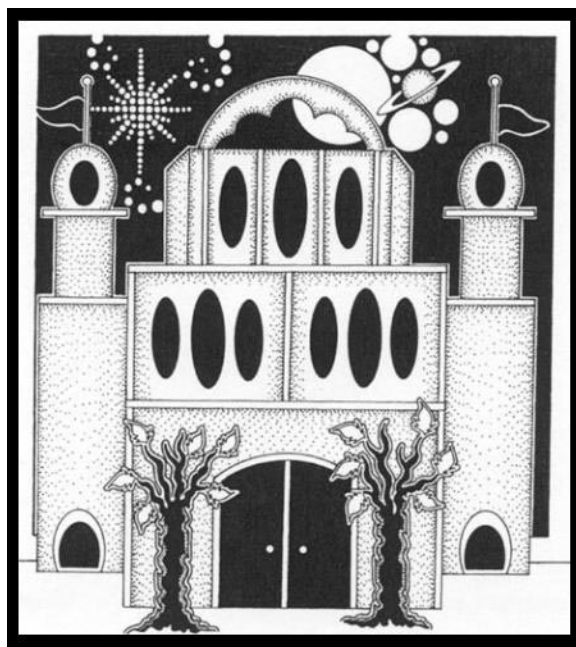


Freaky Frights



Edited by Larry Sells

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Larry Sells deathwalk@earthlink.net

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FREAKY FRIGHTS

Psychos brandishing their knives,
monsters shambling through moonlight,
seeking to snuff out your life.
The nights are filled with freaky frights.

Graveyards cast a ghostly spell
on passersby. Specters invite
souls into a living hell.
The nights are filled with freaky frights.

Witches, vampires lurking near,
werewolves hide just out of sight.
From books and movies they appear.
The nights are filled with freaky frights.

Nightmare creatures all around.
Imagination gives them life.
Their chilling presence brings a thrill.
The nights are filled with freaky frights.

By Shannon Riley

A Night on the Town
By Eric S. Brown

Alex rolled over where he lay on the wet grass of the hill and pulled the .45 automatic, which he'd stolen from his father, from his belt. He checked the clip and glanced over at Chuck. "You sure about this?"

Chuck was busy checking out the National Guard armory below through a pair of binoculars. Almost all of the armory personnel had frantically departed now, on their way to try to save the town from the crisis, which was engulfing it. "You got a better plan for staying alive?" he answered.

Alex shrugged. He kept peering over his shoulder into the trees because he knew Fairwood Cemetery was less than a mile behind them. Any minute one of those "things" could come lumbering over the hill. If one did it would not only cost them cover but they would very quickly find themselves in a fight that they weren't ready for yet.

This whole thing had been Chuck's idea. The pair had been "hanging out" at Alex's house watching the Sci-Fi network like they did every Friday night when they had heard the news. A military tanker carrying a deadly new virus had crashed just outside the small town that they lived in. Less than an hour later, reports of people who'd been exposed were the top news of every local station and a hell of lot scarier than anything on Sci-Fi.

Those infected by it first were mainly the paramedics, firefighters, and their ilk who had rushed to the crash scene. The virus worked rapidly and turned them into monsters of a sort. It attacked the DNA of its host altering him or her into something no longer human. Victims became insane as the virus made them stronger, faster, and caused their skin to take on a yellowish hue. The original group which was exposed turned upon others who arrived at the scene in a spree of insanity and mass murder then dispersed all over town infecting more and more until the town of Cullowhee found itself fighting for its life.

That wasn't the only effect of the virus however. The plane had crashed near the town's main water supply and was even now seeping deeper and deeper into the ground, spreading across the town like a cancer. Soon it was discovered that the virus didn't need a living host to survive. It could reanimate and reshape dead tissue just as easily and so the

dead had began to claw their way free of their graves to help add to the body count of dying innocents.

Alex's parents had been gone on business for the weekend so the two teenagers were left to fend for themselves. They had locked the doors and broken into Alex's dad's bedroom drawer where he kept his .45 but still they hadn't felt safe. When they heard on the news that the National Guard was being called up that's when Chuck had gotten his idea.

Alex's house was within walking distance of the local armory. Chuck figured that the guardsmen would come in, grab what they needed, and haul ass out into town in a semi-organized panic, leaving the armory open to anyone with the nerve to try what he was suggesting.

All the normal laws and rules had been thrown out the window the second that the tanker had went down. A few M-16 rifles would sure help them to stay alive a hell of a lot better than a single handgun and according to the news reports it took that kind of firepower to stop one of the living infected.

So now the boys found themselves laying on their bellies on the hill above the armory as a little drizzle fell around them and it seemed their chance had finally arrived. Chuck looked down at the compound through his binoculars once more. "Looks like they're all about gone. Most likely this is the best chance we're going to get. You still with me?"

Alex nodded his agreement.

The pair got to their feet making their way as stealthily as possible down the hillside. Lights were burning all over the base and the parking lot was lit up as if by the noon day sun but no one seemed to be left on the other side of the thick security fence as Chuck hopped onto it and started climbing over. He was extremely careful of the barbed wire which ran across its top. Alex followed right behind him.

Chuck dropped to the asphalt of the lot with a loud splash. He'd landed in a puddle from left from the earlier rain. His eyes darted in every direction, trying to see if he'd been heard but nothing moved throughout the base. On the other side of the lot, he saw that the fence's main gates were open and he could hear them creaking slowly in the wind.

Chuck and Alex wasted no time. They headed straight for the armory itself only to find a locked door awaiting them. "Jesus!" Alex wailed tugging at the knob. "What do we do now?"

Chuck grabbed the .45 from Steve's trembling hands and shot the lock, point blank. Alex stared at Chuck in horror as the door swung inward. "Everybody and everything around here probably heard that!"

"Then I guess we'll have to hurry won't we?" Chuck grinned.

They made their way inside. The outer offices were trashed. The desks had been shoved around and paper thrown everywhere as the guardsmen had responded to the town's call. The weapon storage itself was deeper inside the building but the boys found it unlocked and in an equal state of disarray.

"Holy shit," Chuck breathed as he looked at the weapons on the walls and scattered over the floor like a kid in a candy store. "I don't think the packs we brought are going to be enough to carry all this."

"Don't get greedy!" Alex snapped, grabbing up an M-16. He rammed a clip into it and pulled back its readying mechanism. "Let's just grab what we can and go!"

In less than a couple of minutes, the boys were loaded with full backpacks and armed to the teeth. As the pair started to leave, Chuck yelled, "Wait!" and darted over to rack of keys behind one of the desks in the main office. "No reason we shouldn't bum a ride too." Alex shook his head as Chuck grabbed a set of keys for one of the few remaining transport trucks left outside. "Okay, man," Steve pleaded, "Can we just go now?"

Once outside, Alex started to climb into the truck's passenger seat but Chuck caught him by the arm. "No, you drive," Chuck ordered pressing the keys into Alex's palm. "We aren't going home yet!"

