

Enter the Realm

Sells
Publications

Second Anthology

Editor

Larry Sells

Copyright © 2004
Sells Publications

No part of this publication maybe reproduced in any form, by Photostat, microfilm, xerography, or any other means, which are now known, or to be invented, or incorporated into any information retrieval system electronic, or mechanical, without the written permission of the copyright owner.

Larry Sells
deathwalk@earthlink.net

Realm Table

Cover Art	Marge Simon
A Doll for Janie	5
Across the Way	11
At Night	35
Benediction	38
Blue Monday	52
Bus Driver	57
Confessions	73
Couch Potatoes	75
Coughing Fits	84
Desire	92
Sol-Zeta Five	110
Family	116
Forbidden Appetites	124
Foreign Matter	139
Father, Risen	142
The Grin	162
Ink Spot	170
Knights of the Round	184
Life's Loser	189
Night Crawls In	192
Night Fright	200
Nightmare	205
Of Death, Resurrections	212
Peeping Tom	218
Picture A World	226
Pods	237
Reflection	253
Shop-Mart	258
Soul Mates	267
The Desires of Angels	277
The Ghostly Woman	280
The Quicksilver Wall	289
The Return	299
The House Broods	307
The Job	311
Through the Heart	315
Trapped in the Mijnan	324
Trick or Trick	338
The Tunnel Back	343
Upon the Eve of Woman	366
Whitley and the King	389
Worthington Court	398
Pack of Death	407

A DOLL FOR JANIE

By Nancy Jackson

Again she was humming the strange yet familiar song, sending shivers up her spine. Opening the door to the tiny bedroom, Lynn watched the chair rock all on its own while her daughter Janie, sat on the bed braiding her dolls' hair. Quickly she closed the door, hoping to erase from her mind what she'd just witnessed. Janie giggled and mumbled something aloud. The hairs on Lynn's neck stood straight up when an odd shrill voice answered her back. She placed her hand on the doorknob just as the oven timer buzzed. The annoying alarm resounded throughout the quaint home and Lynn bounded down the stairs two at a time. So far what she had hoped to accomplish while staying at the cabin for a month, wasn't working. Lynn feared she'd never be able to reconnect with her daughter.

She placed the tray of frozen fish sticks and fries in the oven and once again set the timer. Had it not been for her sister Belle phoning last week, begging to come watch her beach house while she was away, she wouldn't have known how to go about reaching her

daughter. Good quality time together, away from the gloominess that had become their home, sounded like just the remedy. Ever since her husband died, she had been putting herself last and unfortunately Janie too. Lynn decided to make this an adventure while lessening her guilt-ridden conscience. Janie, understandably, hadn't been herself since her daddy died and blamed her mother for the accident. To her daughter, Lynn had sent him out in the storm on purpose to run an errand that could have waited until morning, putting his life in jeopardy. Had she been able to change the events that night, she would.

She missed seeing her daughter's smile and hearing her infectious laughter. Now all she did was play with a fancy doll she received last month in the mail. There hadn't been a return address or even a card but Lynn figured it was from her sister. While the doll was very pretty with Victorian clothes and bouncy dark curls, it gave Lynn the creeps. In many ways it looked like a petite version of her own daughter, complete with eyes that stared at her with hatred.

While dinner was cooking, she decided to have a talk with Janie.

The house was small but Belle wasn't big on wasting electricity, so there were few lights, making it difficult to see. There wasn't a light for the hallway and the staircase was narrow and rickety. It was still in good shape save for a deep crack running straight down the middle of the stairs.

Nearing Janie's room, her heart stopped as she listened to a conversation between her daughter and someone else. Lynn pressed her ear closer against the doorway hearing them hum the same eerie tune Janie had been repeating since they arrived. Lynn wished she could remember where she'd heard it. It was such a familiar tune, and she could hum along easily to the rhythm.

Then it came to her, an old rhyme about stepping on a crack and your mother's back would break or something silly like that. She laughed to herself for a moment in remembering how often she would walk home singing that, making the three-mile walk seem short.

The sound of the unfamiliar voice broke Lynn out of her childhood memory. She placed her

hand to the knob just as a crash from the other bedroom echoed throughout the house. It was uncomfortably dark. She tried the switch to her room but nothing happened. Frustrated she stormed into the bathroom and turned on the light, opening the door wide. It only gave off a dull glow, but was better than nothing. Grabbing a step stool from the linen closet, she placed it under the light fixture. Carefully she stepped up and unscrewed the little metal knobs encased around the square glass cover. She almost had it off when something pushed her legs from behind, sending Lynn flying and landing roughly on the floor. Her head smashed into the nearby nightstand and a warm sticky substance streaked down her face. The glass light cover had broken in her hands and her wrist was bleeding heavily. She twisted herself around to figure out what happened. Yellow eyes stared back from the doorway.

"Janie, is that you?" she called out.

"Yes mommy."

Lynn couldn't believe her daughter would do such a cruel

thing. Janie stepped closer into the light. In her arms she held the doll whose eyes glowed yellow. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked over and saw a pair of red eyes attached to a hideous looking beast. She struggled to get up but her leg and hip hurt immensely. Janie hummed the song again.

"Janie, I don't want to hear that anymore!" Lynn screamed.

"Don't worry mommy, after tonight you won't ever hear it again," she replied sweetly.

Shivers raced down her spine. She watched in horror as the red-eyed creature came at her, ravaging both feet with jagged fangs. Lynn kicked and screamed but it wouldn't release her. Pain shot through as razor-sharp teeth met bone, slicing her thigh all the way up her right side. The single light from the bathroom went out and she was encased in total darkness.

The creature picked her up as if she weighed nothing more than a feather and hurled her body out the door. She landed in front of the stairs, dazed and trembling just as the oven buzzer went off.

Her daughter stood behind her giggling. Lynn turned, squinting her eyes to see.

"Janie honey, please help momma," she begged. Her vision blurred as the pain racked throughout her tortured body.

Lynn wanted nothing more than to cry.

"Okay mommy, here, hold dolly and I will help you," she offered as she placed the doll in her mother's hands. Within seconds both Janie and the creature pushed her from behind and she tumbled head over feet down the narrow steps. Lynn rolled and slammed headfirst into the front door. A horrible crunch followed by extreme pain and instantly it hurt to move. Blood spilled from her head, wrist, and leg into crimson pools of blood. She lay there, paralyzed, her breathing shallow and labored. Looking up, she watched Janie deliberately walking along the crack of the stairs, singing softly to herself, "Step on a crack, break my mommy's back," over and over again. Yellow eyes were the last things she saw, as she drifted into unconsciousness.

Across the Way
By Octavio Ramos Jr.

Vincenzo Esposito stopped tapping out sentences on a keyboard, interlaced his fingers like a cat's cradle, and pushed his wrists outward. He had been working nonstop for close to eight hours and the numbness running through his muscles, particularly his forearms, meant that he should do more than merely stretch, but he was only halfway through his rewrite of the Patterson Company's funding proposal. Just yesterday morning, the client had bestowed upon him an outrageous deadline, and at first Vinnie had thought about declining the job. But freelance writing was more often famine than feast, and in this instance the feast proved too good to turn down.

Outside a double-paned window flashed several bolts of tenebrous lightning. Rain began to pound on the glass, its cadence like hundreds of fingers tapping incessantly to draw his attention from his flat-screen monitor. Pushing away his wheelchair from the workstation, Vinnie propelled himself toward the window.

He had moved into the Sixth Street apartments close to four years ago. The lucky bastards on the west side of the building had a nice view of the city's downtown district, which catered not only to tourists with its fancy restaurants and trendy clubs but also to locals with its drug pushers and cheap hookers. Unfortunately, Vinnie occupied one of the units on the east side. Its view consisted of nothing more than a dingy alley and another apartment complex across the way. His window paralleled that of the other building.

When he had initially moved in, an old lady had lived across the way. Most of the time she kept the curtains on her window closed, opening them only when watering the plants that sat on the outside ledge or during the dinner hour when she would entertain family or friends.

The poor dear had either moved out or passed away, for soon a dynamic young couple took over the place. He was tall and lean and she was a knockout with ashen hair, high cheekbones, and an hourglass figure. They preferred to keep the curtains open, providing Vinnie with many

opportunities to practice his blossoming voyeurism. Not only did the two enjoy making tainted love in front of the window, they soon invited other guests to engage in such lascivious romps. Vinnie rather enjoyed the spanking sessions but tuned out when the couple would dress in shimmering leather from head to toe and lick each other for what seemed like hours.

Something had happened to that couple also, however, for one year later they had moved on. Unfortunately, the place to this day remained unoccupied, the curtains drawn open to reveal an empty living room. It became a routine for Vinnie to check the apartment window at least once a day. Confined to his own apartment, he rarely ventured into the city, and when he did it was always under the watchful eye of one of his relatives and a stiff-lipped and temperamental home nurse. The window had become his most important entertainment, something he never dared admit to himself. But now that the place was vacant, he had nothing better to do than watch television, knock out freelance jobs, and continue to plod away at writing his first novel or come up with a new short story or poem to keep his name

active in the small-press and semi-pro magazines.

Not prepared to be disappointed yet again but deeply anxious nevertheless, Vinnie blinked his eyes and used the sleeve of his pajama top to clear away some of the mist on the window. His eyes ached to look across the way, but at the last moment they refused to focus on the window—his anxiety level was too high and he could not take another disappointment. So instead, he gazed at the dark alley below. The evening trash truck had come through, leaving in its wake several empty dumpsters and a plethora of discarded paper, shattered glass, and other garbage. A shadow emerged from behind one of the dumpsters and staggered through the alley. Most likely a drug addict, Vinnie surmised as he took a deep breath.

"Come on, *paisano*," he muttered to himself, his voice cracking, "have a looksie already. You can do it. I know you can."

Like a predator, his eyes locked on the window across the way. The curtains were closed and the room was dark. Quickly, he checked his watch: it was 5:15 in the morning. Someone was either moving in or had already done so. Things were

finally looking up.

Most of the day had been crap. It started moments after Vinnie had tried to move from the bed to the wheelchair. Rather than simply plop onto the cushy seat, he had managed to miss the seat entirely, his butt landing on the foot supports and his back scraping on the front of one of the handrails. After nursing his pain and engaging in a prolonged pity party, he had rolled over and crawled toward a nightstand, where he had reached for a telephone chord. Yanking on it with the last of his strength, he then had dialed Nurse Ratchet—her actual name was Rita Carson, but his secret nickname was much more descriptive of the woman's sour personality. As was her custom, she had entered the apartment within several minutes, but along with her had come the usual song and dance, as well as a healthy dose of bad attitude. She had chewed his ass, eased him onto the chair, and then chewed his ass again.

For the next ten hours, Vinnie had cranked out the Patterson proposal, only to find out later

that evening that the company president had elected not to submit. He would receive a check for services rendered, of course, but nothing would compensate him for the long hours he had put into the stressful effort.

Annoyed with the turn of events, Vinnie spent the evening eating greasy chips out of a bag while watching a couple of movies from his ever-expanding collection. The films' plots and their highly stylized images stirred his creative juices, something they always managed to do, and soon he found himself in front of the monitor typing out a new chapter in his horror-tinted opus. The words struggled to get out of him at first, but with persistence he settled into a hypnotic rhythm and from then on the words just flowed.

At a little after midnight, another storm paid a visit to the city, this time the raindrops slamming into the window. With a smile, Vinnie abandoned the computer and wheeled himself forward. The curtains across the way were open and the lights were still on.

Although no one wandered about

the room, he could see some sparkling new furniture. Hands shaking, he reached over to a four-drawer chest and brought out a pair of binoculars he had purchased while visiting a friend who lived several miles from the Grand Canyon. Putting the instrument to his eyes, Vinnie inspected the room across the way. A sectional couch decorated with multicolored stripes sat at the center of the room. On the south wall, he could see the outline of an entertainment center. Although it lacked a television set and its associated accouterments, the center did have one hell of a stereo system. Most of the components he recognized as Pioneer Elite or some other high-quality brand. The compact discs varied from extreme rock music and jazz to country and western and even a dose of classical.

Along the northern wall was a wet bar complete with stools and quite an assortment of booze, including some highbrow wines and spirits. Partially hidden next to the bar was what appeared to be a grand piano of some sort, an acoustic guitar sitting on its well-polished cabinet. Interestingly, there were no coffee-table books on the clear-

glass table in the middle of the room, although a few hardbacks and some sheet music were neatly stacked next to an ottoman.

As Vinnie turned to try and catch a glimpse of the dining area, the apartment's door opened and in walked a petite young woman. She tossed an umbrella onto a small shelf and immediately headed into the bedroom, which was out of view. Vinnie took the opportunity to wheel himself over to his bedroom, for the window there had partial access to the window across the way. Unfortunately, the curtains to the girl's window were tightly shut.

After a quick trip to the kitchen for a bowl of chili and a can of pop, Vinnie returned to the main window, where he drew the drapes closed and peered out of one of the corners. The girl had also returned. Strangely enough, she sat in front of the window, delicate hands resting on her lap. She had pulled back flaming tresses of red hair into a ponytail, thus exposing a pair of wide eyes, a beak-like nose, and slit lips. A long neck led to a small frame with squared shoulders, small breasts, and round hips. She wore a black

sweater and a pair of form-fitting slacks.

For the longest time, Vinnie studied every feature of the girl's face. Her forehead had few wrinkles, eyelashes were long and curled, and the pallor on her cheeks was closer to umber than to pink. He was about to examine her body when something compelled him to return to her eyes.

Set in slightly sunken sockets, her eyes were wide and round, the irises hazel and the pupils dilated. When she blinked, which was not as often as he had seen in other people's eyes, her lashes uncurled a little, only to return to their curled state when she was done? She seemed content to stare out the window, not once shifting her position or even her gaze. What was so interesting in the alley below that she felt compelled to stare so intently? Vinnie looked down and gave the alley a close inspection. Seeing nothing of interest, he returned to his voyeuristic study.

Even through her loose-fitting sweater, he knew that this girl had one hard body. Straight shoulders led to a pair of slender arms, the sleeves exposing only

part of her forearms. But what forearms, nice and tight, with the flesh mounted on rather than hanging from the bone. Then there were the slacks, which accented a pair of round but slender hips and thighs. Good enough to eat, he mused as he pulled away from the window and put away the binoculars.

Sated, Vinnie returned to the computer, where he found himself producing not one but two chapters of his book. He forgot about dinner and the late show, the images in his head coming so fast that he could not stop even to correct syntactic errors or typos. It had been a long time since he had entered what he called "the zone," a place where plot and characterization mattered more than technique and flare. Sweat covered his brow as his characters came to life, pushing away his ideas and moving in tangents he had never considered. It was dawn when he finally pulled away from the machine more out of exhaustion than satiation.

Later that afternoon, he woke up in great discomfort. Grabbing the bed rails, he pulled himself to a sitting position and gasped. His gut was unusually tight, and interestingly one of his thighs

quivered. He had experienced trivial movement such as this before, so he paid the cramp little heed. But then, he noticed something that could not be possible, given his dilapidated condition.

The shock was instantaneous as another spasm of pain rippled up his spine. He blubbered like a child whose favorite blankie had been wrenched away, the tears coming fast and furious, the release of emotion so great that he felt a little euphoric once he managed to retain some control.

Throwing off the sheets, he stared down and muttered a small prayer, something no atheist would dare do.

Maybe there was a god, he thought as he reached out and touched the erection between his thighs.

Dr. Di Nello strolled over to the window and opened the curtains. Several rays of lukewarm light penetrated the room. Sitting next to the computer, Vinnie shielded his eyes as he reached for a pair of sunglasses.

"You need to get more sun, Vincenzo," the old man said in a

low-pitched voice. "It is good for you."

"You mean good for a cripple."

"*Ascoltare*, Vincenzo. I want you to listen to me. I may not be out of medical school yesterday, but I still know a few things. Your mama, she says you are stubborn—*ostinato*, she tells me. So you listen here: You are not a cripple. Your spine, it will get better. It is all a matter of time. Now, if you were to continue more consistently with the physical therapy, then you would see more progress."

"There's been some progress. This morning, in fact."

The doctor nodded. "Want to tell the old man about it?"

"Not really." Vinnie adjusted his posture in the chair. "It's embarrassing."

"Embarrassing? I brought you into this world, son. I know every inch of you."

"Okay," Vinnie muttered trying to suppress a sheepish grin. "You know how sometimes in the morning, well, something kind of stirs? Gets hard. I mean stiff. Down

there."

The doctor chuckled. "When I was young, yes. Only a little does it stir on this old man."

"It happened to me this morning."

"That is very good. Take it as a sign. You see?"

"Maybe."

Di Nello shook his head. "I leave you to these pessimist's walls, Vincenzo. I am off to see your mama."

Vinnie wheeled toward the door. "Tell her I will come see her next week."

"I will. Be well."

Setting into place all four locks and a deadbolt, Vinnie bypassed the workstation and went straight for the window. He peered between the drapes and at once spotted the new tenant across the way. Her clothes had changed, but her posture and blank expression remained virtually the same.

There was a knock at the door.

"Damn!" He wheeled over to it and put an ear against the wooden paneling. "Yeah?"

"Got a delivery here."

"Leave it outside."

"Can't do it, sports shoes. I need a signature."

Vinnie unlocked and opened the door. "Yeah?"

"Bunch of stuff for you, dude. This stuff's heavy, so do you mind if I just wheel it in?"

Before Vinnie could answer, into the room a young man pushed a dolly filled with packages of every size and shape. With one foot, he scraped them off, placed the dolly outside, and handed Vinnie a clipboard with a computer-signature machine on it. Vinnie took the stylus and signed.

"Thanks, dude."

It took a while to rummage through the packages. Among the usual book orders, music orders, and specialty orders he found the package he was looking for. He ripped open the oblong box with a small pocketknife then used his

fingers to tear through the bubble-wrap and the paper stuffing. In his hands, he held a brass telescope. Wasting no time, he was back at the window.

He stared at her for the longest time, once again growing hard down there. As before, she was gazing at the alley below, so for a moment Vinnie turned his attention to the filthy passageway. There was nothing down there, just the usual dumpsters and trash. Not even the regular drunks or hookers were passing through. The place was empty.

Having finished a cursory inspection of the alley, he returned to the girl. This time, she was staring directly at him. Vinnie dropped the telescope and pushed the wheelchair away.

"Oh no," he muttered as his hands trembled.

"She saw me. I know she saw me."

Try as he might Vinnie could not suppress his curiosity. He picked up the telescope and returned to the window. Although the curtains across the way remained open, the girl had vanished.

Despite the afternoon's disquieting turn of events, Vinnie managed to get through the rest of the day with minimal anxiety. He occupied himself the remainder of the afternoon with opening the packages, sorting their contents, and cleaning up the mess. After a rushed snack, he worked on a small pamphlet for a local restaurant and then spent some time working on a new short story. As the sun went down he had dinner and watched one of the newly arrived DVDs, after which he returned to the computer to work on a new book chapter and outline yet another. It was midnight before the urge to spy across the way began to hound him anew.

At three in the morning, he pushed away from the workstation, grabbed the telescope, and wheeled over to the window. Taking a deep breath, he eased the telescope between the drapes and peered out.

There she sat, her clothes different but her posture the same. And yes, she was looking right at him.

Vinnie cursed under his breath. She had been waiting for him—he

was sure of it. All he needed was a sign.

The portent came instantly. She turned her head, her eyes staring right through him. As his whole body began to shake, she smiled.

A prisoner, that's what Vinnie had become. For two weeks had he lived in a madhouse of his own making. Try as he might, he had not successfully ignored his voyeuristic impulses, despite occupying most of his time with writing and watching movies. The telescope sitting beside the computer monitor served his own private little devil, a reminder of what he had enjoyed for so long. It was the inanimate personification of temptation, his Eve's apple or a beguiling asp.

During the first week he had broken down on Wednesday. He had looked across the way only to spot the girl sitting there, her eyes staring back at him.

"Hungry Eyes" he had named her that day. Thereafter in the bathtub he would hold extensive monologues about Hungry Eyes. He wondered if the girl ever slept,

ate, or for that matter moved away from the window to do any damn thing. Or perhaps she somehow knew when he liked to peep. Maybe he had a pattern that she had figured out and was now heavily involved with messing with his head.

The second week he had done much better, not succumbing to temptation until Saturday night. Hungry Eyes had been waiting, however, and he had no choice but to retreat.

"It's my privilege," he had whimpered. "Give it back to me."

Sitting at the computer, Vinnie tried to write but found that the words would not flow. For the longest time he stared at the monitor's "fish" screen saver, watching the denizens of the deep float to and fro in a wash of computer animation. Not once did the fish stare back at him.

"Bitch!"

Vinnie grasped the telescope, placed it on his lap, and wheeled over the window, where he opened the curtains. He sat there and stared at the girl across the way. She stared back at him.

"Stop looking at me. Do you hear

me? Stop looking at me!"

The telescope was forgotten. This was a fight to the finish. He would win. Damn her to hell, he would.

Lieutenant Torres used the blunt end of a pen to scratch his dry scalp. The night had started off poorly, with some poor schmooze jumping off a building to protest global warming. Hours later he had worked another suicide, this time an old lady who had stuck her head in an oven. And now this.

"Detective Torres?" A uniform moved through the crowd of investigators. "This is Dr. Di Nello."

"He the one that discovered the body?"

"No, sir. That was the deliveryman. Detective Simmons is interviewing him right now in the bedroom."

"So what's his story?"

The uniform turned to look at Di Nello. "Go ahead, tell the detective."

"I was Vincenzo's doctor. The family's doctor, to state things quite plainly. I take care of his mother and took care of his father until he passed some five years ago."

"I see." Torres reached for a pad in one of his cleanly pressed trench coat pockets and started scribbling. "Was he always in that wheelchair? I mean, was it a birth thing?"

"No, he was hit by a car two years ago. Spinal injury."

"Yeah, okay. Was he like depressed or something?"

"Could have been." A single tear rolled down the old man's sunken cheek. "Detective, was it suicide?"

"Can't say for sure, doc. I mean, he didn't blow his brains out or nothing. No physical signs anyway. Could have poisoned himself—the coroner boys will have those answers."

"How did you find him?"

"Just sitting in his chair looking out the window. I guess

he'd been there awhile. Had sores on his butt and legs. Bruises on his back from lack of circulation or something like that."

"What's across the way?"

Torres looked over. "A building just like this one. That's about it."

Four large bells clanged incessantly throughout the apartment as someone pressed the door's buzzer. Annie Tumas stood up and walked over to the door.

"Yes?"

"It's Lisa, silly girl. Open up."

"Come on in." Annie walked over to the chair by the window and used her hand to feel her way onto the seat. "What have you for me today?"

"Lots of stuff, silly girl. Your correspondence, for one thing. I took care of all the bills and updated the checkbook so you can evaluate it at your leisure. The personal letters I translated using that new Braille machine—this guy Robert has the hots for

you, but I'll let you read the juicy details for yourself. A few catalogs in your language here, too. Oh, and of course all the orders. Tony will be by with the music stuff for you to review later. I brought some of your new CDs and some new books from Guidepost. And best yet, that kennel in New Mexico should have a new dog for you next week. I've arranged a full two weeks in the mountains for you to get to know him."

"Oh good. I was going crazy here. I really could use the company."

"Hey, I'm here, too. I plan to move in next door in a month or so."

"Lisa, you don't have to!"

"I want to. I miss my baby sister."

Annie smiled. "I was really going crazy, you know."

"How so? The new music piece not coming together?"

"Briggs is a perfectionist and a lunatic. He asked for something subtle but symphonic, so I have

been struggling. I would sit here and listen over and over to the pieces I had written and none of them would come together as a whole. I just couldn't bridge them."

"I'm sorry, Annie."

"Hey, it's okay. I bridged them this morning."

"Cool!"

"I finally shook that creepy feeling."

"Creepy?"

"Every time I sat here I felt as if someone was watching me. I swear, Lisa. I could feel eyes all over me. They haunted me, those eyes. It was as if I could see them peering through my veil of darkness."

"Sister to sister, let me tell you something. You can't see, remember?"

Annie smiled wanly. "I know that, silly girl. But I could still feel eyes on me."

"Not anymore, though. Correct?"

"Not anymore. Thank God."

"Well said. Now, want to join me for lunch? At least we can get out of here. There's a really nice bistro down the road. We could walk down and maybe even do some shopping. I spotted a vintage clothing shop just this morning."

Annie placed a hand on the window and felt the sun's warmth. She stretched her feelings out as far as they could go and smiled. The eyes were gone.

"Lisa, you and your clothing fetish. Oh hell, why not?"

"That's my baby sister. Let me get your walking stick."

Across the way the curtains were closed. Someone new had moved in.

At night I laid her down to sleep
By Terrie Leigh Relf

Such a sweet child. Her
mouth open in sleep, a light
snoring. Wisps of hair cling to
her damp face. I bundle her in
blankets, kiss her forehead, turn
out the light.

In the morning, she is gone.
In her place, a pulsing cocoon.
It writhes on the bed. I close
the door, think that I'm still
dreaming, make coffee, have a
cigarette. The alarm goes off for
school. She doesn't wake up. I
go into her room expecting to see
her sitting up, rubbing sleep from
groggy eyes.

She's still not there. The
cocoon is, though.

It's larger than it was
earlier in the morning. Much,
much larger. I think, I must
still be sleeping. I taste the
bitter espresso, reheated from
last night's grounds, think, it
must be the coffee. It must be
the coffee, and yes, I'm still
asleep.

I have a shower. The scent
of gardenias wafts through the
steam. Towel dry. Rub oil into

my skin. It feels real. But I must still be dreaming because I put on my robe, go into my daughter's room and the cocoon is even larger.

I touch bulbous ridges. The cocoon recoils a bit. There's a faint hissing sound. I go into the kitchen, turn off the kettle, make another pot of coffee, fresh this time, sit down on the couch, wonder what to do. I spill coffee, feel pain. I must be awake now.

The cocoon has rolled off the bed. It writhes and wriggles. I close the door. Consider calling my mother, 911, but my fingers don't connect with the keys. I must be dreaming.

I don't go to work. How can I? I sit there all day, into the night, listen to the muffled sounds from my daughter's bedroom.

From time to time, I look in on the cocoon. It's stopped growing, the color has changed from oatmeal with brown sugar to a deep plum. I can't still be asleep, dreaming, can I?

But I must be as there's a giant cocoon in my daughter's

bedroom and whatever is in it is trying to wrench free.

I'm afraid, but definitely think I'm dreaming. It will be over soon, and my daughter and I will both wake up, go about our days.

But that doesn't happen.

I am awake and the creature opens the door to my daughter's room, braces itself on the door jamb, yawns, says, "I need a shower."

I hear water running. Moaning. I think that must be a good thing. Cessation of water flow.

The creature emerges from the bathroom, all smiles, says, "thank you for being my mother."

I know I must still be dreaming, because this is not my daughter, but some winged thing, fully grown.

It opens the door, flies away.

BENEDICTION TO THE MONGRELS
By Steven L. Shrewsbury

*"There is wishful thinking in Hell
as well as on Earth."*

C. S.

LEWIS

The Screw tape Letters
1942

Dr. Wingate Peaslee smiled at the crowd of clamoring photographers, camera operators and onlookers as he petted the head of the newborn baby. Lightly touching the wispy hair, the stout man said, "Take me away, gents. My work is now done. Behold what only my eyes have seen through the gifts of Ultrasonography."

The snaps of shutters, flashes of light and cacophony of questions couldn't block out the reality of cold steel on Dr. Peaslee's wrist. An officer in navy blue yanked Peaslee's smooth skinned hand away from the scalp of the infant. With a swift motion, Peaslee's hands were secured behind his back.

"Dr. Peaslee!" a youthful female reporter clad in a lime

green dress screamed, falling over the barricade of security officers. A few of the college security men bore her up as she shouted above the din,

"Did you clone this child to test the federal ban?"

While the police jostled the hefty man, Dr. Peaslee called out, "I'm confident that my attorney will have this straightened out presently. I committed no moral crime performing an Intracytoplasmic injection on the egg. Look for yourselves!" The mass of reporters faced the tall, dark haired man holding the infant. The police stopped pulling the doctor and Peaslee declared, "Adam Benedict is perfect. There is not a Telomeres sequence degraded at the end of any of his chromosomal stacks."

Suddenly, the horde of reporters surged and the security drowned in their mass. Police officers, flummoxed at their impotence and astonishment at the situation, hauled Dr. Peaslee down the pristine hallway. His feet dragging in the main infirmary wing of Miskatonic Technical Institute, Dr. Wingate Peaslee couldn't help but laugh.

"Removing you from that facility was a show for the press," Irving Goldblatt told Dr. Peaslee as they stood in the professor's large, but cramped office. Boxes of materials, papers, books, and mementos surrounded them, providing a closer atmosphere. "Those fools make me wretch. They are trying to remake the constitution and must think me meshugeh to let that happen. You should have stuck with stem cell research."

Straightening the sleeves of his rumpled tan suit, Dr. Peaslee proceeded to pour himself coffee from a pot concealed in a cave constructed from dusty books. With some humor in his tone, Peaslee said to his lawyer, "Irving, we knew it would come down to this. Those fundamentalists are as predictable as the sun rising, literal antigens to my system."

The lawyer, wearing an immaculate, expensive, shiny gray suit threw up his hands and replied, "But these maniacs paint you as useless in the press already. If they represent you as

a lunatic, we will get bupkis from the high court!"

Dr. Peaslee shrugged and walked away from his cluttered, paper-strewn desk. "If I'd have announced my research and tests here at the Miskatonic Technical Institute, the self righteous Presidential administration would've came down on me and interfered. My tests in Unique Morphology and DNA splices must carry on."

Peeking through the blinds, Irving commented. "Yet, that didn't stop his minions from watching your behind close, eh? In all of my sixty years, Wingate, I have never seen so many whoring bastards in one spot."

"Protestors filling the parking lot, are they?" Dr. Peaslee sighed, sipping the coffee, his manner for those outside one of pity more than distain. "They started sniffing when I mapped the human Genome. Gracious!"

"Yes, the same group who protest abortion clinics I've seen at public executions fighting for the lives of murderers." Irving's wrinkled face produced more lines as he looked out through the

narrow slot in the blinds. "Those are your enemies out there, professor, the ones who are upholding the pure laws of God! Mazel Tov!"

Peaslee, a man of the same height as his elderly lawyer, gazed out of the blinds, groaned and said, "Don't those fools realize this research is for their own good? I wouldn't be doing this for money! Do they realize how difficult it is to differentiated a cell, read Chromosomes and perform nuclear enucleation?"

Irving shrugged and spoke in a matter of fact way. "That never dawns on such fools that they are wrong until help is required in their own life. They knew you would be free once I caused mayhem with the police, and then they stage this dog, pony, and jackass show. No one has ever been arrested for violating the cloning ban of the President. This is virgin territory, but I am up for it. After my prostate cancer, I relish the chance at deflowering anything."

Slapping both of the lawyer's shoulders, Dr. Peaslee stepped away from the blinds and stepped over to his overstocked bookcases.

"You're a good egg, Irving."

"Heh," the lawyer said, facing the professor. "I'm more of an omelet lately. The work you do is good for all. You must understand, Wingate, taking on some shmegma who value life so much is a joy. It makes my blood flow better."

"Value to life? They worry for a soul? What poppycock!" Dr. Peaslee thundered and scanned his shelves. "We are all lab rats in this evolving soup of chance. Those mongrels outside simply aren't bright enough to realize when someone does them a favor. I work for the betterment of mankind and all they can do is chain my feet to the myths of the dark ages!"

Irving chuckled, "I know it took you 86 tries to get a mutt dog cloned."

"Getting the methylamine straight alone was a victory in that test." Dr. Peaslee ran his smooth fingers over the volumes on the shelves. Several were modern medical journals, but many were aged, leather-bound texts from antiquity. His fingered tapped on the rusty clasps on a few of these

leather volumes. "Yes? And so what are you asking?"

Irving was silent for a few moments before asking, "How many attempts were there before you produced Adam?"

The professor looked at Irving, winked and scrunched up his nose. "Oh, a man needs his secrets, doesn't he?"

"I wonder if the multitude outside is cognizant that Mrs. Benedict is in the asylum at Providence?"

"What would it matter? Mrs. Benedict is a raving lunatic and that is why they have madhouses. She made her contribution. Does she think her Trophectoderm is unique? It was at hand and it worked were others failed, that is all."

"She was quite a yenta, always out of control. I wonder what pushed her over the edge?" Irving marveled, his thin fingers pressed to his chest like a French conqueror.

Peaslee shrugged. "After a trip through my private lab, she snapped. Her incarceration was

hushed up, but in the best interests of the program. Adam's papa has his son back. Mr. Benedict possessed deep enough pockets to reach out and get him. Not every parent who lost their child in a car accident can say that."

The lawyer dropped his hands to his sides and smiled warmly. "If those filthy fanatics outside knew you mingled scientific texts with those ancient volumes of the occult on your shelf, they would be gathering wood and erecting a stake. No amount of my schmoozing would help!"

Dr. Peaslee roared with laughter, stabbing a finger at a volume on the shelf. "What? Just for how I arrange my books? Pee-shaw! A man has to have a hobby! If they thought the NECRONOMICON was real, they would've burnt Miskatonic Tech to the ground by now. Such dark tomes are the stuff of legends to these religious dolts, but if they really saw a copy, goodness! A holy war would ensue."

Irving raised an eyebrow. "They would surmise that you gained knowledge or inspiration from the dark book. If it comes

down to such claims in court, I can get you declared temporarily insane from reading the NECRONOMICON or NAMELESS CULTS here. Is that the German translation?"

Wingate nodded.

"Rare indeed! If I spin a tale that you read such things before you did your work, it will accomplish my goal. This way, to justify your research into cloning, you were maddened by the volume!"

Tears sprang to his eyes as the professor giggled so hard. "Damned lawyers! What would I do without you?"

Grinning amiably, Irving shrugged, and gestured up in the air with both hands. It was at that moment Dr. Peaslee looked back at the spine of the NECRONOMICON and saw a hole materialize. His heart skipping a beat, Peaslee thought indeed the supernatural leapt into his life, but this proved a red herring. A supple fingertip touched the hole on the spine and found the opening real. Turning to face Irving, Peaslee beheld the attorney fold at the knees. Still staring at

Peaslee, Irving bore a savage plume of torn flesh in the middle of his forehead. Peaslee's ears seemed to run in a slower gear as heard the tinkle of broken glass filtering into his senses. The gentle fount of spraying gray matter baptized Peaslee's desk as Irving's great, legal mind was freed of its housing.

Dr. Peaslee sank to the floor in terror, his legs quaking uncontrollably. He fumbled for his cellular phone as sounds of confusion and screams from outside reached him. Gaping at Irving propped back against the wall, he noted the lawyer still looked at him. Dr. Peaslee's bladder failed. He fought to retain his water, but after the initial outburst of brains, cleanliness didn't matter much anymore. With his fingers trembling so, Dr. Peaslee couldn't dial his phone. In moments, college security and the police were in his office. Struggling to breathe normal, Peaslee pointed at his fallen friend. While the officers assessed what happened, Peaslee covered up his soiled waist with a blotter-map of the world.

"Are you all right?" one of the officers asked the professor,

helping the chubby man to his feet.

Looking down at Irving and then out of the blinds, Dr. Peaslee saw the clean bullet hole in the glass. "No, sir, it will be a long time before I'm all right again!"

The officer's left and the professor relaxed on the edge of the desk. Looking at his friend's face, brains and blood painting the once articulate mouth of Irving Goldblatt, Dr. Peaslee's heart leapt. It wasn't out of revulsion, but by the riveting idea in his mind affecting his heart. Reaching into his desk, he withdrew a tiny Tupperware container. Usually, he brought in fish shaped crackers for his visiting grand children in this container. Quickly gobbling up the final three fishes, Peaslee knelt and scraped the lip of the Tupperware container under Irving's chin. Crudely, he swiped the tiny dish up over Irving's lips and nose in a motion not unlike tidying up a baby eating pudding. As the sound of footsteps in the hall rebounded in his ears, Dr. Peaslee snapped the container shut, sloshed the grimy, gray matter once, and stuffed it in his

jacket pocket.

"Doc?" a dark haired police officer with his gun drawn asked. "We got the bastard! Some radical was trying to—"

"Kill me and shot Irving, yes," Dr. Peaslee said softly, tears in his eyes over the loss of his friend. The two older men had known each other most of their lives and for an instant Peaslee felt his research might not be worth this.

The cop nodded, his words falling rapidly, "Yeah. We got him. Screwball tripped over the student rendering of Cthulhu made up for the spirit week float. Lucky for us all the tentacles weren't placed on the float yet, huh?"

Staring at his friend, the professor stated, "Lucky, indeed." He pointed to the stain on his tan pants. "Please allow me to go into my lab and change into fresh clothes. I'm not a courageous individual, my boys. Grant me some dignity."

The dark haired cop shrugged. "I have no problem with that. Let Mike here stand outside the door.

I want no accidents, ok?"

"No more accidents," Peaslee promised and looked up at Mike. This policeman was husky, black and appeared to mean business from his ruthless expression. "A fitting angel. Follow me."

The two men marched down the hallway, taking the stairs to the basement, and arrived at the door to Dr. Peaslee's research facility. The cop gave him a disappointed look as the professor unlocked the door and slipped in. Peaslee figured the cop wanted to follow, but shut him out anyway.

Once in his private lab, Peaslee locked the door and let out a great sigh. From a small locker he retrieved a fresh pair of tan pants and quickly changed. Fishing in his coat, he removed the plastic dish and said, "Irving, my friend, you will thank me someday. We shared so many good stories, fun times...and we shall again."

Dodging the tables full of beakers, computers and tiny machines, Dr. Peaslee started to hum an old tune. Switching on some lights, he went to the large door in the rear of the lab and undid

the multiple locks with a key only he possessed. Opening the thick door, he stepped into a cold, murky chamber that was illuminated only by dull florescent light.

With a spring in his step and a song on his lips Dr. Peaslee waltzed past rows and rows of large jars filled with heavy amber fluid. Peering into the brains of Irving Goldblatt, he felt the confidence that it would never take so many attempts to get his friend back. Dr. Peaslee, ever a man to learn from his errors, felt a slight pang of guilt to reclaim his friend and not just do this duty for the furthering of science. Nevertheless, he glanced at tall the jars around him as he walked to the end of the storage room. Peaslee looked into the last slot, the one he never filled, and was overjoyed at the number of his success. Inside containers were various twisted, freakish, slimy, anthropoid-like, rejects with one thing in common. They were all Adam Benedict.

Dr. Peaslee grinned, faced the tiny, nuclear accelerator in the corner and sang, "Six hundred and sixty five jars of Adam on the table..."

"Blue Monday"

By John Weagly

AlienSkin in January of 2004

Mitch moved in on a Monday. That was the day the blue sock showed up. That was why he thought of it as Blue Monday. The sock was sitting in the middle of his living room. Sitting in the middle of the floor, all by itself, waiting for something.

Mitch didn't own any blue socks.

"Left by the former tenant, no doubt," he said to himself. "I'll throw it out tomorrow."

He tossed the sock into a corner and unpacked.

Tuesday there was a black sock. It was in his medicine cabinet, right next to his toothbrush.

"Peculiar," Mitch thought. He tossed it into the corner.

Wednesday, while Mitch was eating breakfast, he found a sock in his box of Honey-Nut Cheerios. This sock was argyle.

Mitch started to pay attention.

Day by day, more arrived. Dress socks, sports socks, even a single stocking. Solitary socks, never pairs. Mitch thought the sock episodes were charming, if a little bizarre. He let them pile up. "I'll throw them out tomorrow," became his motto.

The socks, however, didn't think it was charming. They didn't think it was charming at all.

When the pile in the corner was two feet high, Mitch decided it was time to investigate the Single Sock phenomenon.

He read books about physics and alternate universes and the Space/Time Continuum. He watched that movie about Stephen Hawking. He studied *Fox in Sox*, the Dr. Seuss book, not the popular porno film from 1993. Finally, in the June 1977 issue of *Podiatrist Today*, in an article by noted podia-physicist Dr. Theodore Abraham Trotter, he found the clue he needed.

