting for spare change. Breathers filled the streets with their umbrellas, their jostling elbows. I looked at them and laughed. These people were walking ghosts: they just didn't know it yet.

My feet took me into a burger bar on Kellett Road. It's hungry work, killing people. I grabbed a Monster Burger and fries, and ate them as I started through the back streets. I was tired now, and just wanted to relax in front of the TV. I hoped *The World's Dumbest Hackers* was on.

As I approached my house, I smiled to see Oscar keeping watch from the chimney pot. But he didn't bound down to greet me. Instead he howled, then sank through the roof into the house.

That was odd. I looked around, but saw no-one else nearby. Maybe being dead was getting to him again. Some dogs find it hard to adjust.

I put my key in the keyhole, but it wouldn't turn. I took it out and looked at it. That wasn't my front door key—

Yes it was. But this wasn't my front door.

I snapped out of the trance. It had worked. I'd followed the killer's footsteps right to his door—

The door opened. Behind it stood a tall, thickset man with black hair and a scraggly beard. He had a metallic third eye implanted in his forehead. And he was pointing a gun at me.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"A customer," I said, improvising desperately.

The ghost dog walked through him and sniffed my leg. The man—the killer—looked at me suspiciously, and past me into the street.

"You'd better come in," he said.

Inside, the house smelled of pizza and cigarette smoke. At least it was warm. The killer kept me covered as he ushered me into the front room. I tried not to flinch as I recognised the scene of the murder memories. The carpet looked clean except for pizza crusts, but the white wallpaper had a dark stain near the floor.

He turned the television off. "A customer, huh? What are you looking to buy?"

"Ghosts, of course. Why sell to the Knacker's Yard when you could sell straight to their clients? Don't you know how much mark-up they add?"

"Shit!" he said. "How did you find me?"

I shrugged. "Word gets around."

"It better fucking not!"

"You can't keep a talent secret for ever, you know. You're too good at what you do. Now, aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

I hoped he'd relax a little, but he was too canny for that. He already had a bottle of Scotch open, and he poured me a shot using his left hand while he covered me with his right.

As I sipped the Scotch, he patted my coat and discovered the gun in my outer pocket.

"Isn't this what the police use?" he said.

"If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me," I said.

"It's a piece of shit. Don't you know they only use it because it's cheap?" He laughed. "Are you a customer or just a very stupid cop?"

He tried to give me an intimidating stare. It worked, with his firepower backing it up. He said, "I could ask you. Or I could ask your ghost. Which do you think would give me an honest answer?"

"Me!" I said.

"No, I think the ghost will. You see, I'll suck out your memories. And then I'll know who you are, how you found me, and whether anyone else knows I'm here."

He whistled, and the dog came trotting through the door. "Oscar! Go fetch the Knackerman. Good boy! Fetch the Knackerman!"

Oscar barked once, then scampered away. I realised he was augmented, fed on human ghost scraps. He could probably beat me at Scrabble.

The killer stepped back. "Sit down and don't move. Any trouble—well, if you know so much about me, you know what I usually do to the meat. But if you sit still, I'll spare you that." He pointed his gun at my heart.

I knew he only waited because the Knackerman could more easily capture my ghost when it was new-born—new-dead—and confused by the trauma.

I also knew that if he wasn't going to bother tying me up or incapacitating me—hell, a blow from one of the golf clubs under the table would quiet me down—then that must mean the Knackerman was close, and would arrive very soon.

I had just minutes to live. And then my ghost had just seconds to live. Well, afterlive.

My mind whirled in panic as I struggled to concentrate. What was procedure? Talk to the gunman. Communicate. Negotiate. While he's talking, he ain't shooting. Yet those barely-remembered slogans felt stale and weak. Blood-soaked images filled my head, urging me to kill the bastard. I wanted to hit him, burn him, slash him—

But he had the gun, and mine as well. I looked around for a weapon. Nothing. You'd think a killer would at least keep an axe on the wall. He only had an Escher print, the one with the white swans turning into black and the black swans into white.

I'd have to charge with my bare hands. That would be futile without a distraction. I looked at the phone and willed it to ring. I longed for someone to knock on the door. Why's there never a Jehovah's Witness when you need one?

Tension crackled. The pause was so pregnant it had quintuplets. I glared at him. He glared at me. He had a better glare because he had three eyes. That unblinking third eye was a port in his head. Only people who deal with ghosts all the time have that op. I prefer my shades—at least I can take them off and not see spooks, pretend that life's as simple as it used to be when it stopped at the end.

The killer nudged the gun from side to side, an inch either way, just to draw attention to it and remind me who had the upper hand. I thought about trying the old “Behind you!” trick, but he'd hardly fall for that in his own house.

I could only wait for the Knackerman and hope his arrival would be the distraction I needed. I wondered what he looked like. They say no-one knows, because when he breaks up a ghost, he sells every scrap and memory except the victim's sight of him.

There's a Ghost Town myth that says he's the Devil, that once the Knackerman takes you, you can't ever get to Heaven. It's amazing how many ghosts still try to believe in Heaven.

Another story says the Knackerman delves into the victim's mind and appears as their worst nightmare. Maybe he'd already arrived, because this *was* my nightmare. Cop caught by the criminal. Becoming the slasher's latest victim. Going to the bottles in the Knacker's Yard.

I wondered who'd buy me and how much they'd pay. *Whoever buys this memory—I hope you fucking choke on it, you pathetic voyeur.*

Then I remembered that not all my mind was in my head. Maybe—

I heard excited barking, growing louder. The Knackerman was coming. I shifted in my seat, turning slightly to one side. The dog burst through the wall, followed by a short guy with greying hair. He didn't look like a bogeyman; he looked like a civil servant on dress-down Friday. Well, it's always the quiet ones.

He said, “What the hell is this? You think because I'm dead, I don't have a social life? You can't just send your superdog to fetch me whenever you get the urge to do some slashing. I've told you to keep it down to one a week.” While the Knackerman spoke, my hand drifted toward my pocket.

The killer looked at him and said, “But this guy knows—”

That was as far as he got. As soon as his gaze shifted, I grabbed a bottle from my pocket and threw it at his middle eye. It smashed on the metal socket.

I wasn't sure which bottle I'd thrown. But I charged anyway. Before I reached him, his face went slack. I seized the gun from his limp hand, then backed away.

The Knackerman shook his head and said, “Stupid fucker.” I didn't know which of us he meant.

Oscar went into a frenzy and tried to bite chunks out of my body. My scrotum iced over as the dog's phantom teeth closed on my testicles. Reflexively I kicked back, but we couldn't touch each other.

The killer looked worn out. “So this is what it's like being a cop.... It's even worse than I thought.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It's a lot more fun this way round.”

I ached to blow him away. All the murders in my mind, all my anger and disgust, said *Kill! Kill!* My grip tightened on the gun, my fingers grasping the trigger.

The killer said, “You can't shoot me in cold blood. That's murder.”

“That never stopped you,” I said.

“Look, you're making a big mistake. Don't be hasty about this. We can work out a deal—”

I laughed. "I never realised just how weaselly all that crap sounds."

The Knackerman said, "You want me to bag him up? He'll fetch a decent amount at the Yard. I'll cut you in for half."

He floated across the room, toward the killer. Then his hands started growing. They sprouted more and more fingers, which swelled and lengthened and curled. The Knackerman cupped his huge, hideous claws around the killer's skull, ready to trap the emerging ghost.

The killer said, "Oscar—get him!"

Oscar leapt into the air, pounced on the Knackerman, and bit his leg. The Knackerman grunted. But the dog didn't get a second bite. He couldn't loosen his grip. The dog's teeth locked onto the Knackerman's leg as if it were made of ultra-sticky toffee.

The Knackerman twisted like a champion contortionist, bending his leg upward. I heard a muffled whine as Oscar scrabbled frantically, clawing the Knackerman's torso. But the Knackerman's whole form was as sticky as flypaper, and soon the dog was just a twitching blob of fur, even his tail immobile.

As the Knackerman's leg reached his face, he opened his mouth wide, dislocating his jaw like a snake. Then he bit the dog's head off.

Oscar's ghostly body shrivelled and evaporated. The Knackerman barked twice. "Nice appetiser," he said.

I had kept watch on the killer throughout, careful not to get distracted, and all the while the Knackerman's hands had stayed wrapped round the guy's head. Now, between the pale fingers, eyes widened in panic. I knew the killer was about to make a last desperate move.

All the rage in my head boiled over. Vengeance for the victims, my own festering hatred, the blood and death in the murder memories—all the violence erupted like lightning. And I held the lightning conductor. My hand clenched on the gun. There was no way in the world I couldn't shoot.

I pulled the trigger.

The silencer went *phut*, like a champagne cork popping. My arm sprang back, my wrist aching from the recoil. The gun was a real elephant stopper compared to my own street-rat shooter.

The killer slumped to the floor, blood dripping onto the carpet. *Another cleaning bill*, I thought.

The Knackerman looked at me and said, "You got his leg, you idiot."

"I know," I said. At the last moment I'd jerked my aim downward.

"So finish him off!"

I shook my head. "I don't want to send him to the Knacker's Yard. I don't even want to kill him. Well, I do. But I don't *want* to want to kill him."

"Hell, he'll get the death penalty anyway."

I smiled. "And afterlife imprisonment for the ghost."

"What a waste," he said.

I pointed the gun at the Knackerman and said, "You're even worse than him. Right now I can't touch you, but if this racket starts up again, I won't only get the breather, I'll recruit some ghosts and go after you. Just because you're dead, that doesn't mean you're beyond the law."

The Knackerman gave me the finger with his hideous claw. Then he vanished through the ceiling.

I sighed. I grabbed the whisky bottle and swigged three shots in three gulps. Then I poured the rest of the bottle over the killer's ragged wound. That was all the first aid I could be bothered with. He screamed most satisfyingly.

"Can I use your phone?" I said.

"Fuck you!" he whispered.

"Thanks."

I called the station and asked them to send a holding van. "I have a murderer for you," I said. "Bring the scoop as well; he's got some memories I want back."

With considerable relief, I decanted the killer's murder reminiscences into the remaining bottle. Yet I knew their residue of gleeful violence would taint my dreams for months to come.

Did I really want my police memories back? They were hardly any more pleasant. Perhaps I should return to the Knacker's Yard and buy myself a new personality, build up a history from the endless shelves....

My fingers twitched. I decided that I would go back, if only to recover my piano lessons. After a day surrounded by death and ghosts, I had a sudden longing to play the piano while I still had flesh and bone to touch the keys.

While I waited for the van to arrive, I sat and listened to my slowly calming heartbeat. Grateful for every blood-pounding thump, I vowed to make the most of those I had left.

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Interview with William F. Nolan

William F. Nolan has been widely published in a dozen fields, including science fiction, mystery, dark fantasy, and mainstream fiction, and has achieved some 1,500 sales (including three to *Apex Digest!*) since his first short story was printed in 1954.

Jodi Lee: Over the years, a *Logan's Run* remake has been planned, shelved, planned and reshelved. As of February 21st of this year, Silver Pictures and Warner Brothers (producers) were stating that the remake is of high priority, but it sounded like Bryan Singer (*X2*, *Superman*) has been pulled from the project. Given this situation, and the right set of circumstances, who would be your favorite to direct the remake?

William F. Nolan: Indeed, it seems that Bryan Singer has (alas!) pulled away from *Logan's Run* after almost two years of development. However, he may return as a producer when he completes his next film assignment (another *Superman*?) and may even resume plans to direct the picture. He's very high on the novel. He would be my number one choice as director. I have, at present, no connection with Joel Silver or Warner Bro.—though I hope to be on hand for the shoot as a consultant, allowing me to write a book on the production, *Running With Logan*.

JL: Will you have any input on casting?

WFN: I have no hand in casting. MGM moved up the compulsory death age from 21 in my book to 30 (for casting reasons). I've been told that Warner's will bring the age down again (to ???) but I have no say in the matter.

JL: For someone that has never read the series (shocking!), but has seen the movie can you explain the idea behind calling the Sandmen, Sandmen?

WFN: In fairy tales the Sandman comes to put you to sleep. In Logan's world the future cops are DS men (Deep Sleep) and their job is to track down runners and terminate them (put them to sleep). Thus, the title fits.

JL: If you were so inclined to classify, how would you view the Domed City—utopian or dystopian?