Confused and in a daze, Alex wandered around the truck and took the driver's seat. Beside him Chuck was busy arranging his new toys. He broke open a grenade launcher and slide a live round into its chamber.

"Just where the hell do you think we are going?" Alex asked.

"Into town, my man. We can be heroes tonight!"

"Aren't you forgetting we just stole all this shit? What if we get caught?"

"Man, you worry too much. We've got enough shit that ain't nobody gonna mess with us!"

"But. . ."

"Drive, Alex!" Chuck yelled reaching over to turn the keys in the ignition. The transport roared to life, its wheels smoking on the pavement of the lot, as it tore through the armory's half open gates.

As the truck bounced out onto the main road, a man came running towards it. His eyes glowed yellow against the blackness of the night like twin suns.

Chuck leaned out his window, opening up with his M-16 on full auto. Alex flinched as the weapons horribly loud

chattering echoed in the cab of the truck.

The man was knocked from his feet, flying backwards as the bullets nearly cut him in half. Chuck cried out lost in some kind of blood lust rapture. "We got the bastard! Holy shit, we got him!"

Alex looked back in his sidemirror at the body twitching on the roadside as they sped on towards town, suddenly wondering if he wanted any part of Chuck's grand adventure.

Alex's eyes jerked back to the road ahead of them. Dozens upon dozens of the creatures were sprinting down the road towards them. Chuck was watching their approach with a smile of gleeful madness stretched across his face. "Run'em down!" he shouted. Alex yanked the wheel hard to the right and the truck slide sideways towards the mob as he tried to brake in time.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Chuck wailed as the closest creature leapt up on the side of the truck grasping for his face through the open window. Alex floored the gas, turning the truck away from the mob and raced back down the deserted road the way they had came.

Chuck was too shaken up to curse.

"We're going home, Chuck," Alex whispered quietly. "We're going to pray that we survive this mess and those things don't follow us back to the house."

"Fuck you!" Chuck grabbed the wheel sending the right tires of the truck off the road. Alex lost control as Chuck continued to fight to turn the truck around. The truck careened off the road smashing head on into a tree. Chuck was thrown through the windshield. He lay bleeding in the grass when Alex finally managed to get his seatbelt undone and stagger out after him.

Alex dropped to his knees beside Chuck. He could hear the mob howling in the distance as they grew closer. He felt Chuck's wrist for a pulse then dropped the limp hand to the ground beside the rest of Chuck's sprawling corpse. Alex's eyes burned as tears welled up inside of them and streaked down his cheeks.

As Alex got to his feet, the first members of the mob came bounding over the hill towards him. For a second, he considered trying to run but realized just how easily they would over take him. His chest felt like it was on fire. "Broken ribs," he guessed, picking up Chuck's M-16 which had been hurled out of the truck with him.

Flames danced around the transport truck. It was only a matter of time until the tank went up. Alex leveled the M-16 at the coming mob and held down the trigger. The men and women who led the pack were torn to shreds as the rifle spat

death but still the mob rushed onwards.

The rifle clicked empty just as a man wearing a ragged and blood stained business suit knocked it from Alex's grasp. Then they were on him, clawing, biting, ripping him to pieces with their bare hands and teeth. The last thing Alex saw was a brilliant flash of light as the exploding truck lit up the night.

IN THE GARDEN OF FLESH
by Cathy Buburuz

Time passes quickly for the condemned. Hours are heartbeats drowning in tidal waves of fear. Thoughts are technicolor mind paintings spilling forth visions of personified agony. Too soon the razor lined jaws of the rapacious blade bugs will seek and devour the nourishment so vital to the ongoing quest and zest for black flesh.

The prisoners lay spread-eagle on an emerald blanket of frilled and tattered moss; hands, feet and necks bound to Mother Earth by ribbons of tiger skin tied tightly to the knotted roots of ancient ganga trees. A thousand pairs of silver armoured legs march toward this garden of flesh, the hairy nostrils of the blades sucking deep the sweet scents of flesh, blood and bone. They are pirates of the jungle in a bold and brazen march toward human booty.

A shivery hush falls over the writhing bodies of murderers, rapists and child molesters as their captors depart on foot for safer, higher ground from which to witness the just reward of the damned.

The queen blade, keen of scent and sound, leads her grisly troupes over matted ferns, braided vines and exotic flowers. Her moist and spotted body sparkles in and out of jungle shadows alive and green in this majestic forest of rain and sun and gnawing hunger. An abundance of lizards, snakes and the odd monkey has not dulled the craving nor the anticipation as they approach the first of the jerking, screaming, bulbous heads of the damned.

SKIN

Do you know how much
The feel
Of a lover's skin
Is missed when it's gone,
How mysterious touch can be.
How it pulls you in,
Forces you to seek its shelter,
Brings you to war torn rooms
Seeking it like Scarlett O'Hara
Stepping over wounded,
Dying and dead soldiers.
This is what the feel
Of a lover's skin can do.
Leaves you heartless,
Makes a starving animal out of you.

By Corrine De Winter

FINISHED WITH YOUR VOODOO
In my dreams
I have killed the little boy in you.
I have bled the tiny frame
That is fearless
In the big bad world.
As though I have cursed you
With wanting
You tell me with suspicion
Of your wet dream.
But Sweetheart
I am finished with your
Fear of temptation
And your coward soul.
I am finished with your voodoo
And Sweetheart
I am finished with you.

By Corrine De Winter

Basilica

In
basilica
a seraphim
lies among
ashes while
the wings
of the
dead
angel
lay
burned
in a
circle
before
the
window,
the
pages
of the
bible
lit
by the
tears
of the
holy
spirit
while
they are
charred
by the
tongue
of the
devil
till a
priest
sees the
seraphim's
bones
after
it's been
crucified

By Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Carnival danse

beneath rapidly circling carousel
miscarriage of justice of life
of limb lost to flashing blade
 gnarled hands
hovering grasping
tearing weakened flesh

screams drowned in musical
tinkling laughter, surprised
shouts of joy
cries of amazed gaiety

dust-chocked sobs
moans muffled by cotton-sleeved forearm
lips mashed split bleeding

sweat dripping from face to face
tears springing from pain filled eyes

the end's fatal nearing
(too slow too slow)

renewed vigor: blade slicing
whistling through air
muscle cartilage tendons

separated bits of meat falling
dropping away, panting

wheezing breaths commingled
with stench of urine
feces blood fear

air close hot heating

life slipping sliding
fading slowly to nothingness

searing pain cooling to relief
numbing tortured tattered flesh

sounds (screams grunts
hysterical laughter) bleeding
blending into shivering vibration

blade gasping slowing exhausted

Stop!

finally finally merciful the end
smiling rattling darkness

the end

By Gary West

GOTHS

They call us "children of the night."
Dressed all in black,
our makeup hides traces of tears.
Our fears are easier concealed
in shadowed rooms.
We congregate in small cafes,
to sip red wine.
Our kind is shunned in light of day,
misunderstand.
We search for love,
fragile as a blood red rose,
and no one knows,
our pain, or how we crave
acceptance, but the darkness of the grave
will be the last refuge from slight
for us, lost children of the night.