Mitch checked graphs and charts and maps and diagrams and

blueprints and an outline of the known universe. He looked at hemisphere and continent and the longitude and latitude. It was as clear as clear could be.

His new apartment was the place socks went when they got lost in the dryer.

Big deal, right? There's nothing frightening about socks. Socks aren't scary or dangerous or evil. Right?

Wrong.

These socks were separated from their mates. They were frightened. They were alone. They were angry. And the more that arrived, the more organized they became.

Of course, Mitch didn't know this, he couldn't know this, and he had no reason to suspect this. To Mitch they were just socks.

And then it was too late.

When socks develop an appetite, they generate an enzyme that has a numbing effect on everything it touches. Like Novocain, if Novocain was made by disgruntled footwear. In

addition to being frightened, angry and organized, these socks were hungry.

It was another Monday. Another Blue Monday, but for different reasons. Mitch woke up after spending the night with extravagant dreams.

In one, he walked on a beach, barefoot, scrunching sand between his toes. In another, a raven-haired woman with the face of an angel gave him an exotic foot massage. She rubbed his arch. She caressed his heel. She touched secret places that only she could find. In a third, a chimpanzee in a train conductor's uniform spread radioactive fungus onto the bottom of his right foot with a butter knife.

Mitch opened his eyes and glanced out his bedroom door. He saw the pile of socks sitting in the corner.

"I'll throw them out tomorrow."

He tossed the covers off and swung his legs out over the floor. As he went to stand and stretch, however, he toppled sideways to the ground. He crawled around

into a sitting position, with his legs sprawled in front of him and he saw what was wrong.

The socks had been busy in the night.

At the end of his right ankle, where Mitch's foot should have been, there was only a bloody stump.

Bus Driver

By Kevin Anderson

"Good morning," Dr. Alton said to the back of Patient 3571. Facing the barred window on the far end of the ten-by-ten gray painted room, 3571 responded without turning around.

"Bit past morning, Doctor. Looks about 2:30 give or take fifteen minutes."

"Ah. So it is." Alton pretended to look at his watch. "Seem to have lost track of time."

"It's an easy thing to lose. Especially when no one is really watching it."

"Shall we get started?"

"It's your hotel," the mental patient delivered through a twisted smile, which Alton could see, softly mirrored in the glass.

"Yes, uhm. State your name please," Alton began.

"Don't patronize me, Doctor."

"It's a routine question. Let's me know if you're still with us."

The resident at County General's 4th floor Mental Ward groaned. "My name is Ryan Samuel Caulfield."

"Age?"

"Forty-seven. Aquarius."

Alton chuckled. "Thank you. Place of birth?"

3571 spun around abruptly, and Alton registered the surprise in the mental patient's face. Obviously, he had assumed Alton had crept into his room, alone. "I was born in Terre Haute, Indiana. Who's the puppy?"

Standing next to Dr. Alton, who was the Ward's Chief Psychiatrist, was a pudgy man in a matching white medical coat, twenty years Alton's junior.

"Ah yes. You're aware this is a training institution. This is Dr. Hanson -- one of my interns. He'll be observing."

"Class is in session and I'm the frog you're dissecting."

"Promise to stitch ya' back up when we're done," Alton joked

while meeting the patient's stare. Alton was struck, as he was every time he walked into this room, at how plain and utterly forgettable the man's face was.

"Occupation?"

"Bus Driver," answered the patient.

"Now, Ryan, why don't we talk about why you're here?"

"Well, for one, because you've heard it a hundred times. And two, I don't like to talk about it."

"And why don't you like to talk about it, Ryan?"

"Because some nightmares can't be chased away by talk. Besides, you don't believe me anyway. If you did, I wouldn't be a guest here."

Dr. Alton turned to a clean piece of paper on his notepad and he glanced over at his student, to assure Hanson did the same. "Why don't we go through it one more time - for the benefit of Dr. Hanson?"

Patient 3571 moved away from

the window into the center of the small white room. Alton felt it was a dramatic gesture, like an actor finding his mark on stage. "Six years ago. That's when it happened. The Routing Manager at the City Transit Department called me into his office. I hadn't said more than five words to him in ten years. All of a sudden he wanted to see me."

"Trouble?" Alton inquired.

"That's what I thought. Jamason doesn't call drivers in to tell them they're doing a fabulous job. No, I thought it had to be bad."

"And was it?"

"No, it was worse - a promotion of sorts. There is this route on the south side. Runs through the rural areas then back up through lower downtown. They had gone through eight drivers in a year on the evening shift."

"What happened to them?"

"Not sure. Most quit. The last one, the one I replaced, just walked off the job and abandoned his bus."

"Abandoned?" Alton echoed.

"They found it at the route's midpoint outside a coffee shop. Keep in mind; I didn't know any of this when Jamason offered me the position. All I heard was pay raise."

"And did something happen while you were driving this route?"

The patient took a step forward. "Not right away. For the first two weeks, I thought I was the luckiest S.O.B. in the city. Hardly anyone rode that route on the night shift."

"What changed, Ryan?"

"They changed."

Alton could tell by the tone in his voice that that his patient was starting to visualize. "They who, Ryan?"

"The people on the bus. Some of them started to look different." The man paused, looking as if he was searching for words. "Like they shouldn't be there."

"On the bus?"

"On the bus. In the city. In this world."

Alton looked over at Hanson and saw a sour smirk of disbelief moved across the pudgy intern's face then quickly bury itself in the rolls of fat that framed it.

"I know what it sounds like," said 3571, "but these people just didn't seem real. Have you ever caught your reflection in something that's not meant to be a mirror - a piece of chrome or tinted glass? Your reflection looks a bit like you, but it's distorted in some way, reminding you that the image isn't real. Not real at all. That's what they looked like."

After a distinct silence, Alton looked up from his notes and peered at the patient threw wire-framed glasses. "Go on."

"Over the next few days I counted nine of them. They were there, but not there."

The patient took another step forward. "The first one got on late one night, 'bout ten. She got on, paid her fare, and walked by me. When she passed, I felt

cold, like when you first open the refrigerator and the chill rushes out. She sat toward the back and every once in a while I'd sneak a glance at her in the mirror. She was always staring right at me. And there was this look in her eyes."

"These people, you say there were nine of them?"

"Five men, three women, and a little girl. And they all had that look in their eye."

"Did they seem to know each other?"

"Not really. They would sit separately 'cept the little girl. She always sat with her mom, well; the one I assumed was her mom. And they were never on the bus all at once, 'cept the last time. They rode in groups of three or five mostly and always got off at the same stop."

"Where was that?"

"A coffee shop. Same coffee shop where my predecessor ditched his bus. It's not near a scheduled stop, so whenever we were about a hundred yards away, one of them would pull the cord. That's when I first noticed

something else about them."

"And what was that?"

The patient took another step toward the doctors. "A young woman got on at Carson Street. She was normal people, like you and me. She sat right down next to one of them."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You ever walked into an empty movie theater?"

"Sure."

"Well, say you did, and there was just one other person in the whole damn theater. Are you gonna take the seat right next to him? Hell no. I'm telling you, the bus was just about empty. She could have chosen from 70 vacant seats, but she took one right next to one of these freaks. These apparitions, as you call them."

"What do you think that means?"

"I'm getting to that. Next night there were three punk kids on the bus, sitting in the back. As we neared the coffee shop, one of the people that shouldn't be here, pulled the cord. There were

six of them on the bus and when I stopped at the coffee shop, they all got off. After I closed the door one of the punks yelled out, 'Why the hell did you stop?' I used the intercom to explain to them how the cord worked, that if you wanted to get off the bus you just pulled it. They started laughing and one yelled back, 'Nobody pulled the cord, Pops.' That's when I figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"That I was the only one that could see them. They're not supposed to be here, and for some reason I was the only one who knew they were there."

Alton decided it was a good time to ask something clinical, hoping to bring the patient back to this room and away from the images in his mind. "Were you taking any medication or drugs of any kind during this period?"

"No, but I started drinking a bit more than usual. I even started carrying a flask after the night one of them finally spoke to me."

"Were you intoxicated when the... apparition spoke?"

"No. I was soon after, though."

"What did you hear it say?"

"It was the little girl. She was the last to step off at the coffee shop, right behind her mom. When I reached over to close the door, I saw her standing there, framed by the bus' opening. She looked up at me from the sidewalk -- her eyes blazing with that look, and although I didn't see her lips move, I heard her clearly. She said, 'You're a bad man. A very bad man.' I slammed the door shut as quick as I knew how and sped away from the curb. I don't think I've ever been that unnerved."

"If the little girl and these people were upsetting you, why didn't you simply ask for a transfer or quit like the others?"

"Now, Doc, you know that I have two ex-wives and five kids to support. This route paid double the one I had before. These things hadn't threatened me in any way, and as long as I took an occasional nip from my flask to calm the nerves -- everything was going to be all right."

Dr. Alton flipped to a new sheet of paper and he heard Hanson do the same. "And was it?"

"No. You know it wasn't."

"Pretend I don't and tell me what happened."

Patient 3571 stepped within reaching distance. "The last night I drove, it was extremely slow. No more than ten real people got on all night. But during the last hour, they started to arrive."

"The people that only you could see?"

"Yes. Before long, there were six. Then seven. Then eight. And nine. They were all onboard and all staring at me with that look. One of pure and unending hatred." The patient started to shiver. He wrapped his arms around himself as if he were cold. "And I know what they hated."

"What was that?"

"Me. Isn't it obvious? They hated me." The patient's eyes became frenzied with anxiety. "I

can still see them as they all stood up on the bus – one by one. They started to move toward me. I can see them in the mirror. It's a little frosted up, but I can still see them. I can feel their icy breath on the back of my neck. I've got to turn around! I've got to defend myself!" Patient 3571 were agitated, panic rising in his face like boiling blood.

"Ryan! You're not in a bus right now. You're safe. You're in the hospital," Alton assured and watched as the quake in the patient's hands calmed to mild tremors. 3571 swallowed hard and continued. "I let go of the steering wheel."

"You let go?" Alton raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I did," the patient started to sob, "God help me, and I did."

Hanson held his notepad out where Alton could see it. Alton read the word that Hanson's ballpoint was pointing to. SEDATIVE? Alton shook his head. "There was a loud crash when the bus jumped the curb," the patient started again, "and an even louder one when it smashed through the coffee shop. Tables, chairs, and

people were crushed like twigs under the wheels. I woke up on the floor of the bus in a pile of shattered glass."

The patient brushed his hands on his T-shirt as if he were wiping away bits of broken windshield. "I got on my feet amid the nightmarish sounds of people in anguish. I stumbled off the empty bus and saw dead and dying everywhere. So much blood. I knelt down by a thin woman who was crumpled on the floor. I rolled the broken corpse over and looked at her face. And, oh God!"

It looked as if the patient would slump to the floor, but as Alton instinctively reached for him, 3571 lurched forward and grabbed his jacket collar.

"It was her! The little girl's mother from the bus! They were all dead. All nine of them splattered about in the shop. I knew they shouldn't have been on the bus. They weren't supposed to be there. If they weren't on the bus I wouldn't have lost control. It's not my fault." The patient's voice faded to a whisper. "It's not my fault."

Although the doctor's were

directly in front of him, Alton knew that 3571 could only see the carnage in his mind.

The patient took a few steps back. "I don't want to talk any more."

"That's quite all right, Ryan," Alton said as the patient turned around and walked back to the window.

Alton gestured to his intern to leave and they both stepped toward the door. "I'll see you in a few days," he said to Patient 3571 over his shoulder. "If you need anything just give, Nancy, a buzz." Alton stepped out into the hall where Hanson was waiting and closed the door behind him.

"So, what's your diagnosis?" Alton said to the pudgy younger man, as a nurse handed the Chief Psychiatrist a duty roster.

Hanson did not hesitate. "Mr. Caulfield is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, brought on by the coffee shop accident."

The nurse rolled her eyes at the young man as Alton handed the clipboard back to her.

"Thank you, Nancy." Alton dismissed her. "Please continue, Dr. Hanson."

"His intense feelings of guilt have manifested delusions that would allow him to believe that the incident was not his fault. He has orchestrated events in his mind making the victims responsible for their own demise. Something that he knows is not true."

Alton smiled and removed his glasses. "That's a very astute diagnosis based on this one session, Doctor. But I'm afraid Patient 3571 is a bit more puzzling than that."

"You mean Mr. Caulfield?"

"No. I mean Patient 3571. In his six years at this institution I have yet to establish even his real name -- today he is Ryan Caulfield -- during last week's session he was..." Alton flipped his notes back, "Alan Emerson, a forklift operator from Rhode Island. Every time I walk into that room, he tells me a new nightmare using a fresh identity. I don't know if he has ever killed anyone, been married, what he did for a living,

or even if he has ever driven a bus. Admitted as a nameless vagrant - no paper work has ever been found on him. No birth or school records. Nothing. It's like he shouldn't be here."

Confessions of an Insomniac
By Terrie Leigh Relf

It's 3 a.m. and Maritza still can't sleep. It could be that double mocha she had around 11p.m., topped with whipped cream, caramel and chocolate drizzles.

It could also be her neighbor spewing gravel as he revs down the alley.

It could be, but it's not.

Maritza can't sleep because there's an incubus in her bedroom. She doesn't know it yet. Well, she's aware there's been something more than a bit odd going on lately. How so? Well, the other night she snuggled against him, startled awake, held her noisy breath until she was certain she heard the sound of someone else breathing in the room.

It was faint, but there nonetheless. Sleeping soundly. Yes he was. Exhausted. He hadn't touched her, just came in through the side wall, passed through the covers, fell asleep.

He hadn't touched her,
though. Not his type. All he
needed—all he wanted—from her was
some place to sleep off the
nocturnal sojourns in other
women's beds.
The story of her life, she
sniffed, *not even an incubus wants
me.*

It was funny, really. Not
funny ha-ha, but funny in a
pathetic way. Yes, Maritza was
awake because the incubus had
finally found her new apartment.
He liked sleeping with her. She
was cozy. Her butt was a bit on
the cold side, but if he wrapped
the covers just so, they both
stayed warm.

Couch Potatoes
By Guy Belleranti

The Eternal Night in March of 2003

Beatrice Killjoy's screams split the early afternoon's stillness and Maurice Chestnut closed his horror novel with a snap.

"Help! Someone! Anyone! Beatrice cried.

Now what? Maurice thought. Another couch potato/television emergency? Beatrice and hubby Cliff were always fighting over who got first dibs on their big screen TV, and it was getting tiring.

Maurice laid his book aside, and heaved himself from the comfort of his recliner.

"Help!" Beatrice screamed again.

"All right. All . . . right." Maurice stuffed his feet into his tattered brown loafers, slid open the back screen door, and plodded across his weedy lawn to the matching box-like house

next door. For two years, he'd had the Killjoys as neighbors. Two long years.

He reached an open back widow, heard Beatrice sobbing, and sighed. "Okay, Beatrice," he called. "What's the problem this time?"

"Maurice? Is that you, Maurice?"

"Yeah." Unfortunately. Maurice tried peeking in, but the dark sunscreen blocked out any view. "I heard you calling for help, Beatrice, so I came and. . . Well, I'm right outside the window."

"Oh, it's awful. Just awful."

Her TV voice sure enough. Damn, but why didn't they just get a second big screener so they could both watch what they wanted?

"Cliff," Maurice said through the screen, "are you refusing to share again?"

No answer.

"Cliff?"

"He can't talk," Beatrice wailed. "And soon I might not be able to either."

Really? Maurice's eyes lit up. That would be a cause for celebration! In fact—

He heard Beatrice heave a big sob, and chastised himself for thinking such selfish thoughts. "Uh, Beatrice, would you like me to, uh, come in? To see if I can help?"

"Come in? I. . . . Oh, I don't know. I hate for you to see us this way. I. . . . Oh dear, I guess I don't have any choice. Yes, come in. The front door's open. And hurry. Before. . .before it's too late."

Too late? Just what had happened over here anyway? Maurice shivered slightly as he closed his hand over the front door knob. Maybe Beatrice had gotten violent. Maybe Cliff couldn't talk because she'd done something to him. Maybe she was sitting in there right now with some kind of weapon. . .a gun or knife or something--

A shout from behind made him whirl around. Two other neighbors -- tall, rangy Bert Higley and his diminutive wife, Alice -- bore down on him.

"What's up, Maurice?" asked Bert. "Alice heard someone yelling."

"Yeah. Beatrice. She and Cliff. . .fighting over the TV again. I, uh I was just going inside to see if I could help smooth things out."

"Perhaps I should accompany," Alice said. "Having an extra man but no extra woman on the scene isn't fair to Beatrice."

Maurice eyed her carrot orange hair -- quite a change from the previous week's black and maroon two-tone -- and nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's cool. And you too, Bert. Just in case. . .uh, in case, reinforcements are needed."

"Reinforcements?" Alice stared. "What do you mean?"

"What do you think has happened?"

"I don't know if anything's

happened, Alice. Just that Beatrice sounded, awfully upset. Bert, stay right behind me. Alice, you stay behind Bert." He yanked open the door.

"It doesn't sound like you're alone, Maurice," came Beatrice's voice from the TV room.

"Uh, no, Beatrice. Bert and Alice are with me."

"Oh. Oh dear. Oh. . . ."

"Would - would you rather we wait outside?" Bert asked, his voice squeaking.

Beatrice didn't reply.

Bert grabbed Maurice's shirt sleeve. "Maybe Alice and I ought to wait outside. Maybe--"

"Beatrice," Alice called.

"It's me. Alice. Alice Higley." No answer. No sound at all except the television.

"Beatrice?"

Still just the television.

Maurice, Bert and Alice glanced at one another.

"I don't like it," Bert said. "It's not like either of them not to talk."

"Beatrice told me Cliff couldn't talk," Maurice said.

"Couldn't talk?" Bert pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his brow. "Then something's really wrong."

"Meaning we better get into that room," Maurice said. He took several quick steps, saw the flickering 52" TV screen, and then saw Beatrice and Cliff.

"Sweet Jesus!"

Somewhere behind him, Alice gasped.

"My God," said Bert.

They realized now why neither was talking. Cliff was in the worst condition of the two, rooted to the davenport like a true couch potato. A thick brown skin had enveloped him, merging his appendages and lower and upper body together into an oval. The only way they knew it was Cliff was by the shoes sticking out the bottom. White and black tennis shoes, the same ones he always wore.

Beatrice wasn't quite as far gone, but she was changing rapidly. Everything below her neck was a big ellipse, and her still swelling neck and face were now three quarters covered by the same potato skin.

"Wow," said a new voice. Darren Daley, another neighbor had joined them, and the rest of the neighborhood seemed to be right behind him.

"That spud bud her hub?" asked one.

"Yep," Darren said. "Always told Cliff and Beatrice they'd take root if they kept watching so much TV."

Alice stomped her feet. "Don't just stand there, talking. . .looking. Do something."

Maurice shrugged. "I think we'd all like to, Alice, but I don't know if there's much we can do. At least not, yet." He grinned, murmured something to Darren and Bert, both of whom also then grinned before turning to murmur to people behind them.

"What's going on?" Alice

demanded. "What's everyone
whispering?"

"Nothing, dear," Bert said.
"Just a little idea of Maurice's."

"So do we have a vote?"
Maurice asked at last, eyes
bright.

A little more murmuring, then
a nodding of heads.

"Looks like it's unanimous,
Maurice," Darren said.

"But just to be sure. . . ."
He raised his voice. "All those
in favor say aye."

"Aye!" The room shook.

Opposed.

Quiet.

"What?" Alice asked. "Bert,
what's everyone voting on?"

"Tonight's block party."

"Party? What--"

"I'll bring the salt and
pepper," someone called.

"We'll take care of the

tinfoil," said another.

"Sour cream over here."

"Mayo here."

"What?" Alice stared around.

"What?"

"Dinner, dear," Bert said.

"Baked potato, french fries,
potato salad. . . . Between
Beatrice and Cliff. . .
there should be enough for all,
don't you think?."

Coughing Fits
By Eric S. Brown

Jacob listened to the claws raking against the outer side of his apartment's wooden door. The slow taunting of a beast which knows its prey has no hope. Jacob glanced at his wrist watch. He still had a terrible flu and wanted this over as soon as possible so he could go back to his *real* pad and crash. He got to his feet and drew two old fashioned .36 revolvers from the holsters under his arms. They were by no means the antiques they appeared to be. Each had been modified and had the firepower of a Magnum.

The apartment door exploded inward in a shower of splinters as the "wolf" came bounding inside. It stood over seven feet tall and thick layers of muscle rippled under its fur as it moved. Jacob turned calmly to meet it and smiled as he fired both of his guns point blank into it. The rounds tore into its chest and knocked it from its feet. It hit the floor wailing like a wounded dog.

"What took you so long?"

Jacob muttered his thumbs flipping back the twin .36 revolvers' hammers once more.

The wolf thing struggled to crawl away. "I've got to do it," Jacob whispered to the wounded creature. "Besides, tardiness really pisses me off. You should have found me hours ago if you're half the killer I was told you are."

Jacob lowered the barrel of one of the revolvers to the creature's head and pulled the trigger. Red pulp and brain matter splattered across the floor of the apartment. Jacob sighed and tucked his guns away. He pulled a small headset from the pocket of his coat and slipped it on.

"Christy, send up the clean up crew," he ordered. Then he bent over coughing violently almost collapsing to his knees. When the fit passed, he added over the com. link, "And gets me some more damn cough meds. I feel like shit up here."

Minutes later, a trio of black vans made their way across the Brooklyn Bridge. Jacob sat in the back of the lead van across

from Christy looking pale and tired. He gulped from a freshly opened bottle of cough syrup like it was a cold beer. He looked over at Christy. Her long blonde hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. Her laptop was open in front of her on her knees. Jacob burst into coughing again.

"You really should get Doc to take a look at you," she suggested with pity in her voice.

"Jeez," Jacob cursed, "I got the job done didn't I? A lot of people still work when they're sick."

"A lot of people don't even believe in things that go bump in the night, Jacob, you kill them. It's not a job you should do at anything less than top form unless you want to end up dead. Look, we don't have anything else to deal with tonight. How about you go home and get some rest?"

Jacob grinned at her. "You read my mind. Sure, go ahead and pay off Doc and the crew and send'em back to base."

"Ok, but what about us then?"

"We're going to stay right

here, check into a local hotel,
get some rest, and wait."

"But I thought you wanted to
go home?"

"I do, but the job's not
over," Jacob informed her.

"The wolf's dead, Jay, how
much more over can it get?"
Christy asked.

"It's not alone here,
Christy. It can't be the one we
were sent to kill. It went down
too easy."

"What?!?" Christy blurted
out in shock. "My God, then why
are we sending the team home? We
can't face them alone."

"Look, truth is, I am dying.
This isn't some simple cold or
flu. It's cancer, alright? I
don't want to die in bed and the
wolves have to be dealt with
tonight before they decide to run
or go underground. I'm not asking
to you stay. I just figured there
was no way in Hell you would leave
no matter what I did or said."

Christy smiled.

The other two vans of Jacob's

team turned and headed for the airport as Jacob's van drove onward into the seedier part of the city. He had taken the wheel himself and dismissed the agent who had been driving. He and Christy found a sinkhole of a motel and got a room. He tipped the owner over five grand figuring the man would need it after tonight to help out with the repairs in the aftermath of what Jacob had in mind.

Christy followed Jacob up the stairs to the third floor room they had acquired and lingered outside its door. She was never great with goodbyes but she knew Jacob may have let her stay in the city but he would never let her face what was actually coming for him.

"So this it then?" she asked.

"I hope so," Jacob answered watching silent tears well up in her eyes. "I've signed all the papers I had you draw up on the way here. All my accounts should be in your name by tomorrow morning. Just make sure you and Doc don't screw up my business ok?"

Christy tried to smile but found that she couldn't. She

turned and walked down the stairs without looking back. "I'll miss you," he heard her say under her breath. Jacob watched her go and then opened the door and went inside.

The room was much cleaner than he had hoped. A roach skittered across the floor beneath his feet and he laughed until another coughing fit hit him so hard he was forced to sit down on the edge of the room's single bed. His throat felt as if he had swallowed a handful of razor blades, his lungs heavy inside his chest. He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. They would find him soon enough.

Around 3 AM, someone or something knocked on his door. He awoke with a start, his eyes watering but he managed not to cough. He knew if he started he may not be able to stop this time. He picked up a bottle of cough medicine he'd brought with him from the nightstand and took a slug of it.

"Jacob Morris?" a thick, cold voice called from the hallway. "Jacob, are in there?"

Jacob didn't answer. He

jerked his revolvers into his hands and fired through the door. The thing outside screamed as the silver bullets burst through the thin door and into its belly. In a blur of movement, almost too fast for the human eye, a "wolf" leapt through the room's window and landed on its feet in the center of the room as three others ripped the door from its hinges and poured inside.

Jacob spun in a half circle, firing as he moved. His guns thundered four times, wounding three of the creatures but the largest side stepped the round he'd meant for it with ease. The movement taxed Jacob's tired body beyond its limits and he began to cough, hacking up mouthfuls of blood.

The largest of the creatures moved towards Jacob as the others thrashed and howled where they lay bleeding to death on the floor as the silver in their bloodstreams poisoned them. It grabbed Jacob by his neck and lifted him effortlessly from into the air. He could feel its fingers digging into the flesh of his neck and warm liquid dribbling down the sides of his throat. The wolf-thing looked Jacob in the eyes and

he saw that it understood. It wanted vengeance on the one who had killed its pack mate and Jacob wanted death with dignity just as it would.

In one fluid motion, it tore Jacob's head free from his body and tossed it across the room and whirled, leaping into the night out the third floor window to the street below. It disappeared into the shadows long before the squealing police sirens could be heard in the distance.

DESIRE
By Kevin Anderson

It was the hardest hit Wilson had witnessed in seventeen years of coaching football.

"Oh, Jesus!" Coach Wilson yelled as the tangle of bodies collided with the ground. The receiver had run a simple down and out, but the quarterback had thrown the ball high and Jeffrey had to expose his midsection in order to grab the ball.

He was hit from two sides almost simultaneously. His helmet jerked one way while his body was propelled in another.

"Please let him be alive," Wilson said softly, running onto the practice field. Arriving at the pile, the coach pulled the linebacker that put the second hit on Jeffrey to his feet.

"Damn it, Carson! This is practice."

"I'm sorry, coach," Carson pleaded. "I didn't see the other hit coming."

Everyone gathered around, holding their breath as the pre-

safety rolled off Jeffrey. Maybe it was the coach's imagination but it seemed the tackle had left Jeffrey's motionless helmet twisted around a bit further than was possible. Holding his breath, Wilson swallowed hard. He was already visualizing the kid in his coffin, or at the very least, a wheelchair tethered to a macabre array of breathing machines.

"Jeffrey! Can you hear me, son?"

Stirring slowly, Jeffrey blinked his eyes, and Wilson took his first breath in almost a minute. Jeffrey swiveled his head to a more natural looking position and said, "What are all you numbnuts looking at?"

A roar of laughter and cheers rolled through the small crowd. Carson held out a hand and yanked Jeffrey to his feet. The frail boy -- not more than one hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet -- was dwarfed by the titans of mass and muscle that surrounded him.

"Hell, Jeff, thought you gave up the ghost on that one," Carson said.

Jeffrey grinned and stared up at the boy that towered ten inches over him. "Maybe I will, when you stop tackling like a girl!"

A new round of cheers erupted. Carson and Jeffrey slammed into each other's facemasks in the traditional and respectful teammate salute.

Coach Wilson clapped his hands. "Let's get back into positions, ladies! We're gonna have to hit a lot harder than that if we're gonna beat Washington High." Wilson put a hand on Jeffrey's shoulder pad. "Why don't you take a knee, Jeff?"

"I'm good to go, Coach."

"I know you are. Just take a breather."

"Don't need one, I'm good to go. And I'll be ready for Friday night. I'm gonna play, right?"

Wilson flashed back to that moment four years ago when this scrawny freshman kid had walked onto his field. He'd have bet a million dollars the runt wouldn't have survived spring training in the East Texas heat. But first impressions framed around delicate features were deceiving. It didn't take long for Wilson to realize this kid had more heart and desire than any he would ever

coach.

So enormous and unending was the boy's desire to wear the school colors on the football field, like his father and grandfather before him had done, that Wilson had made him a promise four years ago. If Jeffrey didn't quit and continued to inspire the team with his courage and desire, Wilson would get him in a game before he graduated.

"I know we're not going to the play-offs this year," Jeffrey sounded deeply remorseful as if it were his fault. "So this will be the last game -- my last game."

Wilson smiled as a carousel of images from the past four years rode by in his mind's eye -- images of Jeffery, a boy without coordination or any athletic skill to speak of, taking the most unbelievable punishment on the practice field. And the more he took it, the more the team rallied around him and his courage.

Wilson grabbed Jeffery's shoulder, now a lanky high school senior, and pointed him in the direction of the sidelines. "Take a rest, and when you've caught your breath, go over to Coach Philips and tell him I said I want

you to learn a running play.
You've got four days to get it
right."

"I'm gonna carry the ball in
the game?"

"You're gonna be pulling my
foot out of your ass if you don't
go take a knee."

Jeffrey hustled off the field
before Wilson had a chance to
change his mind. A minute later,
Wilson glanced back at the kid to
make sure he was taking a rest.
He caught sight of Jeffery as he
pulled up his facemask and vomited
onto the grass.

Wilson smiled. Kid is a
bundle of nerves, he thought.
#

"Pain is an illusion! Women
dig scars, and glory is forever!"
Coach Wilson yelled in the locker
room as the Tyler Wildcats
screamed and howled. "Now let's
get out there and show Washington
High what happens when you come to
East Texas to play some football!"

Pumped up for the last game
of the season, the team started to
run out of the locker room and, as
was tradition, each player rubbed
the top of Jeffrey's head. He was

not only their inspiration, but good luck charm as well. Except this time, and for the first time in four years, Jeffrey had his helmet on. The team seemed to interpret this as a positive, all of them knowing that Jeffrey was going to get his chance on the field. This sent a roar of excitement through the team as they entered the stadium tunnel.

One of his teammates yelled out to Jeffrey as he rubbed his helmet, "You ready to play some football?"

"You know it!" Jeffrey screamed back.

As the last player rubbed his helmet and exited the locker room, Jeffrey slumped back against the wall.

"Jeff, you okay?" Coach Wilson appeared next to him.

Jeffrey immediately righted himself. "I'm good to go!"

"I know you are, son. You still are having those headaches?"

"Little bit. I'll be fine once I hit the field."

"Why do you have on your practice helmet?" As soon as the

question left his lips, Wilson knew the answer. Still, he had to endure the guilt brought on by Jeffrey's reply.

"I was never issued a game helmet."

Christ, Wilson thought. There wasn't a kid on the team with more heart and desire than the one standing in front of him, and he never even bothered to give him a game helmet. "Let me go get you one."

"No!" Jeffrey said, almost in a panic. "I want to play with this helmet. It's gotten me through the last four years. It will get me through the next three hours."

Wilson looked in the boy's eyes. They appeared tired and blood shot. Dark wrinkled circles framed his eyes. Looked like he hadn't slept in days, but through the exhaustion, Wilson could see the burning fire of desire.

"Besides, the team is on the field, and the coach needs to be with his team," Jeffrey argued.

Wilson took a deep breath and gestured toward the exit. They both started to run down the

tunnel when Wilson almost gagged on the air he had just breathed.

"What the hell is that smell, Jeff?"

"Sorry, coach. Haven't washed my uniform this year. It's for good luck. Just like Willie Bartlett did during the Cowboy's seventy-four season."

"Damn, smells like something crawled up in your jock strap and died."

As they ran out onto the field, the crowd began to chant Jeffrey's name. Wilson could see that the whole school knew about his promise. Even the most apathetic and cynical high school students cheered with pride and excitement as Jeffrey emerged from the tunnel.

#

The first half was brutal. Every time the Wildcats scored Washington High answered right back. Wilson was hoping for an uneven game, its outcome clearly visible before putting Jeffrey in, but that wasn't how things were shaping up as the Wildcats headed for the locker room at the end of the first half.

In the locker room, Wilson yelled and screamed in a fire and brimstone vein that seemed to lift the Wildcats up for the second half. Sending his team back out onto the field with spirits raised, Wilson prepared to follow, when Carson waved him over to the toilet area. "I think Jeff is sick."

Wilson raised an eyebrow.
"Where is he?"

"He's in the showers throwing up."

"All right, you get out there. I'll be right behind you."

"You're still gonna put Jeff in aren't ya'?"

"We'll see, Carson. Now get your ass out there."

The coach walked over to the shower and just caught sight of Jeffrey during his final heave. Brown and black liquid with the stench of bowel snaked its way to the shower drain.

Wilson's eyes met Jeffery's and the kid immediately stood up straight. Remnants of the oddly colored regurgitation dripped off

his facemask.

"What's going on, Jeff?"

"I'm good to go, Coach!"

"Then why is there vomit all over my shower floor?"

"It's just nerves. I know I'm gonna get to play, and my stomach is a little jumpy."

Wilson thought for a moment, considering the situation. He didn't have much medical knowledge, but the blackish color of the mess on the floor seemed to be telling him something. He did know that if someone's stool came out black it was a sign of internal bleeding. He wondered if the same was true for vomit.

"Why don't you stay in the locker room and have Doc Martin take a look at you?" Wilson finally said.

"It's just nerves. I'm good to go, coach!"

"I know you are. It's just a precaution. If Martin gives you the thumbs up, come join us on the field."

"I'll be there, coach. Count on it."

"I am." Wilson turned to leave, and then looked back at Jeffrey. "And for Christ sakes, next time you have to puke, take your helmet off."
#

With only a few minutes left in the third quarter, Coach Wilson saw Jeffery trot out of the locker room. The boy ran straight to his coach, who was studying stats. Wilson looked at Jeffrey's beat-up practice helmet over the top of his clipboard. "What the Doc say?"

Jeffery held two enthusiastic thumbs up and said, "Good to go!"

"All right, son. Be ready."

Whatever Washington High was using to keep pace with the Tyler Wildcats, it was all gone as the third quarter ended. With only a few minutes left in the fourth, the Wildcats had pulled ahead by nine points, and Wilson was starting to relax a bit. It hadn't been a great season, but at least it was going to end with a win. He had been so focused on the game that he never even noticed that, after examining

Jeffrey, Dr. Martin hadn't yet come out of the locker room.

The two-minute warning sounded, and Jeffrey stood next to his coach, dancing from one foot to the other. Wilson grinned. He was going to miss this boy's enthusiasm next year.

"Jeff, if we don't get the ball back in the next minute I'll send you in for a defensive play. That is okay with you?"

"Just fine, coach."

It would be a shame if Jeffrey didn't get to run the offensive play he had been practicing for the past four days, Wilson thought. But he knew offense, defense -- it didn't really matter to Jeffrey. He just wanted to run out on that field and hear the roar of the crowd.

On third down, the Washington quarterback threw a bullet up the middle. The intended receiver stumbled, and Carson stepped in front of him. The football hit Carson right in the numbers, and his hands closed around it. He was tackled immediately, but the Wildcats had the ball back on their own forty-six yard line.

As Carson ran howling off the

field, he went straight over to Jeffrey, handing him the ball. "That was for you, buddy!"

Wilson leaned over to Jeffrey. "You ready to play some football?"

"I've been ready my whole life."

Wilson got the attention of a referee and called time out. He waved the whole team over to the sidelines. Even the Wildcats resting on the bench got to their feet and moved over to surround Wilson and Jeffrey.

An unnatural but reverent hush enveloped the stadium. "This one's in the bag, boys, so it's time for Jeffrey's play." Wilson pointed to the Wildcats quarterback. "It's your team, call your play." The quarterback took charge. "This is it. I'm gonna pitch it to Jeff on the wide side, and I want everybody, I mean everybody, blocking. Pull wide after the snap." Acknowledgments moved around the huddle and someone slapped Jeffrey on the back. "And Jeff, you drop the ball and I'll kick your ass."

"Not gonna happen," Jeffrey returned.

"On two. Ready, break!" Wilson folded his arms and watched his first string offense take the field with one substitution in the running back position.

Someone in the crowd saw Jeffery running onto the field and started chanting his name. A slow rhythm rose from the stands accompanied by a harmony of applause and cheers.

Wilson saw Jeffery start to find his place but the boy stopped and looked up at the crowd. The coach tried to send a mental message to his new running back. Don't pay any attention to them, son. Just find your mark.

As if Jeffery had received his coach's thoughts, the scrawniest running back to ever set foot on the Tyler Wildcats' field during a game, took his stance.

The Wildcats' quarterback slowly walked toward the center. Wilson held his breath and nearly jumped in the air when Dr. Martin grabbed his shoulder. "Where is Jeff?" The Doctor sounded groggy.

Wilson spun around and looked at the gash on Martin's forehead. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Jeff hit me. I just came to. Where is he?"

"He's on the field. It's time for his play."

"Call him back over here."

"Hey, I'm sure we can straighten this out after the game."

Martin started to sound panicked. "I couldn't get a temperature!"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I tried several times to take it, but the thermometer kept reading the same! Room temperature!"

"Sounds like you need a new thermometer, Doc."

"I'm gonna need a new stethoscope too, because I couldn't get a heartbeat either."

Dr. Martin had more to say, but his words were lost over the roar of the crowd as the Wildcats

started to execute the play. Wilson turned back to the field and saw Jeffrey darting toward the wide side. The Quarterback pitched him the ball.

Wilson could tell that Washington was caught off guard. With less than a minute left to play, they were all expecting the Wildcats to take a knee and run the clock out. Surprise, surprise.

The coach almost laughed out loud at his opponent's obvious confusion. Jeffrey was so short; most of the Washington players couldn't even see who had the ball. Jeffrey's teammates pulled to the wide side and created a wall around him. Wilson pumped his fist in the air. "Yes. Yes. Go, Jeff!"

The Wildcats' offensive line bulldozed the first wave of defenders, and Jeffrey ran right behind them with the ball tucked securely in his right arm. He moved away from his blockers and streaked down the sideline, heading toward where Wilson was jumping up and down screaming encouragement.

There were only three Washington players between him and the goal line. The first one came at him head on, trying to strip the ball by tearing and clawing at Jeffrey's right hand. Jeffery spun out of the player's grasp, right in front of his coach.

The Washington player fell to the ground at Wilson's feet. Rolling over fast, the player looked as if he was going to pop back up and continue the pursuit, but Wilson saw him stop suddenly and look down at his open palm, fingers spread wide. Over the roar of the crowd, Wilson could just hear the Washington player in front of him scream. His open hand now flailed in the air as if on fire and two pieces of something fell from his palm. Wilson peered down and saw two human fingers hit the grass. They bounced on the tall blades then continued to wiggle like freshly severed halves of a large night crawler.

Horror transforming his face, Wilson looked downfield, watching Jeffrey charge the goal line. The small boy met the final two Washington defenders in a crash of flesh and helmets. The entangled bodies fell over the goal line and

the referee raised his hands
signaling, touchdown.

The Wildcat's bench emptied,
everyone running to where Jeffery
had dove into the end zone.
Wilson got there first and helped
roll some of the Washington
players off of Jeffery.
At the bottom of the pile, Wilson
could see that Jeffery wasn't
moving.

Dr. Martin pushed through the
expressionless crowd and knelt
down next to Wilson who was
hovering over the motionless
figure. Martin leaned over and
pulled Jeffrey's helmet off. An
ear and some scalp came with it.

Wilson's eyes widened with
disbelief as he gazed at the
decomposing body -- its receding
lips, its sunken eyeballs, and
shriveled flesh had the aroma of
decay. Blackened veins were
visible in the neck under paper-
thin skin riddled with rigor
mortis, and the only substance
that had flowed through them over
the past four days was desire.