WFN: I classify the Domed City as stupid. Since the air outside is breathable, why should anyone live under a dome? (There are no domes in the novel.)

JL: Is the Logan series at an end, or is it possible there could be more stories you'll be telling?

WFN: Why should the Logan series end? There are countless books about *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, so why not Logan? When the movie is released I'll have new editions out for *Logan's Run*, *Logan's World*, and *Logan's Search*. And right now I'm working on a new Logan book, *Logan's Journey*. Believe me, Mr. Logan will continue to run. Why shoot a derby-winning horse?

JL: Have you seen *The Island*, and what did you think of the somewhat poorly concealed similarities to Logan's Run?

WFN: *The Island* was heavily influenced by Logan, but it wasn't a total rip off like *Wild in the Streets* in '68. You can't control this sort of thing. Any successful film will end up being copied in some form or another. I don't worry about it.

JL: In your opinion, have the advances in technology been a boon to science fiction movies, or has the flashiness taken away from the stories being told?

WFN: I think special effects are great, and what they are able to do now will enhance the new Logan film. Back in '75, when MGM did Logan they didn't have the effects available today. So long as you create real three-dimensional characters based on genuine human emotion, then special effects are fine. But they must never replace the human story. If they do then the film is a failure.

JL: You spent the early years as an artist. What made you switch from art to writer?

WFN: I won several awards in art during my high school period. Went on to attend the Kansas City Art Institute and worked as an artist for Hallmark Cards. Had my own art studio in San Diego, selling watercolor and outdoor murals. The reason I switched to writing is simple. I knew I could make a career out of my writing but doubted I could do the same with art. Oh, I've kept my artistic hand in, illustrating the covers (and interior art) on several of my books. Very recently, I got an offer to illustrate a children's book, and may do that. Time will tell.

JL: You're a very diversely read writer, from science fiction to mystery to westerns. Do you feel this has helped with your own creativity?

WFN: As a working pro, I've functioned in a dozen fields over the past decades: science fiction, mystery, dark fantasy, horror, auto racing, biography, showbiz, tech writing, hard-boiled, aviation, westerns, and "mainstream." Plus scripts for TV and films. I write whatever excites me at a given time. That way, I'm never bored, so I don't bore my readers. It's all creative, no matter the genre.

JL: What were the inspirations behind "Mommy, Daddy, and Mollie" and "At the 24-Hour" in issues eight and nine of Apex Digest?

WFN: "Mommy, Daddy, and Mollie" was my attempt to write an offbeat ghost story from a child's point of view. "At the 24-Hour" was based on my longtime habit of writing in all-night coffee shops and listening to some very odd conversations. Since giving up coffee I now write days, in my den.

JL: Do you find you prefer to write short stories over novel-length material?

WFN: Yes, I prefer short stories to novels—as clearly established by my pro credits: 166 short stories to 12 novels. But both forms are very rewarding, and each has its place. I waited a long time to do my first novel. I was 37 when I wrote *Logan's Run*. For a first novel it has exceeded my wildest hopes.

JL: Since you have done biographies of Ray Bradbury, what do you think of the national read-in program centered around *Fahrenheit 451*?

WFN: Ray deserves any honor bestowed upon him. We've been close pals for 57 years! He's worked hard every day of his adult life at writing, and taught me to do the same. Most people are unaware of his vast output: 600 stories and over 130 books, plus uncounted poems, essays, plays, etc. Talent only counts when coupled with constant work.

JL: You've led a very interesting life; besides being a writer of amazing fiction, you're a noted screenwriter, you've raced cars, been an illustrator, and the biographer of famous people. Is there any part of your life that stands out as the most enjoyable?

WFN: It's all been a joy. People tell me that, after 50 years at the keys and over 1500 sales, that I should take a vacation. I tell them that my whole **life** is a vacation. I love to write. It's the oxygen I breathe. Of course, it can't go on forever—so I intend to retire on my 100th birthday.

For more information visit www.williamfnolan.com

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PIGS AND FEACHES by Patrice E. Sarath

Patrice E. Sarath is a popular short fiction writer whose work has appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Black Gate*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Year's Best Fantasy 3*.

So, have you girls seen Terri yet?" the old woman called, popping out of the kitchen.

Rachel and Ellie froze, Ellie with her hands behind her back like a schoolgirl to hide the handgun.

"You know," Rachel said, "we haven't yet. We're, uh, looking forward to seeing Terri."

Ellie nodded vigorously.

"She had a boy, did you hear? Nine pounds, two ounces. After you have dinner here, you can go visit her in the hospital."

The old lady popped back out of sight behind the door, and Rachel and Ellie looked at each other, Ellie's face full of exaggerated alarm.

"Shit," Ellie said, laughing.

"Shh," said Rachel. She wanted to get out of there. It didn't help that Ellie was in one of her moods, deceptively amiable. Her eyes were too bright, her fingers twitching.

"Okay, okay. Don't freak."

Ellie set the gun down on the roll-top desk and started leafing through papers, muttering with disgust. Dividing her nervous attention between Ellie and the kitchen, Rachel tugged at the knob on the glass-fronted china hutch. The door stuck. Dim figures lurked behind the glass, porcelain clowns and cloisonné boxes. She tugged harder, her fingers numb and clumsy.

"This sucks," Ellie said. She dropped a pile of papers back on the desk, and the whole stack tilted and cascaded to the floor. Ellie kicked it, sending papers flying across the carpet.

"Ellie," Rachel said, rising exasperation in her voice.

"What?" Ellie said, all innocence. She held out her hands. "It slipped." She made a face at Rachel and went back to ransacking the desk. Without looking at Rachel, she said acidly, "Feel free to help."

Screw you, Rachel thought. She tugged again at the glass door to the cabinet and it flew open with a rattle. A china dog fell over with a loud clatter.

Behind her, Ellie said, "Hey, Rachel, I have news for you. They're not going to put their ration cards in with the little clownsies and puppy dogs."

"Yeah, well, I'm not looking for ration cards."

She turned back to the cabinet. Her mother's china hutch had been dark stained walnut like this one, with the treasures of a lifetime tucked away in the dark and dust. Her grandfather's ring. Her mother's pearls. A diamond stick pin. Lost twice, once in the tangled plaques caking her mother's brain, and again when the house and its contents were sold after her mother's death.

She reached back into the farthest corners, grimacing as she encountered nothing but dust balls. Ellie was right—she wasn't going to find anything in there.

"Have you girls seen Terri yet?"

Startled, Rachel bumped her head on the shelf before she could get out of the hutch. She turned around, rubbing her head. The old woman had come out again, a cold casserole dish held in kitchen mitts. This time a crease of worry marked her forehead between her gray brows, but her voice trundled on. "Did you hear—?"

"Yeah, yeah, a baby boy," Ellie said. "We heard. Come *on*, where do keep the ration cards?"

Tears sparkled on the old woman's cheeks. "So, have you girls seen Terri yet?"

Ellie looked at Rachel and shook her head. "I *hate* Fast A." She drew the handgun and cocked it, pointing it at the old woman.

"Ellie," Rachel said.

"I mean it. We just want the goddamn cards. I don't see that bitch Terri coming around here. Come on. The ration cards. Credit cards. And the car keys while you're at it. Might as well."

"Ellie, you can't shoot her."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not that kind of girl."

Ellie turned to look at her. She actually did kind of look like that sort of girl, Rachel had to admit—wide-eyed, short dark hair askew, low-rise jeans, tank top. Sun-kissed freckles across her nose. Manic eyes.

"Since when?"

"Since always." Standing between them, the old woman whimpered. Rachel sighed. "Look. Why don't you look upstairs, see what you can find. I'll have a few words with her, and see what she can tell me."

Ellie lowered the gun sulkily. "She's not going to tell you anything. Not when she's looping." But she stomped up the stairs anyway.

Rachel looked over at the old woman and went and took the casserole dish from her. It looked like she had stirred together tuna, ketchup, and breadcrumbs.

"Come on," Rachel said. "Let's sit at the kitchen table."

The old woman sat hesitantly, flinching at every loud sound from Ellie's upstairs rampage. Her eyes were clouded with cataracts. Rachel set the dish aside. On the table was a stack of ration cards. Rachel slipped them into her pocket, then put one back. Don't be such a wuss, she could almost hear Ellie say, and she sighed and picked it back up again.

While she dithered, the old woman folded her hands in her lap. Her fingers were gnarled and curved, the knuckles swollen. Rachel set down the cards and smoothed the gray hair off the woman's forehead. She kept stroking, and the old lady relaxed, her eyes drooping.

"Shh. Shh. It's all right. Tell me your name."

"Ni-nine pounds. Nine—" Her voice trailed off.

Sometimes touch could interrupt the looping, make a person seem almost normal. Sometimes nothing could be done. Rachel kept stroking, on the off chance that she could get something useful.

"Wow. A boy, right? What did she name him?"

The old woman smiled and just like that, it was *Hello honey, I'm home*. "Carl Joseph. Carl was so proud. He wouldn't admit it, but he was. Our first grandbaby."

Rachel froze. She had a husband. Was someone else in the house? *Ellie's up there alone*. She probed tentatively, risking losing the woman. "Where's Carl now?"

"He's at the summer house."

She let her breath out. Not here then, if the woman could be trusted.

"Really? Do you want to go see him? We could take you there."

Maybe if they told the woman they would drive her there, she would give them the keys to the car out front. It was covered with dust and the tires were low, but they had peeked in and the gas gauge showed half full. A car and ration cards—that would be a haul.

"Summer house," the woman said softly. "Our own secret garden." She closed her eyes and smiled. "Amid all the pretty pigs and feaches."

"Do you want to go there?" Rachel said again, trying to tamp down her impatience.

"Oh, the things we did there," the woman said, rocking a little. "It was our private place." Her smile became wicked. "The things we did there." She leaned forward and whispered in Rachel's ear, her breath so rotten Rachel had to turn away.

"That's sweet," she said, struggling not to gag. "I'm sure you were quite, uh, something in those days."

"The things we did there." The woman lifted her hands with difficulty and pulled back her matted gray hair in a travesty of wantonness. Muted sunlight from the clouded window glinted on diamonds in her ears and at her throat. "The things we did there."

Oh. My. God. For a moment Rachel forgot to breathe. The diamonds were dots of brilliance against the woman's faded skin.

"Shh," she whispered. She stroked the woman's forehead again. "Just sit nice and quiet now, okay?" She began to unscrew the posts from the woman's ears, her fingers thick and clumsy. "Shh."

The old woman's eyes followed Rachel's hands as she put the earrings in her own ears, each one making a tiny prick of pain. Just to try them, she told herself. I'll give them back.

* * * *

She was clasping the necklace around her neck when a thud from upstairs caught their attention. The old woman looked up, for an instant wholly normal. For a moment there was silence, and then Ellie's rising wail.

"Rachel!"

Rachel bolted for the stairs. She went down the short hall first one way, saw nothing, and then down the other end. She stopped in the open door. Ellie stood there, pointing the gun, her hand shaking so much the gun wobbled. Her eyes were huge, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She turned to look at Rachel

and the gun aimed itself at Rachel's heart. Rachel thought she would stop breathing. Instead, she took a step sideways, bumping into the door, and reached out to take the gun.

"Elena?" she said.

Ellie pointed into the room. "I think we found Terri."

The woman sat in a white rocking chair. It creaking as she pushed back and forth, back and forth. She held a small, soiled bundle in her lap, and her birdlike eyes locked onto their presence.

She sees us. Rachel began to back away under the woman's bright gaze, drawing Ellie with her. Ellie made to speak but Rachel gave her a warning shake of her head. The old lady was one thing. She could still be soothed, the virus dormant.

In her daughter it had reached full flower.

Rachel tugged on Ellie's elbow and backed her out of the door, and the woman turned to gaze down on the bundle as if she had forgotten them. Rachel let out her breath.

"Holy shit," Ellie said, voice shaking, too loud in her fear and relief. "Did you see what she was holding?"

The woman's head whipped back up to look at them, her features suddenly overcome with madness.

Rachel pushed Ellie out of the room and slammed the door shut, holding the doorknob with one hand, the gun with the other. From the other side of the door she could hear a moan and a thud. The door shuddered as the woman tried to get out.

"Shit!" Ellie said again.

"Run," Rachel said. "Just run. I'll hold her here."