By Shannon Riley

The Horrors of War

By

Eric S. Brown

I wake up with Sean standing above me. I look past him to the bright stars above savoring the night though their light nearly blinds me. There is something wet around my head, cold and slimy. Suddenly the chatting of automatic rifle fire and screams shatters the peacefulness of the night. I realize what has happened even as Sean jerks me to my feet. I smell blood, smoke, and death on the air. People are running all around us, fleeing the Eastern Axis troops as they make their way deeper into the city. Sean drags me into an alleyway off the main street as I remember about the war, the fall of the US, and the invasion of her soil. I can hear the enemy troops shouting in Arabic as they draw closer. What I can't remember is why we are still here. I told Sean if he awoke first he was to get us out of the city and away from the front as fast as he could.

"Jesus," I mutter. I whirl on him grabbing him and slamming into the alley wall. "What the Hell are you trying to do? Get us killed?"

He breaks my grip and ducks under my arms to run deeper into the alley. "I'm trying to have some fun," he answers from the shadows. "You do remember fun don't you?" Laughing, he tosses me an M-16. I notice for the first time his leather jacket and faded jeans that he always wears regardless of how out of style they are, are gone. He's wearing an army uniform, dark green, with the rank marking of a US sergeant on his sleeve. "Come on, man!" He yells and darts out onto the street. "Let's show them what death really is!" He runs through the bodies of the last US soldiers and some civilians that litter the street, their bullet ridden bodies flopping like fish out of water as death comes to claim them.

I snap off the rifle's safety, cursing heavily under my breath and run after him. I know the madness has overtaken

him and when he gets like this there is no arguing with him.

Howling at the top of his lungs, Sean charges the Eastern Axis troops. They see him coming and open fire. Blood flies everywhere as a hundred rounds rip and shred his flesh sending him toppling backwards to the pavement.

"Sean!" I yell, popping off a burst at the enemy as I hurl myself behind an abandoned car. Tears of hatred swelling up in my eyes as I look at his mangled form laying a few feet away.

He lifts his head with half his face gone and turned into a mass of red pulp. But he still manages to smile. Somehow he pulls himself to his feet. I can hear the enemy's surprise as he charges them again this time with his rifle blazing. He kills a few of them before they come to their senses enough to open up once more. Sean's body is riddled with holes as more bullets plow through him. He tries to laugh through his own blood welling up in his throat before he falls again. The bastard will never learn.

I slip into the shadows, moving too fast for the human eye to see, and I am suddenly behind the Eastern Axis line. They do not see me until I drop from the sky onto them opening up on full auto. It's done in seconds and they lay still in the embrace of death. I have taken a few hits but nothing I can't deal with. Pressing a hand against the hole in the side of my neck until the skin re-grows over the bullet hole, I cough and hack up a handful of bullets into my palm. I toss them away and wipe my hand on my pants leg before I go to check on Sean.

I find him squatted over the corpse of an Eastern Axis soldier his face buried in the wounded man's neck.

"Sean?" I ask.

He looks up at me with red smeared lips, his eyes shining a bright yellow. "Man, that was so freakin' fun, wasn't it?"

"I have had enough of your games, Sean. It is time you learned when your elder speaks, that you are to listen."

He sees the threat in my eyes and tries to get to his feet as I break off the wooden butt of the rifle. In a blur of movement I hurl myself

at him. We go down a mass of sprawling limbs but my weapon finds its home. I feel his body shaking under mine as I hold the wood buried in his heart until the flames come. His ashes drift away on the breeze as I get to my feet, idly wiping at the stains on my shirt. It is over now. I am alone in the midst of the war torn city of New York. For a moment I wonder if I am the last of my kind, but then I smile showing my fangs to the stars. If so, I won't be for long. The humans loss track of each other so easily in wars and the night belongs to me as it always has and always will.

Holocaust of Roses

I bandage the stem
of every rose I find
all the way up to
their necks as if
mummified and place
them in a glass vase
without their heads
touching. The night
blooming ones open
so widely. I feed
them on aniseed,
pillow every mouth
with pieces of torn
handkerchiefs while
they darken and bleed,
strangling themselves
in the gallows of my
cat's-cradle before
their offspring whose
tears dye deep as a
black carnation's in
mourning.

By Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Killing Time

By

Eric S. Brown

"Is it dead?"

"How the Hell should I know?"

Dennis, a towering man of six foot seven, leaned over to pick up a stick as he propped his custom made Winchester against a nearby tree. Garrett, his lean and cat-like companion, watched him closely. Dennis held the stick in his grasp but made no move towards the thing which lay in the ditch. It's purple, bloated flesh filled the air with the stench of decay and brimstone. It was shaped like a man. It had two arms, two legs, a head, but the resemblance ended there. The tips of its fingers bore long nails like the talons of an eagle and its skin was slimly despite the exposure to the day's blazing sun above. Twin dark orbs filled the space of its open eyes. Not just dark, but empty and black like a starless sky on a desert night. Its mouth looked closed but even so rows of metallic teeth, sharp like razors, protruded from between its lips.

"Oh, to Hell with this!" Garrett snapped. He drew the revolver which hung on his belt, moving with the skill of a professional and emptied its six rounds into the thing. Its body twitched as each bullet ripped into it. Dennis stared at his partner in shock, his mouth agape.

"You can poke it now, Dennis. It's dead."

"What the Hell was it?" Dennis stammered taking a step towards the body as Garrett holstered his weapon.

The thing sat up as if suddenly aware of their presence. Its head turned slowly, black eyes coming to rest on Garrett with murderous intent.

"Lord!" Dennis yelled dropping his stick and grabbing up his rifle, as the thing flowed up from the ditch like a cloud of fog. Its vapors reformed before Garrett as he fumbled his revolver back into his hand and the weapon's hammer clicked

repeatedly on empty chambers. In a blur, the thing's hand shot out wrapping around cold fingers around the gunfighter's neck and hoisted him single-handedly into the air. Garrett legs kicked as he struggled against its grip.

Dennis pumped a round ready in the Winchester and fired almost point blank into the thing, blowing a clearly visible hole through its chest. The thing didn't cry out or even as much as flinch. Dennis heard the snapping sound of bone as Garrett's head jerked at an odd angle under the pressure of the thing's hold. Garrett's legs hung limply beneath his body before the thing released its grip and his corpse toppled to the forest floor with a soft thud. It turned to face Dennis as the massive man fired again.

The shot tore a chunk of the creature's shoulder off but it came forward unhindered. Dennis swung the rifle like a club at its face but the creature's arm caught the rifle in mid-swing, as the rifle shattered.

Its hands reached out for Dennis and ripped him apart with ease, throwing his upper torso and legs in different directions. In the distance, the men's horse squealed and fought against the tethers which held in place for their riders return as the thing caught their scent and moved towards them.