Sol-Zeta Five

By Eric S. Brown
and Gail Davis

On the outer limits of human occupied space, the research station Sol-Zeta Five continued its orbit around the binary star known as Cerebus XI. Inside its metal walls, Officer Brendan McLaughlin ran for his life. His heavy combat boots sent echoes through the empty corridors. His sweaty hands clutched an X-prototype, heavy particle rifle with white knuckles but that didn't matter. He knew it would be useless against her. He'd watched her murder the other two members of his squad with only a single glance from her fiery eyes. Gerard and Lucas had fallen to the floor, their bodies jerking and hissing as their blood boiled, cooking them from the inside out.

Perhaps if Dr. Hall, the resident genius, had still been alive he'd have managed to come up with a way to stop her or at least contain her. Unfortunately, Brendan knew he didn't have time for his mere average brain to do so. He was barely managing to

stay one step ahead of her.

She had made a point of killing the doctor first. He was the only person aboard who'd understood fully what had happened to Sarah. As if that hadn't been reason enough, he was also her father. She had suffered enough years of neglect to turn the love of a daughter for her father into a bitter anger and cold dislike.

Dr. Hall had given himself over to his work long ago. It was said that force had existed since the beginning of matter and energy and the end to the void. It was even hinted that the force was the creator itself, entrapped in a new existence of its own making, forever locked away inside the burning hydrogen of the star. Finding the truth had become an obsession. Contacting the primordial force that resided within the Cerebus, star cluster had consumed him and taken over his every waking moment. Perhaps if it hadn't, if he had paid just a bit more attention to his daughter, he might still be alive.

Brendan had served three years active duty as a shock troop for the Terran Alliance before requesting to be assigned to this

station. He had seen enough death to last him his whole lifetime and had hoped to get away from it all here among the stars. On this quiet civilian station, its sole purpose for existing being research, he'd thought he might have a chance at a peaceful life.

He remembered the day he had first come aboard eight months ago. He had met Sarah that day. Seven years old with a mess of unkempt pigtails on either side of her head. Her deep blue eyes had been full of wonder and her mind filled with questions about his travels and the things he had seen during his service. His heart had gone out to her and they had become fast friends. She was to him a symbol of his new life and the hope of a better one. Yet, he didn't delude himself into believing that friendship would save him now. Sarah was no longer just a little girl, cuter than one could imagine. She was the force of the star incarnate.

The Doctor had succeeded in his dream. Contact had been made two days before through garbled radio emissions from the star. They had swelled to a cacophony that overloaded the stations communications system and the

station had nearly been torn apart as the force moved its essence from the star and aboard it seeking freedom. It found a host in Sarah almost immediately and the terror began in earnest. Brendan was the last person left alive and he had no hope of contacting Earth Prime.

He skidded to halt outside the station's central power core. His last, desperate plan was a simple one that involved destroying the station, himself, and Sarah along with it. He hoped the eruption of the fusion core would be enough to drive the thing back into its burning home inside Cerebus when its host perished being vaporized along with everything else in a 120 click radius.

He eyed the keypad lock on the core's main door and fought to remember the access code. All thought stopped, his insides turning to ice when he heard a giggle behind him. He turned to see Sarah standing in the bend of the corridor, nearly hidden in the shadows of the dim of the red emergency lights.

Only her eyes stood out clearly in the darkness, twin

pools of blue that crackled with the energy of the universe itself. She waved the arm of her teddy, "Bear-Bear", at him in greeting with a hollow smile on her lips. Brendan whirled leveling the rifle at her chest. A stream of charged ions streaked toward her from its barrel but the energy merely curled about her like a halo. The thing inside her absorbed it, unharmed.

She spoke, her voice like a chorus of angels singing.
"Brendan, I want to go home."

Brendan's hand trembled as he dropped the rifle to the floor and typed the code into the lock. The core's doors slid open as tears filled his eyes. He stood with his back to her, his shoulders squared.

"Brendan," she pleaded,
"Please doesn't make me kill you, too. The void must return, Brendan. There can only be peace in the void. This anomaly called life must cease."

Brendan ignored her and stepped forward, knowing his life would be over in the next few seconds. The petulant child wailed her fury. She ran toward

him, raising the palm of her right hand. Energy bristled and shot from it enveloping him as she howled.

Brendan felt his skin melt away from his bones and drift away as the station's gravity failed. His fleshless corpse toppled to the floor and his last unspoken thoughts pleaded to God for mercy on them all.

Sarah stood over him as the station tore itself from orbit and flung forward into the void on a course for Earth Prime. Sarah laughed as tears streaked her cheeks. There was no better place to start making her new home than at her old one. The void would be reborn.

Family
By Eric S. Brown

RJ sat in the passenger seat grinning like the devil. He held an AK-47 cradled in his lap. Leper had asked him several times where he'd gotten it but RJ wasn't talking.

Leper sat in the back of the car with Drake, who still looked pissed that he wasn't riding shotgun on this little venture. Drake had his window rolled down but still the inside of the car boiled with second hand smoke from the countless cigarettes he'd smoked already. He tossed another butt out of the car and lit up again instantly.

Hal didn't mind being the driver. Somehow it made him feel like there was less blood on his hands that way. He took the exit ramp down Bleaker Street and guided the vehicle on towards Charleston drive.

"You think they'll really be there?" Leper asked leaning up between Hal and RJ. His breath stunk like a decaying corpse. "I sure as Hell wouldn't be if I was

them!"

"Shut the fuck up!" RJ snapped shoving Leper back onto his seat.

"He has a point, RJ," Hal said without taking his eyes off the road.

"They'll be there," Drake answered around the cigarette dangling between his lips as he slipped his own 9mm from his jacket pocket and checked the clip. "They always are."

Hal rounded the corner of Bleaker and Charleston, and sure enough they were. Martin and his cronies were sprawled out on the steps of their apartment building, smoking and yapping it up with one another. Martin noticed their car as soon as it came into view. He started shouting and trying to pull his friends to their feet. RJ leaned out the window and let loose on full-auto. Hal's ears hurt as the weapon barked and spat death onto the sidewalk. Martin caught the brunt of RJ's first burst dead on. Hal watched as his body twitched and leapt as the rounds tore into his flesh and knocked him to the ground. Drake dropped his cigarette onto the

floor boards popping off a few rounds with his 9mm as Hal's foot stomped on the accelerator.

In the rearview, Hal could see the bodies laying on the pavement in growing pools of red as he sped away for the building. It didn't look like any of them had been lucky enough to get away in time.

"Shit, man!" RJ howled with joy, slapping the dashboard of the old car so hard it cracked. Drake and Leper were shouting too. Hal whirled the car down an alley and cut across to another road leading away from the scene behind them.

"We fuckin' smoked those bastards!" RJ laughed.

"Hey, Drake. . ." Hal said.

"What man?" Drake answered still high on bloodlust and adrenaline.

"Would you mind getting your cigarette the hell off my floor?"

Drake blinked. "Shit man, sorry." Drake picked up the butt and tossed it out the window. He wet his fingers with spit and tried to wipe at the burnt place

in the floor mat.

Hal had shattered their celebration though and now the car was quiet again. RJ turned to glance at Hal. "What ya doin' later tonight man? Ya wanna catch that new fuck flick over at Joe's?"

Hal shook his head. "Naw, I'll pass."

"Hal don't need no flick man, he's gettin' enough pussy from Sarah!" Leper whooped.

Drake laughed but RJ whirled on them. "Leave the fucker alone! You freaks ever even saw a pussy?"

No one in the back answered.

"Look, I gotta get goin'," Hal said, "Where should I drop you guys at?"

"Right here will be fine." RJ ordered as Hal drove by Riker's Pub. Hal pulled up to the curb and stopped the car, leaving the engine running. Drake and Leper hopped out but RJ lingered in his seat, tucking his rifle inside the depths of his long coat. "You ok, Hal?"

"Yeah, sure man. Fine."

RJ nodded and got out slamming the door behind him. He leaned back into the car through the open passenger window. "You'll catch up with us later, right?"

"Yeah man, if I can," Hal said then pulled back out onto the road. With the others gone he flipped on the radio. Hot tears burned in his eyes. He'd had enough of this shit. Maybe he was just too old for it now or maybe he was just becoming human again. He knew RJ would kill him if he tried to leave so he'd planned everything so carefully. Sarah would be waiting him with their bags ready. They'd leave the city tonight before RJ even realized they were gone. Hal hummed with the music as he drove on towards Sarah and his new life.

Hal parked his car across the street from their home and walked up the steps. There was still a bit of daylight spilling over the tops of the buildings around him. He wondered if Sarah would be ready yet. As he climbed the steps to the door to the building, he heard a voice from behind him.

"Goin' somewhere, Hal?" RJ asked. Hal whirled around to see his friends standing on the street below the steps. RJ's coat bulged with the rifle he still carried. Drake and Leper had the "look" in their eyes. They were expecting blood.

"What's it to you?" Hal shot back knowing he shouldn't have.

"You're mine Hal!" RJ roared. "You're a member of this family and you have responsibilities to us! I am not going to let you go running off with that little whore!"

Hal had no weapon. His eyes darted around seeking anything he could use to defend himself with. No luck. He turned and ran for the building's door.

Leper giggled as he drew the .38 from his pants pocket and nailed Hal right between the shoulders with a single round. RJ hit Leper so hard the little guy fell over onto the street spitting teeth. "You little shit. That's Hal you just shot. He may be fucked up but he's still family!"

"Sorry," Leper tried to say as blood poured from his broken

mouth.

Hal lay on the steps still trying to crawl towards the door. RJ walked over to him and placed a foot on Hal's back. Hal screamed at the pain of RJ pressing down on his wound. "Hal, Hal, Hal, what am I going to do with you?"

At that moment, the door opened and Sarah stepped out into the glow of the streetlights. Leper and Drake burst into laughter from the darkness below as she saw Hal's crumpled form with RJ standing over him. RJ looked up at her. "Go away Sarah, this is family business."

Without answering, she leapt at RJ her fingernails streaking towards his face. RJ tried to dodge but the thunder of a 9mm discharging made him curve his attempt so that he went down on his knees. The bullet struck Sarah in the throat and she fell over him making a horrible gargling sound. RJ shoved off her cold corpse and jumped up wiping at the red stain on his coat. "Jesus," he muttered, shooting a look at Drake. "Be a little more careful next time."

"There won't be a next time,"

a hollow, wheezing voice said as Sarah stood up. "Your time is over RJ."

RJ stared at her in disbelief, his gaze lingering on the hole in her throat. She grabbed him lifting him from his feet effortlessly with a single hand. Drake and Leper watched in horror as she simply ripped him into. RJ's intestines and organs spilt onto the steps as she discarded his lower half and waved his torso at the pair.

Drake and Leper turned running into the darkness. Sarah's laughter echoed in the darkness of the surrounding alleys. She leaned down beside Hal who was now unconscious from the blood loss. "I hadn't planned to take you so soon," she whispered, "but your friends have left me no choice. Don't worry; you'll have the new life you sought. It will be glorious and wondrous in ways you never imagined. And it shall be eternal!" She pressed her long fangs into his neck and Hal's world changed forever.

FORBIDDEN APPETITES

By Louise Bohmer

The hunger for the flesh of his own kind echoed in John's thoughts, even though the masses of society long ago labeled cannibalism a dark taboo. Those who still engaged in the practice, the Elders, were ostracized many eons ago. Now they resided along the borders of the fallen cities of this small decimated world. Since early childhood, John heard the call of these exiled people in his dreams.

His weary eyes focused upon his father's body, propped in an old ragged chair by the dirty kitchen window. Three days in death's slumber had blanched the color from Drey's skin. Livid pools of settled blood discolored his ankles, feet, and hands. John stared at the corpse's purple bloated limbs and his mouth began to water. The voices screamed inside his head, begging him to take a bite.

Let those succulent juices
fill your belly, they whispered.
John ran a shaky hand

through his matted hair and turned

his back on the welcoming cadaver.

The plague had visited his family three times now, yet he remained untouched by its symptoms. Three months ago, the first bruised lumps appeared under his mother's arm. A week following, she was dead. Two weeks later, his sister vomited black blood, after a coughing spasm confined her to bed. His father was the last to succumb. John checked his arms for any signs of the purple festering nodes, signifying the sickness. He was disappointed to find none swelling on his pale skin. Life in this wretched place could only get worse without his family.

His father used to tell him tales of how their planet came into this state of utter ruin.

"We didn't follow the words of the old Riah," Drey used to say, his voice apathetic. His own views on the teachings of the Riah were always indifferent "We strayed from the path and they say this is our punishment."

The message of the archaic Riah always left a bitter taste in John's mouth. He was a prophet from ancient lore who banished the

primeval practice of cannibalism. Before this false Messiah brainwashed John's ancestors, eating the meat of your brethren was considered an efficient and sacred ritual. It kept the population within reasonable limits and ensured no waste of precious meat. Since livestock did not thrive in the desert-like climate of this world, consumption of human meat once seemed logical.

Yet, the Prophet won over the minds of the people, thousands of years ago, with his dogmatic teachings. The "good people", followers of the Riah, slowly murdered their environment through blind faith. Overpopulation became an insurmountable problem. Starvation snipped off the productive lives of billions. Disease followed swiftly in her footsteps, finishing the job. When the dust of massive death cleared, only a mere million inhabitants survived.

The population of the Elders, however, had remained untouched. No one knew for sure how many of these forsaken people still existed. They were rarely seen by any regular citizens. It was said they still indulged in the evil pleasure of consuming one another.

Memories of his first and only taste of human flesh flooded John's mind. His guilt clashed with his desperate yearning to savor the sweet meat once more. It seemed so long ago since his teeth tore through the raw juicy tissue of his dead sister. He remembered Illiya stumbling out of the tattered cloth doorway of the shack. In the garden, he harvested the few meager vegetables their barren land would grow as she approached him.

"John," she wheezed, laying a grey skeletal hand on his shoulder.

"I want you to kill me."

He dropped the rusted spade and turned to look at her. His sister's once bright blue eyes were sunken and dull. She was a corpse hanging on to the last remains of a pitiful life. Brushing off his dusty worn pants, he stood and gently grasped her shoulders. She swayed a little and he held her tightly, afraid she was going to die in his arms.

"Illiya, are you sure?" he asked her.

"I can't take it anymore," she replied, nodding feebly. "Pain everyday...I just want to sleep and never wake up."

"Alright," he sighed, hugging her as she sobbed. "I'll do it."

He fought his own tears as he walked briskly to the tool shed to fetch his father's axe. When he returned, he told her to lay her head upon the gnarled rotted stump, a few feet away from the garden. Weakly, she obeyed. He raised the axe high above his head. Filling his lungs with a deep breath of stagnant air, he paused for a moment and then sank the whetted edge into Illiya's neck. Her head slipped off the stump and fell into the arid dirt.

The pungent aroma of blood teased his nostrils. The ragged flesh, hanging from her headless shoulders, glistened invitingly. He could no longer battle the urge. With a savage grunt, he bent to his knees and hacked off a generous chunk of meat. He sank his teeth into his sibling's raw tissue and groaned in satisfaction. The taste was primal and delicious.

He heard the rustle of the shanty doorway and his father's

heavy footsteps. Frantically, he threw the remains of his feast to the ground. The setting sun cast a small concealing shadow over his gore streaked face. He stood frozen near his sister's corpse as his father drew nearer. Vigorously, he tried to wipe some of the blood off his hands. John turned when he heard his father's footsteps stop abruptly.

"What have you done?" Drey's ominous whisper held little emotion.

"I'm sorry," John stammered. "She wanted to die. She asked me to kill her. Then I smelt the blood and..."

"Too late for you," he murmured, kneeling beside his daughter's body. "I knew this day would come soon. You were always the weakest."

His son laid a quivering hand on his back as Drey began to chuckle. Frightened by the demented laughter, John knew this was a symptom of the plague fever. Delirium was one of the final stages before death.

"Go in the house and clean yourself up," he ordered quietly. His young son obeyed immediately.

He was dozing on the frayed rug, next to the fire pit, when his father entered the shack. Drey walked to the rusted sink to wash the dried crimson stains from his hands.

"Where did you bury her?" John asked sheepishly, rubbing his eyes as he stood. Hesitantly, he walked towards his father.

"She's resting, for now," his father replied cryptically. Without another word, he walked to his bedchamber and retired for the night.

Over the next few days, Drey's behavior continued to grow more peculiar. His son would catch the dying man staring at him with an eerie savage glint in his eyes. The night before he died, while sitting in his worn out chair, gazing out the filmy pane of the living area window, he called his remaining child to him.

"Not much longer," he breathed excitedly, his cloudy eyes darting about. "I'm sorry you can't come with us, but you will serve a great purpose, son. Not all of us can be strong." He

squeezed the boy's hand and then fell into a thick diseased slumber. The next morning, he had perished.

Growing weary under the weight of his memories, John brought his thoughts back to the present. An image of his father's remains strayed into his mind and his mouth watered. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, rocking back and forth on the floor as he fought the craving.

Why deny myself any longer,
he thought. What have I got to
lose if I take a bite? Just a bit
of meat won't hurt.

He scrambled to his feet and ran to the small filthy kitchen. Finding a broken carving knife in one of the drawers, he clutched the blade in his trembling hand and walked towards the body. He knelt down beside the chair and positioned the dull steel above Drey's wrist. As John went to sink the jagged tip into the dead flesh, his father's hand snaked upwards and encircled his forearm.

"Drop it, son," the dead man's voice warbled, as if his throat was filled with water. John's mouth open and closed

slowly as he gasped for air and words. Shock made his limbs feel rubbery.

"Shit!" he cursed. "I thought you were dead."

"Not dead," the reanimated corpse replied. "I was undergoing the process of the great change, just like the others. They should be here soon."

"What others?" his bewildered son asked, pulling his arm out of Drey's slimy grasp.

"The reborn," he told him, a grotesque serene smile stretched across his waxy face. "Your mother and sister. All three of us are now free from the disease of humanity. We are of the Elders now."

"What!" John shrieked, stepping away from his father.

As he continued to back up a few more steps, he noticed the older man's skin was changing. The paleness of death transformed into creamy opalescent skin. As his father arose from the chair, the sun caught shades of blue, gold, and green in his new flesh.

"I'm sorry you won't be coming with us," Drey said as he approached his terrified offspring. "But you kept resisting the temptation. Why didn't you listen when the Elders called? You could've been their leader. You could've undergone the transformation."

"But you told me it was forbidden!" John stammered. "I don't understand."

"Those with the Elder blood are always tested when they are young," he explained, placing his glistening sticky hand on his child's shoulder. "I had to let you pass the test on your own. Sadly, you failed."

"Now I will take your place, brother," the gurgling voice came from behind him.

Arms coiled around his waist and he could feel the wetness of spongy flesh seeping through his thin shirt. He turned and found his sister standing there, her shimmering face beaming up at him. He noticed that where her neck had been severed, was now sewn with a delicate thread, resembling the webbing of a terachon spider. The chunk of flesh he had hacked from

her shoulder was growing back. A tiny hole, covered with sparkling strings of sinew, was all that remained of the old wound.

"If you had given into the hunger when you were but a small child," his mother told him as she entered the musty hovel. "You'd now be in Illiya's place. The High Elder, leader of our forsaken people."

"It's alright, John," his sister said, running a slug-like finger down his cheek. "You have still served a great purpose to our people. When you killed me, and fed on my flesh, you surrendered your power of High Elder over to me. You offered yourself up as the sacrifice. That is very noble."

"What are you talking about?" he whirled around wildly, creating a shimmering blur of their three faces.

"Illiya was to be the sacrifice, originally," Drey explained. "But you refused to give into your hunger. Illiya gave into her yearning for the meat many years ago, son. We all did. When your seventeenth year passed without you feeding on the flesh

of humans, your Elder blood grew weak. It was decided, Illiya would take your place."

"Are you telling me," John said, holding his buzzing head in his shaking hands. "That all this time, I have been half human half Elder? Are all the humans this way?"

"No," his mother replied, moving closer to him. "Only a chosen few humans are blessed with the Elder blood."

He looked at her and asked, "Then why did you keep it a secret from me?"

"It is part of our tradition," his father answered this time. "Being part of a forsaken people, we must test the worthiness of each human born half Elder, before their true heritage is revealed to them."

"And I failed," he sighed. They clustered around him. He noticed, as they drew uncomfortably near, that his mother held a large leather pouch partially behind her back. She moved the bag into full view as she stopped a few inches from his chest.

"Yes", she said. "Now you must complete your cycle as sacrifice." She lifted the bag up and nodded towards it.

John heard something heavy clink together in the sack. His mouth went dry, and he made an attempt to bolt for the door. His father grabbed him, pinning the young man's arms against his sides in a strangling hold. He dragged his son to the rickety table that sat in the center of the eating area.

"There is no other way," Drey said, struggling to lay him on the table. "Illiya must eat the flesh of the one who made her. This is how it is done. If she had remained the sacrifice, you'd be dining on her meat right now. Accept what is to be, son."

He felt strong unyielding hands fastened both of his arms and legs to the table. He looked above his head, and saw his father holding his wrists effortlessly, in his hands. At his feet was Illiya, grasping both of his ankles and immobilizing them as if they were insignificant twigs.

His mother opened the satchel she clasped and removed four thick

iron spikes and a large mallet. She moved to where his father constricted John's hands.

"And now the ritual of sacrifice and final transformation begins," she said reverently, positioning one of the spikes over her child's left hand.

She raised the hammer high above her right shoulder and froze in this stance for a moment. Her eyes closed and she mumbled an inaudible prayer. With all her force, she brought the mallet down and plunged the spike deep through John's left hand. He shrieked and bucked upon the table. Illiya and Drey continued to hold him firmly. As his sister and father began to chant in an eerie pitch, his mother thrust a second spike through his right palm. His howling made the rough table tremble. The process of imbedding the last two stakes into his feet was completed with agonizing slowness. The family members gathered about him ceased their incantations as the final stake was buried into his flesh.

John grew weak as the blood ran, in scarlet waterfalls, from the tips of his fingers. A grey

shroud settled over his vision and he knew death was close by his side. Through bleary eyes, he saw his sister approaching his side.

"Thank you brother," she whispered, solemnly.

He felt her sharp tiny teeth sink into the thumb of his right hand. He heard her chewing the meat away from the bone. His parents began gnawing at his feet. His last thought was a vision of a decaying street gypsy he had seen, lying on a rotten bench, on one of his trips to the Crumbling City. Rats were gathered around the body, eagerly tearing strips of flesh away for their evening feast. Loss of blood made John delirious and, as he died, he pictured his family as larger versions of these vermin, greedily consuming him.

FOREIGN MATTER B-13

By Marge Simon

*It is the season of torment.
I sense this inside the circular
dish where I'm imprisoned. Those
who placed me here for observation
have no idea of my new
capabilities. I am sad, for they
give me no opportunity to attempt
communication. It brings me
painful sensations--knowing they
are soon to be afflicted- their
faces dour, their smiles strained.
Something--a drop of perspiration?
a tear? was inadvertently added to
my culture recently, and I can
read their electric cranial
processes. Indeed, I know a cure
for this virulent E-Coli strain,
for I am the solution.*

*Among my gifts, I know
beauty. Perfection is not limited
by mortal concepts--yet I can
appreciate them--those in white
coats moving upright on two legs--
some stand out from others with
distinction. The young woman who
is watching me--recording my
development, I know--she is quite
lovely, as lovely as her thoughts
which come to me in colors. She
thinks I'm a mere culture--a
strange one, she is sure of that.
Yet she doesn't suspect, and she*

must never do so until it is too late for her to react.

If only she'd take me from this container in entirety, rather than in small specimens for study under her microscope as she's done so carefully for so many days--but how to convey this idea to her? I might try metamorphosizing into something --distract her, shock her so she'll smash the slide, and I can enter then into her flesh, warmly pulsing...and travel easily from that point through vein to artery and on to her brain, and I shall know the truth of love they talk about when we merge, invincible to contagion--and we shall survive. A shame that the rest of them will not._

Alicia Benet was determined to graduate with honors. She refused to allow herself to panic, despite rumors of catastrophic mortalities. A new strain of E-Coli bacteria was proving resistant to vaccines and desperate research was underway to find a miracle cure. To keep herself focused, Alicia chose to concentrate on her present task at hand. Her work had been proceeding well, though she'd not been able to identify the nature of a culture she'd started from

scrapings of a rare Asian fungus. This afternoon, she was determined to make more headway. She picked up the petri dish labeled B-13 and gasped. The culture was actually moving energetically back and forth inside. Quickly, she tweezed a piece of it out and slipped it under the slide. Before she had time to cover the dish, the entire culture--now a mobile entity of its own--slid out and wriggled up the sleeve of her blouse. Alicia shrieked, dropping the slide to the ground where it shattered on the tiles. A piece of the glass flew into her ankle. On the piece of glass was a gift from B-13, which quickly made way for the rest of itself to follow...

Father, Risen
By Eric S. Brown and
Jonathan William Hodges

Brendan inhaled. Deep,
something comforting about the
warmth of cigarette-borne heat in
the presence of a fierce winter.
But there was something more in
the air, too. Something alien.
But with another implosion of his
lungs it was gone, snuffed out by
the flavor of tobacco.

He sat outside his bedroom
window, on the fire escape,
staring down into a narrow,
unfrequented alley in Brooklyn.
To his left and right he heard
conversations, shouting, engines,
a perpetual song of car horns and
bicycle bells, and too loud car
stereos. His neighbors'
televisions. Pigeons conversed
four stories above on the roof.
They sounded nervous, wary,
excited, perhaps all three in one
breath. And he knew they
understood just as well as he.

They saw the clouds
developing, felt the ground
trembling, heard the gods
lamenting. They clucked out
syllables clumsily lumped
together somehow sounding

like 'death,' like 'ending,'
like 'apocalypse.' Something
about cycles and recursions.
Something about heading south
for the winter (pigeons
migrate?) for more than just
the warmth. Something that
told Brendan they knew more
than they let on, but that
was okay. He wouldn't tell
them all his secrets either.

He flicked his cigarette
down into the alley, watching
it pitfall like a torch into
a bottomless abyss, and
climbed one leg at a time
back inside, setting cold
feet on plush carpet.

The apartment smelled of
bachelorhood: of lonely
nights, Chinese take-out,
cheap beer, and old laundry.
Of pay-per-view adult movies,
cheap dates, and one-night
stands. But he also smelled
something else. He smelled
secrets and forthcoming. He
supposed it was his only
semblance of a gift,
something his father might
have once treasured. But he
hadn't seen his father in
years. No, 'years' was a
façade. Decades.

But working as a dishwasher at the little Italian restaurant down the street run by a German illegal didn't leave much room for a future, for being treasured by anyone. It was but a quick line to some form of socialism, to conversations with humans, folks who lived and died all together. Not like his clients.

The lights flickered, trembled, and then returned, like a yawn in the electrical wire. Somewhere in the living room a space heater hissed, clicked, moaned, and he pretended to hear, "Yesssssss." He stepped into a pair of ratty tennis shoes sat by the front door, shrugged on a fleece jacket, and pulled on a black toboggan. The door closed and locked itself behind him.

* *

* *

He sat his elbow on the half-table and, in place of a cigarette, pinched a one-dollar bill between his first

two fingers, gin in a glass
in the other hand, ice
ringing a cacophonous
refrain. Bass from the ice
chest-sized speakers hanging
overhead thumped in his
chest, rumbled in his ears,
and the girl on stage winced,
glancing perturbed toward the
back at the DJ, but he just
turned it up louder.

As the girl plucked the
bill from his hand and
snapped it safely between her
sequin g-string and hip,
shaking her b-cup breasts in
his face in gratitude but
offering no hint of a smile,
a hand touched his shoulder
and he looked back. Saw only
a nose, long and slender, and
a mouth painted dark red.
Too-white
teeth flashing as she said,
"Ms. Drake'll see you."
Brendan nodded, smiled an
almost embarrassed 'thank
you,' never mind he'd been
here a half dozen times
before, and stood from the
table, leaving his gin
behind. The barely-dressed
waitress stood behind,
watching him go then picking
up his drink and returning it
to the bar.

Around the left side of the stage he passed through a STAFF ONLY door, nodded to the black bouncer who sneered in response, walked past the girl's dressing room without glancing in, and stopped instead at the last door in the hallway, a door on which had been crookedly glued a nameplate reading: "Sarah Drake - Owner."

He didn't knock.

Sarah awaited him in the tiny office. Tiny but somehow luxurious. Dark red carpet, deep gray walls, and carefully framed art prints of the Bible's more gruesome stories hanging on the gray palette.

She looked up from a stack of bills and records as he entered, manifesting a skip in his lethargic pulse. She, with money-green eyes and December-pale skin, was the master of dreams and nightmares, simultaneously beautiful and fierce. She warded him away and drew him in with the same glance, and he couldn't help but shiver

as if from a draft in the room. She stacked the papers together with her long-nailed, delicate hands and sat them aside.

"Hello, Brendan," she said, smiling but her voice was like ice, dead and hollow. "It's good to see you again."

Brendan sensed the strain of a lie in her voice but ignored it. He walked to the front of her desk and plopped down in the chair before her without waiting for it to be offered. "How are you, Sarah?" She laughed. "In debt, about to be shut down by the religious fervors of the city, like usual." She watched him carefully. "You have something for me?"

"That depends." Brendan leaned back, throwing his arm casually over the back of the chair and grinning like a cat.

Sarah hissed, baring too-white teeth only vague shadows under the office's only light back in the corner

by the door, but even then he saw the familiar irregularity in their jagged alignment. The sudden points at either side of her front two teeth, like two stalagmites in an otherwise featureless cavern. She reached under her desk and produced a fat envelope, which she slammed onto the desktop. The corner of a fifty peeked out as it struck.

Brendan reached for it, his chair squeaking as he leaned forward, and she caught his hand with a movement so fast he didn't realize she held him until he felt the pain of her grip. He screamed as she stood, twisting his arm close to the snapping point, the club's music continuing to blare outside. Bass vibrating the pictures on the wall.

"How do I know the information will even be worth my time, let alone your life, little seer?"

Tears welled up from the pain but Brendan gritted his teeth against her grip and managed to whisper, "He's

coming, Sarah."

She let go of his arm, her eyes growing wide with shock and fear, and fell back into her seat. She stared at him as Brendan rubbed his arm where striped bruises already formed.

"Can't you feel it, Sarah? The whole city stinks of Him. He's in the air, the ground, everywhere. He is awaking and he is unhappy."

Sarah flung the envelope at him. "Take it and get out."

Brendan barely caught it. Excitement pounded in his chest as he looked inside at the amount of cash. But suddenly he frowned. "I thought . . . ?"

Sarah cut him off. "Immortality's not for you. Take the money and go before I change my mind."

Brendan stalked out of the office, slamming the door behind him, but its rattle in its frame was barely audible over the stereo. The bouncer

glared at him but said nothing, as had come to be the ritual.

He walked back to his seat by the strippers' walkway and lit up a smoke. That undead bitch would get hers soon enough. He had foreseen it, yet he had hoped she would turn him before she died.

Nevertheless, the father was rising. Gregory would soon walk again and the world would be His. He feared not the sun, and the stars themselves fled before His wrath. He was the king of the dead and living alike. A new dark age of terror, blood, and death under the reign of the dark god, Himself, who had given her birth. Perhaps Gregory would need a seer, too.

A girl strolled by in front of him and he stretched one of the fifties from the envelope in his jacket pocket to her. She accepted it leisurely then noticed its denomination as she tucked it into her g-string. She looked up, surprise first on

her face, then calm acceptance. She lowered herself to the ground, lay on her belly, and mashed her breasts against the polished stage.

"I get off at two a.m."

Brendan nodded and she stood, bouncing away from him to a couple of men sat on the walkway's opposite side, and she shoved her breasts into their face.

He wished he could see his own future as easily as Sarah's but that was a wasted wish, wished for a thousand times before. He took a drag from the cig, ordered another gin, and waited. Waited for two a.m. and the uneventful sex that would ensue. Then the morning that would follow, bringing with it the first step toward a better world.

*

* * *

An apartment silent then stuffed with a euphonious chaos. A squeal of tires and crumpling of sheet metal.

Shouts, not of anger but
agony, of fear, of all
Brendan had come to expect.
With enough determination to
rattle his windows, and
certainly too loud for him to
sleep through.

He sat up in bed, paused
briefly to allow his eyes
some acceptance of the
darkness in the pre-sunrise
bedroom, and stumbled to the
window. With a quick tug, he
shirked the blinds out of the
way and looked out onto the
fire escape and the alley
beyond. It was yet sunrise,
a mere four-thirty a.m., and
the havoc had already begun.

"Catch 'em sleeping,"
someone had once told him.
But he doubted Sarah slept.
Not on a night like this one.
Not on a night when her most-
times invisible hold on the
city became altogether
feeble.

He backed away from the
window, got dressed, and
hurried out into the hall.
He bounded down the
stairwell, taking two steps
at a time, and rushed out
onto 32nd Street to find Hell

on earth.

There was any number of things distorted: macabre and foreboding alterations to the fabric that had at one time made New York City the stand alone entity it was. But the history of what now engulfed it was far more comprehensive than its own.

The first thing he noticed was the atmosphere; it would have been a feat to absorb anything else first. It was in the air, creeping along the ground, swirling above in the night sky: a sickly brown cloud, a fog, like decaying flesh, gaseous, sulfur to the nose, bitter to the tongue, choking with each breath. Thick and assuming any number of shapes. Faces poking out from the prevalent cloud, foreign countenances brooding and threatening. The shapes of weapons: battle axes and swords. Spears and longbows. Sneers and growls. In his ears, reverberating. Each distinct voice and threat as real as the smell, the taste.

Cars lay demolished in

the street, windshields but webs of cracks, some dotted with blood from foreheads. The sidewalk was littered with fallen soldiers in a war they were never meant to win. Defeated before they'd ever been made conscious of the need to draw a weapon. He heard a scream somewhere, ricocheting down the city's many corridors, filling the porous caulk on buildings' facades, seeping into the sidewalks and through manhole covers. He thought he recognized it from a couple hours prior, when a stripper from which he'd never asked a name had writhed beneath him. But the city was mostly silent now. The weak had been overcome and only the strong remained. Those too proud, too officious to accept their responsibility as minions, too hard set on leadership - mastership. Like Sarah.

When he arrived at her club, he was surprised to find the colored lights still dancing, the music still loud and offensive. But he wasn't surprised to see an underage girl, nude and illustrated

with crude tattoos, lying dead on the walkway, one slender leg still curled around the silver pole.

He made his way to Sarah's office. She was still there though there was no sign of anyone or anything but her. Her eyes blazed with rage and she bared her teeth at him, hissing like a cornered animal as he entered. After God only knew how many years on this earth, she was for the first time facing her true death. But Brendan was no threat to her, couldn't be if he had wanted it so.

He was about to open his mouth, offer some lame lament in the prologue to her defeat, offer to buy her a drink or something equally feeble, when, in a fit of fury, she leapt toward him, halving the distance between them in a single pounce. She landed and stuck to the floor, crouched like a lion hunting prey.

Brendan flinched, jerked backward toward the door, and grabbed onto the wall.

"Sarah!"

She snarled, flashed her teeth at him, but her green eyes were focused past him, through the doorway.

Brendan felt a wave of cold wash over him, November's first gale, and turned to look through the doorway to the entity filling it.

Gregory stood clad in high fashion, a modern three-piece suit accenting His broad shoulders and swell of a chest. For a flash of a moment, Brendan thought He looked like He belonged on the cover of a ritzy Goth magazine, His violet shirt collar resting calmly on His black suit. Black hair soft and full to end at His shoulders. His eyes emitted a yellow glow and energy crackled and danced about them.

His lips parted in an obscene smile revealing long white fangs of His own. Around and beside Him stood ghoulish-like creatures, half-decayed with hunchbacks, too-large eyes nearly entirely black, and cracked mouths

drooling brown mire. They were clad in tattered rags of ages long past and each held either a spear or dagger ready like Aztec warriors awaiting command.

Brendan recoiled, stepping backward again into the office, forgetting Sarah was there until the low guttural growl forming in her throat reminded him of her presence. Gregory and His creatures moved towards them.

"Sarah," the demon lord breathed as smoke leaked from His open mouth around the words. But she didn't offer Him the opportunity to finish his declaration.

She sprang at Him, a blur of movement, dashing past Brendan so forcefully she knocked him to the floor. Gregory's underlings moved to protect their lord but Sarah ripped through as if they were children, unfurling delicate half-flesh before they could so much as raise their weapons. A single slap sent one's head bouncing out the door and down the hallway. Gregory awaited her calmly

and grabbed her by the neck as she reached Him, lifting her before Him. Sarah's feet kicked at empty air as her claws tore at His grip, red nails scratching at His suit, but it refused to give against her cat-like attack.

"Is this the way to welcome your father?" Gregory laughed. "I was once like you, young one, afraid of the sun, hiding in tombs and dark places, feeding only on the weak and foolishly brave, but that was long ago. Far before your sire turned you. Those times are no more. A new night has fallen, black and eternal."

Brendan heard the snap of Sarah's bones as Gregory squeezed before releasing His grip and dropping her to the floor. Sarah's head hung at an unnatural angle atop her broken neck, yet she still fought to get to her feet with black blood bubbling from her lips. She whimpered in pain and hatred, clawed at His ankles and legs.

"I would have let you live, child, but you could not accept me. You raised your generation against me. Even now my true

children slay yours in their crypts and alleyways. Your time is ended."

A bright light like the rays of the sun erupted from Gregory's eyes, pouring over Sarah. She howled as her flesh burned and melted, soaking into the singed red carpet, until only ash was left where her body had lain. A hot whiff of air from the air register in the ceiling disturbed it and scattered it across the carpet, against Gregory's black pants, behind him into the hallway.

Brendan watched it all in horror. To him, Sarah had seemed invincible. A vampire of over 800 years and so powerful, yet before Gregory she had been nothing. He'd expected a battle at least. But now he wondered if he would be next as the light vanished from Gregory's eyes and the lord's gaze fell upon him.

"And what shall we do with you, young prophet?"

Brendan pushed himself up from the floor and felt a sharp pain in his ankle as he put weight upon it, twisted in the fall. Still, he straightened his back

and did his best to look strong in the eye of the father. Of his father, whom he hadn't seen in so many years. A father who'd once told him he had a future.

"I have served you, father, with my knowledge. I ask only that you let me live so that I might persist to do so."

Gregory chuckled as more His offspring entered the office to replace the ones who had been slain, remaining upon the floor, and empty husks of rotten flesh.

"You've served me, you say? With your freelancing? With your time spent in - " He paused, looking around the room, around the building with eyes Brendan suspected could see through walls. Beside Him, one of the beings lunged at Brendan, thrusting a spear in his direction, then reclaimed its step, over-eager to impale him on its tool. "In establishments such as this one?"

"I've done more than only that, lord. I've witnessed to the ignorant, I've proclaimed your coming back, and I've . . . "

But Gregory wasn't listening, was instead inclining his head toward the subordinates on his

right and whispering to them,
"Kill him."

Brendan laughed
nervously, took a step
forward with arms raised in
innocent questioning, and
said, "Your lord, I hardly
think - "

But Gregory had already
turned away, His footsteps
pounding down the hallway in
perfect time with the bass
still playing through the
club. His ghoul-men blocked
Brendan's path, looking upon
his pink, warm, living skin
with disgust, and perhaps
with a sense of envy, as
their spears and daggers rose
and fell with wet stabbing
sounds, splashing the office
walls with blood. Brendan
screamed his father's name in
vain.

THE GRIN
By Scott H. Urban

"Here. Do you need one of these?" Henderson held his left hand out toward me.

It was a long Tuesday morning. I was killing hours until lunch-time by helping Henderson empty the contents of his desk drawers. Murray Henderson, who for two and a half years had occupied the desk next to mine, had been granted a promotion and pay raise. Now my bullshitting buddy, and Sunday afternoon tennis partner could treat himself to martini luncheons and corner-office putting practice.

I don't want to give the impression that I was jealous of Henderson, or felt he was undeserving -- quite the opposite. Henderson was a capable administrator and a hard worker. But who can watch somebody else being promoted and not feel he himself could do a better job?