A noise behind them made them turn around. The old woman had come up the stairs behind Rachel, holding the rail and stumbling. The hall was narrow—they would not be able to get past her.

The door shook again. Rachel tightened her grip. She raised her voice to the old woman. "Go back. Go back to the kitchen."

"Su—summer," the old woman said. "Hou—hou—" Then she said, "Pigs and feaches."

"What the hell?" Ellie said.

"She's gone. Last stages," Rachel said. She raised her voice. "Go. Back."

Stupid. As if enunciating would help. She steadied the gun. "Cover your ears, El."

"Pigs and feaches!" the old woman insisted. Her voice broke.

My God, Rachel thought. Is she crying? She lowered the gun and looked closer.

"Rachel!" Ellie screamed.

The door pulled from her grip and Terri pushed it open, lumbering out before Rachel could slam it shut again. Rachel squeezed the trigger and put three bullets into her. The reports banged sharply in the confined space. Terri slid down the wall, her clawed hand just missing Ellie's ankle as she fell. Ellie jumped.

"Feaches!" screamed the mother.

"Do it," Ellie said. "Damn it, Rachel."

Rachel steadied the gun and fired one more shot.

The old woman toppled over in mid-feach.

They ran.

They clattered down the stairs, bursting through the front door with its faded quarantine poster. The dusty old car waited next to the sidewalk, its tires sagging. Rachel and Ellie jumped down the stone stairs leading from the front door to the street, holding onto each other.

"Okay," Rachel said. "Okay." She forced herself to breathe, to stop repeating herself. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Ellie nodded, breathing hard. She gestured and Rachel handed her the gun. Ellie put the safety on and then put the gun in her belt.

"So, no cards," Rachel said. She heard her voice shake and thought she wouldn't say anything for a while. She sat down on the stairs and Ellie sat with her.

It was a fine autumn day, slightly chilly. No one else was on the street. They sat at the top of a hill, the street sloping away from them, a row of narrow townhouses riding the contour of the land, every one of them with a quarantine poster tacked to its front door. Rachel rubbed her fingers—they had gone numb again. She was glad she had been able to hold the gun and fire it.

"Where did you get those?"

Rachel started. Ellie looked at her, her dangerous brightness muted. Rachel touched the necklace self-consciously. She shrugged and got to her feet, trying to ignore the icy sweat that trickled between her shoulder blades. "I dunno. Listen, I want to check out one more thing." Ellie said nothing. Rachel flushed. "It'll only take a minute." She had to return the diamonds. *Shit. What have I done?*

Ellie waved a hand, looking out over the street. "Whatever."

Rachel left her sitting in the sun, a small figure on the deep stone steps. She didn't want to go back into the house. Instead, she followed a flagstone path to the side of the townhouse. A wooden gate hung ajar. She pushed it open into the shaded back yard. The stone path led into an overgrown garden, weeds and grass springing up between the flagstones. Fig trees, their leaves rounded like puzzle pieces, bent over the path so she had to push the heavy branches aside. The garden opened up, and a twisted grove of peach trees, whip-thin branches scraping the ground, surrounded a stone birdbath.

At the back of the yard stood a small, screened house, barely larger than a gazebo. The summer house. *The things we did there.* So this was where the old woman screwed her husband. Despite herself, Rachel grinned. She followed the flagstones straight to the little house. The screen door hung askew, the wooden framing weathered. She strained to see inside and could make out some furniture.

"Did you kill them both?"

Rachel whirled around. Carl?

A skinny old man stood in the peach grove at the bird bath. His clothes were worn, but neat—faded

jeans, a work shirt. Boots. His beard was grizzled but trimmed. Still, for good measure, she looked down at his hands. He followed her gaze and gave a wry smile.

Shit, she thought. He didn't have Fast A, but that could be worse. More dangerous. He was old, sure, but he was far from frail.

He gave her his own frank appraisal, and she flushed. She remembered the things the old woman had whispered.

In the silence, he nodded at the door to the summer house. "Go on in. Not much to see."

She hesitated, then acquiesced. She pushed open the creaky door and stepped inside.

The floor was a dark wood, stained by time and weather where rain came in the screens. A few bugs scuttled off into dark corners, and it smelled of deep mildew. It was much cooler inside.

An old brass bed took up most of the little house. It had linens on it and was neatly made. He slept here, then; the house was for his wife and daughter. The door creaked open again and sprang shut.

"How did you keep them from coming out here?" she asked.

"I think she knew not to." He was right behind her. "The more I've seen of it, the more I think they're still in their heads. They just can't get out."

Rachel remembered the old woman's catch in her voice when she stared at her over the gun.

"You just want to believe that," she said. "That they're still in there."

"What do you believe?"

She lifted her shoulders, trying to sound offhand, though her heart thundered in her chest. She was very conscious of his closeness. "It's Fast A. Once the plaque destroys all the connections, that's it."

She imagined the virus racing toward her brain with every beat of her heart, ready to encapsulate her neurons in its own genetic material. Fast A. Super-Alzheimer's.

"So you can just kill them. Convenience or mercy?" Before she could answer, he gestured toward the bed. "Have a seat."

She thought of herself in that bed, with him, doing the things the old woman had done, feeding her own desire. Her heart thundered. She sat down on the bed and drew off her boots. He hesitated only a second before sitting down next to her, drawing her dark hair through his rough fingers until it hung loose around her face. He pushed down the straps of her thin tank top, dropping a kiss at her breastbone. She lay back and he pressed himself against her and they sank into the old mattress together.

They took their sweet time, and when they finished, lying together in a sweaty tangle with the cool evening air wafting through the summer house; she drifted into sleep.

* * * *

She woke in the dark, shivering, sweating. She was thankful she was lying down; she felt dizzy.

He muttered something.

"I have to go," she said. "My friend's waiting for me." She didn't really think so; Ellie had probably given up and gone on into town where there was a safe house for the uninfected.

Rachel sat up slowly, letting the vertigo recede, and collected her scattered clothes. She dressed and he watched her, propped up on one elbow.

"Mercy or convenience?" he said at last.

She stopped and looked at him. "I did shoot her, and I'm sorry for that. But Fast A killed her long before I did."

She sat down to put on her boots, but before she could move away, he reached out and touched her ear, his finger sliding along the earring. She froze.

"Do you know what one of the first symptoms is? Increased sexual appetite. The virus wants to spread, and the best way to do that is to increase proximity to hosts."

"I don't have—"

"When she got infected, she told me she wanted to remember this place. She knew she didn't have much time, so she remembered what she loved the most—here." He gestured. "Our summer house in its grove of fig and peach trees. When I saw you at the gate, I knew she had told you, and I knew she had remembered. She gave you these, didn't she? Her gift—she gave you—"

He was crying. With clumsy fingers, Rachel took out the earrings and pulled hard at the necklace, snapping the thin chain. They fell to the floor with a soft tinkle. She pushed blindly toward the screen door, stumbling a little. It screeched open and banged shut behind her. It was dark in the garden, the flagstone path a pale glimmer, and she had to fumble at the gate latch before it would open.

The front stoop was empty. Rachel began the long walk down to the town.

* * * *

She was shivering hard by the time she reached the business district. Her throat was sore, her fingers stiff. She stretched and clenched her fists, and the stiffness eased a bit. She had to find Ellie. She had to tell her—she didn't know what she had to tell her. *Hello, I'm in here. Don't shoot.*

She didn't know how much time she had. No, she thought. I can still think. I can still reason. To prove it, she looked up at the street sign, illuminated by a fading electric light from a nearby store. She could barely make out the words—she was at Brookes and Highland Avenue. "All right," she said out loud, her voice shaking. "Fi-five blocks to the safe house."

If they would let her in.

They have to, she thought. They have to. I have to tell Ellie. The old woman was able to remember the two most important things. Rachel knew she could do it too. She concentrated on the words she needed, imagining herself forming new neural connections as the virus wove itself around the old ones.

Someone screamed and Rachel jerked up, but they ran before she could see what they were screaming at. She hurried.

She fell down a couple of times—her feet didn't work right. She broke out into a sweat—she could feel it matting her hair. Her fingers finally curled up into useless fists. Damn it, she thought. I need to find Ellie. I have to tell her.

Something hit her, and Rachel fell to her knees, crying out. She put up her fist to her stinging head and pulled it away. It was wet and sticky. She wiped the blood on her shirt and got up shakily. Stop, she wanted to say.

All of a sudden people were everywhere, shouting at her. Another rock hit her. Light flared from flashlights, and she held up her arm, wincing. *Where's Ellie?* she tried to say. Ellie!

She scanned the crowd, trying to see through the glare, forcing the words to come out. Ellie! "Fi-fi—" No. That wasn't it. She had to find Ellie before it was too late.

"Rachel?" She spun clumsily. Ellie looked at her. "God, Rachel. No. No. Not you."

Ellie, listen. Listen. You have to listen. I'm still in here. "Figs-fig-fi—" Rachel forced herself to stop.

Ellie was crying. She pulled out the gun. "No, Rachel. No please, go away."

Listen. I'm still here. And I love you. I keep you sane, remember? You keep me crazy. And this has nothing to do with us. I will go with you, wherever you want. I won't touch you, I won't infect you. Because I can control this. I swear it.

Damn it. It was important and now she couldn't remember what she wanted to tell Ellie.

"Stop saying that!" Ellie aimed the gun. "Please, Rachel. Go away."

She sent me to him, and I went. And oh God Ellie, I have so much to tell you. What she said, about pigs and feaches, she meant *figs* and *peaches*. Peaches, Ellie. The summer house in the grove was where they made love, and she sent me to him as a gift. Please, Ellie, listen to me. I love you so much, Fast A is just a part of it.

The sound of the safety clicking off rang like a shot itself in Rachel's ears. She almost wept. Up until this point, Ellie'd had the safety on. She hadn't been going to shoot. She hadn't wanted to shoot. Rachel could still convince her. Rachel stumbled forward, hands outstretched. See? They're fists, I closed them like that so I couldn't touch you or hurt you. I can't hurt you. I'm harmless.

The first shot dropped her and she stumbled and sat down, blinking, staring up at Ellie, who was screaming until her voice almost disappeared. "Go away! Go *away!* Goawaygoawaygoaway!"

The pain spread in Rachel's chest. It was hard to breathe. She concentrated with the last of her strength.

Ellie fired again. The bullet exploded through the tendrils of plaque for one single bright instant, throwing Rachel's brain into sudden clarity. She looked straight at Ellie and said, "I'm here, Ellie. I'm here."

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Cain Xp11 (Part 2): The HenRy Lee Lucas Memorial Highway by Geoffrey Girard

Geoffrey Girard has penned dark fantasy and horror tales for such anthologies as *Writers of the Future* (he was a 2003 winner), *Damned Nation* and the recent *Prime Codex*. His first book, *Tales of the Jersey Devil*, was published in 2005 and *Tales of the Atlantic Pirates* hit bookstores last summer. Two more *Tales Of...* books will arrive in 2007. You can find out more online at www.GeoffreyGirard.com. This tale is the second installment of a four-part novella. The first is available online at www.apexdigest.com.

He caught up with Ed Gein just south of Cincinnati.

The true-life inspiration of such horror-movie icons as Leatherface, Norman Bates, and Buffalo Bill had been, fittingly, watching TV when Becker entered his house. Some countdown on *VH1* about the fifty most "Outrageous Moments" in Rock and Roll history. Though, biting the head off a bat now seemed somewhat trivial. Compared to another history which, fifty years before, had included girls dangling from meat hooks and necklaces strung with nipples, skulls stained with vegetable soup, suits of skin stitched from half a dozen bodies ... and all the rest.

All the rest.

Becker was tired of the historical specifics. They always netted out to the same with these men, anyway.

Mutilation. Necrophilia. Rape. Torture.

Pain. Fear.

Death.

The detached freedom to do whatever they wanted, while also imprisoned by some *Other* inside that angrily demanded they act within those same freedoms. Enslaved freedom. Oxymoron. Contradiction.

Monster.

"You want another glass of milk?" said Becker.

"No," Gein said, "I'm good."

The kid had already put away two. And a tall stack of pancakes, hash browns, a plate of bacon, and all of Becker's toast. Hadn't eaten a decent meal in almost two weeks.

For 'Ed Gein' it had been twelve days A.C.

After Cain.