As the sun crept behind the surrounding mountains, Daniel dismounted from his horse. He wore all black except for a white collar which stretched around his neck. Blood stained the grass at his feet. He looked at the bodies and knelt beside the one closest which was still intact. Slipping off a glove, he touched it. Images raced through his mind. "A killer and a thief on their way home, they stumbled upon it and paid for their unluckiness," he thought. He reached out and gently closed the thin man's eyes with his fingers tips. These men, no matter how evil themselves, never should have met death like this.

Daniel's heart ached with guilt. If only he had been able to stop the demon back in Sylva, these men wouldn't be dead now. After years of searching he had found the demon there. It had made the town its home, slaughtering the residents, and turning the ghost town into its lair where it lurked waiting on passers-by to feed its eternal hunger.

The Pope himself had charged Daniel with the thing's destruction over twenty years ago. His search had led him from Europe to the States and then out here to the West. He had faced it down in Sylva and had his chance to end its killings then and there but the thing had been strong, stronger than even he had imagined. It fought him to a stand still and managed to flee, leaving him for dead. He'd spent months recovering only to resume his search. Now he was close on its trail again. This time, he swore he would not fail. All of this would shortly and finally he could go home to Rome. This time he would be ready.

Dan stood and said a prayer for the dead men before returning to his saddle. The demon's trail was clear and its stink upon on the psychic ether reeking. He spurred his horse and rode into the twilight.

Night fell in earnest. Heavy clouds moved in obscuring the stars and blocking even the moonlight from reaching the fields and forest below. Daniel pressed on in near blindness leaving his horse behind for fear that it may stumble on the overgrown and winding trail. He could feel the thing's presence nearby but couldn't judge exactly how near or far. He carried his sword ready in his hands. His order didn't condone the use of firearms or science besides they were of this world and useless against a being that was from outside the realm of man and his natural laws. His sword was forged of the finest silver and blessed by the angels of heaven in the ancient days of man was all he needed. Engraved upon its blade was the shape of a burning bush that almost seemed to glow in the pale light.

Daniel stopped and opened his mind to the night and his surroundings. Instantly the demon's thoughts flowed into him with such an intensity he nearly dropped to his knees, the feelings of rage and hatred overwhelming in their power and proximity. The creature in turn sensed his weakness and burst from the tree line to his right taking advantage of the moment. Daniel managed to roll with its blow or he would have been killed instantly. He felt ribs crack and break inside his chest as he was knocked into the brush. Fighting the white hot pain inside him, he leapt to his feet swinging his blade in time to meet the monster's second strike. As the sliver blade slashed putrid flesh and black ooze smeared onto its metal, the creature shrieked over the sound of its own sizzling wound where the touch of sliver still burnt.

The thing backed off nursing its wounded hand and glaring at the priest with eyes that glowed white as bright in the darkness and they were black under the light of the sun. Daniel stood his ground and waited for it to make the next move as spots danced in his blurring vision.

Three rows of razor teeth dilated open as a stream of spittle shot from the thing's mouth towards him. Daniel swung his blade to block the spray. The bubbling liquid ate at his holy blade melting its top half to slag. Then the creature lunged forward again pressing the attack. This time Daniel met it head on. The remaining part of his sword plunged into its chest even its hand dug into the priest's stomach. Daniel screamed and fell as the creature staggered backwards dragging Daniels innards which it clutched like a rope between them. Daniel watched as blue flames flared to life around the sword buried in the thing's body as the creature tried helpless to yank the blade free. The flames grew and spread consuming the creature as it stood there like a human bonfire until a slight breeze swept through the night and tore its ashes apart scattering them in the air.

Daniel lay still as his blood pooled underneath him, praying for forgiveness and mercy from the lord. As he closed his eyes to rest he heard angels singing a welcoming hymn.

The Takers

By Eric S. Brown & D. Richard Pearce

It was the day before Thanksgiving, but Mark had little to be thankful for. As he drove away from his home, he replayed their last conversation in his head. "There are givers and takers, Mark," she'd said, "You can't have one without the other. And I'm through giving." He had said everything he could think of to keep the ship from going down, but it didn't matter. The marriage was over.

In a way, he blamed himself for not caring enough. Maybe she was right, but she'd known what he was like when she met him. He was meant for greater things - if she could just see that, that the times he ignored her were an investment in the future...

When he thought about it, the divorce just seemed like one of those things that was meant to be, part of his weird destiny. He supposed when the initial shock wore off, he would hurt a great deal more. But right now, he had other things to worry about. Where would he live? Who would take care of him?

He had no steady income to speak of. He was a writer who was just beginning his career. Sometimes he sold short stories or articles for cash but most of the time he only got paid in copies and exposure. Even in his best months, he was lucky if he cleared two hundred dollars.

He reached down and flipped on the radio, hoping music would help calm him down and take his mind off his problems, but all he could find across the dial was news. America was in a new war and there was no end in sight. He hoped there wouldn't be a draft. He already had enough problems in his life, and he didn't have time for distractions like that.

Mark left the radio on a random station and gunned the car, increasing his speed as he tore around the winding curves of the road towards town. He realized that without really thinking about it, he had decided to

head for his parents' house. They wouldn't be happy to see him on their doorstep with his suitcases, but he could swallow his pride and they would give him a place to stay. His mom wasn't as good a cook as his wife, but at least the laundry would get done.

While he sat behind the wheel, his mind was far away, making plans. He didn't notice until it was too late how close he was driving to edge of the road. His right front wheel dropped on the asphalt sending him careening out of control. He fought to stabilize the car, tugging at the wheel with all his strength, but his speed was too great. The car flew from the road and smashed into a nearby tree as Mark's world went black.

He awoke with blood burning his eyes. He reached up to wipe it away and a sharp stabbing pain shot through his body. Looking up at the shattered glass of the windshield where his forehead had struck, he realized that though his seat belt had saved his life it had also fractured several of his ribs. He painfully slipped it off and opened the door, falling out onto the damp grass of the roadside.

He propped himself up against the car and fished around in his pocket for a cigarette. When he managed to get the pack out he threw it away in disgust. The pack was soaked in blood.

He had no idea how long he had been out, but assumed it had been quite a while, as the sky was beginning to darken. Everything seemed gray, and he wondered if he was going to get rained on now as well. Great. Mark wondered why no one had come along and seen the accident. Surely, if someone had they would've stopped to try and help him. People still helped each other out, didn't they?

Suddenly, Mark heard laughter on the car radio. Mark leaned his body closer towards the car's open door to listen. How in the hell had the thing stayed on?

"Mark, Mark, Mark," the announcer laughed. "It's time to pay up, little brother."

Mark shook his head and thought he must be losing his mind. In the past few hours he'd been through

enough to push anyone over the edge. He thought he recognized the announcer's voice though it was one he had not heard in years.

"Greg?" Mark mumbled to himself.

"Yep, it's me," the radio answered.

Mark stared at the dashboard in horror. He felt his heart sink inside his chest and tears began to well up in his eyes, washing the blood from his cheeks. "Greg . . . I am so sorry."

"I should think so," the radio voice answered in a cheerful tone, "You never come and visit me anymore. Why is that?"

"I, um, I guess I felt bad..." Mark was confused, didn't Greg remember?