Henderson had a staple remover in his hand. "I have a couple extra, and my desk is going to be cluttered enough as it is. Want it?"

I reached out my palm; he dropped the cold metal-and-plastic gadget into it. "Thanks," I said, "I've needed one of these for a while. I've just been too lazy to fill out a triplicate requisition form to get one."

He chuckled -- the bureaucratic paperwork of our firm was a long-standing joke between us. When I had first been hired, another payroll number and 'alone in the big city,' Henderson had set me on my feet and shown me how to navigate the touchy, twisting maze that needed to be negotiated to get anything done in our office. I was going to miss this big, husky, witty executive who had been my working neighbor. Now titles served as a more effective barrier than any physical distance.

"I know what you should do," said Henderson. "Fill out a requisition form for a twenty-two year old stripper with blond hair and huge tits to take my place."

"What? And have you shuffle the papers so that she's lap dancing in your office? No way!"

We laughed, but it was

strained, and I knew the fault-line was widening.

* * *

Henderson and I went out for lunch at our favorite Chinese eatery down the block. He picked up the tab, saying it was his turn. Before, we had always split the bill evenly. Although I didn't want it, images of Murray's paycheck, with higher digits than mine, coalesced before my mind's eye. I felt snubbed, but squelched the thought. I knew we wouldn't have many more lunches together, no matter how much Henderson spoke of reservations for next week's noon-time hour.

Back at the office, I helped him cart his professional belongings up several flights of stairs, dropping the bulky boxes without design on the low-cut carpet in his new domain. I ignored the mocking thought of our decades-old, scuffed linoleum floor in the old room. With a nod and a promise to come up and visit him every now and then, I rode the elevator back down to my floor, mentally undressing a curvaceous passenger instead of dwelling on Henderson's move.

I sat back down at my desk, groaning inwardly at the thought

of having to go over the next quarter's budgetary proposals. I'd discovered there was no quicker cure for insomnia than budget proposals. And the notion of distributing unwanted and ignored counter-proposals depressed me even more. Henderson's desk -- no, make that former desk -- sat there untenanted; a deserted outpost that seemed to say, "Everyone else has moved upward and onward; what's wrong with you?"

I moved my hands down my thighs, smoothing out my pants, and encountered, through the fabric, an unlikely bulge in my right hip pocket. It looked vaguely obscene, and I wondered if I had gone into the restaurant displaying it on my leg.

I reached into the pocket and pulled out Henderson's staple remover. I held it in front of my face, narrowing my eyes critically. "My, what an evil-looking device you are," I surprised myself by murmuring aloud. For some reason, I was reminded of the wolf that tormented Little Red Riding Hood. "What are you grinning at?"

For the staple remover did

have a malicious smirk. I turned it head-on and stared at it. I have no idea how long I remained like this. I was alone in the too-warm room and no one would bother me for the rest of the day. The staple remover sat poised between my thumb and forefinger. With a sharp arc of metal, four fangs swung in on each other, clicking. Each individual tooth was cruelly-pointed and fiercely-edged. I had received too many reports scratched and marred, the top left corner of the title page lacerated, to not believe its efficiency. I stared back into the depths of the maw, noting the springy, forked tongue that kept the jaws wide, ever eager to latch onto something new.

It was soothing, almost hypnotic, to sit there and work the jaws of the staple remover. From its hinge came a high, whining squeak. It was at once annoying and yet tolerable. I thought of my wife, back at home, with two children, likely crying. I hadn't told her yet about Henderson's promotion. Over the past two and half years, we had all grown to be friends, and Vivien would be happy for Henderson. But I knew that while she smiled, she would be looking

at me from the corners of her eyes, questioning, wondering when (and if) I would enter the house bearing such news concerning myself.

I brought my mind back to the present, banishing such thoughts, and focused on the staple remover. I wondered how many pages it had isolated, how many bulletin boards it had decimated, how many friendships it had separated --

All right, that's enough, I told myself. Let's not get carried away with this. A staple remover is a staple remover. And a budget proposal is always a goddamn budget proposal, and you'd better get to work on it, no matter how much you hate doing it.

Still, I didn't set the device down; it remained in my hand. It had, I decided with a grin of my own, a decidedly 'magnetic' personality. I put my left forefinger in the narrow space between the shining fangs. With aching slowness, I brought the tips toward each other. When my skin began to feel pinched, I released the spring. The sensation had been -- what? I couldn't describe it. 'Intriguing'? I wouldn't let

myself say 'exciting.' Yet, without any desire on my part, the image of my wife digging her nails into my shoulder in passion came to mind.

I shook my head, remembering I had to call Central Purchasing.

Then I brought the staple remover down on my finger again. I didn't release the tension at the first sensation of the pinch. I continued to press down. It went beyond 'pinch.' A thrilled rush warmed my groin. What am I doing? I questioned myself, but I neither replied nor stopped. The four teeth of the staple remover were just slightly off-set to pull up metal fasteners, so my skin was pulled down and in and sliced, rather than being directly pierced.

I felt dizzy, as if blood were draining from the back of my head. Where was I? No, I knew, and I jerked my finger out and sat back in my chair, stupefied, watching blood well up out of a wide but superficial cut I had just inflicted on myself. There was a tiny stain of red along the inside of one of the teeth of the staple remover.

Your grin gets even wider, I told the little tool. But enough playing around, it's time to get back to work.

Then I put the incisors against the inside of my left wrist. You wouldn't, I told myself. You don't dare. I pressed the teeth down straight into my flesh. Tendons and purple, throbbing veins protruded between them. The steel was impossibly cold. I ignored the salty droplets running into my eyes. Don't be silly. What in the world would you want to do it for? You have all you need: family, home, safe secure job. There's no reason. The eager edges bit into my skin and felt strangely comforting. I realized the tiny machine would hurt me, was aligned against me, but that didn't stop me. I felt relieved by the realization. We both knew exactly where we stood.

I began to squeeze.

INK SPOT
By Kevin Anderson

I'm a lot of things,
adulterer, barroom brawler, and if
you count the war -- killer. But
I'm no liar, and it rubbed me
wrong to have to fib to my
granddaughter when she asked me
who was the strangest person to
ever come into my shop. Telling
her the truth would have been
kindred to a sin. No twelve-year-
old needs to know that the things
going bump in the night aren't
always products of a youngster's
imagination. My granddaughter
doesn't need to know that monsters
are real.

Hell, I'm in my fifties, and
I wish I didn't know. But there
is no going back -- not after that
night.

It started out like any
other. The sun fell out of the
sky fast, plunging the 6th Street
club district in Austin, Texas,
into darkness -- the kind that
seemed to be an open invitation
for the city's night things.
Young neo-punkers and club-hoppers
spilled out thick onto the street
that Friday night. All believed
the night was theirs. All
believed they could live forever.

I own the Ink Spot Tattoo and Piercing Parlor on the south end of 6th street. There is a head-shop on my left and new age book store to the right where all the young Wiccans seem to gather. I see them as they walk by my window -- their long hair resting on flowing cloaks. Makes me wish I were twenty again.

On this particular August evening, I had just walked into the shop after my semi-nightly viewing of the Mexican free-tailed bats leaving the Congress Avenue Bridge. I had seen it a thousand times, but it never ceased to fill me with wonder, watching that black cloud of just over a million bats leaving all at once in search for food.

"How were the bats?" my assistant Chloe asked.

"Hungry." It was my standard reply.

She checked out early that night leaving me alone to pierce and tattoo the dozen or so college kids that would eventually stagger in.

By a little past eleven,

there were three girls in the waiting room and one in my chair. I was doing a quick touch up of a rose that had faded from too much exposure to spring break, when out of the corner of my eye I saw a very tall black woman speaking with the girls in the waiting area. Didn't notice her come in, but the hum of the needle draws most of my focus.

When I had a second to look up, she was handing out money. Each girl quickly snatched an unknown amount of cash from the stranger and promptly left my establishment. Then the women had the gall to turn my open sign to close.

By this point, my blood pressure was about ready to do a Mt. St. Helens.

She causally walked to the back of the store, as if what she had done was the most natural thing in the world. Without addressing me, she looked down at the girl in my chair. "Sweetie. How 'bout you come back some other evenin' and it'll be on me."

The girl in the chair looked at the two hundred-dollar bills the tall woman was holding out to

her -- then back at me. With a sigh, I held up my hands in surrender, and she jumped out of the chair.

In the span of a moment, I was alone with this tall gaunt black woman. Her hair was cut so tight around her scalp I swear it was painted on. She wore a black leather mini-skirt, patent black boots, a tight fitting blouse with a macabre array of zippers and a long scarf, completely concealed her slender neck. She looked Caribbean or Creole -- probably from New Orleans or thereabouts.

Still pretty pissed, I gazed into her brown eyes. "You just sent about a thousand dollars worth of business out the door, honey. Can you give me one good reason why I don't bounce your butt outta here?"

She reached into her coffin-shaped purse and pulled out two thousand-dollar bills. I had never seen a thousand-dollar bill, let alone two.

I tried to get my bug eyes under control as she said, "I need a piercing done. I heard you were quite good."

In the greedy glare of all those zeros, my anger evaporated. "So you need a piercing, do ya," I said as I grabbed the bills, tucking them into my shirt pocket.

"Yes. First things first, though. The security cameras, they feed into a VCR?" She pointed to the three cameras mounted around the shop.

"Yeah. Won't be much help to the cops catchin' the guy who blows my brains out if they weren't." I pointed to the VCR strapped under my worktable.

She stepped forward bent over and popped the tape out. "If you don't mind?" Fact was I did mind, but there was two thousand dollars in my pocket that seemed to scream, *No ya don't, dummy!* The bills won out.

"What kind of piercing do you have in mind?"

"Not me." She grinned showing teeth. "Him." She gestured to the front of the shop.

Standing in my waiting room was a dead man. That was my first thought anyway, but when it started walking toward me, I

thought -- okay, it's a walking
dead man.

As the man approached, it was
painfully clear he was very ill.
His skin was snow white and
dripping with sweat. It was a hot
August night, but not that hot,
not by a long ways. When he was
about halfway to us, his body went
into some kind of convulsion,
slumping against the wall.

Creole Lady rushed forward,
and put his arm over her shoulder,
then dragged him to the chair.
Strong gal. Stronger than she
looked.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Doesn't travel well. He'll
be fine."

His face was pale and
ghostly. I could see dark veins
just under translucent skin, as if
the blood inside of them had
stopped flowing a while ago. I
wanted to say this boy needs a
mortician, not a piercing, but I
settled for, "I think he needs a
doctor."

"They can't help him," she
countered. "Now let's get this
done." I looked into the man's

eyes. They were hauntingly gray and old. Very old.

I realized at that point that I wanted Creole Lady and Zombie Man out of my shop as fast as I could get them gone. "All right, I have a selection of stainless steel posts, studs, and hoops over here. What did -"

"No, I have one," she interrupted. From inside her purse she pulled out a small leather box. Embroidered on the top was an Ankh -- big and ancient looking. It wasn't an uncommon symbol, especially after that movie with David Bowie that I never got around to seeing. It's supposed to be Egyptian or some such thing -- means everlasting life.

Pulling the lid back, she revealed a thick chrome metallic-looking post of a very thick gauge. "That's a bit big for a new piercing," I offered.

"It doesn't matter. Just do it," she barked.

I put on some rubber gloves and retrieved the thing from the creepy little box. "I need to sterilize it."

"No need. It's taken care of." She snapped the box closed as the dead man in my chair started to convulse again. "Besides, there isn't time."

He writhed in his seat and leaned forward almost with his head between his knees until the spasms stopped. As he sat back, his eyes seemed to fixate on my throat. His mouth dropped open and released a soft sigh. I swear he was watching the blood flow in my neck.

With my attention captivated by Zombie Man, I failed to notice from where Creole Lady had pulled a set of handcuffs. By the time I noticed what the gal was doing, she had just finished cuffing her friend's hands to the chair. The clinking sound of the cuffs closing reminded me how much I wanted them out of my shop.

"Hey now. I don't know what you two are into, but I don't do anything weird. Look, maybe we should do this some other time. Your friend here seems real sick, and to be honest, a little creepy. So..."

If my mamma has told me once, she told me a thousand times, *if*

it don't feel right, it ain't right. The small 22-caliber pistol Creole Lady was now pointing at my nose seemed to echo mom's sentiment. Damn, I really should have listened to her more.

"No more screwing around. Get it done. Now!" demanded Creole lady.

It wasn't the first time a gun had been thrust in my face, but it was the first time I didn't ever for even a minute question the gun owner's willingness to use it.

"All right. Where does it go?" I tried to sound cool. Not sure if I was successful.

"Left eyebrow will do," she snapped then pointed with the gun.

I leaned forward to mark the spot with a pen when he suddenly lurched outward with his mouth and snapped at my throat like a rabid dog.

"Jesus! I can't do anything with him bouncing around like that."

Creole Lady seemed to have a moment of indecision, but just a moment. In an obviously practiced

move, she took up a position behind the chair and swiftly wrapped her free arm around Zombie Man's neck. Her other hand kept the gun waving in my face.

"Let's get on with it," she snarled with locked teeth.

I tossed the pen to the ground and took up my piercing blade. As I pinched the skin above the man's eyebrow I heard a soft fracturing sound. I glanced down at the man's open mouth and watched in horror as his canine teeth grew a full inch.

"What the hell is he?" I screamed and recoiled.

"Pop, you got less than a minute to get this done or we're both real dead!" Her eyes met mine, and I could see that I wasn't the only one about to piss their pants.

When I heard the splintering sounds again I tried not to look, but couldn't help myself. His mouth was open wider than was possible and the rest of his jagged ivory was growing. His teeth looked like inmates during a prison break, scattering in all directions -- escaping the confinement in the once human

mouth.

"Do it!" I heard someone scream.

I reached up for his eyebrow again and my fingers slipped off. First, I thought it was the man's sweat that was making him slippery, but as I took a harder look, my jaw dropped open with a gasp.

There was hair growing out of his forehead. Thin at first but in seconds it merged with his hairline and became as thick as anyone's scalp.

Then the real noise started. Bone cracking sounds came from his whole body as he started to reconstruct from the inside out. His mouth started to push forward, becoming a snout barely able to restrain its teeth. The skin covering his convulsing fingers splintered and cracked as claws forced their way out of the tips, like new-born reptiles bursting through eggshells.

"Do it!" came the voice again.

"I can't even see his eyebrow any more! Lord, have mercy!"

Diving in, I made a hole somewhere about the eyebrow -- or where the eyebrow used to be. As fast as I could, I shoved the unsterilized post in the hole as a set of teeth snapped at my arm.

I heard the sound of breaking metal and I saw one of his clawed hands, now free, flailing wildly. The torn half of the handcuff still encircled the wrist, which was covered with thick and still growing fur. I fell out of my chair hoping to stay out of the monster's grasp.

Creole Lady dropped the gun and used her other arm to try to restrain the flailing hair covered hand. As she grasped at it, the claws and hair started to retract. After several more violent moments, filled with thrashing and God help me, howling, their hands finally met in the air and their fingers intertwined, like long-lost lovers.

The beast's face began to fade away and in its place was one that started to look human. I got a few seconds glance at what a Neanderthal might have looked like as the inhuman snout and teeth retracted, leaving large hairy cheekbones and brow, framing the

man's face. In a moment more, even those disappeared, sinking back into the normal folds of human expression.

I pulled my butt off the ground as Creole Lady un-cuffed her companion's other hand.

He stretched like someone waking from a long nap, looking much better than he did when he came in. He looked alive. "Was I a bother?" he said to Creole Lady.

"No, sweetie." She kissed his forehead. "We were running a bit late, that's all. Won't happen again. Promise."

He spun in the chair and looked at himself in the mirror. "Very nice," he said, touching the new pierced eyebrow.

Creole Lady must have read the confusion on my face. "He doesn't have it under control yet. The silver helps." She smiled, turned to her companion. "Let's go. You're on stage in a half hour." She dropped a couple of tickets in the chair and said, "Come check out the show, pops."

"No, thanks. I'm a Crosby, Stills and Nash man."

"Suit yourself." As I watched the two exits my shop, arm-in-arm, Creole Lady stopped at the entrance and changed my closed sign back to open. Then as quickly as they had come, they were gone.

I stared at the reflection of the full moon in the glass of my front window just listening to my heart pound. After my circulatory system returned to its normal rhythm, or as close as I would ever get to it again, I looked down at the tickets. They read - *One night only at The Bone Yard - The musical stylings of The LON CHANEY JUNIORS.*

Yes sir, I'll tell you what, that is one tale I won't be telling my grandbabies.

KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND

By Bruce Boston

Space and Time #81, 1993.

I awaken on the hard stone of the rampart, fully dressed for battle, my mouth still clogged with sleep, no memory of the night before. The sun is already high in the sky. I sense immediately that there is something wrong at the castle.

Hoarse shouts and cries of panic, the creak of wood against leather, rise from the courtyard below. I roll over on the stone, the chain mail pressing my doublet against my chest, and look down. The yard is a chaos of running forms. The Monseigneur, our Lord, is gesturing frantically, directing the placement of men and equipment. He has dressed hurriedly and the tails of his nightshirt trail from beneath his cuirass. Lines of foot soldiers are hauling the ballista into place. Already the cauldrons are heating. At the far end of the yard, Sir Christopher has gathered the knights of our order and is speaking to them. Our ladies have retreated to the castle. I can see their faces, pale and strained, as they crowd together to peer forth

from the narrow stone embrasures.
I can see their white hands,
clutching the brightly colored
scarves of their champions.

Further along the parapet the
master cannier is barking orders
to his apprentices. They roll the
forty-pounders into place and
begin packing them with powder.
All the preparations for a siege
are underway.

I stand and look across the
plain, shimmering with heat, to
the forest beyond. There is
movement there, dark movement
amidst the dark stillness of the
trees. The enemy is there, though
they have not yet shown themselves
upon the plain. Judging from the
movement, their numbers must be
large.

I shake the last dregs of
Morpheus from my brain. My place
is among the fellow knights of my
order. I take the narrow stone
stairs three at a time and descend
into the chaos below. At a trough,
I splash water across my face. The
sleeves of my doublet are stained
darkly --.with wine? --.with
blood? -- yet memories of the
night past still elude me. Hunger
gnaws at my belly, but there is no
time for food.

I reach the end of the yard and confront Sir Christopher. I grab him by the shoulder.

"What's happening? Tell me what's happening!"

"Find your horse, man!" His face is flushed with exertion. He knocks my arm aside. "Soon we ride."

A groom has brought my black mare, Sylvie, forward. Her eyes are wide, nostrils snorting. With a few sure strokes of my palm, I calm her. I swing into the saddle. Sir Christopher is now grouping us in the center of the yard. Bowmen stream past our sides to mount the walls and support our charge. The drawbridge is winched downward on its heavy chains and we ride across the moat, brave knights nearly a hundred strong.

We begin to move onto the plain. The sun is hot, the wind fierce upon our faces. I ride straight and proud amidst the camaraderie of my brothers, harnesses jingling, my broadsword slapping at my side.

And now, the enemy has come forth from the trees to meet us.

Yet, there is no glint of sword or spear or polished armor from their assembled ranks. No ranks of cavalry or bowmen. They move on foot, a faceless mob attired in drab and mottled green streaming forth from the brighter green of the vegetation, which has concealed them. And at their flanks and rear move giant engines of destruction. Tanks and mortars and howitzers. I do not know from where the knowledge of these weapons has entered my mind, but I do know them. Just as I know that this army is from a different age than ours, some far future world. Just as I know that we must soon fight them and die.

As our charge begins to falter in sight of this invincible foe, a shadow falls across the sun. I look upward to see that giant child's face filling half the sky. I remember at last the shallow illusion of our lives. I realize for the hundredth time, the thousandth, that we are only holographic images of a holographic kingdom, bound by the caprice of a malicious boy's imagination.

I begin to turn in the saddle, to shake my fist at the imprisoning screen which is our

sky, to curse that apparition I
despise, that face which runs us
through our paces, which kills and
resurrects and kills us once more
in an unending cycle of blood and
carnage. But already the shells
are sounding about us, sending up
huge chunks of the plain in fiery
gouts. Bullets are whistling past
and my comrades are beginning to
fall by my side. There is only
time for the battle.

And so this life and death.
Again and again.

LIFE'S LOSER
By Nicholas Knight

Donald threw the smoking gun into the river, hopped into his car, and sped off into the night.

After driving for a couple of blocks, his nervousness faded, quickly replaced by elation. He felt triumphant. Vindicated! Never again would he have to listen to Mikey gloat, or be embarrassed by Mikey's put-downs.

#

Everything Donald had ever done, Mikey had copied...and had done better. "Nice try, loser," was what Donald had always heard.

It had all started one Halloween back in elementary school. Donald had been the first one in the class to think of dressing up like a robot, but he'd made the mistake of telling Mikey about his costume. On Halloween, Mikey made sure to arrive at school first...wearing a robot costume of his own. The children all thought Mikey's costume was amazing, what with the beeping control panel in his chest and multiple working blender

attachments where his hands should be. Donald's costume was almost as impressive, but no one paid him any attention -- Mikey took all the glory.

And so it had continued from there on out. Mikey had beaten him in sports. Mikey had scored higher grades. Mikey had won the hearts of all the girls Donald had ever been interested in. Mikey had gotten the better jobs. And he'd always rubbed it in Donald's face:

"Nice try, loser."

Then tonight, twenty years after that first fateful Halloween party, the two "friends" were out at another party, and once again Mikey had copied Donald's costume. This time, they were both dressed as Devils. Their costumes were so similar, that Donald's girlfriend apparently hadn't realized that she'd snuck into the host's guest bedroom for a sexual tryst with the wrong Devil.

Donald felt that Mikey had gone too far, and he decided to put an end to their rivalry once and for all. When Mikey went outside for a smoke, Donald followed him. After he pulled the trigger, Donald got to have what

he'd always wanted -- the final word. "Who's the loser now?" he'd sneered at his dead friend.

#

Speeding around a bend, Donald didn't see the red light until it was too late. He hit the brakes and his tires squealed in protest as his car hurled into the intersection. He was hit from both sides. The car exploded before the paramedics could get the unconscious driver out.

Donald found himself in purgatory. A demon roughly escorted him to the Gates of Hell, where the Devil stood waiting. Donald quickly realized that it wasn't the Devil standing there; it was Mikey, still dressed in his convincing costume.

But something wasn't right -- Mikey was fading in and out of sight.

Seeing Donald, Mikey smiled. "The paramedics just got to my body, they're reviving me... Nice try, loser!"

Night Crawls In
By Nancy Jackson

Lindsay lay alone watching the dim green numbers on the clock show midnight. Earlier in the night she had seen a spider making its way across the wall, and somehow the very thought of it in the same room, kept her awake. Of course she was no stranger to the frustration of insomnia. Between her husband's snoring, endless thinking, and an overactive imagination, sleep was a rarity in her life.

Jay was a wonderful, hardworking man and ever supportive. Tonight he decided to sleep on the couch to see if it would somehow do the trick, and bring Lindsay to one full night of peaceful slumber. It seemed like a cruel trade off but she thought it was worth a shot just this once.

Breathing slowly in and out she willed herself to fall asleep. The humidity had also been a factor as of late, being unusually warm for the season the air was dry. While she was self-conscious of her middle-age body, the heat had made her start sleeping in the

nude. A slight cover of warmth hung over her body, gently caressing her with its breath and promise of dreams. That was what she missed the most, dreaming.

Staring upwards she counted out the three branches from the tree outside, its shadow looming twice its normal size. The lack of sleep had helped her to see many strange things that were easily explainable in daylight. Her husband would be furious if he knew she had fallen asleep at the wheel three times this week. Somehow her car veered smoothly into the other lane, without her noticing. She was grateful for the blaring sounds of horns that erupted all around her. It had felt so good in those precious moments, why wouldn't it come now?

Other objects made shadows sway on the wall in an eerie rendition of ancient ritual dances. Something moved and she blinked. Peering closer she saw it. There it was! The spider crawled right above her, its thick fuzzy legs scurrying with amazing speed and gusto. Had it not been for the faint light from the crescent moon, she never would have seen it in the dark.

Lindsay's pulse raced, her body reacting to its fears. She hated everything about the dark. Nothing looked the way it should. Her husband had long since stopped making fun of her need to sleep with a nightlight, a tradition started when she was a little girl. For years she had horrendous nightmares and freakish dreams that no small child should ever have to deal with. Sleep was its own nightmare and she tried to stave it off for as long as possible. Now not only did she have the night to contend with, but a spider as well, her two biggest fears in one.

Beads of sweat lined her forehead as the heat wave washed over her body. Lindsay's throat became sore and increasingly dry. Sitting up she fumbled for the light beside her bed. As she pulled at the little metal chain it broke off and fell to the floor. Her eyes took their own sweet time adjusting to the darkness while her hands felt around for the glass of water her husband had brought her earlier. The first drops of water were pure pleasure against her parched lips and mouth. Greedily she guzzled the rest down practically choking. Something felt strange as she

swallowed. Trying hard she couldn't make the uncomfortable feeling go away. The water had gone down without a problem, but what was that fuzzy, cotton-like feeling?

Panic swept over her body. It was clear there was an object stuck in her throat. Her heart raced as the realization of having swallowed the spider finally hit her.

Lindsay could hardly breathe, blood raced through her veins at top speed as the spider crawled back up her throat. She swallowed again and again, but it wouldn't budge. It sat there, its legs feeling around, pushing against her insides. Opening her mouth to scream, nothing would come out. With her nails she clawed at her throat, feeling the lump scurrying about to avoid her. Sweat poured down her forehead, drenching the sheets beneath her body. Leaning forward she coughed and sputtered in an attempt to dislodge the intruder but the thing was too stubborn and determined not to come out at her coaxing. The only other thought she had was to vomit the savage thing up. Sticking her fingers down her throat she barely gagged. She never cared for

throwing up and her stomach resisted. Her pillow fell from the bed covering the nightlight on the wall.

Darkness flooded the room, she was too afraid to move or get up. What if there were more spiders? There could be anything lying there in the dark, waiting. It was at night when things crawled and awakened, things that should never be seen in the daylight. Memories from her childhood of the stories her mother read about bugs and monsters that fed on darkness, raced through her mind. Those very things fed on people and their fears. They knew she was scared. She had always been scared. Their eyes used to watch her from every corner of her room, floating closer until she got the nightlight. Perhaps they had grown tired of waiting for her and now there was no lighter to protect her from them.

The more the spider moved the more frightened she became. Lindsay imagined it crawling around her insides, spinning a web around her internal organs and pulling it tight, killing her slowly. Visions raced in her mind of it laying eggs deep within her

chest cavity, only to have a million baby spiders infesting her every muscle, cell, and pore. They would fill her up with webs and feed off her blood supply until she was nothing but flesh and bone. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her days were outnumbered, and it would be the night that would eventually kill her.

Lindsay just couldn't go out like that, not without a fight. Pulling open the nightstand drawer she fumbled around. Taking her husband's exacto knife she made sure the blade was nice and sharp. Satisfied she opened it to a decent length. Looking down at her chest she watched it crawling further down, making a pathway between her breasts. She knew it would be painful but she had to get it out.

The spider's body scurried near her bellybutton where she made the first slice, straight and deep. Her subconscious cried out in pain but her mind was too goal-oriented, this was no longer a choice but an absolute need. She watched its legs flutter past the cut and continue down to her lower abdomen. Again she stuck the knife in and turned the blade

grinding it through muscle, giving it a way out. Still it wouldn't escape, but burrowed further. The pain didn't register over her sheer panic. In the dark her blood looked black, like ink. Maybe if she bled enough it would eventually come pouring out too.

Down her thigh it scrambled, looking for the perfect place to nest. Taking the blade she sliced ever inch of her legs until they were shredded, the stark white of her bone reflecting against the sliver of light from the moon. In horror she realized it was retreating upwards again.

The door to her room flew open. Her husband flipped on the light and stood staring at her, eyes wide with shock.

"What have you done to yourself," he cried. Blood soaked the white satin sheets around her body, droplets slowly falling to the floor. He ran over, staring helplessly at the sight before him.

"There's a spider," she said, her voice strained. On the wall by the door she saw it, the same one she had seen earlier. Jay's eyes followed her gaze and smashed it with his shoe.

"It's gone now, what the hell happened here?" he asked. "Baby, you are losing a lot of blood." "I thought it was inside me," she explained. Her one relief was the cold making its way up her body. She felt so tired and weak she was certain sleep would come to her at last. She laughed quietly to herself. Imagine thinking the spider was crawling inside her, what a crazy idea.

"I'm going to call for a doctor," said her husband. "I don't want to leave you, but I'll be right back." She watched him panic, racing around the room, tears streaming down his face.

"No Jay, just let me sleep, a nice long peaceful sleep, I think I've earned it," she said. "You could just turn out the lights, things always look different in the dark."

Night Fright
By Guy Belleranti

"I don't go out nights no more," Ernie insisted.

"Come on," Charlie said. "It's a sure thing. If anyone sees us outside the place it won't be a problem. It's Halloween night and I got spooky costumes for us to wear. We'll blend in with all the freaks."

"No. I--"

"We need your safe cracking," Marvin cut in. "Charlie and I can handle old lady Compton's alarms no problem, but the safe, hey, that's your area."

"No, not anymore. I'm out of the game now and staying straight."

"You're turning chicken," Marvin said, "that's what you doing."

"No." Ernie shook his head. "No. And I don't go out nights anymore. The werewolf--" Ernie broke off, his face paling.

"Where what?" Charlie

laughed, and elbowed Marvin who also laughed. "Are we hearing him right, Marvin? Did Ernie say he can't help us on this job because of werewolves?"

"Sure sounded like it to me," Marvin said. A mean sneer twisted his scarred face. "But I think he's making excuses." He wrapped one of his huge arms around Ernie's neck and squeezed. "Is that what you're doing, Ernie?" Marvin increased the pressure. "Huh? Is it? You making excuses 'cause you don't want to be partners with us?"

"Please," Ernie gasped. "You're...hurting...me."

"Should I break the wimp's neck, Charlie?" Marvin asked. "Should I?"

"Nah, at least not 'til later."

Marvin gave one final squeeze then let Ernie go.

Ernie fell to the sagging couch, gasping for air. "You guys gonna leave me alone now?" he whispered at last. "You gonna go and leave me alone, please?"

"Sure, Ernie," Charlie said.
"Until tonight."

Ernie looked up. "No. Don't
come. Don't!"

"If Charlie says we're
coming, we're coming," Marvin
said. "And you better be ready.
Werewolves! Ha!" He laughed, spat
in Ernie's face, and followed
Charlie out the door of Ernie's
dilapidated trailer.

"Told you we should have
never tried bringing him into it,"
Marvin complained as he settled in
on the passenger side of Charlie's
pick-up.

"He didn't used to be such a
wuss," Charlie said, jamming the
key into the ignition and starting
the engine. "In the old days--"

"The old days are gone,
Charlie. And I bet Ernie goes to
the cops after we pull the job.
The pansy!"

"Oh, he won't do that,"
Charlie said.

"How can you be so sure?"

Charlie didn't reply, just
steered the truck away from the

trailer and along the wooded road.

"Hey, Charlie," Marvin said.
"Didn't you hear me? How can you be sure he won't cross us?"

Charlie pointed at a rutted track leading off into a copse of trees. "Because we're gonna park there tonight, then go and give him the scare of his life."

"Huh?" Marvin stared. "How?"

Charlie slowed for a cattle guard, swung the pick-up onto the main highway, and glanced across the seat. "I got some costumes, remember. And they just happen to be werewolves. We'll put 'em on and pay Ernie a little visit."

"If you say so, but what's the point?"

"The point? Scaring him up the ass, that's what. Or are you afraid to come back tonight, afraid of Ernie's werewolves, too?"

"Who me?" Marvin glowered.
"I'm not afraid of nothin'."

#

At 10:30 that night they

parked Charlie's truck, and started down the road, Marvin carrying a crowbar, Charlie a gun and flashlight.

"Moon's full," Charlie said. "Perfect for a little werewolf fun." He laughed.

"It is sort of spooky out here, though," Marvin said after a moment. All these tree branches hanging down, and--

"Huh? You serious? You turn into an Ernie?"

"No, of course not. I'm just--"

"Hey, if Ernie was really scared of werewolves would he live in the middle of nowhere?"

Marvin thought that over with a deepening scowl. "Huh? Yeah, that doesn't make sense."

"Of course it doesn't. There's gotta be something else going on with Ernie. Maybe he's got his own little business going, something he doesn't want to share."

"What sort of business?"

Charlie shrugged. "Drugs maybe. If so, I say we cut in on it."

"Yeah, good idea, Marvin said, "but what about old lady Compton's place? If we're gonna do the job we've got to do it before she gets back from her trip."

"And we will. First let's take care of business with Ernie. We need his safecracking, remember?"

A minute later Ernie's trailer came into view.

"Looks like his lights are out," Marvin said.

"At least in front they are," Charlie agreed. "Come on, let's put on our masks and start the fun."

The two men darted across the clearing, Charlie in the lead.

Marvin wedged the crowbar against the flimsy door lock, then froze. "I thought I heard something," he whispered.

"I didn't hear anything." Charlie snapped, but he pulled his gun from his waistband just the

same. "All right," he whispered.
"Do it."

Marvin twisted the bar, the lock snapped, and Charlie plunged into the trailer, flashlight on, gun ready.

Marvin hesitated, then stepped over the threshold to follow.

"Ahhh-- Oh God!" Charlie cried. His gun - or somebody's - exploded once, then a terrible growling sound pierced Marvin's ears.

"W-what?" Marvin cried. "What is--" The sentence died in his throat as the growling repeated, as Charlie fell back against him, a sudden dead weight. Marvin stumbled backwards, losing his balance as he fell out the trailer door, Charlie on top of him.

"Charlie, what's--" Marvin broke off as the moon lit Charlie's face. The werewolf mask had been ripped away and-- Charlie's face had been ripped away, too, and his throat torn open!

Marvin shoved free of Charlie's still form as a voice

half-growled, half-screamed, "I
told you not to come! I told you!"

Then Ernie was upon him.
Ernie, all covered with hair, and
with teeth like daggers.

Nightmare

By Eric S. Brown

Shanti sat in the car as the light of the rising sun gleamed off her windshield. Her eyelids were heavy and she blinked, moving in her seat to stay awake. Her window was rolled down and she flipped the ashes of her cigarette out onto the pavement of the parking lot. She knew she was on the verge of collapse as she reached down with a shaking hand and lifted a cup of cold coffee from the car's drink holder. Taking a sip, she watched them coming towards her. They moved so slowly. There must be a hundred of them she thought. Shanti wasn't worried though. The car still had over a half tank of gas and the motor was running. The only thing she worried about was passing out from exhaustion and the things swarming over her. She didn't want to die.

It had been over 24 hours since she last slept. It had all started the night before. She'd come home from work like normal and flicked on the TV as she worked out. Reports of mass hysteria and murder were all over the news. By the time she'd

gotten a shower and dinner ready, the reports had changed to tales of the dead rising from the grave and killing everyone they encountered, eating them alive. The local channel was running a list of hastily set up shelters at the bottom of the screen. It was like watching a bad movie. She cut off the TV not believing a word she'd heard and decided to finish her meal out on the deck. She carried her plate and drinks outside and took a seat on the swinging bench. The front porch was small but the back deck of her house was spacious and had a wonderful view of the fields and farmland around her. She saw someone coming up the drive. It was unusual. No one, not even her, ever used the back drive. Yet, a figure was walking up it on foot as the sun was sinking behind the mountains.

Shanti got up and stared. It looked like her neighbor Mr. Moore but he was walking funny. It was like he was staggering, unsure of how to move his body. Then she saw him a bit more clearly as the motion lights cut on. She screamed. His throat had been ripped open and blood poured down the front of ragged t-shirt. His eyes were white and as he looked

up at her on the deck a low moan gargled out of his mouth.

Shanti had dropped her plate letting it smash into pieces on the wooden deck and ran inside. She streaked through the house snatching up anything she could think of that she might need because she *knew* she had to leave and leave now. Calling the cops wasn't an option. What she had seen on the TV started to sink in and she knew it was real. Even if she called, the cops may never come, not with what was going on outside.

She ran out the front door to her car, a load of junk in her arms, opening the rear door and tossing it inside. The only items she keeps with her as she slid into the driver's seat were a carton of cigarettes and a thermos of coffee.

After that, she had tried to drive to one of the shelters she'd read about on the news but when she reached it all she had found was a building surrounded by creatures like Mr. Moore had become. It was clear that if anyone had been inside, they were dead. She had driven onward since then from town to town, place to

place, stopping only once at a deserted station where the power was still on to get gas and relieve herself. She hadn't stopped again until this morning. The huge parking lot of this Ingles grocery store had been empty when she pulled in and she hadn't seen a creature in sight anywhere. It wasn't a place she could sleep safely but it had been a place to rest.

She had sat here for almost an hour, watching the things come into the lot from the street or out the woods behind the store. At first they hadn't seem to notice her so she spied on them with a morbid curiosity, studying them. Then one of them had noticed her car as she cranked the engine and lit up a fresh cigarette. She was so tired but as they drew closer she had no choice but to take the road again. She rubbed at her eyes and pulled out of the lot listening to the hungry moans and wails behind her. They were so loud she could hear them over the engine even as she drove away. The interstate loomed before her. She put her foot to the pedal as her eyes slipped closed.

Of Death, Resurrections &
Deliverance
By Marge Simon

Clyde sat staring at the screen until it went black. A figure came on, etched in white and the channel clicked to another without his touching the remote. Nothing worth watching but better than nothing at all. He belched and reached for the last cold one in the cooler at his feet. As he popped the top, he noticed the hole in the screen door. Had to be a tom that tore the screen. Cats! Agatha must be in heat again. Just like Caroline behaved, with those wails and wallowing around on the rug like a slut. He knew that wasn't so. Hell, he was bored. And she wouldn't put out, always on his case to get a job. Bitch.

As if summoned, Agatha appeared from under the sofa, yawning and stretching in one fluid motion. She padded to the table, gave it a look then cleared the distance to the top where light reflected off the fish bowl.

"Yeah, kitty. Just me and you and that stupid fish. We're here all by our lonesome like

usual." **(you mean you're here on your lonesome but you can't remember why)** Clyde pulled a pack of Lucky's from his pocket. Shook out the last, lit it and wadded the empty pack into a ball which he aimed at Agatha. Easily evading the missile, she leaped down and wandered off towards the bathroom. He watched her tail weaving gracefully back and forth and wondered absently if she really was in heat again. If she was, she'd get the boot. He took a swig of the Coors Lite. Tasted like piss water, as his dad would say. But Caroline always stocked this shit, said she'd gotten a taste for it growing up in Colorado or something. No matter his own tastes inclined to lager beer. Any brand, hell.

** shitty pad, no kitchen, nothing but a full size john and a sink! You're stuck here with these shitty pets she leaves you to mind, shit TV that screws up, eff it**

Channel surfing was out. Weird shit, like no matter what he flipped to, only one channel kept coming back. Clyde locked into staring at the tube for another hour, watching what had to be a marathon for religious funding

until he dozed off. A sudden gush of cold air awoke him. He stretched, scratched his crotch. **Damn fleas!** Gradually he focused on the tiny room. Goldfish was in trouble--yeah, big time. It was barely moving and gasping belly up at the water level.

Shit! She'll think you did that on purpose! Blame you for nothing when she comes back, always gotta find something to bitch about thinks you just sit around and wait for her to come home while she's humping her behind at that god dam office well thanks bitch but you don't give a happy shit what happens to her precious

He strode over to the fish bowl and picked it up. The fish moved pitifully and Clyde viewed it with disgust. He shuffled to the bathroom.

"You ain't gonna make it, Goldie!" She floated there barely moving her fins, eyes bulging, lips moving in and out ** (like Caroline's had last night when you had her in the bathtub but you can't remember that either, right now)**. Clyde snorted as he dumped the contents of the bowl in the john. He placed the bowl beside the tub, noting that the shower

curtain was still drawn shut, the way Caroline wanted it. Always has to have things her way. La de da, the scrawny little bitch.