After the others had arrived in the kid's driveway, as they had elsewhere before, as they would somewhere again. After they'd burst from the car like trolls breaking free from beneath some bridge and raced up the steps into his house. Smashed his father's face with a golf club as teeth bounced off the living room wall. After they'd dragged his mother and brother upstairs.

After Cain.

A single carload, filled with the psychopaths developed during the "Cain Xp11" project. The most infamous serial killers in history on the ultimate road trip. Ted Bundy, Henry Lee Lucas, Albert Fish, John Wayne Gacy and Jeffrey Dahmer.

And not the Jeffrey Dahmer waiting for Becker back at the hotel room. The eleven year old kid with glasses and a soft voice. That was another one altogether.

Cloning was funny that way.

Becker looked over 'Ed' again.

Ed.

The boy ate steadily but quietly, the uneasy silence between them amplified by the bustling diner. The kid was fourteen. Cropped, dirty hair. He looked tired, like he'd done a couple tours in Fallujah.

The others had told the boy, just as they, themselves, had recently been told, who he was. That he was, in fact, a clone. A lab-produced photocopy of a notorious killer. That he'd been adopted and raised by strangers as part of some clandestine government test. That he was, in fact, a bred killer. They'd left him with that information and then, as they were done with the rest of his family, had gotten back into their car and driven off. Leaving him, for the first time, it seemed, to decide his own fate.

After Cain.

The first thing the boy had done was to cover his family's faces with open notebooks to hide their vacant, glassy gazes, the steadily graying skin. He'd emptied the kitchen closet for food. Found cash in his mother's purse. Got himself up to go to school each morning for two weeks. Afraid, he told Becker, of where the police would put him if they knew his parents were dead. Afraid he'd be blamed. Afraid they'd make him live with strangers.

Afraid.

But Becker couldn't worry about that now. He wouldn't.

In a couple of hours, the good doctors from DSTI would arrive. What happened then, where those men decided to reshuffle their fourteen-year-old lab rat, was not his concern.

His mission was only to hunt these boys down, them and their genetic brothers. To bring them back to DSTI. Back to the test tubes and computers. The neurochemical testing and mind games. Back to the lab where they'd all been made. And, if capture proved too problematic, he'd also been given other options.

His mission.

"You gonna eat that bacon?" Gein asked.

Becker looked up, collected himself back to the table. "No, go ahead."

The boy reached over to his plate and took the two slabs of half-cooked bacon. Becker looked away as 'Ed' started stuffing the greasy meat into his mouth. He couldn't help but wonder what other slippery meats had once passed over those exact same lips. What gristle those same sharp teeth had once chewed into. The same tongue savoring the taste of dead flesh.

It wasn't fair, Becker knew. This kid was not *the* Ed Gein. Not technically.

Nature/nurture, right?

Hell, the rest of the world knew the boy only as Trent Alsip. Dr. Jacobson's secret notes had simply read 'ED—ALSIP'. Illinois? No, Becker decided, studying the doctor's other annotations; it was a name. An adopted name. It had been enough. Thanks to changes in "Homeland Security,"

Becker now had access to better records, and he quickly had his list of the hundred Alsips in the United States with sons in the right age range.

Ages ten to eighteen. Almost ten years of monster making.

With that, it was just a matter of looking at the map again.

The Murder Map.

It had become Captain Becker's dearest and most trusted partner. There were three hundred homicides a week in the United States, almost half completely uncleared, unsolved. As many as a hundred murdered by complete strangers. Fed info from headquarters throughout each day, Becker always knew precisely when and where the last American life had mysteriously ended. Then, it was only a matter of making his red dots, starting to mark some lines along the various highways, and looking for possible paths.

Just like connect the dots. But with dead people.

The more brutal the murder, the better. The two women in Delaware. McCarty and Nolan. McCarty's son was still missing. The bodies of the woman and her children found in Zaleski State Park. Recent unsolved slayings in Unity, Ohio and Lovett, Indiana.

One group clearly heading west along Route 50.

Fresh blood. Fresh trail.

Alsip #42, son aged fourteen, right along the same trail. It had been worth a look.

Trent Alsip. Ed Gein.

One down, as many as fifteen left to go. But Becker wasn't discouraged. It was a start.

While TV shows made it seem that such things resolved themselves in an hour, Becker lived in the real world. He'd recently pursued Al Qaeda chief Ibrahim Yassin for eleven months before completing the mission. If the assholes at CNN didn't get that, so be it. He did. And so did his bosses, who simply wanted matters concluded discretely and thoroughly. There'd been more than 16,000 murders in the US in the past twelve months, almost 100,000 rapes.

What was another hundred?

Based on some of the imaginary lines Becker had drawn on his map and what the boy, Gein/Alsip, had overheard, it appeared the original group had picked up John, the one who wore a clown suit, in Pennsylvania that first night out. Another small group had already split off and was apparently staying along the East Coast. The geneticist, Jacobson, the father of them all in his own horrible way, had apparently gone on alone shortly after freeing them.

But it was the group heading West that Becker was most worried about. The freshest trail. The bloodiest trail.

"Becker," the boy said. "Can I order another side of something?" His face was already wet and shiny with bacon grease and for just a moment, Becker thought it was blood.

"Sure, Becker said, looking away again. "Why not?"

* * * *

Emily purposely led Allison slowly into the apartment. She didn't want her little sister to miss a thing.

It smelled musty, like a dirty gym locker room. Like too many boys. And the slight odors of pot and of sex still lingered in the room. Allison had paused in the doorway, and Emily took her arm to gently lead her beyond her instincts. The door shut behind them.

It had been a couple months since she'd last seen Allison. Ever since Emily'd moved out of the house, or been tossed out, or whatever it was that had happened, they just weren't that close anymore. But a simple phone call was all it took. A big sister inviting her old pal over to watch a video and grab some pizza. Allison said yes almost immediately. She was a nice person, that way. Always had been.

Pretty, too. Even prettier than Emily remembered. Grown her hair out long and straight like all the others, which the boys would like for sure.

Two of them, Al and Jeffrey, were watching TV again. Al liked to bite. Jeffrey was the only one who hadn't done her yet, or her roommate, actually. He liked boys, it seemed. So he, John, and Ted had gone across the hall one night. Visited the thirty-something who lived there. That had been funny.

The nurse, Ms. Stacey, sat between them on the couch, the head tilted slightly to one side. Her eyes were bare, dark slits, the whites behind still fluttering wildly. Her two breasts had been pulled out and over the top of her t-shirt.

None of the three seemed to notice that Emily had entered the room. "That's Jeff and Al. 'Ms. Stacey,'" she introduced Allison to them anyway. "And John, of course."

Slumped in the room's only other chair was a boy dressed as a clown. The red and blue makeup was smeared and patchy, his collar stained a dark red where his chin rested on the top of his chest. A bag of Doritos rested on his crotch. Over one eye, a huge, red, puffy ball dangled from his lopsided hat. He'd turned slowly as they entered the room and tracked their movement deeper into the apartment. His red lips had formed into a moronic smile.

"Emily?" She felt Allison tugging at her arm.

"Hey," a low voice said from the kitchen behind them. "This her?"

"Allison," Emily smiled, took her hand away. "My baby sister. Ain't she the sweetest li'l thing?"

"Sweet, sweet." The boy laughed. He looked older than the others by a few years. Long, wavy dark hair and scorching blue eyes. "But she ain't no baby, is she?" His eyes moved slowly over the girl, while he bit at his lower lip. "What up, Allison? I'm Ted."

The girl had lowered her head.

The dried blood on the kitchen floor looked just like smeared chocolate.

"You being mean to my friends?" asked Emily.

"No, I..." The girl's voice had trembled. "I ... nice to meet you."

"That's better." Ted moved closer, grinning with a distinct and totally hot smile Emily had grown to recognize. This was gonna be fun, fun, fun. "Nothing to be afraid of, right? Your sister said you were pretty cool. She sure got the pretty part right. You smoke?"

Emily liked Ted the best.

Ever since the first time he'd raped her. His hands closing so tightly around her throat as he pushed her to the living room floor. The life and air leaving her body as one. Her roommate's frantic screams, muffled with duct tape, so very close. The other naked shapes moving above her. Then Emily had looked into his eyes and seen it.

Nothing.

No rage. Not even amusement.

Nothing.

Thrusting into her like a piece of machinery, the blackness of death spreading over more of her teary-eyed vision, the guy honestly didn't care if she lived or died.

She'd never cum so hard in her life.

He knew that she had and laughed. Then he squeezed harder until everything went black. She awoke hours later when he was raping her again. "I thought you were dead," he'd smiled.

Oh, yes. Emily liked Ted the best.

How they'd finally met was simple enough.

Al appeared on MySpace six months before. Just another kid on the Internet who liked talking about killing soccer moms. Dreamed of strangling one in the back of her minivan while her daycare brats ate Happy Meals in the front and waited for him to finish. Had a hard-on for serial killers. Who didn't? Wanted to blow up a mall one day, send body parts flying among a rain of Payless shoes and Abercrombie boxers. The guy was pretty funny.

Then, one day, the kid sends an email and says he and a buddy are heading west. Would she be cool if they stopped by to party some time? Bring some pot or X. Guy was probably younger than he was pretending, but she wasn't past hooking up with a high school kid. Sure, what the hell.

Five teens showed up that day.

Al, Jeff, Henry, John, and Ted.

They'd taken their time with the two girls.

Emily and her roommate Kim.

Days.

But Ted and Henry were tired of Kim. Wanted more.

Always wanted *more*.

Emily knew just who to call.

Allison. Pretty, perfect Allison. Ms. Eponine in the school play and Ms. Cheerleader Squad and Ms. Honor Roll. Fourteen. You really want scary? Forget Bundy and Dahmer. How 'bout another Britney-fucking-Spears clone? The good girl. Princess of the known world. At least according to their mother.

Not the fuck-up. The stupid one, the druggie, the slut who'd had the abortion. College dropout.

Twenty-two years old and working second-shift food services at Wal-Mart. Princess of Nothing.
Who'd finally found her King of Nothing.

Oh Mom, if you could only see us now.

"What was that?" Allison asked, her eyes grown wide just like one of those anime vixens.

Emily giggled. You could hear Kim in the bathroom again. Thumping and mewling in the tub.

"Come on." Ted put his arm against Allison's back. "I'll show ya."

Down the hall, the sounds became more distinct. The strange gargling noise. The slow and steady THUMP of something hitting a wall, perhaps.

"Emily?"

The bathroom door was open just a crack, and Ted pushed it back with one hand, positioned Allison to look within. It was dark inside, the hall light creeping in almost carefully, the smears and trails of blood leading to and from the bathtub black against the shadowed tile floor.

THUMP.

Something moved in the tub. Shifted back and forth in the flawed darkness.

"Not sure how much she really feels," Emily said behind them, as she peeked in on her roommate. "She's so high on 'Special K' right now."

She'd been amazed how easy it was to buy ketamine on the street. Just like the boys said it was.

THUMP.

"The cuts were made below the elbows and knees, so it was easy to stop the bleeding."

"Easy?" Ted laughed. "Like hell."

"Well," said Emily. "Easy enough."

"Yeah," he agreed. "I guess it was."

One of his hands now held Allison against the doorframe, keeping her from collapsing. In the dark shadows, it was tough to know for sure...

"What ... what did ... Emily?"

"Shhh, sweetheart. Don't you worry about any of that just yet," Ted told the girl, as the thing in the tub burbled and flopped. "We were just having a little bit of fun is all. You like to have fun, don't you? No? Your sister told us you were a fun girl."

"Fun, fun, fun. When did he take her lips?" Emily said.

"Last night." Ted shook his head. "Crazy fucker. That dude'll eat anything." Albert had already taken so much. Both breasts. An eye. "Kinda wish they'd just left her alone."

"I like her like this," another voice said behind him. "Better time. This the sister?"

"Yeah." Ted turned. "Allison."

"Proof of God."

"Yeah, for sure," Ted agreed. "Allison, this is Henry. He's a good guy."

"You going first?" the new boy asked.

THUMP.

"Nah." Ted smiled. "Go ahead. A promise is a promise."

"Cool." Henry took hold of Allison's arm.

"Back in one piece," Ted reminded him.

Henry puckered his lips. "Not a problem."

Allison turned to her sister and started to speak, but no words came out of her mouth. Only a rasp of breath as Henry led her down the hall towards the bedroom.