"About what, Mark? That I couldn't offer you anything else? You know, I was just reminiscing - remember when you showed up that day? It was the happiest day of my life. My long lost brother coming out of the blue after all those years apart. Do you remember how I hugged you?"

"It wasn't my fault..."

"Whose was it? Dad's, for spoiling you so much, I guess, getting you used to having your way. I gave you everything I had, and you took more. I got you a job, gave you a place to stay. It's not everyone who can take another person's whole life, Mark. You took my career, my wife, everything I had. "

"I didn't mean for it to happen the way it did, Greg," Mark whispered.

"Sure you didn't." Greg smiled, suddenly materializing in front of Mark's eyes on the road. The pale starlight of the night seemed to pass through Greg as if he wasn't completely there. He leaned over and offered a translucent hand to Mark. "Just like you didn't mean to throw them away when you were done."

Mark looked away sobbing and ignored Greg's offer to

help him to his feet. Mark began to feel an anger stirring inside of him. "It was your own fault, Greg."

"*It was my fault* that you were a drunk and a loser with nowhere else to go? I tried to help you, Mark. Is that why you murdered me? Hacked me up, tossed in the trunk, and hauled me out here into the middle of nowhere?"

For the first time, Mark looked around. Greg was buried not twenty feet from where he sat, but that didn't matter now. "Yes!" Mark screamed turning to look into Greg's hollow eyes. "What you had should've been mine! It was mine! I didn't ask to be dragged away as a child. I wanted to stay with mom too. This town was my home!"

"Well," Greg said, "I don't guess it matters now, does it? Your wife - my wife, actually, was right, you know, there are givers and takers, and you can't have one without the other." Greg paused, glancing off into the woods.

"They'll be here soon."

"Who? Who will be here soon?" Mark raged.

"The Takers," Greg watched the tree line, waiting. "I'd really love to stay and watch but not even the dead are safe from them. And I've given you enough. You won't get my soul too."

Mark blinked as a drop of blood from his mangled scalp dripped into his eyes, and Greg was gone. He was alone in the night.

Finding strength in his hatred of Greg, Mark pulled himself to his feet using the car to lean on. "Come back you bastard! We're not through yet! I killed you once and by God I can do it again!"

His voice echoed down the desolate roadway among the surrounding trees. Then he saw them, two black forms far in the distance. They stood on two legs like men but the similarity ended there. Their arms were elongated and their hands hung so low that the silver talons of their fingers scraped on the asphalt as they approached.

They were darker than the night and appeared to absorb all the light around them. The car's headlights flickered and died as they drew near. But their eyes glowed like the fires of Hell, orange and bright, full of anger and hunger. Yellow teeth gleamed hungrily when they opened their mouths to howl. Mark grew cold as they approached, and his argument with Greg was forgotten. His worries from the day vanished, snatched from him and drawn into their shadowy forms. He couldn't remember even his wife's name, all of his memories gone, and he was left with nothing but the hollow emptiness of terror.

"Oh G-God," Mark heard himself stutter. He fell into the driver's seat and tore frantically at the glove compartment until he got it open. He pulled out a .38 revolver from its depths and hobbled up out of the car once more.

They were so close now he could smell them. The foul odor of brimstone and decay intermingled. Mark pointed the gun at them with his trembling hand, not even remembering now why they had come, but desperate to escape them. "I don't know who you are but you don't have any business here." He pulled the gun's hammer back with his thumb. The beings paid no attention to his threats and continued their slow advance.

"Go away!" Mark wailed and fired. His bullet passed through the first creature and imbedded itself in a tree across the road from where he stood with a soft whacking sound. He turned to run, but stopped, unsure of his way, and unable to decide on a path.

"No!" Mark pleaded, finally running, but they were upon him. Their talons tore flesh and their yellow teeth gnawed upon his throat, but the physical pain was subdued, unreal compared to the feeling of having his being dragged from his tattered remains.

Greg watched them turn away from Mark's lifeless body as it sunk to the road. The lead creature held a small ball of light clutched in its paw-like hand as the pair disappeared into the darkness, melting into it once more.

"Enjoy their company Mark," Greg said. "You've earned it." Then he too was gone.

A gentle breeze picked up the fall leaves from the ground over Greg's unmarked grave and swirled them up into the air but only Mark's soulless shell was left to see them reflecting in its glazed over eyes.

The Forest's Lamentation
By Jessica Cargill

Hot, heavy breath clouded the too frigid air into veils of condensed fear. Wide eyes scanned the darkness that hid more than just the skeletal forms of slumbering trees, knowing the deception that the peace was. The forest was silent, but the prey knew it was far from dead. The flimsy coat seemed little protection from the claws of terror that gripped his heart. Tiny animal whimpers escaped his throat, and tears like frozen quartz danced on his cheeks.

From before on the path, a figure moved. His death's eyes rooted him to the spot, eyes the color of ice but burning with a hunger older than the stars. Silken lengths of snowy hair seemed to be a part of the merciless snow that made not a sound beneath her feet. The wintry sun touched her skin, and turned it to blazing crystals of stunning beauty.

The silence was not broken as the two forms sank to their knees, and the ghostly shapes of the wolves around the two watched, eyes of molten gold solemn and wild. The silent avatars of winter paid witness to the huntress, and then turned to become again part of the ageless and savage landscape.

George Taylor was master of his whole word. He took to heart when the Bible said that Man was put over this earth and all its creatures. George Taylor, corporate master of Camino Inc. and CEO of one of the largest companies in the logging industry, was King of the World.

He was an honest, God-fearing man, loved his kids and loves his dog, took good care of his wife. He felt like he had logged every forest there was, cut down every tree that stood in his way. He had conquered the world. Unfortunately, there seemed to be nothing else to conquer.

He sat in his chair, Bud Light resting peacefully on his stomach, and stubbled chin on the back of his hand as he looked out across the cleared farmland view from his huge house. He lived alone, and he was thinking, trying to think of where there was some place he hadn't been. He sat in his Lazy Boy and reached over, pressing the speaker on his phone.

"Clarice? Get me my mapper."

His mapper was the man who bought and sold land for him to log on. His mapper persuaded the damned ecologists to spit up the dirt. His mapper was very valuable to him.

"Sir?" the scratchy voice of his mapper got on the line.

"Have we got any new conquests yer lookin' after, boy?" George boomed.

"No, not that I see . . ." his voice trailed off. "Wait! No, there's something here in Western Wyoming. It's private land, though. I've been bargaining with the woman who owns it for years and I've never gotten anything out of her. It's really the only thing left. Sir, I don't know why you're concerned. Your funds are all very stable, and we've got plenty of land--"

"Never mind that. Just arrange a meeting with her for me, wouldja?"

"Sure, if you insist. But really, Sir, I think it would be pointless--"

George reached over and shut the speaker off.

The house that sat on the hill, overlooking a forest nearly as vast as one could imagine, was nearly overgrown with vegetation. It seemed to blend into the shrubbery gone out of hand, it was covered with vines, and a deep forest's shadow fell over the place all day long. George lusted to clear the land, to make it so you could see through the boughs of the looming trees. They seemed to bow over, to whisper to themselves. It was like the very forest was plotting against him.