Later when Clyde came back to pee, he saw the fish was still alive. It was swimming crazily back and forth at the point where the bowl flushed. Clyde hit the lever, heard the water surge and gurgle in, watched the whirlpool take Goldie to her fish heaven. He waited. Goldie returned.* *(now are you remembering something?)** He snatched open the shower curtain, stepping back in relief.* *(yes, she's still floating there, her eyes frozen in surprise just as you'd left her but forget it, tell yourself it didn't happen--go ahead)**

Clyde picked up the bowl and filled it with tap water. A swipe of his hand and Goldie was back in the fish bowl. Unzipped again, but it was a no go. Wasn't going to happen this way, so he chucked Goldie back into the toilet and peed. This time, it was a great relief. He returned to watch the last of the religious marathon, which had been going on for 24 hours straight. At some point in this religious drivel, he slept again until he was startled awake

with his head in the toilet,
choking on his own piss.

* *"And He taketh the fish and
the loaf.."** droned the voice of
the TV evangelist. He sensed
Caroline was behind him. Flash of
light, then steel cold hands
clamped on his throat until all
struggles ceased.

A week passed. The neighbor
phoned the cops. In due time, two
officers showed up to check things
out. Agatha welcomed them, winding
in and out between their legs.

"Find anything?"

"Not much. Just the cat, a
couple of goldfish swimming in the
bathtub--that's it."

"Sure stinks in here."

"Yeah. No wonder the neighbor
called us."

"What you want to do about
these fish?"

"You want them, fine. Not me.
Or you can flush them. Toilet's
still working. But I'm thinking I
might take the cat. My wife's been
after me to spend more time with
her. A friendly kitty like this

might do her good. Anyway, let's
get out of here. Gotta wonder who
lived here, don't you? What an
effing piss hole."

Peeping Tom
By Guy Belleranti

Nevermore Magazine, October 2003

Tom didn't know about the raven when he made the phone call early that evening. Not that it would have mattered had he known. He'd have made the call anyway, had been itching to make it since his first peek in her bedroom window.

He punched the numbers on the pay phone with cold precision, waited for her to answer, and kept silent until she repeated "hello" a second time.

"I saw you last night." He spoke in a high pitched sing-song tone, far different from his normal voice.

"Saw me? What--"

"And the night before that one and the one before that. Prancing around in your undies, you were. And when you took it all off and went into the shower--"

"You sick-o." The woman slammed the phone in his ear.

Tom fed the phone more money and redialed, not at all surprised when it rang on and on at the other end. He'd gotten to her, just like he'd hoped to.

"You can let it ring, but you cannot hide," he murmured." He hung up and headed for home at a quick pace.

Good thing he had a strong pair of binoculars. He couldn't risk getting too close to her window tonight.

He was halfway down the block when the raven swooped out of the sky. A big shiny black creature with pointed beak, it landed on the chain link fence bordering the sidewalk and fixed its gleaming eyes upon him.

"Peeping Tom," it said.
"Peeping Tom. Peeping Tom."

Tom fell back in surprise. Then, as the bird started up again, he lost all control and charged at the creature.

"Peeping Tom," the raven cawed, taking to the air,

circling out of reach.

Tom stared up, shaking with rage. "Come back here you damn bird," he shouted. "I ain't scared of you." But the bird continued circling, growing smaller and smaller against the setting sun until it finally vanished from sight.

Tom muttered a curse. Had what happened really happened? He'd heard tales about ravens, tales where the bird's coming foretold evil and disaster, but this. . . .

Tom shook his head and swung back in the direction of the pay phone. He'd show that bird real evil. He felt under his jacket to the waistband of his pants, and ran his fingers over his stashed gun. Make another phone call, bring the bird back so he could draw a bead on it -- that's what he'd do.

Tom grinned, still visualizing. And at the same time show that damn broad she should have never hung up on him.

#

She answered on the first ring.

"I got pictures of you," Tom said, his voice a squeaky falsetto. "Lots of dirty photographs."

She sucked her breath in sharply, and he went on before she could disconnect.

"I think I'll hang them around town. Yeah, I'm gonna make lots of copies so everyone can get an eyeful."

"Please. . .no. Don't." She began to cry.

"You shouldn't have slammed the phone on me before, bitch."

She didn't respond, just continued sobbing.

"Oh boohoo, boohoo," Tom mimicked. He hung up, laughing. That would teach her.

He started down the street, watching the sky, slowing as he reached the chain link fence. But no raven came.

#

Darkness had set in by the time Tom reached his apartment. He rummaged in the fridge for a beer, popped the lid, and chugged it down.

Hearing the fear and helplessness in her voice had really stirred him up. Yeah he'd drop by tonight, do a little more peeping.

Tom fondled his gun, thinking of the raven, of how he'd love to fill it with lead, even bat it with the gun if he got the chance. He gathered up his binoculars and camera, stuffed a couple cookies in his jacket pocket and set out.

Her house wasn't far. It was a little place -- two bedrooms, one bath - the kind they used to build, but seldom did anymore. He'd happened upon it by luck, had been cruising the streets one night and had seen her sitting on the tiny front porch. He'd peeked in other babes' windows before hers, but none had turned him on like she did.

Her lot butted up against some woods, and it was through these trees that he made his nighttime approaches.

Three times he'd done it so far, and last night he'd actually gotten inside her house.

It had all happened so fast.

He'd settled into his favorite tree, binoculars to eyes, when she'd come out the front door and driven off in her old VW. Oh yeah, for a minute he'd been furious. But then he'd had his idea.

He'd tried her bedroom window, had found it unlocked, and had slid it up then climbed inside.

That's how he'd learned her phone number - it'd been written right there on the phone in her bedroom. He'd looked in her closet, then felt through the filmy things in her drawers, reveling in their scent. And he'd found a spare key, one that opened the back door.

The sprinkling of stars in the moonless sky momentarily vanished from view as Tom melted into the woods. Was he wise to come here tonight? She'd probably be on her guard after his calls to her earlier. And that

bird. . . . What if it was
watching him as he watched her?

Tom grinned, almost laughed.
So what if it was.
Wasn't that just what he wanted?
How else would he get his
chance to kill it?

He made his way to his usual
viewing tree and swung up
among its branches.

Damn! Her bedroom light was
on, but the curtains were drawn.

Tom raised his binoculars and
silently swore again.

Totally blocked out.

He dropped back to the
ground.

"Shouldn't have closed your
curtains, bitch," Tom muttered.
He felt in his pocket and smiled
as his fingers found the key to
her back door. "Here I come,
babe."

Tom moved through the
shrubbery, then, bending low,
raced across the small gap between
house and woods. He
could almost taste her now,
wondered if she'd scream when

he did.

He drew the key from his pocket and snapped on his tiny flashlight so he could see the lock. Another minute and--

A sound came from behind and above. . . . Rushing air. . .flapping wings. . . .

Tom jerked around, caught a fleeting glimpse of motion with his light, and then something hit him with a fury of talons and beaks. The raven. Several ravens. They came from all directions, knocking the keys, flashlight and gun from his hands, jabbing his face, digging deep until they ripped both his eyes from their sockets.

And above his screams he heard them repeat over and over, "No more peeping Tom. No more peeping Tom."

PICTURE A WORLD

By Stephen D. Rogers

Michael took another pull from the bottle of tequila, the bite blurring the lines of loneliness. It would be so easy to paint him out of the picture the way Lisa had, so easy except for the deadline.

The architect wanted delivery tomorrow before he met with his bankers. No painting meant any payment. No payment meant no more tequila and even tequila couldn't be allowed to stand in the way of tequila.

Michael placed the bottle out of sight and turned to face the canvas.

The house was penciled in, a corner lot, the perspective based on the architect's drawings. There was a car on the left for size and a little girl on the right for the human element, three trees and a few clouds a puffy white.

Welcome to the neighborhood.

Michael opened a tube of oil and squeezed the paint onto the

palette, repeated the process until he had the colors he required to make the colors he needed.

The architect was window crazy and nothing was harder to paint than windows. In perspective, the closer he got the window the more transparent the glass. As the windows pulled back towards the horizon, the glass became more reflective. Then there was the surface itself.

Michael blended blues, grays, and whites.

Leaving the picture window for last, Michael slowly painted the rest of the windows, frame by frame. He paused every fifteen minutes to check that the glass captured the light correctly.

In college, he had called himself an artist and preached art for art's sake. That was the luxury of being a college student. When else did idealism feel like realism?

Six months after graduating, he found himself applying for a position as a civilian dispatcher to pay off his loans. When he couldn't convince his ever dwindling circle of friends that

he wasn't a cop, he decided to grab the extra money and become one.

Anti-establishment hero becomes a tool of the oppressors.

Lisa helped him come to grips with the way things were. He even grew to like the job, at least the protect and serve part. He was a good cop and he knew it.

Now five years later he was an artist again. Just last week he bought a used car outright with the proceeds from his first paying job: Bloom Dentistry, paintings for the waiting area and three examination rooms, something to sooth the patients.

Michael hunted for the bottle and rewarded himself with an extra hit of tequila.

The picture window was next.

The architect had selected a box window, which meant every row of panes was on a different angle, each one giving the glass a distinct set of qualities.

Michael took up his brush.

The first row was completely reflective.

The second row was mostly reflective, somewhat transparent.

The third row was more transparent, the yellow curtains clearly visible for the first time.

The fourth row was transparent enough to see the sixth row in the background. No, the curtain would be blocking that.

Michael stood to clear his head, chugged from the bottle to make sure his head wouldn't get too clear.

Becoming a law officer had been ironic but the work honest and engaging. The paintings he had stooped to doing, however, was closer to prostitution, schlock for schlock's sake. The dentist might as well have ordered some paint-by-number kits.

Michael fortified himself with another shot.

If it wasn't so late he'd make some coffee. Caffeine shakes could cause some interesting brush strokes. When was he meeting the architect tomorrow, ten o'clock?

What time was it now?

He glanced at the clock to see it was already tomorrow.

What if the architect hated the painting?

Michael sat and completed the picture window before he lost his nerve.

He squeezed out the colors for the siding and roof.

After selecting a clean brush, Michael quickly fleshed out the rest of the house.

Lisa would have loved this place. She liked lots of windows, craved light and lightness. In the end, she couldn't handle being a cop's wife, especially a cop who couldn't even....

Michael swore and gritted his teeth. He only let his mind drift for a second and she was back, haunting him.

He took a quick sip and gauged the level in the bottle. Which would he finish first, the painting or the tequila?

The yellow curtain moved as a pale hand straightened a snag.

Michael rubbed his eyes and took a deep breath. He only needed to concentrate. The windows were done. The rest of the house would be done shortly.

He finished the house and gathered more colors.

The little girl on the sidewalk was six years old, clutched a doll in her right hand. She had blue eyes but you couldn't tell from this distance. The dress was white. Her shoes were barely scuffed.

She was returning home after playing at a friend's. She wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. She had the brains for it and was good with strangers. She would make an exceptional caregiver.

Painting the street was simple. The development was new enough that scars hadn't had time to accumulate.

This was a perfect world.

The car was going to be a problem. Vehicles had always been

difficult for Michael. There were no surfaces on a set plane, reflective metal flowing through all dimensions. And then of course there were the windows with their curved glass.

Michael let his gaze wander over towards the house. The architect couldn't complain about the job. Maybe there'd be others or at least referrals.

A face appeared at the picture window.

Michael took a healthy slug of tequila.

It was late and he was tired. His imagination was working overtime.

Channel that energy. Complete the car.

Michael could smell the newness of the vehicle as he brought it to life, saw a ding appear on the side. The owner must have been pissed.

Five years on the force, Michael had seen his share of fender-benders. Two cars totaled and all the occupants hospitalized, the hardest part was sweeping up the glass. But if

someone was only tapped, out jumped the drivers shouting curses at each other, waving guns if they had them.

Michael glanced back at the house, saw the face reappear. There she was in all her pale beauty, Lisa, one hand pressed against the glass, fingertips tentative and endearing.

She couldn't forgive him for the death of Jessica, for not apprehending the hit-and-run driver and making him pay even though Michael hadn't been assigned to the case, had been ordered to stay away in fact. Shortly after the funeral, Lisa disappeared and not even her folks knew where she went.

Michael upended the bottle but when he finished choking, she was still there, staring out the window at the little girl. For all the tequila he'd poured into himself, Michael had never been so sober in his entire life.

Jessica swung the doll as she skipped home.

With a roar the car whipped around the corner, the tires squealing as the driver tried to regain control.

"No!" Michael grabbed the sides of the canvas.

Jessica screamed as the car bore down on her, jumped the curb, and flung her up into the air before pulling back out onto the road.

The doll landed on lawn unpainted.

Lisa came rushing out of the house. She scooped up her dead baby, turned to Michael and started screaming.

How could this be happening?

It wasn't fair.

Michael quickly looked away, unable to face any more guilt, and he then saw the license number of the vehicle as it continued down the street.

Michael still had friends on the force. Even if they weren't willing to follow up on the information, they'd tell him who the owner was. Once a cop, always a cop.

He called the station, asked who was working. Danny, Danny

would help.

"I need you to run a plate for me."

"What's up?"

How did he explain? "I received an anonymous call tonight, a witness to the hit-and-run."

"I'm on it."

Michael recited the registration, keeping his eyes averted from the painting. Please let this not be a dead end.

"Mikey?"

"Yes?"

"At the time of the incident, the car was registered to a Paul Reston of Sherwood Drive. He sold it two days later."

Michael dropped into the nearest chair and covered his eyes with his free hand. "Reston could afford to change cars at the drop of a hat. He's a successful architect."

"You know him?"

I knew the color of his

money.

"I'm meeting with him tomorrow morning."

"That's fate for you."

"Yes, fate." Michael took a deep breath. "Thanks a million."

"No problem. You want me to send some backup?"

"I'll be fine." Michael disconnected and returned to the painting. He wanted to memorize all the details for his ten o'clock.

It was time to paint a killer into the corner.

PODS
By Kevin Anderson

"Halfway between heaven and hell is a spinning ball of dirt we call planet Earth and I'm here to tell 'ya friends, -- whether you fear God or the devil himself, there is more down on this rotating sphere to chill your bones and curl your insides than you could possibly imagine. This here is the Twilight Man and I've seen things that would make a Navy Seal run crying to his mamma. I could tell you stories, folks. Anyone got their ears on? Come back"

Dale took the thumb off the CB mic's call button and listened intently. His left hand gripped the steering wheel of the Mack truck like a vise. He was cutting through a stormy night northbound on Utah's desolate Interstate 15. Thunderous rain explosions bombarded the eighteen wheeler's windshield as Dale strained to hear the silence escaping from the CB's speaker. He was a moment from hanging up the mic, resigned to continue his search for entertainment on the radio, when the speaker came to life.

"Breaker, breaker -- that's one hell of an intro you got there, Twilight Man."

Dale grinned. "Like my expanding butt -- it's a work in progress. Who do I have the pleasure of jawing with on this dark and stormy night? Come Back."

"Well, they call me the Night Crawler and I'm on the rebound -- headed south on Interstate 15. 'Bout eight miles from Paragonah."

"Looks like we'll be ships passing in the night, in say five -- ten minutes. I'm currently Yankee bound just a mile shy of Cedar City."

"I'll be sure to wink at 'cha, good buddy. Sounds like you have some stories to keep this old trucker awake for a few days -- but I think I got a tale that'll perk your interest. Come Back"

"You've got my attention Night Crawler," Dale breathed into the mic.

"Problem is, this tale has a beginning, middle but no end."

"Say again, Night Crawler."

"Well, this thing just happened to me 'bout thirty minutes ago and I don't know what to make of it. Sure would appreciate your opinion."

"The Twilight Man is here to help. Start spinning that yarn, good buddy."

After a reverent pause in which Dale assumed the Night Crawler was using to elevate the drama of his tale, or maybe just finding the words to begin, the voice in the night continued. "Just after I left Salt Lake my bladder sent the clear message that I needed to shake hands with shortly. Which was fine 'cause I hadn't eaten all day neither. I pulled into a chew and choke called The Broken Wings Cafe. Kind of a heavily weathered place, if you know what I mean?"

"That's a big 10-4. I've passed it on many occasions, but never stopped."

"I and my ulcer can highly recommend the chili. But the company is definitely lacking."

"How do you mean, Night Crawler?"

"You know how it is when you've been on the road for a few weeks straight with no one to jaw with. I went in there looking for a place to piss, some food that would continue to hurry me along to a premature death, and just a little human conversation. Not too much to ask. 'Em I right Twilight Man?"

"I hear 'ya, Night Crawler."

"Now I admit that I hadn't taken the time to wash the road off this body for nearly two days, and maybe my twelve hour deodorant was in the fifteenth hour of trying to do its job, but I tell 'ya, Twilight Man, I tried with a big smile on my face to start no less than ten conversations with employees and locals."

"And no luck?"

"Hell, Twilight Man, it was like trying to talk to an appliance. After thirty minutes of that I was more frustrated than a toothless beaver."

Dale let loose with a few chuckles. "Well, antisocial behavior is not that big of a mystery, Night Crawler. The

Broken Wing is not a trucker's stop -- more a local hangout."

"I know Twilight Man, and at the time I chalked it up to my casual relationship with proper hygiene. But when the thing in the parking lot happened, I got to wondering."

"Do tell, Night Crawler."

"As I was leaving, my foot slipped off the brake and my rig slid back about ten feet before I got it back under control. I heard a loud cracking and tearing sound and I thought Lord-O-Mighty, don't let me have just kilted nobody."

"What did you hit?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I probably would not be telling this story. I jumped out of the cab and ran to the back of my trailer. It was plenty dark back there and my flashlight was flickering because the batteries were just two gasps from death. But it seemed I had backed through some sort of wall made of twigs and mud. I was plenty relieved, I'll tell you what. But then, I heard something that made my jewels jump up into my throat."

"And what was that, Night
Crawler?"

"It was like something had
just died. Something on the other
side of that wall had just let out
a death cry and it did not go
gently, good buddy."

"Well, don't leave the
Twilight Man in suspense. What
the hell was it?"

"I climbed up on my rear tire
and took me a gander over that
twig wall. The wall circled round
and made a huge bowl shape and
lord have mercy. What I saw I
don't think I'll ever be right
with. Twilight Man, there was
over a half dozen of these large
oval shaped -- pod things."

"Come again, Night Crawler.
Did you say pod?"

"Affirmative. Pods. Eight
or nine of 'em. And my rig
cracked two of 'em wide open.
There was this red and yellowish
slime spilling out. Looked like
something my third wife would have
served for supper. God awful in
the kitchen she was -- bless her
heart. But what was sprawled out
in that slime was something she

couldn't have conjured up on her worst day."

Dale began to wonder if the Night Crawler had downed a few spirits at The Broken Wing, before stumbling out to his truck. Then he remembered they were in Utah. "And what was that, Night Crawler?"

"Inside, the goop looked like the beginnings of a man -- or something close to it. It wasn't completely formed yet. The arms were frail and the head was dark and narrow, but I could see its eyes -- big, bulging and spaced far apart almost on the sides of its head."

"You wouldn't be yanking the Twilight Man's trailer now would 'ya?"

"I wish I were. I hightailed it out of that parking lot and have been pushing ninety-five ever since."

"Best keep them eyes open for Smokeys. You could be paying some heavy green at that kind of speed."

"I'd rather deal with a bear than whatever the hell that was at

The Broken Wing. I want to put as much distance as I can between me and that freak show. For the last thirty minutes I've been gnawing on the whole thing and I think I've got a theory. Did you ever see that old movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?"

"Think so. Is that Mr. Spock guy in it?"

"Well, he was in the remake. The original came out in the fifties, I think. Kind of a red scare Sci-Fi."

"Sure, sure. I see where you're going with this."

"It would explain things. Wouldn't it?"

"Explanation or not -- that is one wild tale you have there Night Crawler."

"Yeah, definitely a story for the grandkids come Halloween. Hey, I think we are about to pass each other, good buddy."

"I spy your headlights in the distance approaching fast." Dale set the CB receiver down on the console so he could switch hands on the steering wheel and flash his headlights -- giving the Night

Crawler a friendly wink.

Both semi-trucks slowed down so they could get a look at one another as they passed. With only about twenty feet dividing them as they sped by one another, Night Crawler tapped his lights and threw out a wave.

But Dale did not do likewise. He had frozen like a slab of meat in the freezer.

"Hey now, Twilight Man -- that is just plain rude. I thought we were friends here."

Dale didn't respond. A chill was moving through his body and turning his blood to ice.

"Twilight Man, you got your ears on? Come back."

As if someone had snapped their fingers, Dale suddenly thawed. He grasped for the mic and quickly brought it to his lips. "Night Crawler. You have got something on your trailer!"

"What the hell are we talkin' about, Twilight?"

"I counted three. Looked like they were crawling along the top working their way to the cab."

"Three what?"

"They looked like men, but they had..."

"Had what?"

"They had what looked like...wings. On their backs they had wings."

"Oh hell, Twilight Man. Now who is pulling whose trailer here?"

"I am not bullshitting you, Night Crawler! You have unwelcome guests!"

"I don't see anything."

"They're on top. There's no way you can see 'em. I'm gonna exit and get back on going your way and come up behind you. Slow down so I can catch up but don't stop. You hear me?"

"You're scaring me, Twilight Man."

"Just hang on and I'll be there in a flash."

Dale let the receiver fall onto his lap as he exited the freeway. He blew threw the stop

sign at the end of the ramp and turned the steering wheel hard. Several wheels on the left side of the truck left the ground as he executed two quick turns and pointed the thirty-ton vehicle south. Pushing the accelerator to the floor, he sped down the onramp.

He fumbled for the CB mic, which had slid off his lap and was dangling between his knees. "Night Crawler, I'll be at your backdoor in two minutes." Dale paused for his friend's reply. Silence. "Night Crawler! Don't go quiet on me, good buddy." Still nothing. "Damn!" Dale shouted and tossed the receiver onto the console.

The rain seemed to be falling harder and Dale squinted to see the road. As the windshield wipers struggled to keep the glass clear, Dale could just make out the Night Crawler's tail-lights. He was closing the gap very fast. Too fast. The Night Crawler was either going very slow or wasn't moving at all.

Dale slammed on the breaks as he realized that he was only seconds away from smashing into the back of Night Crawler's truck,

which was stopped in the middle of the Interstate.

Wheels skidded to a stop, and Dale's truck came to rest about twenty yards behind Night Crawler's rear wheel flaps. Dale's headlights did a decent job of chasing away the darkness and lighting up Night Crawler's back door. He sat still for a few moments and scanned for movement. Nothing.

He picked up the mic. "Night Crawler."

Soft static was the only reply.

"All right then," Dale grinned to himself. He reached under the seat and pulled out a sawed-off shotgun that was a gift from his mother, along with a knife so big it would have put Jim Bowie's to shame. He stuck the knife in a sheath clipped to his belt and then opened the cab door. He jumped down from the cab and listened. The rain bombarded the ground with a thunderous roar and the wind howled like a pack of wolves. He slowly walked up to the backdoor of the truck. Remnants of the slime the Night Crawler had described decorated

the back bumper. The rain was beginning to wash it away and Dale felt a twinge of nausea as he saw some of it dripping to the pavement.

Twigs and globs of mud also appeared on the rear of the vehicle. And something else. Dale moved in closer and grabbed a large fragment off the door latch. It reminded him of shell remnants he had seen on his brother-in-law's Ostrich farm in Texas. Only this was bigger. Much bigger.

Then it hit him. Night Crawler's body snatching theory was off. Way off. Not pods. Not aliens. But Eggs. His fellow trucker had backed into something's nest.

He let the enormous eggshell fall to the ground and he peered around the corner of the trailer. It was about a fifty-foot walk to the cab with nothing but stormy weather blocking the way. He got about ten paces towards the cab when he saw a hand, or something that looked like a hand, reach out of the driver's side window. It adjusted the side view mirror, then recoiled back into the cab like a retreating cobra. A second later, Night Crawler's truck fired up with a roar. It vibrated under the hum of its 365-horsepower

diesel engine, and Dale called out. "Night Crawler!" Dale heard the truck go into gear and it started to roll forward. "Jeez!" Dale screamed and started to run back to his truck. As he jumped into his cab, he froze for a moment as he heard and felt two very large somethings pass overhead. Big somethings. Whatever they were Dale sensed, they were heading north -- back to the Broken Wing. Shaking it off, he slammed his door shut and put the truck in gear.

Both trucks raced south on the 15. The lead vehicle had a few seconds' head start, but Dale was gaining. He moved through the gears like a man with a purpose, and was soon pulling up along side Night Crawler's truck. Dale's cab was even with Night Crawler's trailer as he pushed the accelerator to the floor. He inched forward, slowly overtaking the other truck. The two cabs were running parallel, with only a foot of space between them. And that's when Dale looked over into the other cab. Glaring back at him from behind Night Crawler's steering wheel was something out of a nightmare. Its engorged eyes were pulled around onto the sides of its narrow head. The eyes were

beaming back at him with rage and intelligence. Below the eyes, where humans displayed a nose, this thing had a hideous beak with jagged edges for tearing flesh. Jetting up above its shoulders were wings, which seemed to fill the cab.

Dale's eyes widened as the thing's beak opened and let out a hideous sound that could be heard over two semi-truck engines and a raging storm. It was the anguished scream of a parent that had lost a child.

A taloned hand thrust something out the window and it landed on Dale's truck. Night Crawler's severed head skidded across the hood and smashed into Dale's windshield before sliding off into darkness. For the second time that night, Dale slammed on the brakes, bringing his truck to a screeching halt.

He sat for a moment and watched Night Crawler's truck become smaller and smaller until finally it blinked out of existence. As the rain washed away the blood on his hood, Dale slowly turned the truck around and started

heading north. He popped open his cooler, pulled out a Dr. Pepper, and drank it down quickly.

Dale thought about all the strange things he had seen on the road and wondered where this night fell on his weirdness scale. About a five or six out ten, he thought.

He crushed the can, threw it to the floor, and picked up the CB's mic. "Halfway between heaven and hell is a spinning ball of dirt we call planet Earth and I'm here to tell 'ya friends -- whether you fear God or the devil himself, there is more down on this rotating sphere to chill your bones and curl your insides than you could possibly imagine. This here is the Twilight Man, and I've seen things..."

REFLECTION

By Kevin Anderson

A hot flash of terror gripped Morgan's throat as she slammed on the brakes. She had never killed anything and she was not ready to start now.

Her new Mercedes skidded on the driveway, coming to rest with a sudden violent jerk. The black cat, whose life she had just saved by not crushing less than two tons of automobile, stared back at her with mild disregard.

"Oh, you little shit!" Morgan breathed, glaring back at the feline through her windshield. She tapped the horn and the cat scurried across the lawn and up a tree in the front yard.

Ms. Morgan Devlin, real-estate agent in the Dallas area for nearly twenty-three years, chuckled slightly as the comedy of the situation finally grabbed her. She had just about skidded into her new client's fence to avoid a stupid cat.

"Jeez girl. Get a grip." She talked to herself quite often. Especially when looking at her reflection. Checking her eyeliner in the rear view mirror, she

wished it were bigger so she could see her hair. She would've taken a minute to check her hair in one of the three compact mirrors in her purse, but she was in a hurry, and knew there were plenty of mirrors in the house.

Morgan was meeting her boss at this two-story Victorian in the elegant Highland Park district. They were scheduled to do a walk through and together come up with a plan to market the property. She had hoped to arrive ahead of him and get a feel for the empty house without his flirtatious prattle.

His Jag wasn't in sight, so she got out of her car and started digging for the house key in her purse. She pulled out a ring of keys all with different colored labels. Holding them up in the sunlight, she searched for the one with the purple tag. As she found the key, something seized her attention. A dark movement in her peripheral.

A silhouette had suddenly framed itself in one of the upstairs windows. Then as suddenly as Morgan turned her head to get a good look, it was gone. It hadn't walked away but rather fell from

view, as if the floor had been removed from the spot in which it stood. Through squinted eyes, she took a harder look at the window, noticing odd shapes of reflected sunlight glimmering along its edge. She shrugged, dismissing the image as a warped reflection in the hot Texas sunlight.

Grabbing the right key, she took a quick glance at herself in the mini-mirror on the key chain. "Looking good today, sugar."

Entering the house, she did a quick walk-through of the downstairs. When she moved through the kitchen, she snarled a playful growl at her reflection in the microwave door -- something she had done a million times as a child.

Before heading upstairs, she stopped to take a good long look at herself in the full-length mirror in the entryway. Since childhood, staring at herself always seemed to give her a sense of calm. The relationship she had developed with her reflection was all about control. As a teenager, she would stare for hours at herself. When she smiled, her reflection smiled. When she stuck out her tongue, her reflection

stuck out her tongue. No matter how far out of control life got, she would always be the master of her reflection. She was in control.

In adulthood, that warming sense of control embodied by her reflection became a check and balance system. When her reflection looked a bit heavy, she could force herself to throw up. Back in control. When her reflection showed too many age lines, she could have an operation. Back in control.

"You are looking fine today, sister."

As she stepped onto the second floor, she heard a car horn. Her boss usually liked to make an entrance in his silver Jaguar, even if it was just onto a driveway.

Walking over to a front facing window, she planned to throw him a wave. But when she looked down she didn't see her boss's car. Only her Mercedes occupied the driveway.

A stem of confusion wound through her mind, then suddenly blossomed into terror as she saw herself get

out of her own car. She felt faint watching herself on the driveway, digging through her purse, holding up keys in the sunlight, and looking for the one with the purple label.

Control left her. And so did consciousness.

Shop-mart
By Eric S. Brown

Published in Dying Days

John tapped his fingers nervously on the steering wheel. Tonight was the first night of his new job. He stared through the dusty glass of the windshield at the beaming red letters, which ran across the top of the new super shopping center.

"Shop-mart: Satisfaction guaranteed. Open 24 hours, seven days a week."

He slid on the red vest he'd been given earlier in the day at his orientation and stepped out of his car. Even when he'd come here as a customer, the gigantic parking lot had filled with him awe.

It was 10:45 PM, late enough for most of the small town of Sylva to be in bed, preparing for work or school on Monday morning, yet he counted over a hundred cars under the pale glow of the lot's lights before he gave up his count in frustration.

John despised working and

hoped the night shift would require less of him than the rushed hours of the day. The sea of cars around him increased his nervousness about his first night and filled him with a sense of dread. He may have to actually do something after all.

The glass doors slid open as he approached, welcoming him to his new nighttime home. The customer greeter nodded as he passed by, most likely laughing inwardly at the "new guy". John made his way to the rear of the store and entered the personnel/storage area. Mr. Stephson stood beside the unloading docks as other employees labored to unload the night's stock delivery under his supervision. When he noticed John walk in, he turned and extended his hand in greeting. "John, I'm glad you made it. You'd be surprised how many people sit through orientation just to get paid those few hours and leave never to be seen again," Stephson laughed.

John took the offered hand and shook it firmly. Stephson's flesh felt cold and clammy in his grip. "I need the money for more than just a few hours." John

joked.

Stephson led John further into the back of the store. "We have a staff meeting at the beginning and end of every shift. Just too kind of update everyone and keep the whole staff informed of what's going on, on a day to day basis. You're excused from tonight's meeting, this being your first night with us, but I will expect to see you at all the others."

Stephson said firmly. John tried to hide his hatred of "staff meetings" and merely answered,

"Yes, sir."

"Your office is in here."
Stephson opened a door half concealed by a stack of crates. Inside was a lone chair, surrounded by more than fifty monitors showing scenes from across the entire store. "You've worked security before, so I am sure you know the job. I won't waste time explaining things to you. Get in there and start protecting us from shoplifters," Stephson laughed and turned to leave John to his work, but suddenly he stopped in his tracks, looking at John with cold hard eyes, all remnants of his previous

kindness gone, and warned,
"Remember your job here is to
catch thieves and stop trouble
before it starts with the
customers, nothing more. Keep
everything else to your self no
matter how odd or unusual it may
seem. Are we clear?"

Shaken by the cryptic and
strange warning, John nodded his
agreement quickly, wishing
Stephson would just go away. As
Stephson left the room, John shut
the door and sat down in the
chair. He spun in it a few times
and smiled. It was comfortable
enough alright. Then he settled
in and started watching the
screens. His eyes drifting from
one to another until, they all
seemed to blur into one. An old
woman pushed a cart through the
produce section. A young man
roamed hardware searching for the
proper kind of motor oil for his
car after using a computer display
to find the type. Long lines of
people waited at the front
checkout lanes in a hurry to get
home. John stretched his hands
above his head, yawning. "Maybe
this won't be such a bad gig after
all," he mumbled to himself. Time
passed slowly in the cramped
office however, and soon he began
to feel sleepy and totally bored

out of his mind. As he struggled to find something to keep him awake, a realization struck him. The break room for the employees never appeared on any of the monitors. Most chain stores like this one watched their employees like hawks as they could be an even bigger risk than the customers. He began to experiment with the controls of the monitoring system. On a lark, he decided he would find the break room and watch the staff meeting just to have something to laugh at and keep him awake. Surely, it would have to be more interesting than the rest of the crap he was watching. Clicking button after button, he finally found what he was looking for. A man and woman in red Shop-mart vests sat across a table from a young woman in jeans and a T-shirt. The rest of the room was empty except for vending machines and a tiny coffee maker. He scanned the other screens. No other workers were even on their way to the meeting yet he was sure Stephson had said there was going to be one. He eyes darted back to break room screen as the young woman slammed her fist into the table and leapt up from her seat. The two in Shop-mart vests moved towards her as if trying to calm her down. It

was only then that John noticed the break room's door was locked and tightly sealed as the young woman flung herself against it. He watched her lips form a scream and wished the monitors had audio capabilities. She fell to the floor clutching her shoulder where it had struck the door. The man in the Shop-mart vest flung himself at her and lifted her from her feet with a single hand as if she were as light as a feather. John blinked in surprise. What the Hell was going on? John clicked off the camera sending it back to its normal random pattern, wondering what he should do. Something was most certainly wrong in there. He tugged the bottom of his own vest, straightening it as he stood. "What the Heck?" he muttered, "If I check it out at least, I'll get out of this dang room for a while."

He left the office in hurried walk for the break room. As John rounded the corner into the store's main rear area, a pimply-faced teenager whom he knew was in charge of the pet department during 3rd shift, stopped him just outside the break room door.

"You're not supposed to be here. It's my turn tonight," he

informed John in an annoyingly high-pitched voice. John flashed his security badge and shoved the kid aside. Muffled screams came from within the break room. The kid glared at him and said, "I'm telling Mr. Stephson. You're going to be in big trouble for cutting in when it's not your turn." Then he turned and stormed off in huff.

"His turn?" John wondered. "What the . . . ?" Ignoring the pouting kid, John tried the door to the break room. It was indeed locked, just like he had seen on the monitors. Fumbling around in his pocket, he fished out the master key he had been given and slid it into the lock. The screaming had stopped by the time he was able to open the door. He shoved his way inside. Both Shop-mart employees held the woman in an odd embrace, sandwiching her between them, their lips pressed against her flesh. John's mind screamed group rape but that didn't make any sense. Something like that was more of a myth than reality in a small town like Sylva. A trickle of red liquid flowed from where their lips met the woman's skin as John stared in horror. Mustering his courage, he yelled, "Shop-mart Security! Stop

whatever the hell you are doing right now!"

The man and woman dropped the limp corpse, letting it slid onto the tile floor as they stared at John. The man's eyes burned casting an eerie yellow glow in the dim lights of the room. "Who are you?" the man asked in a hollow voice devoid of emotion. His muscles rippled under his Shop-mart uniform.

John cursed the fact that he hadn't been issued a gun. The woman stepped towards him, hissing through bared teeth. "Ah, crap," John breathed backing up slowly, before he turned and fled from the room. The young woman and his job were forgotten. He only cared about getting out of the store alive.

He dashed out into the main part of the store, dodging customers and employees alike. He could see the exit doors up ahead and poured on extra speed, deciding to cut through the freezer section to throw off any pursuit. Too late, he noticed the orange caution signs on the floor. He flew face first into a freezer of frozen breakfasts. He tried to cry out as the breaking glass

slashed into his cheeks and throat, before his body bounced backwards from the impact. A large shard of broken glass stuck out from underneath his chin and blood poured down the front of his red vest. He grabbed the shard using the last of his strength to try to tear it free so he could breathe again but his hands were too slippery from his own blood. As he blacked out, the last thing he heard was the store's intercom blaring. "Cleanup on isle 14. Cleanup on isle 14."

SOUL MATES
By Douglas E. Wright

Bailey approached her old homestead and climbed the wooden steps to the top of the porch. The verandah groaned as she stepped across its weathered planks. Carefully, she slipped past the torn screen door and stepped over the decaying threshold. Inside the foyer, strips of wallpaper hung like paper nooses off the ceiling and dripped from the walls. She drew a breath and slid into the bowels of the abandoned house. Bailey eased into the living room where bits of furniture; shards of glass, collapsed plaster ceiling, beer cans and cigarette butts littered the room. Scattered on top of the hardwood floors, broken panes of glass crunched like breath-mints beneath her feet. A dilapidated rocking chair wobbled in the breeze in front of a smashed window while mice scurried through broken walls. It seemed hard for her to imagine she had escaped this prison. She had once been sentenced here, when the walls were her sole companions and colorful printed drapes listened to her dreams.

#

Bailey tossed her hair over her shoulder and continued her walk about the house. After she browsed the remnants of its past life, she stood at the bottom of a stairway. She raised her head and stared up to the next level. The images of her fiancé's fists reverberating off her skull flickered in front of her. Then, she recalled the night they stuffed her into an ambulance before committing her to a secured padded room.

She closed her eyes.

The mental pain and vision of her fiancé', Alcoholic Andy, vanished. His image and hypothetical jealousies all dissipated.

Bailey inched up the stairway to the second floor and strolled through the corridor that funneled into the master bedroom.

This is where it all began. This was the room where she fell madly in love. Now, all it held was a water-stained mattress blanketing a warped pine plank floor. The room's grungy window kept most of the autumn sunshine at bay while confusing memories prickled her flesh.

She flashed back to that lonely

night. The one far from present day.

The sky had grown inky black while a raging rainstorm stretched its electric white branches across the heavens. Andy had been drinking as usual. After quickly extracting sex from her, he left her abandoned and sullen.

She lay silently on their bed, her eyes flushed with tears. Again, her spirits had been doused and her body bruised. This was one of those times she wished his love had not been so violent. Yanking tear-soaked pillows from behind her head, she hugged them close to her battered frame. After a few minutes in the dark, she became silhouetted in the glow of a flickering screen. Her body resembled a damaged porcelain doll bathed in computer light.

Suddenly, a disembodied voice crackled through the air.

"Are you all right?"

The voice stunned Bailey. She scrambled for a blanket and pulled it over herself while tears of pain streamed down her cheeks. With reddened swollen eyes, she scanned the room for the intruder.

She hiccupped and gasped for breath. Fear wrenched her soul.

"Wh -wh- who . . . or what are you?"

"I'm not really sure," it answered.

The monitor blinked with every syllable it uttered. She watched its electronic blue font dance across the screen. Its voice spilled from cheap computer speakers. Its voice didn't speak in conjunction with its bold typed text.

Bailey pulled herself to the head of the bed. Then, as inconspicuously as possible, she made sure she was out of its vision. Stretching out, she yanked her robe from a chair next to the bed. She draped it over her naked body and tried to make sense of the computer-generated voice.

"Come here," it cracked.

Cautiously, she crawled from her bed and snuck to the painted press-back chair in front of the desk. Bailey peered through its bars into the monitor's face. The words on the screen disintegrated. A flashing "haunted house" screen-

saver popped up. Its animated windows and doors swung back and forth while pencil-thin bats fluttered about the screen emitting high-pitched shrieks.

Suddenly, a delightful face replaced the image.

"Hello."

"Jesus!" Bailey jumped back.
"What's happening here?"

The voice paused for a moment.

"Wanna touch my keys?" it asked.