"I'm gonna watch," Emily said.

"Like hell. What am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Ted's face didn't look interested. It looked angry.

"Not a prob," she said, and pulled out her cell phone. "Gimme a sec."

His pupils had dilated, eyes grown almost completely black.

"Hey, Mom," Emily said into the phone, waving him away. "It's me. Yeah, hey, listen. Allison's over here. She's pretty upset about something."

Ted grinned now.

"No. You should probably come over." She rolled her eyes.

Muffled screams now trickled from the end of the hall.

Another Princess of Nothing.

"Yeah, Mom," Emily said. "We'll be waiting for you."

* * * *

"There's Kansas. We got Kansas yet?"

"I don't remember." Becker ignored the car and its plates as they passed.

"Ummmm." The boy checked his paper, grabbed the pen. "We didn't." He added it to his list. "That's..." He counted. "Thirty-two. Not bad with all these back roads."

Becker turned the radio back on.

"You always want noise, don't you?" the boy said.

Becker flipped through the stations, found nothing again, stared straight ahead. Indiana moved by in a

blur of one-storey homes, rotting churches, and Dairy Queens. "I guess," he replied.

Just down the road, there'd been a holdup a few days before. Couple of teens, a boy and a girl, raped and butchered in the woods behind the store.

He was getting closer.

"How'd you get that?" Jeffrey asked, pointing at the scar that ran the length of Becker's arm.

"Christ, kid. Read your book. Take a nap or something."

"I thought you liked the noise."

He heard the playful taunt in the boy's voice and turned. He'd found him the very first night, hiding in the closet of Dr. Jacobson's house, where, it seemed, the boy had been secretly raised as a surrogate son by the geneticist.

Another damn piece of the grand experiment. First, the kids that were still at the facility. Then, the original six who'd escaped so brutally. Finally, there were another dozen like 'Ed.' Like 'Jeffrey.' Boys who appeared only on the secret inventory, the one only Dr. Jacobson had known about. While most of the clones had been raised on the grounds of DSTI where they were carefully monitored and influenced, raised in a variety of test groups of abuse and non-abuse, the doctor had also slipped several away to be raised by adoptive parents in authentic environments outside the DSTI walls.

All in the name of science. For the betterment of man. *Etcetera. Etcetera.* To understand what caused aggression, violence, evil. Isolate it. Cure it. Control it. Then to one day unleash it again. The Xp-11 gene. Was it really all just a matter of chromosomes and enzymes?

If so, Becker wasn't stupid. He'd read *Scientific American* and had watched enough SciFi channel to get the big picture. He could easily imagine biological weapons that would infect the enemy with a murderous hate so they'd turn and kill each other. Or provisional injections of rage to boost aggression and strength in battle-fatigued troops.

After he'd almost wrapped his head around the human cloning and experimental abuse, it was no surprise the assignment to fix the escape of DSTI's homegrown killers had come straight from Major General Durbin and the Department of Defense. Or that Becker was one of the best and most trusted operatives Delta Force had.

Most trusted. Yet, he kept this clone of Jeffrey Dahmer hidden in motel rooms most of the time. At first, he'd brought the boy along to fill in some of the gaps. To gather intel on Dr. Jacobson, DSTI and the other boys. But he had all that now, and still he dragged the boy along. Hadn't told DSTI *or* the Major General about him yet. The kid had become Becker's secret. His insurance, he finally admitted. If the Major General or anyone else started getting too squirrely, if Becker ever felt a screw job coming, he had the boy. He had some leverage. A clone of Jeffrey Dahmer, paid for, in part, by the United States military. The *New York Times* or Fox News would sure have some fun with that.

"So..." the boy pushed, "how'd you get it?" He spoke a touch effeminately, and Becker had always assumed the kid was gay. Just like his parent DNA. It wasn't a choice, he'd 'just been born that way.'

So, then, was it safe to assume he had 'just been born' a psycho killer, too?

"War," Becker said, unwilling to chase after that debate again. He fixed his sleeve to hide the scar. "Someone cut me."

"And the others?"

They'd roomed together for almost six weeks now. The boy had certainly seen the other scars. Six weeks.

"Yeah. Those too."

Six weeks of the dreams. The nightmares.

"Did you get the guys who did it to you?"

Becker adjusted the rearview mirror.

"Did you?"

"No. I don't know. Got rescued. Don't remember much."

The boy moved in his seat, looked out the window at the car they'd just passed. "Missouri again," he reported. "What do you suppose they're doing with Ed now?"

"No clue. He's not my job now." Becker moved again for the radio. Behind a chain link fence, several grubby children waved at him as they passed. "He's DSTI's."

"Sure," the boy nodded. "I guess he's okay."

In the dreams, 'Jeffrey' stood over Becker's bed, his face continually morphing between the boy and the man Becker knew only from the file photos. The man who'd murdered, raped, and partially eaten at least seventeen men. Both faces were always slick with dark, dripping blood.

In the dreams, Becker could never move. He could not look away as the inhumanly-sized teeth eventually widened, stretched even longer, and then sank deep into his flesh. He could only scream. And pray it was just a dream again. That he would wake.

That the *thing* sleeping in the same motel room each night, just ten feet away, had not finally revealed its true self.

"Alabama," Becker said, nodding at the car on their right.

"Thirty-three!" The thing beamed.

* * * *

4 Nov—What lies behind and before each of us is only a tiny matter compared to what lies within. Iacta alea est.

When I initiated the XP11 project twenty-one years ago, I feared this. Today, after all the tests and reports, the various splicings, mechano-synthesis and STR markers, I wholly embrace it. Reason, Observation, Experience; the Holy Trinity of Science.

This one was prettier than the others.

When I cut her, I thought again of the Buddhist monks who practice bhavana asubha. Those who meditate in isolated graveyards, mounting fresh corpses bloated with putrescence, or merely rooting through the muck and sickness of a living woman. Contemplation of the body's true foulness. Seeing ourselves for what we really are. Genuine monsters.

The spit and snot. Her tears. Piss trickling down her legs. Putrid, soft, yellow-brown-colored shit. The bile of her vomit as she puked in fear. The sweat on her skin. Lymph slick. Just inside, the synovial fluids greasing her joints, the mucous and phlegm lining the insides of her throat and stomach. And the blood. Always the blood...

For a hundred dollars, she'd danced thirty minutes for me. 'Misty' said she. 'Jacobson' said I. What do I do? 'They say I'm a doctor now. Ha. Ha.' I directed a company called DSTI that clones humans, creates bioengineered killers. Silly? Yes, I suppose so. Science is an edged tool, with which we play like children. Cut our own fingers. Yes, I have lots of money. She touched herself for me in a dark motel room while I watched TV. Five hundred more. Her real name was Gail, Abigail. Where once there was an alluring girl...

The pretty smile, the teeth now broken, jagged and bloody. Gaping fetid sockets. I found two rotting wisdom teeth still lurking in the back of her mouth. Her hair, highlighted and long like an Olympian goddess, had, only an hour before, lain across my waist. Now it was sticky with bloody stumps at the ends from where I'd torn it out. The tight, tanned flesh across her young stomach, once stripped, became dripping meat.

Her mesentery, like a baby's blanket over her intestines, slips between my fingers. It reeks. All of her reeks. Long legs are nothing but bones. They are painted in blood and graying flesh is stuck to them. Breasts are no more than fatty tissue and two bags of saline. Where once there was an alluring girl...

Another illusion that baits such unspeakable things. In one Sutra, the female bodhisattva becomes a rotted corpse to release her lover from his lust. In another, a woman gouges out her own eyes for the same purpose. Sweet Abigail. I held her liver, uterus, and heart, fingers pushing through the membranes which held each in place. Like reaching into a pumpkin to make a Jack-o-Lantern. Her intestines spilled more vomit and fecal matter over my lap. They were like large worms squirming in my hands before I lay them across the floor.

A genuine monster.

Samvega, the monks call it. Samvega. The dreadful awakening that surely comes from such sudden awareness. That it is ALL an illusion.

Science is one thing, wisdom another.

Is this why I have been summoned again? Fata viam invenient. Funny little games. I wonder each day how the others are doing. Jeffrey, especially. To what have they been summoned, I wonder. Now that I've set them free in every possible way.

* * * *

The car held five comfortably, which worked out well enough. Al did most of the driving, said it was relaxing. Henry sat in the back with John and Jeff, took turns at the wheel and napping. Ted always rode shotgun. Liked to hog the radio and follow their journey on the map with each town they passed. "Beaufort," he'd announce with some secret satisfaction. "Mt. Sterling is next." They kept the nurse tied in the trunk.

Left the heat cranked and the windows cracked a bit unless they were hot-boxing. A new Jay-Z CD in the player. The floorboards were covered with candy wrappers and crumpled Taco Bell bags. A couple of empty beer cans. Missouri moved by in a blur of barnyards and strip malls.

There was no particular destination anymore.

All the others, the list Jacobson had given them, had been freed. Mission accomplished. A dozen more kids, clones of psychotic killers, each one scattering into the four winds. Though, Henry supposed a bunch hadn't gotten very far. A couple of the kids looked weak as shit. Just didn't have it. Not that he saw. Hell, they'd killed the one kid themselves. Richardson. The Hillside Strangler clone. Total pussy.

Some seemed pretty cool, though. It was nice to know they weren't in this alone, that there were others. The kid named 'John' had joined 'em early in Maryland. Wore the goofy clown suit his predecessor had made so infamous. Funny. Version 2.0 had only killed four. So far...

Then there was Berkowitz. He'd headed east with Dennis and planned to pick up a couple of other guys.

But this road trip was westward. See the Pacific. Maybe find one of those porn stars to party with. Or try and visit some old stomping grounds in Texas.

"They named a highway after me."

"Who did?"

"Cops did." Henry looked up from his book. "Pretty cool, yeah?"

Ted shook his head. "Stop reading that shit."

"Jealous?"

"Ancient history, faggot. That guy, the one they named the highway for, *that* guy is dead and buried. He killed a hundred people. You didn't. They ain't named shit for you."

"Whatever."

"You guys gotta stop obsessing over those old files and gay true crime books. Getting boners for shit *you* didn't even do. And this guy..." He pointed. "You and that stupid fucking clown outfit."

"I thought you liked it."

"Dude, I love it. It's funny as hell and scared the shit out of that mom, but it ain't you. You're not John Wayne Gacy. *You are the* John Wayne Gacy. Get it?"

"No."

"Man—" Albert laughed, looking over "—I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"The kids like the suit. I like it."

"Then fuckin' wear it," Ted spat. "I don't give a shit anymore. Assholes."

Henry retreated to his book.

Maybe it was time to finally cut loose. To ditch the others once and for all and go his own way. They were bound to get caught eventually, traveling together. A guy in a bloody clown suit buying Gorditas and Mexican pizzas at the drive through. Maybe they should have kept the Emily girl around a bit longer. And killed Ted instead, maybe. Emily, at least, had been up for anything. But then her mom had shown up and things had gotten ... *weird*. Ted had flipped. Emily hadn't made it.

Still had Stacey, at least. Nurse Stacey had always liked him best. Maybe the two of them could take off together.

"Fine," he blurted out. "Where we at? What's this road?"

"We're still on 50, retard. About thirty miles to Jefferson City. What do you care?"

"Maybe they'll name *this* highway for me."

"What for?"

"We could stop for a little bit, you know. Maybe have some more fun."

"What kinda fun?"

"Best kind."

"Now you're talking, Henry. That's the shit I wanna hear. Stop living in the past, girls. This is our time now, our life. Someone wake Jeff up."

"What about that house?"

"Which?"

All their voices had become one voice.

"There. With the swing set."

"You and the fucking swing sets."

John squeezed his clown nose and made a HONK HONK sound with his blood-crusting mouth.

"Okay. You heard the man. Let's have some more fun."

* * * *

"Remember, they're sociopaths," Kristin said. "Lacking almost every benchmark of ordinary human social development."

Becker knuckled the headache from the side of his head opposite the phone. "But I got five of 'em together. Ten maybe. Could they get along? How long?"

"Sounds like a bad joke. Five psycho killers and a Rabbi walk into a bar..."

"Funny, Romano. How long?"

"I told you, spree killers aren't usually classic sociopaths. You're talking something new here."

"You have no idea."