Thank God that it was still constrained through the glass window of the lady's office. The furniture was of a deep brown oak, probably all antiques. The woman who sat at the table, her fingers steepled and a frown on her face, seemed to be matching of this wild place. Her face was slightly lined, but it didn't make her look old, only wiser. Her hair was of spun silver, and he had a horrible flashback of his grandmother. The old woman could whip him from here to Sunday, without even breaking a sweat. He had a burning feeling that this woman would be the same. But he was George Taylor, and he was going to get what he wanted!

"I'm sorry, Mr. Taylor, but I'm afraid this land is not for sale."

"I'm willing to offer you three million dollars for just *half* of it." he said.

He had been round this argument for a while. "I'm not willing to sell this land, Mr. Taylor."

She persisted. He was becoming frustrated.

"What is it with this damned land? Is it some old family heirloom or somethin'?"

She sat back in her chair and looked at him coolly. "If you do not calm down, sir, I am afraid I will have you removed."

He calmed immediately, and rubbed a hand through his hair. "All right," he looked at his watch. "I'll leave then. But at least tell me why I *don't* want this land. Really."

She smiled, and the smile made him feel increasingly uncomfortable. "This place is haunted, sir. By a Baobhan Sidhe."

She pronounced it *Baavaan She*. He stood up with a look of disgust.

"Fine then, lady. It's your land, after all. Geeze."

George Taylor wasn't about to give the place up as easily as that. In the height of midnight, he snuck out from his black Suburban and shrugged his parka tighter against the night's chill. The forest's gloom reached out all the way and seemed to grip his soul in a hand colder than ice, but he trudged on. He jumped at the slightest noise, the hooting of an owl, the snap of a twig. Then, he came to a clearing. In this clearing was a large hill, covered in silvered grass. He saw at the top of it a woman. He was puzzled, for he hadn't known that anybody lived here. Surely his mapper would have told him about it.

He went up the hill and saw that she was quite young with fine features and wide gray eyes the color of moonlight, hair as beautiful and delicate as the light from the stars falling in waves from her pristine brow.

She looked at him and said nothing, just smiled a bit with lips as dark as red cherries.

"What's a fine young lady like you doing up here this late in the middle of this awful forest?"

She stood up and lowered his eyelashes. He felt a wave of desire wash through him and was struck speechless by her beauty.

"Do ye want to dance with me?" her voice held a slight Irish lilt. Or perhaps it was Scottish. George couldn't tell and didn't care.

George opened his mouth to decline, but found himself grasping her nubile young body to his and dancing away on the top of that hill. Giddily he thought of what he was doing, dancing with a woman at midnight on private property. In the middle of a forest!

He danced, and danced, twirling in frenzied circles like one of those ballerina people. How he danced! He was panting and sagging up against the woman when the moon was close to the horizon, and he felt like he couldn't take another step. He simply leant up against her.

She whispered into his ear softly. "Do you fear the forest?"

He couldn't help but nod. All lies were drained out of him. "Have for years. Was where my Pa was killed."

"With good reason do you fear it." She whispered, and then leant her head to his neck, soft lips parting against his neck and hard teeth coming down. They fell together on the hilltop, the white ice form finally letting go the man. He seemed so pitiful now, no longer King of the World, but just a man, in his death. The eyes of the wolves below looked upon him with no pity.

With a cry that rose to the winds the baohban sidhe fled into the forest, and from miles away you could hear her. The air was filled with the howling of wolves curling around her cry to where the sounds were inseparable from one another. From across the forest came a cold wind, and a small boy looked to his grandfather, fear shining in his eyes. The old man looked out across the darkness and smiled.

"Are the wolves gonna get me, grandpa?" the boy asked, his voice warbling in the vastness of the night, swallowed by the trees. The old man shook his head slowly.

"Wolves won't hurt you, boy. Nothing here will hurt you, so long as you don't fear it."

The boy looked out across the shapes of the trees, and it seemed to him that the moonlight illuminated just a bit more of the night.

WE'LL ALWAYS HAVE PARIS

By
Steven L. Shrewsbury

***"Where we such clusters had, as made us nobly wild, not mad;
And yet each verse of thine out-did the meat, out-did the
frolic wine."***

ROBERT HERRICK
1648

Daughter, believe me when I say that I always loved Stefan. Since we were children and roamed the wastelands near the Blackened Forest, I adored him. It was not just because he grew bigger, stronger and more cunning than the other boys released from the caverns below Germany. Unlike many of the others who called themselves "army brats" of American servicemen trapped overseas during the solar cataclysm, Stefan possessed honor. Even as a wee lad, he would defend those against bullies. When he grew older, the enemies were larger, but still there. Stefan and the code of his blood never changed. From the caverns of Germany to the ruined streets of Paris, Stefan was as he was.

Listen to my simple story and look off across the ruins of the olden city. Appreciate what it took to get this small community we have now in Paris. Remember that out of the ashes, life will always arise.

Never seeing sunlight until our teen aged years, those of us from the Germanic caves were a saucy lot. This drive is what made us abandon the shelter and leave the life reserved for moles. That is a habit of youth, to be so impetuous, but I digress. Once the older generation died off and the youth decided to trek to the surface, Stefan was one of the few who remembered the lessons of his father and grandfather. While scores of us reveled in the opportunity at freedom, indulging in every whim of the open air, Stefan was careful to learn how to survive. Some were happy just to see the sun that we feared so, that destroyed the surface of the Earth. Not overly concerning with such silliness, Stefan remained focused. When he made a promise, Stefan kept it. His words were not just a speech disguised as an overture to copulation; Stefan's word was his bond.

So many died on the trip across the sun kissed land once called Europe that we soon were a tribe of two. Sun kissed? That is a funny term handed down to we in the caverns who chose to become scribes. If the solar flares were a kiss from Sol, then the star preferred to use its tongue when it touched the Earth. If not for Stefan and his abilities to find food and live off the land, I would be dead. Scant vegetation returned to the ground and only bizarre vermin or hard shelled bugs survived. Stefan knew what to hunt and how to prepare it so we would not go ill. So many refused to listen to him and so many died.

Please take these lessons to heart and remember how fortunate we are to be alive. If not for Stefan and his love for me, we would not have this paradise that was Paris at our disposal. You see, he made a promise as a boy that he would always take care of me and look after my well being. Seeing this as a boast, I accepted his words simply because, well, I wanted to survive. In time I grew to adore the hulking savage, unique to our tribe in this new savage age. His touch, voice and manner enraptured me deeper than just his warmth at night.

While religions, morals and habits of the bygone times evaporated, Stefan kept his code and it served him well. His grandfather instructed Stefan not only in ways to eat and keep warm, but on how to fight and create weapons. You can thank Stefan for his brilliance in creating daggers from the barrels of the rifles melted in the solar storms. Various larger weapons forged out of girders and whatnot became hatchets or swords, but again, I deviate from my story.