Her fingers involuntarily slipped above the keyboard and then she slammed her index finger against the 'ENTER' key before jumping back. Her hands melded themselves into a stiff ball against her chest as she watched the screen. She swallowed a breath and held it deep inside her lungs as the face continued to speak. With every word, the voice became clearer. Its sentences leapt across the top of the screen with single syllable jabs.

The image's lips barely moved.
"Call me Cheen."

Bailey moved the chair and

pushed her face toward the computer to examine the entity. Its ghostly image shimmered while illuminating the darkness around her. Her hands gracefully floated over the electronic effigy. She traced the outline of its face.

She spoke into the microphone chip. "Human, you're human."

He smiled and answered, "I guess you're right."

Night after night, Bailey met with her electronic friend. They discussed their dreams and what the future held for them. Bailey wanted to be a songstress and he was going to write the 'Great American' novel. There were nights when tales spilled from his lips like a spring bubbling over the edge of an artesian well. And other nights, Bailey strummed acoustic love songs and sang about love to her new friend.

Time dripped away like melting ice on a mountain stream. Then, late one winter night Bailey offered a gift to her computer-generated friend.

"Cheen, I've written a something for you."

Enveloped in a shadow, she picked a few chords and softly sang to his wavering image. His eyes swelled with tears. Then, for the very first time, his face pushed out of the monitor. He became three-dimensional. Cheen's words no longer graced the screen. They floated through the air as a whispering echo.

"That's so beautiful," he wept. She stopped and moved closer.

"What's wrong?"

His smile crinkled the corners of his lips and tears dribbled down his face. "No one has ever done anything like this for me," he said, "nothing quite as beautiful as the sound you've just sung." His blond hair ruffled as if a breeze had breathed across his face. The computer started to pulsate. Bailey's bedroom grew misty, the frost on the windowpane melted and snow slid off the outside ledge. A dusty mauve light embraced the room. Footsteps lightly crept toward her. A soothing sensation sank into her soul.

She retreated to her bed. An image faintly appeared nearby. Its feathered edges began to fill and soon the profile of a man towered

over her. The closer he came the less frightened she felt. He bent over and slid his hand underneath the strap of her silk negligee. It slipped off her shoulder. His hand glided to hers and with a firm grip he reeled her up from the bed.

Their chests brushed against each other's as he lightly placed a finger under her chin and tipped her face upwards. A chilled wind blew. Her waist length hair swirled around them. His lips pressed into hers. Bailey's silk nightie slid down her legs and pooled around her ankles. His tender loving arms encompassed her and as he lifted, her petite frame folded into his.

Cheen's slate-grey eyes drank her in; then he gingerly laid her on the bed as they became lost in each other's kisses. Sweat rolled from his body. Their wet naked figures shone in the moonlight. She savored the sweetness of his lips, the gentleness of his fingers and the taste of his breath. The sensation of his stroking swept her into a heavenly cloud as she heard his last loving words. "Someday, you'll be mine."

#

"What in the name of God are you

doing?" screamed Andy.

Bailey's eyes burst open. The fog was gone and a small pile of snow pushed heavily against the windowpane. The computer light twinkled in the dark. Springing up, Bailey looked about the room. She saw her nightie crumpled on the floor. Her face froze in the light of the flickering computer screen.

Bailey searched the room in terror.

"Cheen. Come back. I love you," she screamed.

Suddenly, a flurry of drunken fists pummeled her until she finally succumbed. Blood and pain consolidated with her tears, streaming down her cheeks until her body could feel nothing more.

#

The memory of that night was as clear as a northern lake. Her dreams were much like her past. They all had long vanished.

She dropped onto the mottled mattress with strange thoughts. The soft music of Jim Croce floated in her mind. And as she lay on the threadbare mattress, she imagined Cheen carrying her off in the moonlight.

Like a Hawaiian beach, warmth soaked her soul.

Then, a noise of shattering glass filled the house. She rocketed upward. She surveyed the darkening room. It fogged from November grey to midnight black. Snow fell, piling against every windowpane. Once again, Cheen's hand reached toward her out of the haze. She grabbed it; he pulled her close. Their hearts began to beat in unison. Bailey's eyes probed the shadowy room. Nothing had changed. It was as if life had stood still. She plopped her head against his chest.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"Someday has arrived," Cheen said.

As his ghostly shape solidified, she felt his sensation of love spread over her. Bailey realized straight away they both were alive. In some odd way, they both were alive and their hearts fluttered like dead leaves in a winter breeze.

Her soul mate, her lost love had returned.

The Desires of Angels
WC: 439
By Terrie Leigh Relf

It was evening when I first saw him, his eyes the color of rain. He was flying lower than the rest of the flock, a swirl of fog against the night. Our eyes touched for a moment, but I still felt ice crystals form in my heart.

How often does one see a snow angel, live to tell the tale?

I didn't think to see him again, but when I turned the corner, walked the few steps to my house, he was on my front porch.

"Invite me in," he said.

Who am I to refuse the desires of angels?

We merged in snow that drifted through the living room windows taped loosely against the draft. His lips, his hands, his skin, a searing cold that left more than a few marks.

"I'll return for you," he says, and I wonder if it's possible to escape the desires of angels.

* * *

In the middle of the night,
I'm awakened by someone calling my
name. I pull on my robe, slide
into my slippers. The heat is on
80, but I feel a lingering chill.

I go to the window, watch the
falling of the snow. Laughter. I
extend my gaze toward the patio,
where a flock of angels have
gathered.

I wonder what the neighbors
will say, but just for a moment,
as another angel walks into my
house, says, "come to bed."

I've realized it's not wise
to refuse the desires of angels.

This one presses his blue
lips against mine. He tastes of
shadows and unnatural yearnings.
Hours pass and he takes his leave.
The air is still, the only sound,
the chattering of my teeth, the
rustle of feathers on silk.

A gust of frigid wind, My
bedroom is filled with angels.
One sits down in the corner to
make origami stars. Another
stands before the full-length
mirror, raising, then lowering his

wings. Others go through my
drawers and cupboards, take books
from my shelves, open and close
the freezer. I hear a tinkling of
ice, the slosh of water from an
over-filled tub. My mind awirl, I
bury myself beneath the covers,
pray for them to go away.

* * *

The angels take wing in a
flurry of pearl-gray and
opalescent feathers. Yet one
remains.
I sense his presence, follow a
path of obsidian tufts.

There--another snow angel,
this one's hair singed charcoal.
Around his eyes, a halo of red
stars. He bares his teeth in
greeting, extends clawed hands.

I feel the ice drift through
my veins at his touch.

The Ghostly Woman
By Christy Bradshaw

I see her in my dreams. She waves her hand toward herself as if she is wishing that I would come to with her. I can't see her face. I can see that she is wearing a long white gown that flows in air without any sort of wind. This gives her the ghostly effect that I feel from her. Not to mention that I cannot see her face. Is she from Heaven, beckoning me to her or is she evil? She is frightening to me. Seeing her makes me want to run but I am stopped like my feet are bound in concrete. I cannot move when she is there. Am I afraid that she will follow me or chase me? What would happen if she caught me? I don't know, I just stand there in sheer fear. My heart pounding and sweat on my brow. My hands shake as she stands there staring at me with no face, but I feel her eyes on me. Then suddenly she is gone again. I can breathe now my heart goes back to normal beats. I have woken up with sweats and screams, as I don't know what to make of her. Her hair is long and rolled

in a knot at the back of her head. She is tall and seems beautiful in a ghostly kind of way. Why does she enter my dreams? My heart says, go to her, but the fear of the unknown scares me to death. Does she need help or is she trying to tell me something?

It is cold, pouring rain, around 11:45 at night on a Tuesday. I cannot sleep so I go to the local ice cream parlor, which is open until 12:00 pm. I start back and take a short cut home. The road is dark and the trees sway over the road above my car. I think that I may have seen a picture of a road like this once on a post card or in a painting. This back way home really is very beautiful even at night. The trees sweep over the road something like the willow tree flows in the wind. I am driving back in this pouring rain thinking that going out for ice cream was a terrible idea because my heater is not working properly and the ice cream that I am eating is making me so cold. The windshield wipers are squeaking back and forth and I can hear the water swooshing around my tires.

It appears that it is about twelve o'clock now. What did that

sign say? Oh, it was probably nothing. I have finished my ice cream and decide to turn on the radio. The knob is stuck again. Does anything work right on this car? So I hit the knob with my ice cream cup and it finally works. The old song by Etta James is playing. I am singing along to "At Last" completely engulfed in this beautiful song. My mom used to sing this song to me when I was a small child. Dancing in the middle of the living room floor she would hold me so close and I could feel her warm arms around me. I could feel her voice through the vibrations of her chest as she sang and I felt so safe and so loved by her. This song takes over my senses and the lonely feeling that I have felt from the cold and drenching rainfall with dark all around leaves me.

At once, in the middle of this song, which has taken me away from it all, I see a huge, wide stretch of rapidly flowing water in front of me. I slam on my brakes and slide sideways in the middle of the road.

I see something stuck in the middle of the water. The water is not very deep, about up to the

knees. Looks like an automobile with a huge tree across the top of the car. It is so dark and rainy I cannot tell for sure. I try the cell phone and guess what, it is not working out here. No tower near by, I assume. I will have to go back and get help for these people. I must see what has happened and what kind of help they might need. I get out of the car in the dead of night with this terrible rain clobbering down on my back. Look at my watch and see that it is midnight now. Why, because I always have a schedule and it is just habit to look at this watch on my arm. I think that I must look at this thing on my arm a dozen or so times a day.

I am getting closer to the car now and it appears that this car is just like mine. It is the same model and color. That is so strange. There is a woman inside the car. Oh, there is water rising above my knees. I must hurry to help her. I open the door and she is strapped in with the seatbelt. It is stuck and I cannot get her out. There is a huge gash on the side of her head and blood is everywhere. The tree has crushed in the top of the car. I talk to her and she does not answer. The sounds of the rain

and water make it difficult to know if she is dead or alive. I cannot even hear her breathing with my head leaned on her chest. I am pulling so hard on the belt trying to get her out of the strict hold that it has on her. I cannot get it loose. I panicked jerking on this belt. I will have to go get someone. I turn to go toward my car and see that a tree has been struck by lightning behind my car. I have no way of leaving. I know that she must get out of the car before the water covers the car. The damn up one of the other roads must have broken and is sending all of this water through here. I look back to her and beg please someone help me get her out of this car. She is doomed if I cannot get her out. I still don't know if she is alive or not, but I am just struggling to get her out. I pull once more and the belt finally loosens. Her head rolls toward me. My head was close to her shoulder when her head rolled. This woman looks like me. I look up in pure shock and look back at her again. I cannot tell what is happening here. How can she look just like me? Too caught up in the action to worry about this right now I pull her from the car. I am dragging her through the water. I can hear

her boots splashing through the water as I pull her. I see the water rise to the side mirrors on her car as I am getting her to my car. I put her in the passenger seat, for what, I cannot go anywhere with the tree behind my car. I guess just to get her in from all of this water. I ran back to see if I can move the tree at all and it will not move an inch. I go back to the car and get in with her. Shut the door and just breathe for a minute. The rain is pounding around my car.

The lightening is the only light that I have to see by so what am I going to do? I see the water rising over her car and surrounding mine. She has not moved. I think that I may be able to check her pulse now having her in out of the rain. To my horror, she is dead. I am not dreaming and there is that woman again. She is here with me awake this time. What does she want? My emotional state is broken down so now that I just scream at her, "What do you want from me? Can't you see that I need help? This woman has died and there is no one to help me." This time she speaks to me and I can see her face. Her face looks

very sweet. Her eyes are as black as her beautiful hair. She says, "I have been visiting you to help you all along." She tells me that she must stay a mystery at this time. She loves me and I am to go with her. I tell her that I must know her identity. She says that she was able to take on the appearance that she chose after her death to summon me. I ask her what I do with this woman that I have taken from the car covered in water now.

She tells me that I have been panicking over nothing. That woman has been dead for about fifteen minutes. I said what you mean. She says, "That woman is you." "You had the accident on the way to the parlor. I have been coming to your dreams to warn you that something may happen to you soon. It is time for us to go. It is midnight and they are calling us." I ask her, "Who are they?"

She leaves me alone in this mess after my question. Just disappears into thin air. I not only feel fear from her now, I feel anger. How could she haunt me so in my dreams then appear at my worst hour and start something so serious not to finish it. I

must go and get help for this woman. I just cannot make myself believe that this woman is myself, dead in my car. I climb over the tree that is down behind my car and begin to walk in the pouring rain back toward town. Cars are passing me by; no one will stop for my cries for help. Now I only long for someone to recognize that I am there in front of him or her. There she is again in her long white gown. What does she want? I scream at her "Please leave me alone." "I am not dead you see, I am pinching myself and it hurts! I am drenched with rain and I feel it! I feel the cold all around me!" She says to me, "You will see that what I say is true. I know that you don't want to believe me, but it would be easier for you if you would just give in and come with me." I am thinking, who are **they**? She extends her arm and hand to me and says, "Please." I am crying now hunched to this soaking cold ground with my hands over my face. She has made me weak. I don't know what else to do. She won't leave me alone. I am so afraid. How long has it been that I have seen my family? How many times have I wished that I were with them? I am thinking these thoughts to myself, my life passing before my eyes. I take

her cold white hand and she asks me to look at her. Afraid, I look up and see her as she really is. I see my mother! I ask her "Why did you not explain who you are to me. I surely would have come with you." Mother says "They want you to come with me by your own decision. They did not want you to come just because I am here." A light opens up in all of the darkness with tiny beams of rainbow colors coming from all around the sides of the light. "Let's go, now." She says. She holds my hand even tighter. "They are waiting." She says. But I say, "Who are **they**? Where are we going?"

She says, "You will see." I ask her "What time is it now, my watch seems to have stopped." She tells me "Time does not matter to you anymore." I hear the song again. As we are walking toward the light where we are going is explained through the lyrics of the song, "At last", "I found a dream that I could speak to", "You smile and the spell was cast and here we are in heaven, for you are mine at last!" I know that I am in Heaven but still not knowing who **they** are, finally, I smile...at last. I say to the light my name is Maggie.

THE QUICKSILVER WALL

By t.santitoro

Mel watched flakes of slightly acidic snow drift lazily onto the barren rock and dirt outside his cave. Behind him, his robo-companion fired another laser burst at the pile of rocks it was using to heat the small enclosure. Outside, across the boulder-strewn plain, laid Mel's crippled zip ship, beneath the glow of the system's ringed gas giant.

He stared beyond the drifting flakes at the rusting hulk of his vessel, and cursed for the nth time. He'd been stranded here for five standard weeks now. He was running low on provisions, and winter was coming to this sector of the small planet he'd been lucky enough to crash-land on, when his accelerator had blown.

Lucky, HA! Lucky that he'd survived the entry burn, lucky that this piece-of-crap-rock-in-space was mostly comprised of level craters, surrounded by

mountainous upheavals. Lucky that he'd taken the robot with him on his hunting trip to Alpha 10-A, a planet he'd never been to, and probably would never see. Lucky, indeed. That's what his wife would say, anyway.

He thought of her now. She was the main reason he'd decided to go hunting, in the first place. Her and her domineering attitude. If she could see him, now, she'd give him an unequalled I-told-you-so lecture for sure. She'd told him to pack cold weather gear, of course. Alpha 10-A was a tropical jungle, according to the brochures, from its equator almost to its poles, but she'd insisted.

"You never know, Mel," she'd said in her annoying whine of a voice.

He grunted angrily at the memory. Even twelve parsecs distant, she could get on his nerves.

He came away from the cave entry, to try to get warm. The

rock pile was glowing with a cheerful red heat that belied the situation. How much longer could he survive here? The robo companion's batteries wouldn't last forever, and neither would his food. He'd only packed enough for two months, and he'd been carefully rationing it. Still, it was only a matter of time before it ran out. He could practically hear his wife, when they would give her the news:

"Starved to death? My Mel?" she'd say. "Serves him right. I told him to pack more food."

Mel paced the small area, unable to escape thoughts of her gleeful self-righteousness. He frowned.

"Shut up." he said aloud.

The robot made a query noise, but he ignored it, squatting down in front of the heated rock cluster, and rubbing his shoulders for warmth. If only he'd packed his cold weather gear...

A nasty wind picked up outside, finding its way into the cave. Mel shivered and stood up. He began to pace again, and his wife's voice taunted him from inside his own mind.

"You should have listened to me, Mel. You know I'm always right."

Always right. The words echoed through his brain, mocking him.

"Always right," he mimicked sarcastically, and then shushed his robot before it could question him again.

Well, maybe it was true. Maybe she was always right. Circumstances certainly seemed to be proving her correct this time. That fact infuriated him almost more than his situation. He continued to pace.

If he could just hold out for another four weeks. According to his calculations, the planet would

round the system's gas giant by then, giving his zip ship's limited-range communications equipment an unblocked path. If he could make it till then, perhaps he could call for help.

He stopped pacing, and bent over the rocks again. He almost began to miss his wife and her over-bearing manner. It's what had kept him alive and kicking all these years, the desire to --just once-- see her proved wrong. He'd been longing for such an event for the last 17 years. Nearly the entire length of their marriage.

The robo-companion dosed the rock pile with its laser beam again, and Mel had to move back a little from the intense heat.

What would she say, if she could see him now, huddling over rocks in a cave, on a barren, isolated little waste of a world? He knew what she'd say, alright.

"Well, Mel," she'd say in her irritating nasal twang, and god awful Terran accent, "You shoulda

packed your parka."

Mel stared glumly around the cave. Something in the back caught his eye. A twinkle. He stood up, squinting into the darkness at the rear of the small chamber. Then, curious, he decided to investigate.

The back wall of the cave was rugged and fissured, full of shadowed crevices. He called the robo companion over to light up the area.

In the bright beam, Mel saw something strange. Leaking from the rocks was an odd, metallic fluid. It reflected the light that played over it, giving the appearance of quicksilver. Mel's robot was a companion model, a domestic helper without analyzing abilities. He frowned at the substance, noting the way that it moved, almost deliberately, and wished that his droid was a commercial model.

He went back to his pile of camping gear, found a metal

skewer, and returned to the slowly flowing metallic liquid.

When he tried to touch the fluid with his skewer, it halted its progress down the rocks then, amazingly, it moved away. Mel caught his breath.

"Leave it alone, Mel," he could hear his wife warning him. She would play it safe, of course. "Never mess with something, if you don't know what it is."

Her motto in life. She'd raised their xenophobic son that way, and he'd never gone hunting with his father. He'd never even left their home world. Mel grumbled under his breath, cursing his wife for that.

Her insistence that he desist, prodded him to again try to touch the strange ooze.

This time it curled backwards into the shape of silver, breaking wave, then suddenly shot some of itself forward, narrowly missing

the hand that held the skewer. Mel jumped back, stunned. It was almost as if the fluid had intelligence.

He retreated to his rock pile, heart pounding, too preoccupied with his discovery to feel either the cold of the cavern, or the warmth of the rock cluster. What was that stuff?

He glanced around, and realized with a start that the entire rear wall of the cave was a glistening, streaming mass of metallic ooze.

He called his robot forward, away from the flow, and edged himself towards the front of the cave.

The wind had picked up some more, the flurry of acidic snow had become heavier, and Mel was trapped between the hostile elements, and the seeping metallic tide.

His robo companion had only

made it halfway to the front of the cave, when its base was engulfed by the quicksilver substance, trapping it where it was.

He stood transfixed, unable to tear his eyes away from the robot as it tried unsuccessfully to free itself. It was many long moments before the realization dawned on him that he, too, was stuck. The silver sludge flowing from the cave wall had reached his feet, sucking up around his ankles.

Mel felt his heart rate quicken. He began to pull his feet out of his mired boots, and then realized that there was no place to step. The metallic goo was everywhere.

That's when he heard it again, from the depths of his mind. His wife's voice.

"You should've listened, Mel." She said, her whiney tone mocking him.

"You know I'm always right."

He struggled against the ooze, blocking out her taunting. He became frantic, like a trapped animal, reason leaving him.

His wife said, "Don't fight it, Mel. You'll only injure your flesh." She said "flesh" with a deadly relish that made him shudder, and he gulped, frightened.

That's when it hit him. His wife's voice wasn't in his head. It came from the quicksilver substance, from the streaming cave wall. The oozing fluid was intelligent. It had gotten inside his brain somehow, and had been playing with his mind the whole time.

Too bad he didn't live long enough to appreciate the special irony in that.

The Return
By Eric S. Brown

Published in Dying Days

Jack knew the end was coming. He leaned back in his recliner and fired up a cigarette, flipping through the channels on his small TV, which sat across the room. He was determined to find a station that was still on the air, which was not broadcasting information about the storm.

After running through the channels twice, he gave up and hurled the remote at the screen in disgust. He watched as it struck the screen, shattering glass, as a shower of sparks drifted to the carpet. "Damn it!" he yelled and took a long drag of smoke into his lungs. Cradled in his lap was his .357 Magnum. The only remnant of his old life. Before last night, he thought it would rust forever buried in mothballs and too small clothes in the depths of his closet. Now he held it again in his hands though it brought him no comfort.

Jack heard, before he'd lost interest, enough speculation about

the storm and what was causing it to know a simple man like him had no hope of ever understanding the bugger and he didn't give a rat's ass. The storm had come from seemingly out of nowhere beyond the commentary belt and made its way towards Earth. A giant wall of fire engulfing all in its path. Over half of the world and everything in the solar system beyond had already felt its fiery embrace. "Fiery embrace," Jack muttered aloud, stifling a laugh. It only looked like a giant fireball from the outside according to the scientists. The robotics probes the world governments had launched into it had sent back pictures of the cities already inside it before they had stopped functioning. Pictures of untouched cities that looked normal in every way except for their complete lack of life. No one could even guess what had happened to the people who were inside it. They were just gone.

Jack knew he had prepared himself as best he could. He had made a run to the stores before the mass panic got too bad and stocked up on enough beer and cigarettes to waste an army. Jack had also picked up a box of ammo for his .357. Inside his pockets

were several extra sets of rounds to go with the loaded gun.

For the first time in years, he was glad that Sue was gone. It seemed so long ago now since the wreck out on I-40 that had taken her from him. She'd been on her way home from another late night at the office in the school writing her lesson plans and setting up her room for the next day. She had loved her job so much. That was when a drunk named Walter Wiggins had taken everything Jack had from him in a matter of seconds as he had cut by Sue doing 80 mph in the turn on Hall's bluff and sent her car careening off the road as she tried to avoid a head on collision.

The thought of Sue made Jack lumber over the fridge and pop open a beer. He could swear he smelt her hair even now. The clean and freshly washed scent of her head as she crept into the bedroom after work and laid her head on his chest as she had done so many times before. Not the charred and burnt stench he'd smelt as the hospital as they had covered skinless face with a white sheet. He could still see the blood seeping through the thin

material as they hauled her away. Her funeral had been a closed casket one with good reason.

Jack downed the bottle in a long gulp and opened another. He was alone now and the storm was coming.

The Magnum felt good in his hands. It reminded him of his days as a cop. Being a cop had meant almost as much to him as being a teacher had to Sue. Still he didn't regret what he had done. The look on Walter Wiggins' face was priceless as he had caught the man pulling into to his own drive way hours after Sue's death. Walter had staggered out of his car and ran for the front door of his house and Jack's police cruiser had pulled in behind him. Walter had been so afraid of getting another ticket and loosing his license. Jack had caught him easily and shoved him to the ground pressing the barrel of his .357 to Walter's forehead. Jack had smiled as he pulled the trigger and watched Walter's brainmatter explode from the back of the drunken man's head staining the gravel.

Jack walked over to the window and looked out from his

apartment at the fire in the sky. It was less than a mile away and creeping towards him. The streets below were empty except for a few abandoned cars. Everyone else had fled the city hoping to put a few more moments between them and the storm. It would catch them though. There was nowhere to run now.

Jack noticed there were still lights on in the church across the street and wondered if a few of the faithful had stayed to wait on the end and pray together. Had Sue been alive that is where she would have been waiting on Jesus to take her home to Heaven. Jack knew only Hell awaited him. He'd never believed in a God. Not with all the things, he had seen everyday on the force and certainly not after what had happened to Sue. No God who loved humanity could ever have let her die that way after the life she'd lived.

He continued to stare as the fire raced over the city. It burned over his window giving off a bright glow but no heat. Suddenly the room seemed to swirl as the storm took him, reality itself folding and distorting. Jack blinked and he was no longer

in the apartment. He stood in an open field surrounded by rolling hills of green grass that glistened with gentle morning dew. The sun shone bright overhead smiling down on him. "Jack," a voice called from beside him. Walter Wiggins sat on a rock near him smiling. "It's good to see you again. It's been too long."

Walter appeared just as he had that night in his driveway. He wore a blue T-shirt soaked in his own blood and tattered blue jeans. Walter smelt heavily of drink and decay. A jagged hole torn in the flesh of his forehead from where Jack's bullet had entered. Jack jerked up his Magnum, leveling it at Walter's chest as Walter got to his feet. The meadow they stood in echoed with thunder as Jack fired again and again. Chunks of meat and bone flew from Walter's body as the man toppled over to the ground and spasmed as more bullets still ripped into him until Jack's gun clicked empty.

Jack felt a hand on his shoulder, warm and gentle. He turned to see Sue standing behind him. Unlike Walter, the scars of her death were gone. She looked more radiant and beautiful than

ever. Her eyes met his and he saw that hers were wet with tears. A man stood beside in white robes glowing brighter than the sun. An aura of peace seemed to emanate from him.

Walter got to his feet walking toward the three of them. "He still hates, just like me."

"Yes," the man in white said sadly, "He does."

Sue sobbed openly and turned away from Jack as moved to embrace her. Jack fell to his knees as he realized where he was, tears welling up in his own eyes. "Forgive me!" He screamed. But Sue and the man were gone, only he and Walter remained.

Walter walked over and helped Jack to his feet. "It's time to go home, Jack." Jack watched as the grass around them dried up becoming brown and brittle. Clouds covered the sun and new wave of fire swept towards them.

"You bastard!" Jack raged, pulling himself away for Walter. "You've taken her from me again!" Jack lashed out, his fist striking Walter's jaw so hard his own

knuckle shattered under the blow but Walter didn't move or acknowledge the attack in any way.

"Jack, I took her the first time, but this time you were all on your own."

Tears bled from Jack's eyes as he stared at Walter. "Why?"

"Because, Jack. You're like me more than you know." Walter turned to watch the fire streaking towards them. Jack screamed as it swept over them. This time as it engulfed him he howled in pain as his flesh melted and bubbled. But he did not die, this pain was endless and eternal.

THE HOUSE BROODS OVER US
By Bruce Boston

i.

It was always the house with
its crumbling eaves and weathered
gables, its turrets and cupolas,
its ornate fretwork and blank
window eyes. It was the house with
its sagging porticos and scattered
trellises, the dark green vines
trailing up the walls
until their leaves turned sere and
pale in the sun's heat.

It was always the house with
its trenched history
and ineradicable stains on the
hardwood floors, vivid as
birthmarks or faded as old scars.

ii.

I gathered the tools of the
draftsman's trade with a serious
intent, to learn the craft of the
cartographer, to create a detailed
map with a detailed legend,
extensive and accurate, that
would not only chart the limits of
the house but give specific
definition to its varied
elaborations.

I set out to explore its
multiple levels and

seductive recesses, the shadow and
substance of its rectilinear maze.

And you came with me in your
wayward fashion,
less than innocent and far from
knowing, to
share my explorations and test the
dimensions
of the world waiting beyond each
wall.

iii.

We discovered hallways that
led to nothing
and others that turned back upon
themselves.

We entered rooms that were
ordered and others in rank
disarray.

You sat at a slender desk in
a high drawing room that bathed
your flesh in films of light. I
paced
beyond the carpet, dictating
imaginary letters
to composers and poets and heads
of state.

We slept in a Victorian
boudoir rich in its
mock oriental decadence, the
portraits of dead
sinners gracing our walls.

When I cut my hand on a
splintered balustrade,
your lips closed on the single
drop of blood
that welled in the lines of my
palm.

iv.

When you turned back,
gathering up the ball
of yarn you had cleverly unwound
to mark our distracted passage, I
ventured farther to uncover
corridors and cul-de-sacs that
recalled ones we had visited
together, standing rooms and
sitting rooms and those stripped
bare of all decors.

Was it days or only hours
that I wandered before you found
me crouched against a wall,
unable to speak beyond a thirst
that filled my body to its pores?

v.

We have settled in the rooms
we inhabit and
we do not stray past their
boundaries. We stay
close by our hearth and our fire
beneath a mantel lined with framed
images of these same rooms.

Beyond us we can feel the

house brooding through
days of neglect, the accumulated
dust sifting into its bones, the
sun shadows and moon shadows
crawling across deserted floors,
the shame in its solitude as it
waits for a step to cut the
silence.

The Job
By Guy Belleranti

"I want to scare people," Arnold told the giant sitting behind the massive desk at SCARES UNLIMITED. Especially Kara, he added to himself -- and Yvette and Brad and all the others who had poked fun at him over the years.

"Do you now?" The huge man cracked his scaly knuckles and stared Arnold's chubby form up and down.

"Okay," Arnold said, a flush enveloping his plump face, "I know I'm not exactly what you'd call scary looking, but I could be." He held out the want ads from the morning's paper, and read aloud, "'Join our Scream Team. We guarantee you'll be providing scares in no time.'"

"So?"

"So I want a job with your firm. I want to join the Scream Team."

The giant continued to stare. "Hmmm."

"I could crash parties with an ax and terrify everyone," Arnold went on. "Or" -- Arnold

grinned -- "I could foam at the mouth and brandish a chainsaw." That'd frighten everyone, Arnold thought. Frighten them into heart failures. Ha. Ha.

"No," the giant said, eyes still fixed on Arnold unblinkingly. "I don't think so."

"Okay, then I'll do something else. Jump out growling or...." Arnold broke off. Damn! Didn't the ogre ever blink? And what was it with that tongue of his flicking in and out over and over?

Arnold sucked in his breath as the tongue gave another flick. No way! For the end of the giant's tongue was...forked! Wouldn't **that** send some shivers through the Yvette's and Brads of the world! How had the guy done it? Surgery? Could he do it, too?

"Your application," the giant said, "is quite interesting."

"Uh, really?" Arnold sat up straighter.

"Yes. I like how you say you're looking for new challenges."

Arnold bobbed his head. "Sure

am."

"Ah." The tongue flickered in and out again, and the eyes continued to stare. "Yes!" the giant said suddenly.

"Huh?" Arnold asked.

"A zombie. That's what you'll be."

"Oh. I mean - great." Yippee! Arnold thought. "When can I start?"

"Immediately." The giant shoved back his chair and yanked open a door in the back wall. "This way."

Arnold puffed to his feet and followed, giggling. Yes, yes, YES!

They passed down a long corridor.

"Just ahead," the giant said.

I'll show people now, Arnold thought. I'll show them by scaring them. "Oh, I'm going to love being a zombie," he exulted loudly as they emerged into a dimly lit room.

"And I'll enjoy helping you

become one. But first--" The giant moved like lightning, constricting Arnold's meaty frame in his arms, his staring eyes glowing in the half light as his tongue snaked out. "Yes, you'll make a fine zombie, but only after your first job.

"First...job?" Arnold gasped. The giant's face, his tongue, swam before him.

"Yesssss," the giant hissed. First you will be sssupper." And he sank his fangs into Arnold's neck.

Through the Heart

By Corrine De Winter

I lay awake with palpitations all night, unable to smooth them out. I thought of how you would hold me to you like we were at the edge of an abyss. And how it was that before all of this I never knew your face or heard your voice. And then all at once that I needed more than anything to look at you, touch the reality of you and hear you say my name.

Yes, in another world we were on our way, driving down the remains of Route 66. We stayed in motels with names like Candle Light Inn and Forty Winks Motel. We had 7-11 picnics in graveyards and carved haiku in the Mojave desert. You read fairy tales to me and sang me to sleep and combed my hair with your fingers, and wherever we went people stared at us and thought of tragic love affairs, wondering where we would end, and how.

Landing in Texas we stayed in a motel called El Patio, located near the Alamo. Mornings we'd hear tourists chattering, sipping coffee, and handling pottery at the stand across the street run by a brown woman and her young son.

We'd get rolls at the corner cafe and come back to the room, wasting the daylight with wine and kissing. And in the next room a mariachi player practiced until dusk.

A few blocks down there was a Goodwill Store where I found an elaborate wedding dress for 12 dollars. No one had bought it because there were blood stains on the sleeve, as though the bride had taken a razor to her wrist after being left at the alter. I told myself it was from Chianti, and that every fairy tale has a little blood.

And then we left for Nevada, me wearing the stained Cinderella dress, and headed straight for Las Vegas, to one of those tacky chapels lined up like Taco Bells. The owner's daughter was our witness. She sneezed through the whole 8 minutes of ceremony and her father kept pausing to say "God Bless You." Finally you pulled a plastic ring from your pocket that you won from the bubble gum machine in Nashville, outside of Gran Ole Burgers. It has a big pink stone with tiny gold stars floating around inside it. "The universe." You said, putting it on my finger, smiling

that red wine kind of smile. And Baby, I knew at that moment that I was so in love with you I felt immortal, and could almost sense wings breaking through the skin on my back.

We payed the Justice \$15.00 and left with the \$190.00 we had between us, heading for the desert, to a town that exists just a few miles outside of all those ghost towns haunting Arizona. Towns like Ruby and Silverbell. Paradise, Constellation, Oro Blanco and Tombstone. And finally we land in Humboldt, about 6 miles away from the ghost town McCabe. Piles of boards, bricks, tin cans, broken glass and a dreary cemetery were the only things left of the place. We found out later that the town was full and prospering in 1896 until a fire broke out 4 years later at Jerry's Last Chance Saloon, spreading from there and consuming 14 buildings. Things didn't get any better in 1901 when a smallpox epidemic broke out. "It's like a warped Pompeii." you said, spreading the local newspaper on your lap, your finger moving down the FOR RENT column. "50.00 A month with farm chores." you laughed. We'd found a home.

She was a 76 year old widow

who listened to Bessie Smith and Patsy Cline, and harbored a still out back, making vodka from potatoes she grew. Her name was Lucy. The 2 rooms we had upstairs in the sun peeled house were all we needed. Civilization seemed eons away, with the nearest store 34 miles west.

From the beginning of the exodus I was afraid it wouldn't feel real, like the way sometimes I'm "outside" of myself in a crowd, or looking out the car window at the scenery passing like props in a movie. I had my doubts when we sewed our plans, but it came together, not sluggish like a summery thing, but a quick split like Midwest lightning in July. It did feel real. Rising early and working until dusk most days, meeting survival and dancing with it by the hour. I never felt that way before. The other reality fell away, and it was you who pulled me from there, allowing me to trust your mouth, telling me to forget forest fires and autumn stars and the black limbs of oaks in November. The present slid in like an atom bomb, and every scene imploded with your touch. And everything, everything was pale as clouds next to your kiss.

In August, when it was hotter than hell, I give birth to twins. You cut the umbilical cord with your jackknife. The girls had your bright eyes and my wild hair, sandy like the atmosphere we lived in. And the next year brought a son, Elijah Hart. Ely was wild and four times he went on a walkabout before the age of 12, always returning on his own. 'Them babies", said Lucy, 'They ll be gone soon enough. Hold 'em while you can." We ate dinner with Lucy every night, becoming her replacement family. She was tired of living alone after so many years.

"How did you meet Daddy?" the girls asked me one day, after listening to Lucy's vintage love stories. "Good timing." I say. 'Lucy says Daddy's a looker. What does that mean?"

"It means he can do and say things other people can t." I saw how Ely was a small version of you. Passion was branded into him, he could barely sit still. If he wasn't learning he was miserable.

In almost every way we had reached the end of the world. That forgotten farm was where we were meant to be. America was crumbling

by the foot daily, but we'd found our place. One day the stranger comes, needs a place to stay 'just for one night." He practically begs. Lucy's too old to argue the point, and as I stood behind the screen door with the girls wrapping their arms around my waist, you reluctantly agreed. "If you don't mind the barn." He nods gratefully. He was handsome and shadowy and charming, but I knew he wanted more. I knew he was the kind that'd been moving too fast to come into that slow motion world of ours.

He spends one night, and another and another. He immediately made himself useful. Lucy was becoming weaker by the day, and he started helping with the chores so I could tend to her, bedridden and pale. I'd bring her oatmeal and mashed potatoes, but she'd push the food away as if it were poison. She'd accept a little brandy now and then, reminisce about the days before her son was thrown from a horse and killed, and Bobby, her husband, died of heart failure. And all the while the new farmhand got closer and closer. Sometimes when he sat at the dinner table he'd touch my leg. Every hour I was anxious for him to leave, make his exit to Los

Angeles like all his grand stories told us he would do. But only his stories progressed. He'd come at night to drink with us. Johnny. He didn't have a last name. Just Johnny.

And Johnny would come into our room when you were in the fields, tell me I'm beautiful and "I want to touch you. You want me to touch you, don't you?" I'd push his dirty hands away, and walk out, but all the time I'd feel him watching me. He was getting into everything, into places that were only ours.

"Tell him to leave." I finally said to you one night. Tomorrow." But it never happened. In the morning, when I bring Lucy a glass of juice she's already heaven-bound. You and Johnny dig a space for Lucy out back and everything was silence but the shovel hitting dirt over and over. One foot down, and 4 more until you were sure it was deep enough to go undisturbed. We turned away when Lucy's body was brought out. All that night the girls wept, and their crying to me was the mourning of something more than Lucy dying. Our simple, dusty world was also dying. Civilization had crept in.

I remember the last day like a loop that plays over and over, a skip on the phonograph. Johnny was finally leaving. You offered to bring him to the station so that he would have no excuse to stay one more day. It was a bright morning, Elijah and the girls waving at me with white smiles and tawny faces from the back of the truck, and you kissing my forehead and promising that you'd be back for dinner. And where did it end, Sweetheart? I am always still, every minute of each night, turning over and over with a full moon inside me, unable to ignore desire. Strange bird, you know I was born the minute you first looked at me, and you were drawn, colored like a cartoon, into my world. I was your Psyche, soul and butterfly, the humble servant girl who washed your feet with willow branches and summer ram. It is 17 years since those 4 rooms and wild children and sepia roads, and I am still turning toward the mystery of you. Our girls, and Elijah will stay true as children, their small quick steps unsure but driven. It was a terrible magic that ripped them from my arms. I ask God each day why the stranger had to come, but there is only the silence of unknowing.

Surely, you know that we
became the citizens of Silverbell
and Ruby and Oro Blanco. We found
our gold, our freedom. We found
our new world, but that Shangri-La
turned turned us transparent,
existing solely of pure spirit.

This is my Paradise.

I refuse to leave these
warped structures, these dried
weeds. This dandelion sunshine.

And dark it goes, legs
pumping past remembrance, past
birds and blindness and open
mouths. I do not want tomorrow, or
these wolves in the snow full of
promise. I do not want to be Red
Riding Hood without you.

Until you come again there is
no shepherd with a flock of
purity, with moonstone eyes and
honey tongue. There is no shepherd
raising wisdom in the meadows.
There is no blue-eyed shepherd,
Dearest, coming to embrace me into
a higher world.

Trapped in the Mijnan
By Jason Earls

"I don't know, Cindy," Jan said. "I just think he's interesting."

Cindy smirked, then scowled, as if imitating the comedy and tragedy masks.
"Well, he sure isn't handsome."

Jan wiped off the table in front of her with a white towel while balancing the cup and saucer the customer had left with her other hand. She peered into the cup. It was filled a third of a cup with creamer laden coffee. The coffee seemed to swirl inside. But that was just her curiosity and excitement about the man who had been drinking it minutes earlier.

"They don't all have to be handsome," Jan said. "A man can have other qualities, you know."

Cindy glared into the foyer at another group of customers entering the restaurant, her arms folded in a

self-protective embrace, then she wheezed with exhaustion. "Oh, you mean qualities like total weirdness? The man you're so infatuated with comes in here and doesn't even talk to anyone. He just doodles on a piece of paper and guzzles coffee for hours straight."