"Most serial killers work alone. I don't know, Becker. Those reports you sent me ... these guys are textbook cases otherwise. They all have massive egos. God-sized narcissism and a grandiose sense of self. How long before an ego like that wants its own way?"

"Even for a teenager?" Becker looked over at Jeffrey sitting on the motel room's other bed. A book in his hands, a half-eaten box of pizza at the foot of the bed. The latest *Harry Potter* movie on HBO. "They need the pack."

"Typically. Are we officially talking teenagers here? Becker?"

"What? Yes. Maybe. If I were..." He reached over and took a slice of pizza. "I need to get in front of these guys."

"Is this the girl on TV? The one in Decatur. Killed her family and her roommate. Looking for boyfriends of some kind?"

Right, Becker thought. Decatur. But don't forget the family in Maltoon, the Lehmans. Or Emma Bradeholts in Sparksville. "Maybe," he said.

"Um, damn." She drew a quick breath. "Okay, good. The more info you give me..."

"Yeah, I know. So?"

"So if these are teenagers you're talking about now, this could get much worse. Most serial killers commit their first murder in their late twenties, finally acting out on one of the specific elaborate violent fantasies they concocted as a child. The same fantasies all of us have as children."

"Okay?"

"Where the rest of us grow out of such fantasies, only because we've developed socially and are afraid of how society will respond, these guys don't. They still don't give a damn what other people think. Their social development, naturally prone to limitations, will suffer even more thanks to their age. Freud often said a child would destroy the whole world if he had the power."

"Freud's a funny guy. So, why is this worse?"

"If these are teens, they're still in that first stage of sociopathic behavior. Withdrawing from reality, entering a fantasy world. But, this one is a prolonged fantasy world *shared* by others."

"So you don't think they're coming out."

"Would you?"

"I don't know."

"Adult psychopaths pick just one, maybe two, fantasies to develop, to plan, to perfect over the years. Get it right. Making a fantasy real takes preparation, precision, and time. Even a psychopath understands this part when he's twenty-eight. But a kid..."

"Yeah."

"These guys you're after. The very moment they think of a fantasy, boom, they can make it come true. Instant gratification for their childish godlike appetites."

"And getting away with it."

"The best part of any fantasy, isn't it?"

"I guess. So how does this help me?"

"From what I see in these reports, 'Ted' will probably go where the girls are. Teen nightclubs, I guess. Friday Night Lights. The Mall. Start there. 'Al' and 'Henry' are classic loners, but Henry seeks approval. Inability to take criticism, and he needs more recognition than most."

"Wants an audience."

"His dreams. His fantasy. Yeah, something like that. He'll go for the older women. Looks like his mother did a real number on him, poor kid."

"Yeah. Go on."

"Jeffrey' is most likely homosexual..."

Becker glanced at his own 'Jeffrey,' sitting just a few feet away. Two duplicates of the exact same person. One quietly reading a paperback and eating pizza, the other on a whirlwind killing spree. "Right, right. You get anything more on Tumblety?"

"More Jack the Ripper, huh? I'll have more for you by your next call."

"Thanks, Kris. Really."

"Hey."

"What?"

"You sound like hell."

"Thanks a lot, pal."

"Seriously."

"Seriously." Becker laughed weakly. "Remind me again why I didn't ever whisk you away."

"That's easy, Becker," she said. "Because you always play by the rules."

"Hey, Kris, I—"

"Get some sleep." The phone went dead.

"You guys used to date?" the boy asked.

Becker tossed his pizza, half-eaten, into the box. "Shut up, kid."

"Thought so."

Becker collapsed into his own bed, stared at the TV for a while.

"How come you—"

"She was already married," Becker stopped him and stood to retrieve his murder map. Had to get ahead of these guys. "What the hell you reading now, anyway?" he asked, laying out the map on the small motel table.

"That vampire book." The boy tilted the book down so Becker could see.

"I asked you not to buy that one." A shiver ran across Becker's back. "*Retribution*? Looks stupid."

"It's actually pretty good." Jeffrey thumbed his page. "The vampires are real, real nasty."

"Yeah," Becker said. "But how's their social development?"

* * * *

The man who finally came into the room didn't look like the guy from the pictures. The one with the dopey eyes and the crazy hair. This guy was balding with a grey mustache. Much older. He wore the same dark blue prison suits as the other guys. He smiled. He looked nice.

David knew the same man had once murdered six people with a .44 revolver. Blinded another. Paralyzed an eighteen-year-old girl. On and off for a year, just walked about the streets of New York and shot total strangers.

David knew this because it was all in the file. The one Dr. Jacobson had given him.

All about David Berkowitz, the “.44 Caliber Killer.”

The Son of Sam.

David was another son. Cell for cell and genome for genome. Just thirty years younger. Sam, whoever the hell that was, apparently had been quite fertile.

"I know you?" the man asked.

"Sorta."

"Sorta? You look real familiar. What's your name, kid?"

"David."

"No kidding." The man smiled. "Two peas in a pod, how about that?"

"Yup."

"So who are you, and to what do I owe this visit? They told me you had some kinda letter to get in or something."

"Um, Dr. Jacobson thought..."

"Ah, I see. Good old Richard Jacobson. Haven't heard from him in years. You his kid or something?"

"Sorta."

"Again with the sortas. And he 'sorta' set this up?"

"I just wanted to talk with you."

"Well, you got about fifteen minutes here, kid. What ya want to talk about?"

"Do you feel bad about killing all those people?"

"You're one of those beat around the bush kinda guys, huh?"

"Do you?"

The man crossed his hands. He smiled, but it wasn't a good smile this time. "Every damn day," he said. "You writing a school report or something?"

"I just ... trying to figure things out. I have..."

"You have what?"

"Strange thoughts. *Bad* thoughts."

"Yeah? Is that what this is about? I used to talk to the dog, you know. Thought he was possessed by a demon and he told me to kill people. 'Bad' like that?"

"Sometimes."

"Really? Shit. Sorry, kid." The man freed a pair of glasses from his shirt and fixed them to his nose. "You talk to your parents about this?"

"Mom's dead. Dad's ... well..."

"Friends?"

"Not really. They..." He thought of Dennis and Andrei sitting out in the car in the prison parking lot, waiting for him. Andrei, whom he'd picked up just weeks before, per Dr. Jacobson's orders. The one he'd freed. The one who'd strangled that hitchhiker the other night. "They're kinda bad."

"I hear you, man. I had the same, growing up. Adopted, shitty dad, immoral friends, the whole nine yards..."

"I know."

The man studied him for a moment before speaking again. "Yeah. You seem to know a lot. You know Jesus Christ?"

"Not really."

"No?" The older David leaned forward. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' You read the Bible?"

"No."

"Start now. You're not alone. God's servants are always facing the trials of this corrupt world. Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Paul.... They all endure tremendous suffering and temptation at the hands of the great enemy."

"The devil."

"Has lots of names."

"Cain."

The man smiled again. "And God said, What hast thou done, Cain? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.' Sure ... but it's not just murder, kid. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. And the price of sin is death."

"Death."

"But, David, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Always wish I'd learned this sooner."

"Do you really believe all that?"

"Pal, I was once a sinful man addicted to pornography, a devil worshipper who studied Satanism, a

murderer who wandered the streets at night hunting pretty girls to shoot at. The Son of Sam."

"And now?"

"A Son of Hope, I like to say. All things for a reason, right?"

"If you could go back—"

"Can't." The man shook his head. "No second chances. But I'd ... no, I'd surely find another way."

"You sure about that?"

The man studied him again. Tilted his head as if recognizing something for the first time, but unwilling to accept it. "David..."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing," the older man said quietly. "It was nice, ah, meeting you. Good luck." Then, he stood and left the room without saying another word.

* * * *

Becker waited, and was ready when the next call came.

A payphone just outside Columbia, Missouri that one of the targets had used twice before that same week. To call his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker. "Everything's okay, Mom. I'll be home in a couple weeks." Something to that effect, maybe.

Henry Whitaker. Aged fifteen.

Birth name: Henry/11.

Parent Gene: Henry Lee Lucas.

How the Major General had pulled this off, Becker didn't really care, but they'd been tapping the Whitaker's home and a dozen other families for weeks. Most of the clones' adoptive parents were employees of DSTI, so they'd probably agreed to the tapping. He'd been desperate for another lead. Now he had one.

So Becker and the clone of Jeffrey Dahmer sat in a car together for two days watching a payphone in the outskirts of nowhere. Then, one afternoon, a kid pulled up in an old Dodge and made a call. Positive ID made. Stolen car. Same make and model as the Christie's, recently found killed in Mount Sterling.

Kid stopped to buy some Burger King. Then headed outside of town. Becker followed, not even bothering to hang back. Kid didn't notice, didn't even seem to check his rearview mirror.

Not more than a half hour later, Becker pulled into the Paddy Creek Park. He'd never been there, but he knew it well enough. It was any small community park, a crime scene waiting to happen. He watched for a few minutes.

The boy had just vanished a minute before behind one of the brick buildings attached to a small amphitheater in the center of the park. Obviously closed for the winter, the rest of the place was empty. Becker had pulled over just beyond the top lot. Following the kid was a lot easier than he'd imagined. He looked just like his photo, for one. Hadn't thought to change his appearance in the slightest.

Becker got out of the car. "Stay here," he said. The sun had finally dipped behind the endless lines of

leaf-stripped trees that surrounded the park. "If I'm not back in an hour, you call this number. Tell 'em you're with Becker and where you are."

His passenger saluted, sliding down into the seat.

Becker watched the boy for a moment. The blond bangs and glasses. The uneven smile. He wondered what truly awaited the kid if he actually called that number.

"Back in an hour," he said.

It would be more than enough time to secure the perimeter of the park. No other cars. Still, he wondered how many of the boys he'd just found. Couldn't call for backup. No time. But it'd be difficult to take down a half a dozen teenagers.

Becker moved closer within the growing darkness.

His 9mm drawn. Silencer.

Closer still, he found his target again.

Thought of waiting until the kid headed back to the car. Too tough to get up to that stage. The boy had moved out toward the center of the platform, half lost in the fall shadows. Kneeling over something.

The kid wasn't alone.

A form, a woman, lay before him like some kind of Mayan sacrifice. She was not moving.

Becker aimed his gun, considered taking the shot immediately.

A last look. Area secured.

"Henry," he called out, keeping to the shadows.

The boy jumped to his feet. Fumbled awkwardly with his pants. A wide blade shimmered in his hands.

"Drop the knife," Becker ordered, and moved quickly up the steps to the side of the stage. One side of the knife was serrated. "Drop it now, Henry." A step closer.

"Who the fuck are you?"

The woman at his feet was nude. Laid over a blue tarp. Her body covered in dirt, filth, and old scratches. Even from twenty paces away, she smelled dead.

"Guy who can help get you home. Your mom's looking for you, Henry."

"My mom? What the—" The boy laughed. "You don't have any idea, do you, you stupid fuck."

"Why don't you tell me?"

Another step closer. Clearer shot. Leg, maybe. Shoulder.

"You know, I just called that bitch. Told her 'gain that I'm coming back some day soon. That I'm gonna cut her head off. You from DSTI?"

"No."

"She beats me, ya know. Makes me dress up as a girl sometimes for her friends. Forces me to watch her giving sex. Then the men ... just like him."

"Like who?"

"Lucas. Henry Lee. Just like him, just like me."

"I don't know about any of that, Henry. I just—"

"Stop calling me that. You got no right."

"Fine. Put down the knife."

"Fuck you, dick. Don't you get it? She was doing it on *purpose*. She wanted me to be like him. She did. Or they did. Someone did."

Becker could not argue. He'd seen the video tapes and read the reports. Traumatization in the formative years was textbook development for a serial killer, and it had been freely prescribed.

"Road trip's over, man," Becker said. "The other guys are already back home."

"Bullshit. Those guys are halfway to Cali by now."

"I swear to God, kid. They're not. This is over. Just put down the knife. You can end this thing now before it gets any worse."

"Any worse? I'll cut this bitch's head totally off and then—"

"No, you won't."

"I'll cut you." Henry took a menacing step toward him, his eyes wild. God only knew what was running through his veins. What hellish venom brewed intentionally in some lab.

"No," Becker said again. "You won't."

"Do you know who I am, asshole?"

"Whitaker. Your name's Whitaker."

"Like hell, you fucking liar. Don't you know I'm Henry Lee Lucas?"