I will spare you fancy tales of Stefan slaying the giant roaches near the Somme. While one may chose to think these yarns colored by ages, suffice it to say Stefan's ability to split the bodies of these monsters bordered on the superb. Wading into these creatures, Stefan never flinched at the bath he received of dark guts and insect parts. Drawing grime with every stroke, mighty Stefan cut a path for us through this swarm of survivors. Covered in the putrid ejecta from these beasties, the warrior from the bowels of Germany never looked more appealing to me.

"This earth here is forever cursed with blood," Stefan said of the battlefield. "I feel it inside that we must strive on and leave the wastelands behind. We must press on and leave this land."

I never questioned Stefan of his words. Perhaps he knew of the insane wars fought on the very spot where he destroyed the creatures. Maybe he was ignorant of this and just felt a calling inside to move forward. Whatever the case, he was correct.

A few of the last stragglers from our birthing realm beneath the earth ate freely of some strange roots. The horrors that sprang from their skin--spikes, spores and running puss, children, I dare not speak on such things more. Always constant was Stefan--either warning them away from such habits or wading in the entrails of insects that measured two meters long. In time, we were alone and that provided less worry for him. Though so afraid for myself, I found my emotions focused on him. My pride soon accepted that fact that he was all there was for me, no matter what.

Never once did he shoulder this burden with a complaint. His grim face often held a smile. Perhaps if he abused his task or lost his temper, it would have been easy to feel different. Praises be to whatever gods there are, for Stefan was a good man on the inside. Somewhere in that barbarian body, beat a heart that echoed long into his past...and perhaps that is why he was fair. It was in his blood.

His need to provide for me drove us across more lands once used as battlefields and into the scorched realm that used to be Paris. Ironically enough, even the roaches left Paris, having picked it clean of anything worth consuming.

Vividly, I remember when the great tower of Paris first graced my eyes. For some reason I thought it would still stand as in the books we read as kids, but this proved utter fantasy. Melted like a dying candle, only one of its legs curved up to the sky, the landmark was a fitting marker for the rest of the world. Stefan held my hand as we walked down the wide, ruined avenue named after the fields of Elysia. Together we walked Paris uninterrupted. He kissed my forehead as we stood in front of the empty shells that were once grandiose museums. Walking near the tranquil Seine River, I knew true love.

It was pure chance, or perhaps part of his ostentatious destiny that Stefan discovered what he did. Stefan found that the prize of the Earth lay under the foundations of a place once called Notre Dame Cathedral. Always a realist, Stefan comprehended his place in the darkened world. He completely understood the arrogance of the higher classes in the olden

epoch. The tale spun to us by his grandfather told of class warfare and evil folk aplenty. Stefan believed that these dire people refused to tell the populace about the sun storms in advance. Most believed this episode a global surprise, but true sages in the deep caverns refused to accept this notion. When Stefan saw the hidden chambers under the mighty church of Jesus Christ, he knew his suspicions proved true.

Since I was one of the only people alive who could read, I deduced from tattered files that the complex Stefan discovered sustained itself. Accomplished via a power source far below it, I theorized it was a nuclear generator--I guessed, but it does not really matter. I read the words over doors of the huge complex that read, **UNITED NATIONS CRYOGENIC STORAGE FACILITY**. Many pieces fell into place.

Anger seized Stefan at first when he walked among the cubicles of frozen people. We thought these tubes countless at first, two by two by race as if in an ark. In a way, they were. These were the elite selected by some person afar off in time to rise again and repopulate a doomed planet. Apparently, the alarm clock broke.

My dear Stefan sat outside the cathedral on the fallen cross that once decorated the spire of Notre Dame, contemplating it all. He touched my cheek and gazed across the landscape, telling me he loved me. Again, Stefan promised he would always take care of me, no matter what the world brought. Such a harsh man in appearance, my Stefan, that ones today may not accept his gentle side as fact. He lived on instinct, refusing to learn to read, but his brilliance was underrated even by himself. Under that mop of unkempt brown hair my lover Stefan birthed an idea that has served us well unto today.

Stefan stood tall, gripping the handle of a well honed club of iron and smiled. Through his hairy face came a dim smile that made my heart melt. He went down below the surface and so started the first glorious night of the rest of my life. It began with sound of shattering glass, and in time was graced by the delectable aroma of roasting meat. Our bellies full, we made love by the biggest active refrigerator in the world. Our shouts of passion drifted all over the barren city and then he held me fast.

The next morning he stood by the doors of the cryogenic chamber and then let his gaze wander across the wasted city. Stefan said, "Anna, I promised you I would take care of you

and I will. In this place we will remake our tribe. There are books for you and meat for our children. You see, we'll always have Paris."

"The Adversary"

By Eric S. Brown and D. Richard Pearce

The morning was dark and cold. Rain fell from the black clouds above and Dan could hear the wind howling over the patrol car's engine. He sat in the driver's seat, casting impatient glances at Johnson's gas station. Alex had insisted they stop for coffee but Dan knew it was just an excuse for him to see Sheena. She always worked the morning shift and Alex had it bad for her.

Dan lit a cigarette, but kept his window rolled up. If Alex could waste their time like this, he could damn well smoke in the car.

The car's radio crackled to life with Maxine's voice. "Dan? You there?"

Dan sighed and reluctantly picked up the radio. "Yeah. What's up?"

"Mark just called, Dan. He's got some kind of problem over at the construction site where they're building the new school. He wouldn't say what it was but he seemed kind of shook up. He wants you out there ASAP."

"Can't you just send Harry?"

"Sorry, Dan. Mark asked for the sheriff, not a deputy. He was rather frantic."

"Damn it, Max, it's probably just another worker dispute."

"Watch your language," Max ordered sternly. "Just go see what he wants."

"Yes ma'am. We're on it." Dan answered, slamming the radio back onto the dash as Alex opened the passenger door. He carried a cardboard tray holding two steaming cups. His smile turned to a frown as he saw Dan's face. He climbed into the car, shutting the door as he glared at Dan's cigarette. "I thought you were going to quit."

Dan shrugged and flipped on the siren gunning the car out the station's parking lot.

"Jesus!" Alex wailed trying to keep the coffee from scalding his groin as it sloshed around in his lap. "What the hell's your problem?"

"Mark's got some kind of trouble out at the construction site again."

"And that's got you this pissed off?"

Dan didn't answer. The drive to the construction site was silent except for Alex's feigned coughing at Dan's second hand smoke.

As they pulled into the site for Bethel County's new school, the lot was nearly vacant. Only Mark's pickup and a few unattended "diggers" were around. None of the usual workers were to be seen. The place appeared totally dead except for the light on in Mark's office trailer.

Dan marched up the small entrance ramp to Mark's trailer and started to knock. Mark jerked the door open so quickly that Dan was caught in mid-knock. Mark's face was pale. His normal know-it-all cocky attitude replaced by a look of fear. "Thank God, sheriff. I am glad you're here. Come on inside," he said so fast that Dan's head swam.

Dan and Alex entered the trailer as Mark shut the door behind them. Mark's office was a mess of jumbled papers, a desk, two oddly placed chairs, and blueprints stapled all over the walls.