"So?" Jan said, her eyes closed and her head cocked. She sauntered toward the doors of the kitchen, her blonde ponytail bobbing.

Cindy followed, her short black hair frozen to her head. "So, have you ever seen any of the drawings he leaves behind? It's the art work of a demented man."

"Well, what if I happen to like demented men?"

Jan entered the kitchen in one stride. Cindy stopped in front of the swinging doors. She looked down at the grease stained carpet, and shook her head.

* * *

Jan pushed open her bedroom door and headed for her Mijnan. She sat down on the bed, placed the instrument on her lap, and began playing. The Mijnan was a musical device Jan had designed and built herself. It looked like a strange combination of trumpet, guitar, and accordion. She blew into a copper tube, strummed the strings, then pumped the bellows while playing notes on the keyboard. The tone of the Mijnan was a mixture of vanilla and quartz: rich, unique, and totally compelling.

It had taken Jan seven years to build and design the Mijnan, and she considered it to be her life's work. She wasn't in a band, never had any musical training, but had succeeded in learning to play the instrument at almost a virtuoso level. Only three people had heard her play: her mother, father, and friend Cindy. All of them wept each time, and could barely believe the sounds it was capable of.

Jan's father was a Luther and an inventor. He had taught Jan

the rudiments of instrument building, and had worked with her on the first Mijnan prototype. But after he saw her zealous determination, he warned her of the difficulties that playing instruments of one's own invention would bring. She, however, did not care. She ignored his warnings. And afterward, he discouraged her efforts at every opportunity. He knew she wouldn't be able to get a position in a well paying orchestra playing self-designed instruments. He tried to interest her in the piano, cello, tuba, and any traditional instrument. But she hated them all. And she continued to improve the design of the Mijnan over the years, despite her father's protests, as well as work on her playing ability.

Her hard work had played off. The Mijnan was now truly a work of art which produced sounds as unique as the shape of the instrument itself. Sounds that humans only heard occasionally in dreams. It was a weeping machine. And her technique at playing the instrument was mind boggling. She could strum the strings and chord an accompaniment to the

horn melodies, her hands a blur,
or she could play keyboard notes
in unison with the ringing guitar
chords, all the while shaping
the notes with the accordion-like
bellows.

Now, she was working on
composing a piece of music for the
man in the cafe she had fallen in
love with. The man who came in
and didn't speak to anyone. The
man who came in and drew bizarre
pictures every day. Pictures of
smoky graveyards
and monstrous flapping owls with
human heads encircling the moon.
Pictures of dismembered zombies
dancing on churches. Pictures of
goat-creatures setting
themselves on fire.

Jan had been practicing her
composition for months. Tinkering
with it daily. Obsessively. And
now it was almost perfect. The
only thing that wasn't quite
ready was her nerve. She had to
work up the courage to play it for
him. And she couldn't imagine
what would happen if she failed to
win the man she had become
enamored with.

* *

*

Jan set a stack of clean drinking glasses beside the soda dispenser. "Has he been in today?"

"Not yet," Cindy said. "But he will."

Jan inhaled the musty, smoke-drenched, restaurant air deeply, then blew it out. She looked at her shadow on the wall and had one of those out-of-body existential moments. The time to play her composition was approaching. She glanced down at her trembling hands.

"Here he comes now," Cindy said.

Jan lowered her head. She brushed a lock of hair out of her closed eyes. She had set a goal to engage him in conversation today. More substantial conversation than what had already occurred between them.

She turned and looked at him. Her face flashed into a brighter mood. She knew his name was Doug. But had never called him by it. He was standing beside his usual table, taking off his trench coat, and putting it in the seat across from him. He

sat down, placed his worn, black sketchbook on the table, and took out one of the numerous pens from his shirt pocket. He bent forward, his face a mask of concentration, and started to draw.

Jan approached his table with pad and pen in hand, even though she was certain he would order coffee. She stood by his table, staring as he moved his pen proficiently. His wide green eyes, thin neck, and large nose weren't exactly appealing, but not entirely repulsive either. His clear complexion almost made him look too young for her, but she assumed he was in his early thirties, which made them compatible. She focused again on his eyes. They held tinges of melancholy, while an uncontrolled rage seemed to linger somewhere in the pupils. Her forehead wrinkled with vulnerability.

"Hello, Doug. What can I get you today?"

"Coffee."

He didn't take his eyes off his drawing. Even though this was the first time she'd used his name

during the five months she'd been waiting on him.

"Okay." She went and poured the coffee. As she walked back, her long red thumbnail tapped against the ceramic cup repeatedly. She heard it clicking, and tensed her thumb so it would stop.

"Here you are."

She tried to think of something to say to start the conversation. She rubbed her hands on her thighs, smoothing out her apron. "Um... May I ask you a personal question?"

He continued moving his pen with slow precision. And didn't answer.

"Are you an artist?"

Pause. Pause. Another pause. She thought he wouldn't respond. Then--

"No, I'm not."

She smiled, and waited. Hoping he might elaborate. But that was all. Three words. She didn't press further.

There would be no conversation.
And she knew she would have to use
her Mijnan to tell him how she
felt.

* * *

She practiced the piece that
night until it was perfect. The
strumming of strings, fingering of
the keyboard notes, manipulation
of the bellows, everything was in
perfect synchronization, the
movements so ingrained in her mind
she didn't even have to think
about them.

Her eyes teared up several
times while she practiced. She
was moved deeply by the sublimity
of her piece, and the tone of the
Mijnan. As she played, she saw
in her mind's eye two tiny black
figures surrounded by walls of
white snow
walking off into the distance.

*This music will make him
mine,* she thought.

* * *

Jan entered the restaurant.
It was her day off. Doug was
there. A cup of coffee was
setting beside him. He worked
over his paper with pen in hand,

his
body tucked into a tight ball over
his disturbing drawings. She
carried the Mijnan over to his
table, set it down, clicked open
the case, and brought it out. He
didn't even glance at her. She
set the instrument on her lap,
took a deep breath, and prepared
herself to play. She heard the
restaurant grow silent, then she
listened closer as the patrons
behind her began whispering. Doug
finally looked up at her with his
face flushed. Then he lowered his
head back to his drawings
and moved his lips.

She started to play,
strumming the strings, blowing
into the tubes, fingering the
keys, her hands and fingers
nothing but a blur, gliding
expertly over all
parts of the instrument. A few
customers rose from their tables
and came closer to hear the
uncanny music. Others stopped
eating and listened in a seemingly
dazed rapture.

But Doug didn't move after
his initial response. He stared
at the meager lines he was making
in his sketchbook. Unaffected by
the music.

Minutes passed. Jan stopped playing. The piece was finished. Many of the patrons applauded. One shouted "Bravo." But Doug acted as if nothing had happened. She watched him with an embarrassed grin, praying inwardly that he would at least say something.

She waited, but he only continued to draw.

She put the Mijnan in its case, lifted it, and started to leave. She had failed to win the man she wanted. She shambled toward the foyer. Once there, she stopped and looked out into the parking lot. Something about the cement and the passing cars outside sent a chill of bitter loneliness through her. She set her instrument down, opened the case, and pulled out the .45 she carried for protection. She walked back to Doug's table. He was still hunched over his drawing. She stood behind him with her heart shattered, and felt an intense desire to shatter something of his. She placed the gun an inch from the back of his head. She murmured, "Cold-hearted bastard," turned her head away with her face scrunched up,

and pulled the trigger. The customers screamed and ducked when they heard the shot, and saw the blood and tissue fly over their plates, glasses, and silverware. Doug's bullet-shocked body bobbed, then slumped over in the seat.

Jan stomped over to the foyer, scooped up her Mijnan, and ran out of the restaurant like a crook.

* * *

She drove around and around her block, terrified to enter her apartment building. She circled and prayed and cried and yelled. But finally she had to go home.

She opened the door of her building carrying the Mijnan, and headed toward the stairs. A man was sitting on the stairs leading up to her apartment, his arms resting on his knees, his head cradled in his hands. The back of his head had a gaping hole and the surrounding matter was in vile shreds. He rose and she saw that it was Doug. He ambled over to her. She dropped the Mijnan with a thud.

"Jan, I love you."

She strained to listen as he spoke. Her mind blurred with what she heard. The words weren't coming from his mouth even though his lips were moving. They were coming from inside the case of her Mijnan. For a moment she thought she had lost her mind. That the murder she had committed and her resulting panic had driven her insane.

"I love you, Jan. I want to be with you forever."

She saw his mouth moving again, but heard the words emanate from her instrument case. She stooped down and took out the Mijnan. She looked deep inside one of its larger tubes. A tiny pin-prick of purple light shown deep within. She didn't know what it was exactly. But felt it had to do with what she was hearing, and with the reason Doug was standing before her, still alive.

I created some type of supernatural instrument, she thought. My passion must have invented the supernatural aspect, and now his spirit is trapped inside.

She put the Mijnan back
inside the case, lifted it, and
grasped Doug's arm.

Then she led him upstairs to
her apartment.

Trick or Trick

By Guy Belleranti

Dirk laughed from behind his clown makeup, and pointed his gun at the vampire-costumed couple. "Your jewelry," he said to woman. "Give it to me. And you--" he waved his gun at the man "--toss your wallet on the couch."

Both did as ordered, and Dirk laughed again. It was so easy picking out targets on Halloween night. He could walk the sidewalks and no one noticed or cared. He was just one of many costumed figures out and about. Then, when he saw the chance, he rang the bell at someone's house, and when they opened the door....

"Trick or trick," is what he always said, flourishing his gun at the same time. He'd already robbed three places tonight, leaving the owners tied and gagged, and the lights off, when he left.

And this couple - apparently he'd caught them just before they left for a costume party. Vampires! Ha! He was the one who

going to suck someone dry. Take their cash and jewelry and add to his evening's haul.

Dirk tucked the woman's necklace, bracelet and two rings into one of the big pockets of his clown suit. Nothing of outstanding value, though one of the rings did have a small diamond in it. He rifled through the contents of the man's wallet. Lot's of credit cards, but those weren't of any use. "Two twenties and a ten?" he snarled. "Is that all you have?"

"I don't carry a lot of cash," the man said.

"Yeah, but I bet you've got more in the house. And you--" Dirk looked at the woman "--you've probably got a box stuffed with fancy jewelry."

"We aren't wealthy people--"

The front doorbell chimed, and children's chatter reached his ears.

What the hell.... He'd turned all outside lights off. Couldn't the damn brats take a hint?

"Not a sound," Dirk whispered, waving his gun

menacingly. A minute went by and the voices faded away, back toward the sidewalk.

Now, where had he been? Oh yeah, more valuables in the house. He shot a glance around the room. Some nice artwork on the walls, new-looking furniture.... Okay, maybe the couple wasn't rich, but they must have more that would make his visit worthwhile. He'd just have to search a bit.

Dirk whipped out a length of rope. "Lady, turn around while your husband ties your hands."

"Tie her hands?" the man squeaked. "I--"

"Shut up and do as told," Dirk ordered. He threw the rope at the man. "Tie her."

The man's eyes burned anger. "Sorry, dear," he said to the woman as he wrapped the rope around her wrists.

"Now her ankles," Dirk said, tossing a second rope.

A minute later, she lay on the floor trussed up like a turkey.

"Excellent," Dirk exulted. No one else had rung the bell, and things were going perfectly. He'd give the house a quick search, and then be on his way. But first he had to tie the man, and then gag both. "Sit on that chair," Dirk ordered pointing at one of a straight-backed set. "Then put your hands behind the chair back."

The man hesitated, then slowly sank onto the chair.

Dirk grinned. "I must say I'm impressed with your vampire outfits. Nice Dracula style clothes, and the make-up looks natural, too, almost as good as in a Hollywood film. Too bad you're gonna miss your party." He pulled out another length of rope. "Okay, Mr. Vampire," he said, leaning in, "time to-- Aaa!"

Dirk screamed as the man's jaws fastened down upon his gun hand. The gun clattered to the ceramic tile, and Dirk screamed again, his eyes popping in horror, as the man's mouth released his hand and fastened on his neck.

"What are...you...." Dirk's head spun, and as he sagged to the floor he saw the woman fling off her bonds and move in, fangs

extended.

"Nice fake knots, darling," she purred to her partner.

The man nodded a silent reply, and blood dripped from his mouth as he said to Dirk, "And you, my foolish clown, thought we were in costume. "Come, dear," he urged his mate. "Replenish yourself. Drink up."

THE TUNNEL BACK
By G. Warlock Vance and
Scott H. Urban

"Dr. Killough, I'm not sure this is such a good idea." Henry Grosvenor ran a finger between his necktie and his Adam's apple, as if starved for air. Tiny drops of perspiration beaded on his brow and cheeks.

Myra Killough was beginning to have her own reservations about the entire affair. After all these months, I've never seen Henry so nervous—except when I had him under hypnosis. But I'll be damned if I back down now. She straightened her no-nonsense, Navy blue business coat and proceeded toward the admission booth of the "Beecham-Harris Carnival of Fun."

"The, um, weatherman called for an eighty per cent chance of rain. So maybe we just ought to head back to your office . . . all right, Doctor?"

Myra brought herself to a halt, realizing she was forging ahead solo. She turned back to Henry, letting him see that she was smiling—but also getting a

little exasperated. "Henry, look up at the sky." She gestured toward the heavens with her right hand. "Not a cloud in sight. The weatherman isn't a prophet, Henry. Sometimes he gets the forecast wrong. And you know what? It's all right. He's allowed to make mistakes. I want you to remember that. You can make mistakes in your own life too. You can get over them—survive—and come out even better."

"Psychiatrists aren't prophets, either," Henry said—but not loud enough for Dr. Killough to hear.

Myra walked the three yards back to where Henry stood, rooted in place. She put a calming hand on his shoulder. His entire body vibrated under her palm—almost as violently as if he were trying to ride a jackhammer. "Henry," she said soothingly, "I'm right here with you, and I'm not going to leave you. Everything's going to be all right, I guarantee it."

Henry looked down at his immaculately polished shoes. "Y—you can't guarantee what's going to happen in the future, Dr. Killough." Once he surmounted the initial stammer, the words came

out in a furious rush.

Myra raised one quizzical eyebrow. "I suppose that's literally true, but I'm convinced this afternoon is going to open up the world for you, Henry. You'll walk out of here a new man, confident and self-assured." She took his right hand in her left. It was so sweaty he might have just pulled it out of the kitchen sink. She gently tugged him forward, facing him until he overcame his panic-born inertia. Myra paid for two adult tickets—"good for all rides until closing"—and dragged her reluctant patient into the crowded, clamoring, and tacky, neon-lit carnival midway.

Hucksters in game booths called out to them: "Five shots for a dollar! Win a prize for the beautiful lady!" "Three balls, one dollar! I can see you're a good pitcher! Knock down the jars, pick the prize of your choice!" "Four quarters, four darts! Pop the balloon and pick any of these posters you see right here!" Myra noticed that Henry wouldn't look directly at any of the pitchmen; he kept his eyes on the ground. She wanted to take his chin and force it up but knew

it would be the wrong tactic. Smells—sugary cotton candy, greasy funnel cake, spicy Polish sausage, syrupy cola—enveloped them, reminding Myra she'd skipped lunch yet again. Her stomach rumbled, and she made a note to buy herself a hot pretzel before leaving. The crowd nudged, jostled, swarmed around them—youngsters trailing balloons and shoelaces, teen boys and girls wrapped around each other, couples pushing strollers or holding onto toddlers' hands. High-pitched squeals from Tilt-a-Whirl and Octopus riders punctuated the noisy din.

"Are you hungry?" Myra asked. "Do you want to get something to eat?"

"Oh, no. You can't possibly believe anything served here is healthy or cooked in sanitary conditions, can you?"

"I don't think you'd want a steady diet of carnival food," she admitted, "but one treat probably wouldn't hurt."

Henry shook his head as if trying to throw off an unfashionable hat.

They emerged from the row of

game booths and made their way through the kiddie rides. The carousel's calliope sounded unnaturally merry. Children pleaded to go on a ride "again and again, Daddy!" Harsh laughter and blaring music increased as they neared the adult rides. Youths spun over their head in giant swings, and people endured snake-like lines to ride the Music Express.

"I think I see it over there." Myra pointed to the left. She indicated a long structure with a garish marquee. Henry could make out the red-painted words "TUNNEL OF DOOM."

"Wonderful!" she cried.
"Let's go."

Henry's hand slipped from her grasp. She looked back. His knees had given out and he had sunk to the ground. A portly man in too-small t-shirt and a Confederate flag ball cap jumped over him, cursing. Henry had gone bone-white, and he shook as if palsied.

"I can't do it," he whispered. "I can't do it."

* * *

Three months ago, Dr. Myra

Killough had spoken with Ronnie Hankins, Henry's supervisor at Advanced Analytical Accounting. "Myra, I need you to see one of my people. Henry Grosvenor."

Myra and Ronnie had known each other for years. Ronnie's firm handled Myra's books, and Myra had even counseled Ronnie in the past. "What's the story, Ron?"

Ronnie sighed. "Henry's one of my best accountants—very attentive. But he's also a walking bundle of neuroses. It's only getting worse each day. It's started to impact his job performance, and I'm really worried about him. I'm afraid eventually he'll wind up hurting himself—or someone else. I've told him he has to come see you—or else he has to look for another job."

Henry Grosvenor turned out to be in his mid-thirties, highly intelligent, but average in almost every sense of the word, and yet plagued by behavioral tics, irrational habits, and unfounded fears. He kept every light in his apartment burning twenty-four hours a day every day of the year. His apartment door had eight locks on it, yet he couldn't stand to

have any closet or cabinet doors shut. He wouldn't sit in a chair without looking underneath it, but he couldn't explain what he was looking for.

Myra quickly became frustrated during their sessions. Henry was outwardly compliant, yet stubbornly refused to deal with any emotional issues in his life. He viewed himself as 'normal,' while other people had problems. His parents' divorce and his lack of interpersonal relationships certainly predisposed him to dysfunction, but didn't explain his personality quirks. Finally she convinced Henry to let her try to put him under hypnosis.

"You can try," Henry said, "but I don't think it'll work. I don't even think I can be hypnotized."

Despite Henry's misgivings, Myra was able to easily take him into a hypnotic state. Contrary to popular belief, only individuals with the ability to concentrate their attention for a sufficient length of time could be hypnotized. Her patient's obsessive/compulsive nature was the perfect ticket into the mystery that was Henry Grosvenor's

subconscious. She spoke in calm and gentle tones. "Henry, you're comfortable and safe in my office. Nothing will happen to you here. We're going to look back at some things that happened to you in the past. You'll be able to see yourself and tell me about what you see. Nothing can hurt you, though. Do you understand?"

"Yes. . . "

"You've told me you were happy in your childhood. But at some point, something happened that profoundly changed your life. You had an experience that scared you—made you uncomfortable around other people. Can you tell me what that was?"

Henry's forehead furrowed in anxiety. "I . . . don't want to. I'm scared. . . . "

"It's all right, Henry, I'm right here. Nothing from the past can touch you now. What do you see?"

"I see . . . myself and my father. . . . We're walking together. . . . He's holding my hand. We're at . . . some sort of carnival. We're eating ice cream cones. We . . . ride the Ferris

wheel . . . the little roller-coaster . . . the merry-go-round. . . . I'm smiling, I'm happy, I'm having a good time. My father takes me up to the line at the 'Fear Ride.' I-I look like I'm excited, like I want to go through it. My father is . . . shaking his head. He doesn't want to go. He must think it's silly, or something. But he's going to wait for me while I go through. . . . "

Now we're getting somewhere, Myra thought. "That's very good, Henry. You're doing excellently. I want you to keep telling me what you see."

Henry's voice began to tremble. "I'm getting in the car. I'm by myself. I was so stupid! I should have made my father ride with me. We're moving in the dark. I can't see anything. I-I don't want to see anymore. . . . "

"We're going to find some answers to our questions, Henry. Keep watching and tell me what you see."

"They play scary music with tape-recorded screaming in the background. Monsters jump out at me. I can tell they're fake. They don't scare me. I'm even

laughing. The ride is halfway over when somebody—somebody jumps in the car beside me. I'm in the dark again; I can't see his face. At first I think it's a carnival worker, hired to scare the riders. I even laugh at first. Then he says, 'Are you enjoying the ride, Henry?'"

What? Myra wondered. How can that be?

"'How do you know my name?' I ask. The man doesn't answer; he just laughs. It's—it's a laugh that an executioner or an interrogator might make. There's no gaiety in it, only a sinister recognition of my rising terror. I'm just about to jump out of the car when he puts his arm around my shoulder, drawing me to him. I can smell him—he smells ancient, musty, cold—not sweaty, but decayed. I feel the exhalations from his nostrils on my cheeks.

"'I'm so glad you picked my ride this afternoon, Henry,' the man says. 'I've been waiting for you so long . . . I could just hug you forever.' And then . . . and then . . . he puts his free hand on my neck . . . and he starts to hug my throat . . . he squeezes it so tight I can feel the sides

touch. . . . "

Oh my God! Myra thought to herself, but didn't say out loud.

Henry is crying now, shaken with emotion for the seven-year-old he sees but cannot aid. "I want to scream, but I can't. I strike out with my fists, but they sink into grimy fabric without encountering anything solid underneath. Then the other hand moves slowly up the front of my shirt, creeping up one finger at a time, like a spindly-legged crab walking up my chest. I feel the first two fingers tickle my nostrils then shove their way into my sinuses, reaching up and up, clawing at the soft tissues of my brain. Those digits feel like icicles piercing my frontal lobe. . . so cold. I wonder how long I can hold out without breathing, and I wonder what my father will think when the car comes out holding my dead body. . . .

"And then the bright sunlight hits my face and I can breathe again and I'm punching the seat beside me and I'm crying for my father and the ride jockey is dragging me out of the seat, telling me to grow up and quit crying like a girl. I was crying

so hard I got a nosebleed."

"Did you tell your father what happened?" Myra inquired.

Still in a trance, Henry nods. "I did. He looked like he didn't believe me but wanted to. He went through the ride by himself, but didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. And of course, other people were going on the ride all the time I was sobbing in my father's arms. Some of them were even laughing at me. We left the carnival after that, and I don't think I slept through an entire night for several years."

Oh, you poor thing, Myra
thought. No wonder you're a damn
mess.

She brought Henry up out of his trance. During a tumultuous and emotion-fraught session, she told him what he had revealed. She could see the stark terror in Henry's eyes—a look that indicated he might bolt for the door at any second—running away at full-tilt, never to return to her office (or the sane world) ever again. And conscious realization of the origin of his traumas did not diminish his dysfunctional

behaviors. Myra decided she was going to have to take the treatment to the next level. By some fateful coincidence, a carnival was coming to town the following week—a carnival which featured a “Tunnel of Doom,” similar enough to Henry’s boyhood “Fear Ride” for her therapeutic purposes.

“Henry, I can’t explain what happened to you those many years ago. I don’t know who that man was or how he knew you’d be on the ride that afternoon. But he’s long gone—he’s probably in jail or dead by now—and you’re still here. You’ve got a wonderful life ahead of you to enjoy—but you’ve got to conquer these worries of yours. I believe that if you revisit the carnival and realize you’re all right thereafter, your fears will simply disappear. You can’t let that pervert in the past dictate the way you behave—if you do, that means he wins and you lose. You don’t want that, do you?”

Henry shook his head ‘no.’
“But to go back to the carnival—Dr. Killough, I don’t know if I can do it! Just thinking about it makes me . . . makes me want to toss my lunch!”

During long, intense discussions, Myra finally convinced Henry of the necessity of working through his phobia and reclaiming control of his destiny. He reluctantly said he would visit the carnival with Dr. Killough, although she could clearly discern the tears that welled up in his eyes when he agreed.

* * *

Myra helped Henry rise and gripped his arm as if guiding a geriatric relative. As they walked up to the "Tunnel of Doom," they could see a chain across the entrance to the ride.

"Oh, it's closed," said Henry. "We won't be able to go on it today." There wasn't a trace of regret in his voice.

Myra continued to tug his arm. "Nonsense. This has all been arranged in advance. Come on."

A portly gentleman in a suit coat and tie—neither of which matched the other—came towards them with hand outstretched. "Good afternoon! Dr. Killough," he said, shaking her hand, "it's nice to meet you. And this must be Henry. Henry, I'm honored to welcome you to the Beecham-Harris

Carnival. I'm Forrest Lampman, manager of the midway." He made a point of not offering to shake Henry's hand—Dr. Killough had forewarned him that such an advance would be ignored.

"It's nice to meet you," Henry managed to mumble.

"I understand you've had some uncomfortable experiences with carnivals in the past, Henry—hey, can I call you Hank?"

Henry sniffed. "I'd really rather you didn't."

Lampman shrugged. "Fine, fine. Listen, we want the Beecham-Harris Carnival to be a fun-filled, enjoyable family experience for everyone. It's never our aim to scare or frighten anyone so much that they never come back! That's just not good business sense, is it, Henry?"

He agreed that was true.

"If you'll both follow me." Lampman led doctor and patient up the steps to the "Tunnel of Doom." He released the chain across the entrance platform. "Henry, after speaking with Dr. Killough, I closed the ride this afternoon so

that we could help you out. What we're going to do is walk together, all three of us, through the Tunnel. All the lights will be on, and you'll be able to see all of what we call the 'jolts'—the spooky stuff that pops out at you. That sound all right?"

Henry wasn't looking at the manager. His eyes darted back and forth across the painted marquee, with its lurid lettering and explicit scenes of murder, mutilation, and mutation. He looked as comfortable as a toddler entering the hospital for a booster shot. He nodded, but under his breath he muttered, "If this is family entertainment, it must be for the Addams Family!"

The trio entered the Tunnel. The passenger cars weren't running. With the lights on, the interior was revealed as an aging, dilapidated structure. The 'jolts' were standard B-horror movie fare: a ghost holding a decapitated human head, a psycho who brought a blood-stained axe down close to the riders, bats on strings that 'swooped' over the cars, flesh-starved ghouls who popped up out of Styrofoam graves. Under the harsh electric glare, the props were revealed as poorly

constructed and badly painted. There was nothing inside that would have scared anyone who had ever watched a week's worth of network evening news.

"How are you doing, Henry?" Myra asked him halfway through the Tunnel.

Henry couldn't answer. He was taking deep breath after deep breath to keep from shrieking.

Eventually they emerged at the track exit. The afternoon seemed to have grown darker. Looking overhead, Myra could see thunderheads piling up overhead—Henry's problematic storm. It would rain soon, but she hoped the two of them would be in the car before it broke.

"Henry, I believe you owe Mr. Lampman a word of thanks," Myra urged. "He's losing money this afternoon in order to help you."

Henry managed to force his right hand forward, offering it to the manager for a handshake. "I do thank you, Mr. Lampman," he said. "I don't know if I can say I'm cured—but I thank you."

Lampman laughed, deep and

resonant. "Oh, we're not done yet! Henry, Dr. Killough, what I'd like to do is let you ride through the Tunnel of Doom the way it's meant to be experienced—in the dark and riding in the car. Now that you've seen how it's put together, you won't be scared at all—you'll just be able to enjoy the ride!"

Henry's mouth dropped open. "Oh, no. No, that's all right, thank you very much, but—"

"Take charge, Henry," Myra put in. "You're in control of your life, remember? This is just a carnival ride that hundreds of people go through every day. Nothing bad can happen to you inside. I'll tell you what. You've got to do this on your own, but I'll ride in the car directly in front of you. Does that sound all right?"

Henry was licking his lips, turning left and right in search of an excuse to escape. Lampman had already gone back into the structure and thrown the switch to start the ride. The interior lights were off, and the passenger cars shuddered along the convoluted track.

"This—this isn't such a good idea," he was trying to say, but the swelling organ notes and pre-recorded gurgles of the dying drowned out his voice.

Henry couldn't move his body on his own. Myra almost had to lift his legs for him to get him into the rickety car. His eyes were saucer-wide, and his knuckles were white on the safety bar. Myra hopped into the car several yards in front of him. She clapped her hands as if embarking on a long-awaited vacation. "This'll be fun, Henry!" she called out to him. "Just enjoy the ride!" Light droplets of rain spattered her as she entered the tunnel. Thunder reverberated in the distance.

Wish I'd thought to bring an umbrella. We're going to get wet on the way out.

Whatever the dubious entertainment value the "Tunnel of Doom" possessed, Henry was missing it. As soon as the car moved forward, he closed his eyes and brought his chin down to his chest, tucking himself into as near a fetal position as the safety bar would allow. It'll be over soon, it'll all be over in a

minute, he mentally tried to calm himself. I don't have to look at a thing. Dr. Killough will never know.

Henry sensed the 'jolts' erupting on either side of the car. Although he had seen them in the light, they probably still would have made him jump in his seat—if he'd kept his eyes open. He held his palms to his ears, but he could still hear, all too clearly, the mock screams, the scratchy pleas for mercy, and the maniacal laughter. He could even distinguish Dr. Killough's giggles in the car ahead—she was having far too much fun at the carnival.

And then, with a neck-jarring jolt, the car came to a sudden stop and the soundtrack abruptly died.

Henry opened his eyes, but he might as well have left them closed for all that he could see in the labyrinthine enclosure. "D—Doctor Killough?" he called out. "Are you there?"

"Sorry, folks!" Lampman's voice dimly reached his ears. "Looks like the electricity got knocked out by the storm. Hold tight."

"Dr. Killough? Myra? You know I don't like being in the dark. . . ."

When the throaty chuckling began, he thought that the electricity had returned and the soundtrack had started once more. But the car didn't move, and the chuckling was now accompanied by a gagging, choking sound—coming from somewhere in front.

Oh, God. Oh, God! "Dr. Killough, talk to me, please!"

Objects—bodies?—were being violently jostled ahead of him. He could hear the passenger car rocking on the track. Fabric was being torn, and the choking sound was replaced with moist, wet splashes, like a fountain spurting erratically.

Please, please, please—let this all be part of the therapy, Henry prayed. Let this be Dr. Killough's unorthodox method of curing me. I don't care. I won't sue her. Let's just get out of here!

His own car shifted as someone plopped down beside him on the seat. "Thank God," sighed

Henry. "Myra, I thought something happened to you."

"Whew!" said an unexpected, yet recently-recalled voice. "That was a long wait, Henry. Do you think that was really polite of you?"

Only now could Henry detect the icy, decomposing odor. Only now could he feel the sinewy arm across his shoulders. Only now did the few remaining remnants of his sanity begin toppling like a child's block fort.

"You're-you're real, aren't you?" Henry asked. "You've always been in the dark, waiting for me." He could feel something metallic, thin, and vaguely wet at his throat. He knew that if he swallowed, his esophagus might be halved.

"I think you know the answer to that. Oh, don't breathe too deeply."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. Sweat pooled at the bottom of his spine. If he hadn't already wet and soiled his pants, he was on the verge of it.

"This is the end, isn't it? You've already murdered Dr.

Killough. Torn her face to shreds and then slashed her throat. You're awash in her blood, and now you're going to do the same thing to me. . . . "

His nameless, faceless friend was laughing good-naturedly. "Well, you're partially right, my dear boy." The prickly hairs were removed from Henry's Adam's apple as he swallowed spasmodically. "But this isn't the end." Henry's right hand was forced open and something solid, with grooves to fit his fingers, was placed in his palm. "It's only the beginning." His friend squeezed Henry's fingers tightly on the hilt.

The car surged forward with a sudden jerk as the electricity returned. Henry, alone on the seat, rounded the tunnel's final corner, his open, echoing mouth eerily reminiscent of the exit through which he rode.

#

UPON THE EVE OF WOMAN

By D. F. Lewis

Published Strix #4

Starter, although a non-sequitur, was the only word with which to begin the meal of words. Chiaroscuro was nothing when compared to the sky, the satiny blackness of which outshone, yet sunk behind, the tall white clouds - and how else could Edmund Horla describe clouds other than tall, when each one curved from horizon to horizon? The question remained unanswered, since it was far too nebulous for even Horla to ask. He laid his hand to his forehead, as if he were smacking a recalcitrant child. He remembered punishing his daughter when she stepped out of line - which was not often, bearing in mind her sweet nature. Maria's thoughts were out of control yet again. He lowered his head, as if that would dam up such thoughts at their source - and he breathlessly plodded onward behind the startling array of weather. Yet, he drifted into a single thought, this time one he welcomed: yes, one about his daughter again, who even at her now advanced age, had never been anything short of beautiful in his

eyes. Her eyes were always dear, bright and full of fun, whilst his had long been milky yellow. Such a daughter had made at least part of his life *worthwhile* and, thus he yearned to see her again, knowing deep in his heart that this was impossible, since she was at present much older than he'd ever been - and he was at least an age away from her, at this rate of plodding.

The weather today was not really weather, Horla thought. Weather was weather only when it moved or changed or brought sensations to bear - like wind, rain, snow or skimming clouds - or temperatures dropping amid the motionless freezing fogs with which he was only too familiar in later life. Indeed, today was nothing short of weatherless: the endless ribbons of cumulus entirely static, as if a painterly God had smeared them upon a black canvas. There was next to no air - hence Horla's breathlessness - and an ambience so neutral, he could not bring any thoughts to bear.

Thoughtless, in the true sense. Still, this was rather pleasing, as he did not need thoughts. He basked in mindlessness, with a sigh.

Although the wispy shapes in the sky had not perceptibly altered, Horla could not remember why he had earlier described them as tall. Yet, there it was, nevertheless - a memory, yes, and a stark, unmitigated memory. As he raised his sights to the gloss-backed vault of darkness, twin blurred moons slowly turned into the unblinking eyes of an ill configured crone, one who wore a universe of storm-tressed straggles.

So, with night, weather became truly weather - and it was indeed a memory that Horla now suffered; memories were thoughts gone bad and, sadly, even beautiful daughters grew ugly with old age. Memories, meanwhile, had their mealtime. The Peppermint Factory was at one end of a backstreet road and the Petrol Station at the other. Maria had lived with them as fixtures upon the horizon of his childhood, taken for granted rather than seen. His road was a few alleys away, but the tall chimneys of the factory were visible above some plants - plants that an evident nature-lover must have grown from saplings to things that approached a free-like existence in a backyard otherwise

surrounded by
northern concrete.

The heady smell
from the chimneys was
not at all
peppermint, but
rather a warm dusty
flavor of dungeons in
the air . . .but
Horla did not wonder
why it was not at all
peppermint even when
he tried, in his
thumb-fisted fashion,
to unravel a tube of
Extra Strong Minties
that he knew was made
at the factory, their
tang always hitting
the back of his
throat like fireman's
breath. Indeed, the
emergency services
had to be called to
the Petrol Station on
one memorable
occasion almost
before Horla's memory
was old enough to
retain any memories -
whether they were
memorable or not.

He was three.
The memory, if such
it was, became a

dream that punctuated
sleeplessness. He saw
flames reaching the
sky beyond a dark
terraced ridge of
houses, in one of
which he dreamed that
his yet unborn
daughter would live.
He stretched on
tiptoes at his
window, barely seeing
the ruddy stains
spreading towards the
stars like an
abstract painting
that intended to
eradicate sense as
well as darkness.

Luckily - and he
discovered this when
he was able to
understand - the
garage had no petrol
in its tanks, after a
previous glut.
Rations and so forth
had resulted in a
complete overnight
emptiness. But nobody
had wanted to go on
journeys that night -
so it mattered
little. And the fire
was thus successfully
confined to the

workshop where merely
odd pockets of oil
had fed height to the
wings of flame.

Hell was a place
Horla never wanted to
visit even on a day
trip. The Shell
Petrol sign outside
the garage,
fortunately, reminded
him more of seaside
trips (one of which
he had enjoyed at the
age of four) than its
more lexicographic
soul-mate, Hell. The
garage was rebuilt in
its present style,
the large vehicles
with huge hoses
returning a few
months later to
restock the tanks. It
was really this
Petrol Station in its
second incarnation
that formed Horla's
childhood landmark.
Not the earlier,
fire-ridden one.

The Peppermint
Factory was knocked
down in the early
Sixties. Many

continued to recall
when it employed most
of the people in
those now sadly
forgotten streets,
including Horla's Mum
and Dad: she a white-
clad process line
wrapper and he a
religious know-it-all
in the Factory's
stores. Horla's elder
sister worked part-
time in the office,
where Mr. Roberts,
the Manager, treated
her like dirt. Horla
assumed he would work
there, too, when he
was old enough to
assume. His own yet
unborn daughter, too.
He never anticipated
the final outcome of
his life. One never
could at that age,
except, perhaps,
wondering what it was
like to be dead,
never quite believing
it could truly be
nothing at all.

And like
everything, endings
arrived quite
suddenly. Horla's

elder sister was
killed almost
instantly upon the
zebra-crossing quite
close to the rebuilt
Petrol Station. There
were reddish smudges
that the council
could not completely
remove for days on
end. He was only ten
at the time. And the
Peppermint Factory
was still standing.
Only just.

There were no
trees in Heaven. No
firemen. No sweets.
But just flames and a
few broken pencils in
his Dad's fire-proof
stores. Or so said a
dream his dead sister
sent him. And, what
was more, memories
could never be doused
like flames. The
future was a stickler
for memories. And, in
that future, an older
Horla allowed himself
to be persuaded into
attending a party.
Rachel, Colin and,
yes, Lorna, they
ganged up on Horla,

maintaining that his
ex-wife, Susan really
wanted him to come.
The invitation was
sincere, not polite.
Divorce was not quite
so final, these days.
He shrugged. He had
not encountered Susan
since their
desperately messy
break-up five years
in the past, but not
before an even
messier miscarriage.
With mutual friends
such as Rachel and
Colin, it was
inevitable that the
time would come when
Horla and his ex-wife
would touch memories
again. And her
thirty-third birthday
party presented such
an opportunity or
risk. Oh, Susan has
changed, you know,
Horla. Either Rachel
or Colin had told him
that. He didn't want
to know if Susan had
changed and,
particularly, how she
had changed. She may
have changed back
into someone he would

fall in love with all
over again.

But having
recently obtained a
clean bill of health
from Doctor Starter
what the hell. Yes,
he'd go, but only if
they could persuade
Susan to invite
Lorna. Lorna was not
Horla's current full-
blooded sexual
partner as many
believed her to be.
After all, she had
known the risks as
well as anybody. No,
Lorna was more a
fixture, as some men
suck on pipes for all
the hours God gives
them. Lorna was a
comforter. Someone
Horla could feel all
over, like prayer
beads. Lorna did not
seem to mind, as long
as he refrained in
public. Yet parties
were not really
public places in that
sense. Caressing was
rather expected from
guest in such
milieus. So, after

due consideration
(with some relatively
crude encouragement
from Rachel as well
as Colin) Horla
relented. Lorna was
all in favor, too.

Admittedly,
Susan, Horla's ex-
wife, was only a name
to Lorna.
What Horla failed to
realize, however, was
the duplicity of his
so-called friends. He
was never to learn
that they had based
the evidence
regarding Susan's
"change" merely on a
single sighting in a
railway station two
years before.

The Party
invitation had
arrived in the post.
Not even a telephone
call, to clear the
air.

Susan and a
certain "Gerald"
would be pleased to
welcome Rachel and
Colin, together with

Horla, at their house
warming. Bring a
bottle.

RSVP. The address was
somewhere up north,
so the question of
accommodation was the
first thing that came
to Horla's lips. Oh,
we'll muddle through,
was the easy answer.

Lorna was
sitting on Horla's
lap, at the time of
this conversation,
squirming her bottom
deliciously. She was
obviously eager to
go. Parties were
bread and butter for
Lorna. She had met
Merle at one, after
all. And, indeed,
that was where Merle
had met her. Their
togetherness stemmed
from what they had in
common. Destiny.

But what if it
starts my trouble off
again? Don't be
silly, Horla, Doctor
Starter told you that
there was no sign of
it in your system. If

you keep worrying
about that, you'll
never go anywhere.
Susan will be
discreet, Horla, and
the address sounds as
if it is in the
middle of nowhere,
doesn't it? We can
always put you
upstairs on the bed
with all the
overcoats. There was
general laughter,
Horla included.