"No."

"I kill people. I like to rape dead girls."

"That ain't you, man. That was some other guy. Put down the knife."

"Bet they name this highway for me. Route 50, right?"

"Sure, I'll bet you fifty bucks. Now—"

The boy lunged, knife drawn to strike. Another swipe, and Becker again eyed his target's shoulder, leg. Fuck. Too close.

Two shots.

The body flipped back, legs kicking out, and landed awkwardly on the concrete stage.

"God damn it." Becker moved to the girl.

A woman. The face battered and swollen but recognizable. She'd been dead for a day or two, he figured.

"It's Becker," he said into the cell.

"Got him?"

"Yeah. Henry secured, sir. Need someone to Paddy Creek Park. He's down. The nurse too. Stacey Kelso."

"Understood, Captain. Anything else?"

Becker watched as Jeffrey approached slowly from the distance. He waved him away but the boy still moved closer.

"Kid said something about California and the others. Could be nothing."

"That's good, Captain. Pursue accordingly."

"Any news on the East Coast group or Dr. Jacobson?"

"Just focus on the others for now," Durbin said.

"Oh," Becker managed. The Major General was hiding something. What?

"Anything else, Captain?"

"No, sir."

"Good work, kiddo."

"Yes, sir. Out." He put the phone away, didn't look behind him. "I thought I told you to stay in the car."

"I saw what happened." The boy stopped moving towards the stage.

"Yeah, well ... you shouldn't be seeing this. You really..."

"Is that..."

"Yeah," Becker said. "One of the nurses."

"Is she..."

"They both are. Why don't you get your ass back to the car."

"Why'd you shoot him?"

"He had a knife. I had to."

The boy stared at the two bodies again. Perfectly level with his vision on the raised stage.

"Look, kid, he didn't give me much choice," Becker said. "I did what I was trained to do."

Jeffrey looked up from the two bodies to Becker.

"So did he," the boy said.

* * * *

David stared toward the ocean from the balcony, any view blocked by the several enormous houses between. He couldn't even hear it, the waves. Instead, a couple of gulls cawed beside an opened dumpster behind the pizza place.

He could also hear the others in the next room. Dennis and Andrei. And the girl they'd picked up on the boardwalk a couple hours before. The empty apartment they'd found was half a dozen blocks from the beach. It had been easy enough to break in. Whole building was empty, most of the shops closed, a ghost town for the season.

The girl was crying again.

"Yo!" one of them called above her weeping. "Get in here."

Soon this will be over, David told himself.

Somehow, some way. He wanted out.

Didn't care anymore if he was really the genetic clone of Son of Sam, some balding jerk named Berkowitz. Didn't matter that his dad roughed him up a bit, called him stupid too much, that he'd been prescribed access to porn and violent movies by a bunch of evil doctors working for the military. None of that mattered.

He didn't want to hurt anyone. Not really. Or be around others who did. He just wanted to go home. Play some X-Box. Maybe make some microwave popcorn and watch a funny Will Ferrell movie with his dad.

David moved slowly back into the room.

The girl was hog-tied on her stomach over the wicker and glass table in the living room. Her clothing, which they'd cut, hung in strips dangling from the cords. Andrei was naked too. The TV was on. Some countdown on *VH1* about the fifty most "Outrageous Moments" in Rock & Roll history.

"I'm gonna get some pizza," David said.

"Later," Dennis looked up from the girl. He smiled. "Later."

"I'll be right back." Down the steps, down the street, forget the car, just keep walking. Up the whole Atlantic if he had to. Call his dad to pick him up. Would he? "Hungry."

"What about you?" Dennis laughed and smacked the girl on her bared ass. "You hungry, bitch?"

Andrei smiled, his hand working between his own legs.

The apartment door opened.

Andrei jumped. "Hey!"

"Who the fuck is that?" Dennis jerked up from the couch, lurching towards the hallway. David also turned with the noise.

The door shut again.

Something moved in the shadows, then. Stepped into the apartment. A blur of darkness. It moved so quickly.

Dennis gagged suddenly, blood spurting from his mouth. No, his neck. His hands grabbed up for his throat as the blood pumped out between his fingers and sprayed the white walls and the huge painting of a lighthouse.

Dennis's head tilted back, only half-attached to the neck beneath. Then he collapsed to the floor. Something sleek and black moved quickly away from him into the room.

A man, obviously, surely, David told himself, but it scurried across the ground like a huge spider.

Andrei suddenly lifted several inches off the floor.

His naked body jerked, the choked scream gurgling in the blood, which suddenly sputtered from his mouth as the wide tip of a blade exited through his stomach, then slowly lifted up to his chin. Andrei's eyes, wide and glazed, tracked its progress as his breath rasped and wheezed, then stopped.

The body was tossed to the ground.

David stood frozen as the dark thing then killed the girl. Drove one of its blades into her back so hard that the glass table shattered and she broke through to the carpet beneath. The shape struggled to pull the blade free from the floor.

Then it moved for David.

"What are you," David asked.

The blades whistled.

The boy spilled to the ground, choking slowly, the blood and air releasing in steady surges from his severed throat.

It sounded almost like the ocean.

* * * *

By the time the last of them had died, the killer had already moved back for the front door. Stopped over the girl for only an instant, considered, but moved ahead.

His brothers were still out there somewhere.

His fathers were waiting.

And there was still much work to be done.

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Route 666: Road Trip to World Horror 2007 by Alethea Kontis

Alethea Kontis's first publication was her essay in *Apex Digest* issue #3. She is now the author of *AlphaOops: The Day Z Went First* and the official Sherrilyn Kenyon *Dark-Hunter Companion*, as well as co-editor (with Steven Savile) of the SF all-star anthology *Elemental*. Find out more about Alethea's plans for world domination on her website: www.aletheakontis.com.

The free online dictionary defines “adventure” as *an undertaking of a hazardous or questionable nature*. Think about that the next time you wish someone else an adventure ... or wish one on yourself.

You may as well live in interesting times.

If an “adventure” is the best thing someone can say, be prepared for the worst. But the rest of the Rules of Life still apply: Keep an Open Mind, Be Flexible, and—above all—Be Brave.

At the very least, you'll have one hell of a story to tell when it's over.

When Jason Sizemore, esteemed founder and publisher of this very *Apex Digest*, asked me to accompany him to the Stokers in support of *Aegri Somnia*'s nomination, I thought it over.

When he told me we'd be driving to Toronto, I immediately said yes.

It would be an adventure.

A writer is always up for an adventure (and if you're not, shame on you! What kind of writer are you? Not a very good one, I'll warrant), and she will certainly summon up the energy for an adventure with the greatest potential to go spectacularly wrong.

Otherwise, what stories are there to tell?

I've got to hand it to Jason—our trip to Toronto was not the makings of an 80's movie starring Tom Hanks, Richard Pryor, or Chevy Chase. (Thank the gods.) But it did have its moments.

* * * *

There

I was already running on fumes by the time we got to Kentucky, the aftermath of MidSouth Con the weekend before. Do yourself a favor and try not to schedule two conventions two weekends in a row. (If you're like Steve, do yourself a favor and try not to schedule a dodgy 36-hour trans-Atlantic flight and two conventions in a nine-day window.)

But The Best Boss in the World had asked me, and since I love Jason dearly, I figured out a way to go. I worked out how to get the days off of work. I got my ticket to WHC (ouch!). I set aside some moolah for the hotel and gas. I even got the Boss a bonus *Aegri Somnia* author, since by way of timing Steve was along for the ride. Being at the Stokers was important to Jason, so it was important to me. Everything else was secondary.

At a convention, sleep is kind of secondary anyway.

You just don't usually start out that way.

We left for Kentucky on Wednesday night. Things were being thrown into the car right up to the moment we pulled out of the driveway: suitcase, CDs, iPod, laptop, fancy dress, fancy shoes, curlers, case of water, suitcase, powerbars, books ... including my limited hardcover *Aegri Somnia*, the mass signature

sheet of which our Stoker-nominated editor had somehow neglected to sign.

I always like a trip better once I'm on the road, because at that point there's no sense worrying about what you've forgotten. You really do—and should—leave all your cares behind. And if you happen to leave your razor with them, they do have drugstores in Toronto (hallelujah).

We made it to Jason's house that night in time to settle in, make up the pull-out couchbed, have dinner, and crash. In that order. The next morning, we tried to hit the road early. We unloaded the contents of the Volvo into Jason's SUV (we left the baby car seat in place, since we had more than enough room and Jason swore it would be a bear to take it out and put it back in again). Jason crammed in the rest of his maps and gear, while I entertained myself with getting the owner of the car seat, Jason's two-year-old daughter Lindsey, all riled up.

First, let me say that Lindsey is *reeeeeeally* not a morning person. I used to think my mother was the worst specimen to come across at daybreak, but Lindsey takes the cake. She was sitting in the living room when I came upon her, her high chair parked in front of Dora the Explorer. Her hair was half plastered to her face, and half straight up a foot in the air. She stared at the television like a zombie, unresponsive to either the calling of her name or the presence of food put before her. I half expected Jason to walk up with a sippy cup full of Bloody Mary and say, "Here, sweetie. Hair of the dog."

Of course, no child—morning person or not—can withstand the awesome power of Fairy Godmother Lee. Lindsey was no exception. Within half an hour, we were chasing each other around the kitchen and giggling like maniacs.

All in all, it was a lovely way to start the day. Mad game of tag, followed by Starbucks. I really must do that more often.

Here comes the uneventful bit, so I'll William Goldman it for you: What with one thing or another, nine hours passed.

Jason and I took turns driving in stints and we were at the border *well* before expected ... and I was at the wheel.

Which meant everything was going to go wrong.

The first thing that went wrong was that I was muscled into the Humongous Trucks Only lane. Luckily, they don't hold that against you, and they'll begrudgingly take your toll money anyway. (In that SUV, they probably just thought I was trying to compensate for something.) Next came the bridge—the bridge with VERY narrow lanes. Not that I was concerned about falling off the bridge at all, since I was surrounded on all sides by Very Fast-Moving Humongous Trucks. Hoorah.

And then we were at the border. I pulled right up to the window with no waiting, and handed the grim young man our passports.

Grim Young Man: Where are you from?

Lee: Murfreesboro, Tennessee. (Why can't I say that without a southern accent?)

GYM: What are you bringing?

Lee: Clothes ... and books.

GYM: Where are you going?

Lee: World Horror Convention in Toronto.

GYM: What kind of convention is it?

Lee: It's a literary convention.

GYM: Who are you bringing?

Who am I bringing? Really? Wasn't he holding their credentials? I looked at Steve and Jason, then looked back at the Grim Young Man skeptically. The first answer that sprang to mind was "My pimp and my John." Fortunately for us all, I have learned the ability to think before I speak. Sometimes.

Lee: Um ... my two friends.

GYM: Then what's all that stuff in the back?

Lee: *Clothes* and *books*. (Was he nuts?) We're going to be there for a few days.

GYM: Then why didn't you say that when I asked you what you were bringing?

Lee: I thought you asked me WHO I was bringing.

And he had, too. I know, because the editor in me wanted to correct him and say "whom" the first time he asked the question. But I thought before that outburst too (clever me). Honestly, he could think I was as stupid as he wanted as long as he let us pass.

Finally, he reluctantly handed me back the passports and waved me on. And I drove ahead ... kind of.

What is it with Canada? Do they think we know instinctively where to go? Like geese or something? There were NO markings on the road. Most of the cars seemed to be going in a left-erly direction, so I steered that way. I gently approached the exit, hoping that at some point there would be official designated markings that prevented cars from just bashing into each other willy nilly. Happily, there were. But I didn't have to deal with them for long.

I pulled into the nearest fast-food parking lot, nerves still jangling, and handed Jason the keys.

A few things to note about Canada: paying with American cash gets you a horrible exchange rate, your cell phone will work but it will be bloody expensive, and Europeans have a hell of a time getting cash out of the ATMs. Steve discovered this last one at a dingy little gas station boasting not much more than petrol, toilets, and Mars bars. He later commiserated over the fact with Michael Marshall Smith, who had apparently found himself in the same predicament.

Jason got us to the con's overflow hotel, and checked in. We unloaded the car in bits and pieces, went up the elevator, and opened the door to our rat cage.