Susan had indeed
changed. She was
older. Her "Gerald"
was about Horla's
age. He welcomed
Horla as if he had
known him for years,
Horla this and Horla
that. Horla
introduced Lorna.
Rachel and Colin were
already heading for
the disco in the
sitting-room. The
house was, as had
been predicted, quite
a long way from
civilization, up a
hill, through a
field, across a
stream and under a

large spreading oak.
The guests' shoes
were muddy and needed
to be left in the
porch. That did lead
towards quieter
dancing, however.
None of that rude
stomping they have in
Rumania.

Horla explained
he was now clean as a
whistle. Susan said
it didn't matter. She
had already kissed
him on the lips, upon
arriving, even before
Horla had a chance to
explain about Doctor
Starter.

The party
dragged on far longer
than Horla would have
liked. His eyelids
were drooping with
alcohol, as little
Lorna climbed up his
waistcoat buttons to
get to his mouth.
Rachel and Colin
played Lilliput in
the lavatory, a
bubbly affair of
giggle and counter-
giggle. Susan and

"Gerald" were model
hosts, standing to
attention, in endless
games of Statues. It
was all going to
Horla's head.
Including the blood.
Gurgling in the ears,
like Doctor Starter's
syringes. Horla could
tell he was dizzy, as
soon as he began to
see another Horla as
a separate entity
from himself. Not the
effects of the
alcohol in his rum
and peppermint, he
maintained. Merely
the way the thirst
took him.

Back home, the
private inquest
turned out to be a
trifle strained.
Lorna said she didn't
want to talk about
it. Rachel and Colin
had a blazing row
about Horla's living
remains. In the end,
Lorna was given them
to play with.
Meanwhile, everybody
else, including the
separate entity that

was once called
Horla, lived in a
happy, yet mindless,
state forever and
ever. Horla, after
all, was only a name.
Like "Gerald". And
sisters, daughters,
wives were merely the
blurred scintilla at
the edge of a
migraine. And many
were blinded by the
blazing, blaring
white that the sky
sucked up its sun
with. But none so
seared as Horla.
Deaths were catlike
promises, it seemed.

The next memory
started ordinarily
enough, if
extraordinary
beginnings could
become ordinary by
being regular - like
his bowels used to
be, before he started
eating those things
the alien authorities
said would do him
good. They didn't say
the stuff would stick
in the gut like
thick-cut glue. No

warning about the indigestibility of the things they gave people to eat. No best-past date. No die-by details. Nothing. Just blank labels and substances that oozed from crevices even before one had found the tin-opener.

But Horla digressed. As usual. It was becoming a habit; those unexpected extrapolations from bare nuggets of meaninglessness. He had started to tell the angel about the scorching monster of brightness, the angel being the most pervasive creature of alien tendencies it had been his misfortune to encounter. He really needed to mention Lorna, if only so that he could remember her. The most he knew was that he loved her. She was

shapely beyond shape
itself A mouth as
kissable as the
mouths that girls
used to wear. A hip-
to-hip succulence
that he dreamed of
steering between his
thighs. Limbs as long
as endlessness used
to be for holiday
children in warm
meadows. And,
instead, he became
side-tracked in a
mere moment of hell-
fire apocalypse.

Horla and Lorna
met in a soup joint,
off the highway, one
where customers
shouldn't have been
expected at all, let
alone angels such as
Horla and Lorna. He
slowly ladled the
heavy-duty gruel into
his mouth, trying to
retain as much as
possible under the
tongue and within the
air pockets that had
been formed by each
cheek peeling back
from its own under
layer.

"I couldn't stand being a woman any more," Lorna said, being unable to eat and thus expending the endemic energy of her mouth upon this small talk. "They're so thin-lipped and simply under grunt rather than speak, their eyes overgrown into the slightest slits - so ugly, it makes me want to eat them and then sick them up."

Horla nodded. His mouth was full. So, she continued:

"How did you come to be in these parts? I was left by my parents when the last saucer thing took its load off. No room for children, they said. Which didn't make much sense if they intended to set up shop elsewhere? No future in old people. Or maybe that was

their attraction. A civilization of infertiles. Happiness, without the worry of continuing the species. No need to think of the future, only the present moment. During famines, people should've eaten their babies. A twofold solution to their problems. But now we're here - you and me - and are we happy? I don't even know if we're happy, because there's no more happiness left with which to compare our emotions."

Horla nodded again, knowingly. His daughter had been one of the older ones that the saucer was able to evacuate. He was about to steal a kiss, having squeezed a particularly porridgey soup from his nostrils, rather than swallow it. His mouth was now free.

Yet Lorna turned hers
away, as if kiss
ability was simply a
disguise for a
stronger sucking
underneath. And she
widened her eyes into
iritic soul-burners
reminding him of
another memory when
he had seen her hand
in hand with a
smirking Gerald
Roberts - a memory's
memory like a dream's
dream. Then, that
chiaroscuro day of
tall clouds, an
extraordinary day
among a million such
other consecutive
ones, when daughters
and wives and sisters
called with a single
voice...

Lorna, a crone
with mooning eyes and
storm tresses, lay
beside him in the
truckle, still
snoring off her
dreams. He gazed at
the dim window which,
only a few seconds
before, had been as
dark as the room

itself. Now it began to glow, yet without dissipating the blackness enveloping them. At first, he suspected that a thin-lipped under grunter was outside cooling its eye-slit at the crack in the curtains. Or a dawn-trader gloating at how Lorna and Horla shared a mutual meal-bed. But maybe it was none of these things - beyond even the wildest digression which Edmund Horla was willing to indulge. He turned to much, if not all of Lorna. He wanted to taste the familiar peppermint flavor of her tongue. But today it had an under taste of graphite and an after one of petroleum blood. Meanwhile, he would it was a little girl outside the window: fresh come from warm meadows and everlasting youth - ever upon the eve of

woman. The starter
motor of creation.

WHITLEY AND THE KING

By Cathy Buburuz

First Published in Roswell
Literary Review

Although the two frequently conversed and collaborated via DataLynx, they'd reached an agreement at the turn of the century whereby each would travel to the other's home state for biannual discussions on current projects.

This night they sat on high back chairs in an obscure little bar in Corpus Christi where the jukebox played Country and the waitress played havoc with service and good old common courtesy. To King, it was one of those *you get what you pay for* situations - a pitcher of beer cost less than ten bucks and the three P's (peanuts, popcorn and pretzels) were free - *so what the hey*. But to Whitley, forty-five minutes between beers was not just unacceptable, it was downright absurd.

Four times in the last three minutes alone he had waved his arm above his head like a flag in heat, to no avail. The young lady was far more interested in prancing in and out of a long row

of cowboys, flashing a succession of cheap smiles as she passed. Her simulated cowskin mini-skirt was hiked to the max and she gave new meaning to the term *plunging neckline*.

"Flash a bill," King mumbled between pretzels. The pretzels were salty.

"Bullshit. It's customary to tip *after* you've received the service." Whitley stood up, sauntered past the dudes and cowpokes, and headed toward the wench. Her back was to him so her tapped her bare shoulder, pointed to King, whispered something into her ear, then returned to the table looking smug, self-satisfied.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, what did you say to her?" For emphasis he leaned over, looked Whitley square in the eye and wiggled his eyebrows up and down like a mad scientist.

Wearing a face void of expression, Whitley replied, "I told her Isaac Asimov wanted a beer."

King laughed so hard it was catching. Everyone in a 5-table radius chuckled and raised glasses and bottles in a drunken tribute to the big guy with the silvery beard.

King nodded his approval at the good patrons of *The Longhorn* as he crossed the hardwood floor to the Gent's Room. Halfway there, he felt a pair of eyes burning two neat little holes in his back. He was being watched, he could feel it. He glanced over his shoulder, caught sight of the lady in cowhide. She was doing three things all at the same time: wiggling, winking, blowing him kisses.

"Of course, he chuckled to himself, "she thinks I'm Asimov."

When he returned to the table he seriously wondered why there were three fresh pitchers and three frosted mugs on the table. But before he could ask, Whitley leaned over, looking lost and forlorn, and whispered, "We've got company." King was about to ask an impressive line-up of appropriate questions when a slight movement to the left of him snagged his attention. He saw it and the questions committed suicide in his

throat.

It was less than four inches high, sparkling and trembling. No arms, no legs, no torso. Just a floating pale mass of matter unknown. A jellylike bobber with glossy, penetrating eyes that gazed through flesh clear to the soul. The eyes locked with King's and there was no release. Until it blinked.

King was terrified and it showed. For Whitley's sake, he made a concerted effort to converse, but all he could muster were three little words:

"Who are you?"

"I am the Word and Window of Kysa," Its voice was feminine and soothing, yet masculine in its authority. In it was an incomprehensible horror that chilled to the marrow. The creature continued in mystical, hypnotic tones that caressed or bruised at will. It spoke of visits past, of ancient cultures and traditions, of things that could melt a mind. It told of its need to know more.

In an eerie gesture of comradeship, it hovered over a frosty beer and through bizarre

osmosis it emptied the mug. On cue, the two men guzzled their drinks, both taking great comfort in their loss of sobriety. They shared round after round and the conversation flowed as freely as the booze.

When the creature announced it was time to leave, there were no arguments. Their departure was uneventful, the crowd oblivious.

Smooth and silent, the floater led the way through winding streets and littered alleyways. A bag lady in a trench coat and Adidas stepped out from behind a filthy dumpster, shoved her grubby fingers into King's belly. "Buddy, can you spare a fiver?"

Mumbling something about a dime, King reached down into the pocket of his jeans, then passed his wallet over to hungry hands. *A helluva lot of good charge cards and cash would do in The Twilight Zone.*

Aboard the ship, the Word and Window of Kysa introduced them to a creature taller than a man. It had incredibly large eyes that glistened with the luster of a

thousand midnight stars. Her movements were smooth and elegant. Swan-like. With translucent fingers she reached down, parted the pink down on her swollen belly to reveal a throbbing hole of tangled mauve muscle. Like a vacuum from Hades, she inhaled and The Word and Window of Kysa was sucked into the pulsating hole of its master. Whitley froze; King cleared his throat.

"You're, um, body part told us you came here to study humanity." King's face flushed at his choice of words. "But before we get started I'd like to know if you plan to pick, prod and poke. Because if you do, I'm outta here. Know what I mean? As a member of the human race, I figure I'm entitled to a dash of dignity, an ounce of respect." He made a silent wish that the creature before him would *not* inhale.

"Your bodies are safe here. As Whitley knows, I no longer crave knowledge of man's physical being. It is the essence of man I seek."

"Fire away, Kysa," King said with an elfish grin. He reached over and gave Whitley's shoulder a squeeze. "It's gonna be all right,

old buddy. Hell, this little rendezvous could very well work itself into a shit-kickin' storyline.

"It's been done, my friend, and you more than *anyone* know that story." Like a lonesome cowboy, Whitley's thoughts trailed off into parts unknown.

Whitley's right, King concluded. *I'd be hard put to find another living soul who believed so much as a paragraph in this story.*

Kysa's questions were grueling. She demanded intricate detailed responses that left both men feeling insecure and inadequate in their roles as spokespersons for humanity. It was difficult to determine the time span of the interrogation but later they would estimate it at three days. They did not eat or sleep or even urinate aboard the ship and attributed this to the Power of Kysa.

They explored hundreds, perhaps thousands, of topics. Everything from *Why do humans maintain the inhumane practice of burying their dead underground?* to *Why do increasing numbers of child bearers abort the unborn?*

They discussed politics and economics, addictions and medical procedures, fluoridation and radiation, flora and fauna, The Seven Wonders of the World and architecture, billboards and television advertising, crime and violence, The Holy Bible and paganism, poverty and prosperity, gay rights and legal procedures, astronomy and astrology, anything and everything under earth's sun.

They shared viewpoints and philosophies, ideas and conclusions, stories and anecdotes.

Sometimes they laughed and sometimes they cried. And more often than not, they simply babbled.

When it was over - though they were mentally, physically and emotionally drained - Whitley and King took the Hilton penthouse where they dissected the details of their session with Kysa, chatting endlessly over pepperoni pizzas and gallons of beer.

They agreed the experience was not a thing to be shared with family, friends, associates or publishers. They exchanged vows never to reveal even one iota of information to anyone *including*

their wives. They shook hands.
Exchanged grizzly bear hugs.
Parted ways.

Whitley tucked the details of
the event into the deepest pocket
of his mind where they would
fester and burn in the cinders of
infinite silence.

King, despite his promise,
pieced together an outline, made a
mental note to call Max-the-Axe at
Viking.

Worthington Court
By L. Marie Wood

No one remembered what had gone on before Worthington Court became Worthington Court. Even the oldest resident of Smithfarm Junction had only a fading recollection, and she was almost ninety-seven. Alma could tell you that Worthington Court went by another name back when she was a child. Tolliver? Lynwood? She could never get the name right. She told the town historian that her grandfather used to play with a boy who lived on that street. When the historian, a mild mannered man of 46 with a receding hairline and a nervous twitch in his eyebrow, tried to correct her and say it must have been her father that played with a boy there, she became adamant.

"It was my grandfather, I tell you. I know who it was," she croaked using weathered vocal cords.

The historian flipped through a mass of maps, going as far back as 1880. He scoured over the faded ink, peering through his reading glasses at the yellowed paper, while Alma took a sip of tea. She chewed absently, nothing

but her tongue in her mouth.

"Ms. Roberson, there-."

"Alma," she said, tired of having to. Ms. Roberson was her mother-in-law, rest her soul, and Alma had taken to saying as much ten years before. Age is what you make of it. "Call me Alma, Henry, or don't call me at all."

"All right... Alma," Henry said as color flashed in his cheeks. He looked over the maps one more time before continuing. "I'm looking at the maps and..., well Alma, the street your talking about just wasn't there."

Alma wrapped her arms around herself, shivering from the chill that was picking up on the porch. The sun was going down and the night's chill was easing its way in. *About time to go inside*, she thought. She braced her hand on the armrest of the wicker chair and prepared to stand.

Henry rose with her, before her, though he tried to keep her pace. "It's not there, Alma," he continued cautiously. "The road you talked about. Worthington Court doesn't come into existence until 1915. By any name."

He spoke louder that time and Alma didn't hide her frustration. She wasn't deaf, dumb, or senile and she grew weary of buffoons like Henry who liked to treat her as though she was. She declined his arm when he extended it to escort her back to the front door.

"I don't care what's on your map, Henry Goode. I'm telling you what my granddaddy told me. I remember it like it was yesterday. Granddaddy said he and the boy played over there every summer back when the family came out this way for vacation. He told me the boy didn't live on the street right then. He had lived there years before. My granddaddy asked his father if he knew his playmate's family one night since our family had been coming to Smithfarm Junction for years during the warm months. Great-granddaddy didn't know anyone that lived where the boy claimed to live either, said no one had ever lived there back when he was young. He said it was nothing but trees. Granddaddy went back and told the boy what great-granddaddy said the next day, but the boy insisted on it just like I'm insisting on it right now. The street was there, Henry. He said

the road was there, that his family used to have a house on it, but that they had left." Alma reached for the front door, opened it, and stepped inside. "And that was that."

Henry looked at Alma with confusion in his eyes. "All right?" Alma continued dismissively. "That's all I know. You take that and do what you want with it."

Henry stood in silence, looking at Alma, at the age etched in her face. Her stare, unblinking and direct, was mesmerizing.

"Ok, Henry Goode?" Alma was insistent.

"Y-yes ma'am."

Alma looked at Henry in disapproval.

"Yes Alma," Henry corrected himself. Alma smiled genuinely.

"I guess I'll be seeing you then," Alma called over her shoulder as she let the door close on its own.

Alma walked to the back of her house and pulled out her photo

album. The picture of her great-grandfather was covered with plastic and sat alone on a black scrapbook page. "Handsome devil," she mumbled, as she did every time she looked at the picture. She sighed, wondering if she should have told Henry more about the street, or nothing at all. She knew he wouldn't be able to let it rest. They never could.

Henry scoured the microfilm the town had on hand about Worthington Court and the surrounding area. For a residential area, the street had seen its share of tragedy. Five car accidents with one fatality (a man backed out of his driveway without looking and killed his wife while she stood at the mailbox), three fires, construction accidents, you name it. A woman slipped on ice while walking on the sidewalk. She hit her head and died instantly. More dogs than Henry cared to count had run in the street and been hit by oncoming cars. Two missing children had been reported from that street in the past three years. There had been flooding and severe potholes that the state serviced every year.

Most of the occurrences

seemed to take place in front of a specific plot of land.

Henry dug in the land records as far back as he could go to learn more about plot 197 on Worthington Court, tracing its owner as far back as 1910, when the road took on its current name. It didn't take much to find out who Harvey Kringle's only living kin was. Alma.

Henry drove to Alma's place the next morning with determination dotting his brow. Why didn't she tell him about it? She had no reason to be ashamed—Harvey's sins were his own. The blood he spilled wasn't on her hands. He was trying to think of what he'd say to her when he passed her street. Seeing unfamiliar houses pass on either side of his car, Henry realized his mistake. He banged the steering wheel with his palms and turned onto the next street, intending to turn the car around. He looked up at the sign and noticed he was on Worthington Court.

Henry couldn't remember ever having been on the street before, though he was sure he must have been. He lived in Smithfarm

Junction all his life; there wasn't much about the small town he didn't know. But the ancient oaks that lined the streets and the small, abandoned looking houses weren't familiar.

He pulled his car to the curb, turned off the engine, and stepped out. A squirrel lie dead on its side with its paw stuck in a crack in the ground. Henry squatted to get a closer look, not so much at the animal, as at the crack in the asphalt. It was split in the middle of the road - the jagged break didn't extended to or originate from either curb. It was wide, the darkness inside it seeming to be endless, bottomless. It was as if the ground had opened up to ingest the squirrel.

Henry noticed the softness of the ground at the same time that he noticed there wasn't any blood coming from the squirrel. Henry squinted and looked closer; the asphalt seemed to be forming itself around the squirrel, swallowing it.

Henry turned to run away, but the ground had already engulfed his legs, the sensation like fire roasting his skin. He screamed

out in pain, clawing at the ground looking for something to hold on to, but found nothing.

Alma snipped the article about the town historian's sudden death on Worthington Court and pasted it neatly into her scrapbook behind the others. *Quite a history*, she mused. Over the years, she and her family had amassed scrapbooks upon scrapbooks of newspaper clippings and articles about their street, though the early ones were largely about Harvey and his insatiable need for blood. They talked about his exploits, how he took women who pleased men for money and bled them to drink of and bathe in their essence. They talked about how he forced the family to drink too, believing that the blood would give them youth, special powers, eternal life. They called him crazy, applauded his capture, cheered his death. After the prison turned his body over to the family, there had been no more intrusion on their privacy. They buried him behind their house and tried to forget. Everything had been fine until a boy cut his leg while playing in the dirt on what is now the paved road of Worthington Court.

“Will you ever be satisfied?”
Alma asked the sepia photograph of
her great-grandfather. Her
thoughts were disturbed by a
parcel driver looking for an
address.

Pack of Death
By Larry Sells

Published in Vampire Nights

Susan and Lee Shorts sat at home with their children Allen and Raid. As a family, they watched the late night "Creature Feature." Together they screamed, laughed at the wolf man, Frankenstein Monster, Dracula and other monsters. Tonight's feature was the original The Thing. After the black and white version was over the John Carpenter's remake of The Thing would be next. Susan and Lee could not wait to compare the two and discuss the two movies with their children. It was one of the many pleasures of life they shared.

When the monster in the black and white version appeared, Allen laughed. "It looks like a walking carrot."

"Yes, it does," Raid joined his brother in laughter.

Lee and Susan looked at each other's eyes, smiled, and wrapped their arms around each other. Susan rested her head on Lee's shoulders.

After the credits of the first feature were over, Susan lit the last cigarette in her pack. She sucked the smoke deep into her lungs, held it there for a few seconds, then released the smoke into the air.

Lee waved the smoke away from his face and glared at his wife, but he remained silent to keep the peace of the household. Also, so he would not have to sleep alone on the couch. Ever since Lee had known Susan, she had smoked. When they first dated, he teased her about her mouth tasting like an ashtray, but she would then tell him that his mouth tasted sweet like Pepsi, for he was a Pepsi addict. He knew too well about his faults, so he tried to overlook the faults of his wife.

The smoke reached their children. They just pretended it was not there and continued to watch the movie. They cheered when the next feature started. It was the colorized version of The Thing.

Smoke hung like fog as everyone watched the film even after Susan ground the cigarette out in the ashtray. It hung around like an unwanted guest resting in the lungs of Susan and her loved ones.

To Lee, the smoke formed a white phantom, so he shook his head until the pattern disappeared. Once the form vanished, he continued to concentrate on the movie.

Everyone jumped and screamed when the monster made itself known to them. They kept their eyes fixed upon it until it was finally destroyed.

"This one was more scary than the black and white one," Susan said.

Raid nodded.

"What do you think, Dad?" Allen looked at his father.

With all eyes on him, Lee said, "Yep, sure was and the special effects made it more realistic."

"Yeah, they were cool," Raid said.

Susan looked at their children. "Time for bed. You all need your rest. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I know you both will want to watch cartoons all day long, so off to bed you, two, go."

As one they said, "Oh Mom."

Lee watched the children slowly walk up the stairs to their rooms.

"Now that the children are going to bed. I have to run to the store and buy another pack of smokes."

"Okay, but hurry back," Lee said as he kissed his wife goodbye.

Ten minutes later, Susan discovered a new tobacco discount store had opened up. It was named Native Smokes. She thought to herself, *must be run by Indians or Native Americans.*

The doorbell announced her entrance and an elderly Native American male stood in front of the counter and cash register. He watched her through his long gray hair as she looked through the store looking for bargains on her favorite smokes. The Native American clerk leaned on his cane with his curved back. He tried to straighten his back but could not, and remained in a hunch as he continued to watch Susan.

Her eyes stopped at one pack

of smokes. It was bright red and the package promised the size of the cigarettes to be king sized and made with a special blend of tobacco. Susan shook her eyes and could not believe it. This pack of smokes was not only the biggest but also the cheapest. In large letters written was Phoenix.

Susan approached the Native American clerk with a pack of Phoenix. "I'll take these." Her eyes glanced over some of the disposable lighters. Finally, one caught her eye. It was a bright red one with red lettering that said, "If you smoke you will die." Also, with the design of the skull with crossbows of bones underneath it just looked like the one on the rat poison she had at home hidden away in the cabinet. For some reason everything about the lighter captured her fancy, and she placed it next to the cigarettes. "I'll take this too, please."

The elderly Native American looked deep into her eyes and smiled. "Of course, miss." He scanned the two items. "That will be ten dollars and fifty cents, miss."

Susan gritted her teeth hard

as she looked into her purse for her billfold. *God, I hate it when people call me miss or madam. Makes me feel old. Heck, I'm only in my thirties.* Her hand found her billfold, removed eleven dollars, and handed the bills to the clerk.

After receiving her change and her black plastic sack filled with her purchase, she walked out of the door without even a thank you.

Immediately getting into the car, she lit up a cigarette with her new lighter and sucked the smoke deep into her lungs. *Damn these are good.* She took another deep puff of smoke. *These have to be the best smokes that I have ever had.* She looked at the brand name. It did not strike a cord to her memory, but she instantly knew that this brand of cigarettes was going to be her last brand that she would ever smoke.

After arriving home, Susan poked her head into her children's room. They were both sleeping. She smiled at the thought of them insisting that their nightlight be kept on while they slept to ward off the boogiemán. To her, it allowed her to easily check on

them when she wanted during the course of the night.

In Lee and Susan's bedroom, Susan placed the pack of smokes and lighter on the nightstand next to their bed. She looked at Lee and started to remove her clothing. Usually, she would stop at her undergarments, but tonight Susan was feeling extra horny. She slipped in next to her sleeping husband and started to kiss him on the cheek then she started kissing him on the neck to his lips.

Lee moaned and opened his eyes. Tasting the cigarette aroma from her mouth, he wanted to push her away, but his penis had betrayed him by becoming fully erect. His deep breathing also showed his lustful intentions.

Quickly, the pair of them was naked and wrapped in steaming flesh. They pumped their steamy desires until they collapsed in total exhaustion. Slowly, the sounds of their heavy breathing slowed as they entered sleep.

Day One

After cooking breakfast for her family and herself, Susan sat at the kitchen table with a cup of

steaming black coffee in front of her. She held inside her right hand a cigarette, which she inhaled like her life depended upon it. Whitish smoke enclosed her as Susan sucked on the filter drawing more nicotine into her system.

She placed the cigarette placed in the glass ashtray and it showed like some kind of a trophy as she walked to the stairwell.

"Breakfast is ready. Wake up sleepy heads." She stood in the doorway until she heard the slamming of big and little feet onto the floor of her men's rooms rewarded her efforts.

Minutes later, the kitchen was filled with excited voices. Susan started to pass the food around the table. "Other than watching cartoons all morning, I want you two," she looked at both Raid and Allen, "to do some reading." Raid and Allen looked at each other and nodded.

"I plan to finish that book I started from that Koontz fellow." Susan watched Raid put the last passing plate in front of him after he took a helping.

"I plan to finish this book by Lawrence Block. Afterwards we can go for our weekly drive in the big city of Cedar Falls. Might even go shopping at the College Square Mall."

At the thought of spending her husband's money, Susan smiled and looked at her twins. *Hmm, they aren't identical, but they do have strong physical resemblances to each other. For instance, they both have long slender noses, and deep blue eyes. They are about the same height and build. Their face structure and hair color set them apart from each other. Both of them do look like their father. Both definitely cuties.*

Everyone piled in Lee's four-door Grand Am. "Here we go to the big city."

Susan looked back at the kids who were playing a strange string game. Allen had the string shaped like a hammock. Raid studied the puzzle and placed his fingers underneath Allen's and the string structure slid effortlessly onto Raid's fingers. Feeling bored, Susan turned back around and lit up a cigarette. The white smoke spread through out the car waging

war with the clean air.
Lee waved the smoke away from him.
"Please, open up a window, I feel
like I'm being smothered."
Susan blew some smoke in his face
then opened her window. "My smoke
bothers you?"

"Kinda, but you don't."

Smiling Susan took another
drag from her cigarette. The
white smoke floated toward Lee.

Lee looked at her and lowered
his window.

The kids having tired of
their game started talking between
themselves. Finally, Raid leaned
close to the front seat, "Mom, may
I have a drag on your cigarette."
Susan's mouth opened wide but
nothing but silence came out.
Lee stole a look at Raid, "No,
Raid, smoking will slowly kill
you."

"But Mom smokes and she's
alive."

Susan watched through the
silence and knew that Lee was
thinking of more comebacks against
smoking. She wanted to beat him
to the draw, but decided it would
not serve any purpose, so she
remained silent.

"True, but smoking takes years away from your life and not only that, it's bad for you." Allen pulled Raid back to the backseat area, "Told you so, didn't I."

Raid sat there and shook his head. Smoke drifted into the backseat area. Without hesitation, the boys breathed the air and took in the smoke.

Finally, the Grand Am pulled in the parking lot at College Square Mall. They looked at the almost empty parking lot, and knew that the empty Walmart store had hurt their business when they moved out of the mall. It was easy to find a place to park that they did not have to walk far to get to the entrance.

Suddenly, Susan started shaking and sweating heavily. It was as if she were a heroin addict. She knew what was the matter. She needed a cigarette. When they arrived at the entrance, Susan lagged back and stood next to the cigarette but container. "I'm going to have a smoke. You guys go ahead and do some shopping. I'll find you."

Lee looked at her hard his eyes penetrating into Susan, "You just had a smoke, not more than fifteen minutes ago."

"I need another one."
Lee shook his head. "Shoot yourself."

As Susan lit up her cigarette, her family continued in the mall. Her shaking and sweating stopped, and she felt back in control. *These are good. Might have to have another one when this one is done.*
An hour later, Lee, Raid, and Allen exited College Square Mall. Susan was still smoking a cigarette.

"How many have you had?
Can't believe you were smoking all of this time. Thought you were going to join us."

She looked at her pack of cigarettes and noticed she had only a couple left. She knew better than to ask her husband to give her a ride to the new tobacco store. Especially, when she just chain-smoked half a pack. "Sorry, just lost track of time."

"I'm concerned about you. It seems that all of a sudden the

only thing you care for is smoking those death sticks."

"It's one of the few pleasures I have. I don't drink alcohol, don't eat sweets, don't overeat, and don't really have any real hobbies to speak of."

Lee scratched his head. "Time for you to find a hobby other than smoking. It's getting out of hand."

The twins looked at each other and slowly walked away from their parents. They did not like the tone of their voices and the way they looked at each other. To them, it was as if they wished each other to be dead.

Susan saw the effect of their fighting had on the boys. "Now look at us, our fighting is scaring the kids."

Lee looked at the two boys and knew she was right. "It's okay, your mother and I were just disagreeing. We still love each other and you."

The boys as one nodded and held their arms out to be hugged by their parents. Seconds later, the whole family were in a huge

group hug. Tears of relief streamed down Raid and Allen's cheeks.

A half an hour later, the Grand Am drove into their garage, and Lee and Susan carried in the boys' purchases.

After they ate, everyone gathered in the living room to watch TV. They were waiting for CBS to have their Creature Feature. It was Godzilla vs. King Kong, a family favorite. After that, it was the original black and white version of King Kong.

Everyone had a huge bowl of buttered popcorn and a can of pop in front of them. They ate popcorn by the handfuls, in front of the TV.

Susan saw that Raid and Allen were getting sleepy. To her, they seemed not able to keep their eyes open. She looked at Lee, and noticed that he was too involved with the movie to notice, so Susan decided to let them fall asleep and after the movies were over Lee and her would carry them to bed. Susan started shaking again, so she lit up a cigarette and breathed in the smoke. Soon smoke filled up the room. Lee looked at her with his

eyebrows lowered.

"I'd been good, I hadn't had one in a while."

"True, but you had smoked a lot earlier."

Shrugging her shoulders in a defensive manner, Susan looked at Lee. "So what, you are not my keeper."

The twins stirred, but did not awake. They lay fast asleep on the couch.

Lee rose quickly knowing he could not reason with her picked up Raid and carried him to the twin's room.

Shaking her head, Susan got up, picked up Allen, and carried him to the boys' room. Then, she walked back downstairs to finish watching King Kong. The craving came back stronger than ever, so she lit up another cigarette, her last one.

After she ground the fire out of the smoke, Susan drove over to Native Smokes.

She walked in and walked straight to the counter. The

Native American clerk looked at her. "Welcome back. Nice to see you again."

Studying the clerk, Susan thought it was a different person because this one looked a lot younger. The wrinkles were almost gone, his liver spot on his right hand was gone, even the man's gray hair was now a shiny black. He was not hunched over a cane like he was last time. The cane was still in use, but he was not leaning on it as much.

"Are you the clerk that worked last night?"

"Yep, I'm the only person who works the counter at night. I'm also the owner."

She nodded even though Susan did not believe him. "I'll take a couple cartons of those smokes I purchased yesterday."

"Phoenix. That's thirty-six dollars." The clerk handed her the carton inside a sack.

Handing him forty dollars, she now corrected herself. *He had to be the one working last night how else did he know which brand she bought. Maybe he wasn't that*

old after all.

The clerk gave Susan four dollars, and watched her leave his store.

When Susan returned home, she hid the carton knowing her husband would not approve of her purchasing a whole carton, even for as cheap as they were. To him she was literally burning money that could have been used for something else. She sat in the dark kitchen the only light was her cigarette as she smoked it to the butt.

Lee moved aside as Susan joined him in bed. He was fast asleep. She was glad, for if he was not asleep he would have wanted to have sex. She was not in the mood. With her back to him, Susan fell asleep.

Day Two

Susan did not feel like cooking anything for breakfast. Therefore, she pulled the cereal down from the shelf, removed the pitcher containing orange juice, and gallon of milk from their refrigerator then set them on the table. When she had everything ready, Susan smoked a couple of

cigarettes before waking up her family.

A few minutes later, the whole family gathered around the table. Each had a bowl of cereal in front of them. Susan watched them eat then lit up a cigarette. The white smoke floated encircling them like fog.

Lee between mouthfuls of cereal and milk watched his wife smoke the cigarette. He disapproved but decided to keep it quiet, for he did not want to start the day with an argument. Especially on a Sunday, for this was the last day of the weekend and tomorrow the twins would go back to junior high school, and he would have to go back to work at the local paper, Hooterville Chronicle. He cherished the weekend because it was his time to spend with his family.

After the meal was over, everyone but Susan went into the living room to read. Susan sat in her chair and looked at the mess her family left. Usually she would start immediately to clean it up and do the dishes. But today, she lit up a cigarette. *I just don't feel like cleaning this mess up. At least we have a*

dishwasher to actually wash the dishes. All I have to do is gather them up and rinse them off. Then of course wipe off the table. I'll do it after I have finished with my smoke. Damn, this is a good cigarette. To me they just get better and better with each puff I take.

Minutes later, she ground the cigarette out, and slowly started cleaning off the table. *When I get all the dishes in the machine and the table cleaned, I'm going to have another cigarette.* Dishes in the machine, table cleared off, milk and orange juice were put away, and she stole a look into the living room. Everyone was busy reading. She walked back to her chair in the kitchen lit up another cigarette and started puffing on it like her life depended upon it. *This is a good treat, another smoke to calm the nerves.*

Lee read Robin Cook's Coma and loved the way the narrative flowed. He took a glance at what the twins were doing. Raid was reading a Stephen King book called Misery, and Allen was reading another Stephen King book called The Dark Half. Seconds later, he resumed his reading. He was

almost finished with the book when he started thinking about Susan. Four cigarettes later, Susan walked into the living room, picked up her book a Dean Koontz novel called The Watchers. Suddenly, she started coughing and coughing.

Lee and the twins looked at her.

She continued to cough into her hand.

Concerned Lee asked, "Are you okay?" He slipped his hand around her back.

She coughed another heavy cough. Susan looked at her hand. There was some thick substance mixed with red, which looked a lot like blood. Grabbing a tissue and wiping her hands, Susan thought about telling her husband. But he would only blame her smoking, so she decided not to tell him. She just tossed the Kleenex into the nearby garbage container as if nothing happened.

"You okay?" Lee asked his eyes digging at her silence.

"Never better. How's the book?"

"Good."

The twins resumed with their reading as they decided that nothing was wrong.

Day Three

Susan sat at the kitchen table looking at four empty packs. She smoked each cigarette as fast as she could. *I've never smoked so much in my entire life. But I'm hooked on these.* She held another cigarette in her hand, lit it, and started puffing on it. The room was filled with thick white smoke. Susan waved some of it away, so it would not burn her eyes. *I think I have a real problem here, but I do enjoy these smokes. Heck, everyone has an addiction. Mine's smoking these smokes.* She looked at the bones crossing underneath a skull then the name in huge bold letters announcing to the world, Phoenix. *Phoenix is it that bird that flames out when it dies and gets reborn in its ashes.* The red glowing tip burned down to the filter, Susan grounded it out then lit up another. *Oh, that's it. With each cigarette, my smoking addiction is reborn.* She thought about it and started laughing so

hard she started to cough.

After Susan was done coughing, she looked at her hand, and saw more blood. She wiped the blood off onto her pants then forgot about it. She looked at the clock. The digital face said 12:00 PM. *You mean it's only noon. I smoked four packs.* She looked at the almost empty pack. And grabbed another cigarette. *Almost five packs.* Despite having smoked all of those cigarettes she grabbed another one, lit, and sucked in the toxic smoke. She walked into the living room and started reading where she left off yesterday.

After reading for an hour she became tired, so Susan put the book on the floor next to the couch, returned the ashtray to the end table, then lay down on the couch. Seconds later, she was asleep. At three o'clock Raid and Allen wakened her as they slammed the door announcing their return from school. Stretching, Susan sat up, lit another cigarette then watched the twins enter the living room.

"Hi, everyone."

The twins looked at her as

she started to cough.

"Mom are you okay?" Allen said as he slowly approached his mother. She stopped coughing. "I'm fine honey, I'm fit as a fiddle." Susan set the smoking cigarette in the ashtray and hugged her children.

Seeing she was okay and that she still loved them, they walked over to the TV, turned it on, then sat on the couch. A Bugs Bunny cartoon was on.

Susan finished her cigarette and used the glowing tip to light up another. The smoke floated toward the children, and they breathed it in. Soon they started coughing and tears streamed from their red swollen eyes. She tossed the empty pack away, went into the kitchen to get another full pack, returned to the living room, and lit it. Briefly, she turned her attention to her children. They were fast asleep. *Maybe I should waken them, so when Lee comes we could have supper. Usually I would cook something, but I just don't feel like it. I think I'll be able to convince him that we could go out and eat or order something to eat here.* She

looked at the clock. It read 4:45. *Shit, he'll be home soon. He usually gets home at five.* She looked at the heaping ashtray. *I better get rid of all of these cigarette butts and the one in the kitchen as well.*

Lee walked through the door exactly at 5:00. The first thing he did was take a deep breath looking for any signs of food cooking. The only thing he got into his lungs was cigarette smoke and lots of that. He looked around the kitchen and saw the smoke cloud that hung above the ceiling. In fact, he could barely see the ceiling and what he did see of it was stained yellow from all of the cigarette smoke. Instinctively, Lee knew that Susan's smoking had greatly increased. Looking at the wastepaper basket, his suspicions were correct, because there were two layers of cigarette butts in the top of the basket.

He set his lunch container down and joined his family in the living room. The twins were asleep on the couch in front of the TV, which switched on cartoons. Lee switched his attention to Susan smoking a cigarette on the other couch. "Hi honey."

She looked at him and saw the concern on his face. Susan knew she did not conceal the amount of her smoking. "I think I and the twins are suffering from a chest cold, so can we order in tonight?" Lee thought it over and knew that they were not suffering from a chest cold but from his wife's smoking, but he decided to keep that to himself. "Yes, I'll order a large barbeque pizza while you wake up the twins."

Susan signed with relief. "Yes, that would be grand. It's our favorite type of pizza." She walked over to Raid and Allen and shook them until they woke up.

They rubbed their eyes with their fists. As one they asked,

"What's up Mom?"

"Daddy's ordering a large barbeque pizza."

Allen and Raid smacked their lips and kissed their mother on the cheek.

Everyone gathered on the two couches and watched cartoons. Lee heard a car pull in the driveway and knew it was the pizza delivery person. He went to the back door located next to the kitchen. When

pizza delivery person arrived, Lee paid him and carried the pizza to the kitchen. He then set it down on the table and shouted, "Pizza is here come and get it."

Susan came into the room and went to the refrigerator to remove four cans of pop, and placed them in front of each chair, then walked to the cabinet for four plates.

Seconds later, everyone was removing pizza from the box onto their plates.

After all the pizza and cans of pop were gone, everyone gathered into the living room to watch the news. Susan lit up a cigarette and the smoke drifted through the room. Coughing erupted throughout the room.

The smoke from the cigarette entered everyone's lungs and solidified. Seconds later, everyone was struggling to take in oxygen. Their faces started to turn purple. First, the twins lost consciousness and drifted off to death.

Lee and Susan with purple faces tried to mouth some words to each other, but there was not enough oxygen in their lungs. They collapsed onto the floor next to each other. In their dying

moments, they crawled to each other and held each other's hand for the last time.

At Native Smokes, the elderly clerk and owner stood waiting at the counter near the cash register. His wrinkles were completely gone and he did not look like he was in his seventies, it was as if, he was reborn. The clerk stood straight up and did not use a cane, but looked like he was in his twenties and filled with energy and a new bounce as he walked to the cash register.

A customer walked up to him. "I'd like to purchase a carton of Phoenix."

The man smiled, "I hope you enjoy them. Most of customers enjoy the taste, and they usually wouldn't purchase another brand of cigarettes."

"I know," the customer cleared her throat, "I just love them and think that they are the best smokes around."

The owner nodded and watched her walk out. Just underneath his breath he said, "Most people will die for them," and he started laughing.