Oh, the hotel was fine enough. The room was just the SIZE of a rat cage. Inside the room were two twin beds. I looked at Steve and Jason again in turn, and did the calculations. I mentally cursed myself for yet again having gone against instinct and not grabbed my Aero Bed on the way out the door. I kept cursing myself, loudly enough to drown out most of Steve's fascinating lecture on the definition of a standard European "double" room. I stopped just in time to hear his suggestion that we just tough it out and "get romantic." I could not, however, stop myself from laughing at the idea.

Jason asked after another room—which of course there were none—and as a last-ditch effort the hotel staff offered us a rollaway bed. For a small (*aka*: exorbitant) fee, of course.

I sighed, and offered to pay for the bed. Steve may have been a little dismayed and not a little surprised at my final judgment under pressure, but I've been to enough conventions. I've learned my lessons, and your lessons, and then some.

Sleep may indeed be secondary, but it's still *second*.

The rollaway bed wasn't so bad. I had brought my own pillow along for the car ride, so that was a bonus. The mattress on the rollaway was much softer than the beds in the room, and perhaps even a tiny bit bigger. In fact, it was just a tiny bit bigger than there was space in the room. We shoved one twin bed up against the wall and the other up against the air conditioning unit, and all three of us still had to lift and shove and squeeze to get the whole rollaway in enough to lay flat. But we finally did it. We stood back and admired our handiwork...

...and realized that our room now consisted of a small entranceway, a bathroom, and one slightly wonky Great Big Huge Bed.

It was every twelve-year-old's dream.

On the way to the convention hotel, we wondered casually which friends we might run into first.

We made it three feet—and I'm not kidding when I say THREE FEET, count 'em, thirty-six inches—when we were embraced by the very vivacious Robert J. Sawyer and whisked off to the bar.

The convention had officially begun.

* * * *

And Back Again

What with one thing or another, three days passed.

By now you've read the WHC Con reports and seen the pictures in Locus (Michael Laimo still owes me five bucks), so I won't bore you with more details. Suffice it to say that many friends were met—new and old—many books were enthusiastically defaced, many deals were witnessed, and many MANY alcoholic beverages were consumed. I didn't get any rest ... and Jason got food poisoning.

But like a certain the chart-topping Torontonian rock band reminds us, the point of the journey is not to arrive.

Steve was a champion. On Sunday he marched the poisoned Jason past the angry bus driver and poured us into the car. I curled up into a ball on the backseat, and Jason drove around the same block three times before finally finding his way out of the city. Steve turned the music up, played DJ, and chattered constantly to keep whoever was at the wheel alert and awake. Jason looked progressively worse and worse; Steve took the keys from him as soon as we stopped for lunch and handed them to me. No one argued.

No one bothered to check the gas gauge either.

The “almost empty” warning light never worked in the first Saturn I owned, but it was never an issue. I drove to school and drove to work and filled up like clockwork every week (back when \$10 got me change back from a full tank). Happily, the little orange icon in my Volvo is in proper working order. It's saved my carcass more than a few times on the way to and from work.

But the way to and from work in Murfreesboro, Tennessee is fifteen miles long, with three exits between origin and destination. Conversely, the way to the US from Toronto is a wasteland.

When I noticed the warning light in the SUV, I started praying.

It's pretty bad when I resort to praying—and I am not selective in my deity. I go through God, Buddha, Allah, Kali, Ganesha and any other Hindu god I can remember, Mother Mary, Mother Earth, The Unnamed Ones, The Machines of the Universe, and my own personal guardian angel, Murphy.

Not that praying to Murphy ever gets me anywhere—he's usually the one laughing his ass off at whatever predicament I've gotten myself into *this* time. But I digress.

Prayers led me to Exit 17. I followed the little blue sign with the tinier white arrow to the left and drove. And drove. And drove.

We finally found ourselves at a four-way stop, at the center of a conglomeration that had given up on the wish to be a town when it grew up. Staring back at us was a dusty one-pump service station with a giant LEASE sign in the window.

Of course I'm not kidding. This is all part of the adventure, you see. The heart pounding, the gut-wrenching fear ... this is all part of the adventure.

Since the female was driving, I sidled up to the first pedestrian I spotted and rolled down the window. When I asked after a gas station, I was informed there was none. When I conveyed my sheer desperation, he asked where we were headed. "Home," said Steve. "Kentucky," I said at the same time.

"The States," our Samaritan translated sagely. He gave us directions that led us far down one road, turning right, and going farther down another. Farther into the wasteland. My gut clenched.

Jason tried to be sympathetic and hopeful all at the same time. "What's the worst that could happen?" he asked. "If we run out of gas, we walk to the gas station and get some more. Don't worry. It's okay."

On one level, I knew what he said made perfect rational sense. But had he just been to the same convention I had?

Every horror fan on the planet recognizes those famous last words.

How long had that gas station been closed? Did the Department of Canadian Wasteland Transportation know about this ... or care? What if that little blue sign was just a lure for desperate travelers, the locals of the "town" forced by some ancient demonic geas to direct said travelers into the depths of said wasteland from whence they never returned...

...and there it was. I was so elated that I filled the car up while the men relieved themselves, and I sprang for the full tank. That dingy little gas station had rescued me from my terrible imagination. That dingy little gas station was my salvation, my oasis in the desert. That dingy little gas station ... was the same dingy little gas station we had stopped at on the way up.

You have to appreciate the irony.

According to Jason, there was graffiti in one stall proclaiming that "This Place Sucks."

Considering ourselves recent experts on the area, we had to agree.

Our last hurdle was the US border. Here was where we would find out if they would let Jason back into the country, and if they would scold Steve for having left it in the first place. We were given plenty of time to contemplate this and countless other scenarios because, unlike Canada, the wait in line for the US border was over an hour.

We watched car after car was searched. We watched as a woman in line who got out of her car was yelled at and approached by tetchy armed officials as if she might explode at any moment. We made up stories about how the *furriners* in the sedan ahead of us were the refugees responsible for defacing our dingy gas station. We postulated a slew of questions the border patrol could possibly ask us, and what our serious—and not-so-serious—answers would be. Offhand, I added, “What if they ask us about the empty baby seat?”

There was a pause; it was obviously something the men hadn't considered.

I put my hands on my cheeks and, suppressing a wave of giggles, screamed: “Oh my GAWD, we forgot the BABY!!!”

Our proud author was the talkative one at the border; I think our publisher was doing his best not to throw up. For some reason the guard's interest was in neither of them, but in ME. (I was as surprised as you.) Author and publisher he got; he wanted to know how I fit into the equation. That quip from before rose up in my throat and I swallowed it down, mechanically spouting a succinct description of my job at Ingram that apparently sufficed. He waved us through.

And that was it.

Well, that was it apart from the rest of the grueling hours home. I don't remember a whole lot more than the road, the thunderstorms, and black raspberry ice cream in the Ohio town I will forever remember as “Wikipedia” (thank you, Steve).

Okay, I DO remember more than that, but I won't bore you with the details. After all, if what happens at the convention stays at the convention, it follows that whatever happens in the car ... well, you get the point.

The things some people will do to get home and sleep in their own bed ... and I did that night (technically, the next morning), and it was wonderful. It wasn't a decadent foreign city surrounded by 300 of my closest friends, but it was home and it was sleep and it was wonderful.

It was a week later, when we were finally unpacking the last WHC box, that I realized I had traveled across North America—to Kentucky and Canada and back—and never gotten my *Aegri Somnia* signed.

Jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaasoooooooooooooooooon!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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Cover Artist Bio

Walter Simon was born 1971 in Allentown, PA and grew up in Toledo, OH and Hot Springs, AR. After earning a BFA in painting and drawing from the University of Montevallo he went on to receive his MFA in painting and drawing from the University of Georgia. He has worked as an art instructor at the University of South Alabama since 2001 and exhibits art at the Chesser gallery in Mobile.

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Monument by Nancy Fulda

Nancy Fulda is a mother, an author, and an Editorial Associate for *Baen's Universe*. Visit her website at www.nancyfulda.com for more information.

The ruins are larger than they look from the freeway. Massive, oppressive. Chunks of blasted metal lie scattered like the fragments of a long forgotten eggshell, half-buried in the ruddy gray mixture of dirt and ash at my feet. My untrained eye strains to classify each piece of otherworldly engineering, reassemble them in my mind like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Here rests a mass of heat-soldered wiring and gear shafts, there a fragment that might have been an engine, but it is all so deformed and time-dusted that I cannot be sure.

"You won't find it here, ma'am."

I jump at the voice. Looking around, I spot an old man lounging like a misplaced shadow against the massive fragments. A moment after that, I realize from the outline of his hat and the dusty markings on his shirt that this is the park ranger, nearly a relic himself in the gathering darkness.

"Beg pardon?" I ask.

"What you're lookin' for. You won't find it here." He pushes away from the wall and heads toward me. "Folks find lots of stuff here, but never what they came lookin' for. Five dollars, please."

I press my finger to the device in his hand and authorize the money transfer, vaguely confused. "I'm not looking for anything. Just spotted the ruins on my way home for Thanksgiving and decided to stretch my legs while the car went for gas."

The ranger waves me forward. I walk past the battered perimeter chain, onto the official monument grounds.

It is different, standing here, being here, than it is to read about it in history books or view it on a virtual tour. Sadder, somehow. Lonelier.

Dust stirs around my tennis shoes as I walk. I realize with sudden vertigo that I am tramping through *their* ashes, disturbing a crematorium, traversing a mass grave. I step carefully. I feel out of place here, in my cotton tee-shirt and faded traveling jeans. But looking at the voiceless totems around me, I can't think what I could have worn that would be appropriate. After all these years, we still don't know how many of them there were. We don't even know what they looked like.

Tourist panels blip as I near them, finding my pupils and offering up visual overlays of the monument's prior appearance, doling out history lessons from dust-clogged little speakers. One of them shows me footage of the original vessel tumbling in flames. A man's voice drones about moral quandaries and conflict of interest. I wave my hand irritably over the panel and it quiets.

The missiles made a kind of sense, I guess, from one perspective. World governments issued requests (in English, of course, and then later in German, French, Morse code and some mathematical construct based on prime numbers) that the ship remain in orbit. With no apparent response, with the vessel steadily dropping through the atmosphere—what options were there? Who knew what weapons of mass destruction might lie nestled in its hull? Who knew what kind of biocontamination might unintentionally leak from even the most benevolent visitors? Was it so dreadful, this small destruction that averted the chance of a greater one?

From another perspective, the missiles were an abomination. Politicians spoke of making amends, of

greeting the next envoy at a safe distance, armed with information gleaned from the wreckage. But they were wrong.

There was nothing to learn from the wreckage, nothing to steal. Just twisted hunks of technology that human engineers could make no sense of, spreads of ash where, presumably, organisms once walked. Three generations of scientists have built a perilously fragile framework of theories, painstakingly sculpted from crumpled hunks of metal, carbon fragments, and vivid imagination; a children's building-block tower of ideas, constantly knocked down and then rebuilt, never passing a certain stage of growth. Were they invaders, messengers, refugees? We don't know. In a hundred years, they've never come back. In a universe the size of ours, perhaps they never will.

Cinders and rubble slide beneath my feet as I traverse the crater. The wind sings and whispers against the metal spires overhead, but down here there is only ghostly calm. A chain rattles near the entrance. The park is closing.

"Found something, didn't you?" the ranger says as I head for the winding path up the crater's wall. I nod. I want to say more, but I haven't found words for it, so I stick my hands in my pockets and keep climbing.

I understand what he meant now, about no one finding what they came for. In the early days, physicists came here looking for the key to interstellar travel. Generals came looking for weapons, xenobiologists sought a new kind of life. And the architects, the ship's masters themselves? No one knows what they came for, but it's almost certain they didn't find it.

At the crater's rim lies an assortment of little metal effigies, tattered ribbon, and dried flowers; decaying remnants of tributes left by other visitors in earlier times. Hundreds of thousands of mourners came to this overlook in the first years after the crash. Now, though, only a single fresh bouquet rests on the reddish stone. I feel certain that the park ranger brought it.

It is dark. Distant, fragile stars hang over the crater. Across my shoulder and far away I see my car's running lights, pulled to the side of the road and waiting for me. Slowly, I unclasp the necklace I am wearing—the only thing of value with me—and lay it on the dusty pile of offerings. The wind brushes my hair.

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