"So what's going on, Mark?" Dan asked, plopping into one of the chairs. Mark stared at him as if searching for words. "Well, Sheriff, as you know, we're trying to build the county's new school here."

Dan nodded, tapping his fingers on the desk.

"We're laying the foundations now."

"Get to the point, Mark," Dan ordered.

"This morning we were doing some blasting, getting rid of the last rocks we couldn't move, and we found. . . I don't

know what we found. . . But I sent the men home. I called you right off sheriff, because I've never seen anything like it."

"Like what?" Alex asked. "What did you find?"

Mark struggled to keep his composure. "I think you need to see it for yourselves or you'll never believe it." Mark picked up a pair of heavy flashlights and handed one to Dan. "Come on."

The drizzle had worked into a full-fledged rain as Mark led them out onto the site. He took them to the edge of a large hole in the middle of where the foundation was being laid. The stench coming out of the hole was so strong that Alex actually did start coughing. Dan made a face of disgust. The smell was unmistakable, putrid and rotting. Dan knew what he would find before he even turned the beam of his flashlight into the hole, though he had no idea it would be so many. The pale beam traced its way over arms and legs, dozens upon dozens rotting corpses filled the hole packed like sardines.

"My God," Dan muttered. "How many do you think are in there?"

"Don't know," Mark shrugged, looking green and on the verge of vomiting. "I'd say at least two hundred."

"Two hundred," Alex echoed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You see why I called you, sheriff? I...I can't deal with this. I'm just an engineer."

And barely that, thought Dan, but he said, "Go on home. Nothing for you to do here. I'm betting there isn't going to be a school built here now."

Mark sputtered an incoherent protest, then looked at the pit again, and bolted for his pick-up. Dan was sure the bastard was just as glad to be gone as he was to see him go.

"D. . .Dan?" Alex asked.

He turned to look at his trembling deputy. Alex had dropped his coffee and stood staring in shock at the pit. "What do we do?"

"Call for backup."

An hour later, the site was crawling with cops, medics, rescue workers, journalists, and even a pair of SBI men. The feds were still on their way. Body after body had been hauled from the pit; all naked with their bones so crushed they looked like human putty. Men, women, children . . . Dan had never seen anything like it. He wondered where he'd put them all. The town morgue and the hospital combined couldn't handle this many. In the end though, he guessed it wouldn't really be his problem. Agent Jeffery Thompson of the SBI had already taken over the situation and for all Dan cared, he could have it. Dan was forced to admit this was out of his league.

Dan had sent Alex home earlier. The poor kid just hadn't been able to cope with this. He got in the way more than he helped and there had been no point in making him stick around.

Dan bit into a sandwich the volunteers from the local fire department had provided and leaned against his patrol car. The sandwich was already stale and he threw it aside. So much for breakfast. He thought about going over to Mark's trailer where Agent Thompson has taken up residence, using it as a makeshift base of operations, to tell the SBI prick that he had enough too and was going home, but then thought better of it. No point antagonizing the state - he might just get assigned a grunt task. A sudden warmth in his hand made him look down. Blood was dripping from his clenched fist. He opened his left hand and frowned. It didn't hurt, but he must have been clenching so hard he'd driven his nails right into the palm. He glanced back at the hole and shook his head. This shit didn't make sense. He wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and headed for his car.

As he drove, he kept rolling over in his mind how something like this could happen in Bethel - the middle of nowhere, North Carolina. Small towns were supposed to be immune to this kind of shit. It was the reason he'd moved here after serving as a cop in New York, to get away from the crime and the horrors of the big city. Well, that and there weren't a lot of Catholics around here.

He felt sick, a lump in his throat. Too many smokes and not enough food, he reckoned.

Two hundred bodies in an unexplainable mass grave, all crushed, all only days old if their appearance told the truth, how in God's name does something like that happen? There was no way someone could haul that many bodies into Bethel, much less find the time to dig a mass grave for them at a place like the construction site. Someone would have seen them, if not the workers, then someone driving by on the main road. It always stayed busy even at night since it was the only road in and out of the town that connected to an interstate.

As Dan pulled into the gravel driveway at the end of his yard, a black sedan sat waiting for him. He noticed it had out of state tags and guessed the Feds had finally showed - funny that they weren't using a Government Issue car though. They'd have questions for him, more than he could stomach at this point. A man sat behind the sedan's wheel and glanced at Dan as he parked. He wore a causal blue jacket over a white shirt and looked to be in his twenties.

As Dan got out, the man walked around the car to greet him. "Sheriff Jackson?" He asked.

"You a Fed? They send you down here to make my life even more of a living hell?"

The man smiled. "No. My name is Darven. I am with the church."

"The church?" Dan said, "What church?"

Darven appeared to be a bit insulted. "The Church. The one in Rome."

Dan slammed the car door and made for his porch. "Get the hell off my land before I arrest you for trespassing! I've dealt with enough assholes and whackos today already!"

Darven took a step and grabbed Dan by the arm. "Sheriff, I strongly suggest you hear me out. If you don't, I cannot be held responsible for the repercussions."

Dan tore free of Darven's grasp. "Look mister, in case you didn't know, we just uncovered a mass grave today, two hundred people dead and rotting in the ground. I'm not exactly in the mood to talk about God."

"Nor I, Sheriff, but you need to know what you found." Darven went on. "We must act quickly. Those people weren't dead. They weren't even human."

Dan stopped for a moment - this guy was certifiable, all right. "Father, or whatever," he said, "You have exactly five seconds to be out of here before I start shooting."

Darven started to protest, but the look in Dan's eye told him that the sheriff was serious. Maybe serious enough to carry out his threat. He glanced at Dan's makeshift bandage, and his eyes narrowed, but he turned and got into his car.

He was gone before Dan was inside.

On the TV, the Asheville station was showing a breaking story - sources were tight-lipped, but reports estimated as many as 35 corpses were being pulled from the proposed site of the new school in Bethel. Causes of death were unknown, but foul play was definitely suspected.

"Thirty-five?" Dan was a little surprised they had even admitted that number, but he supposed it would be hard for the state guys to hide the huge numbers coming out of that pit. Common practice though; the truth would just cause a panic situation, as everyone with a missing person in the family would be trying to get info out of the state, or the feds, if they ever got here. With the public becoming inured to the track records of serial killers, 35 was just a curiosity, not a record.

Dan contemplated going to bed, but didn't think he'd be able to sleep. He half-dozed on the couch as the news continued with speculation and interviews with press decoys - state and local. His mind wandered to the pit. He had seen some pretty brutal stuff in his time in New York, first as a kid in Brooklyn, then later as a beat cop. Blood, violence and death - none of it was new to him, and scale didn't really make it much different.

The burning question for the state was: who were all those people and how did they get down there? But something else bothered Dan.

He had watched the retrieval of the corpses for a while, and had played a game that he hadn't had to play since Brooklyn. He watched the faces of the corpses as they came out of the pit, and made up stories about them. He used to do that whenever he had to deal with death before, to help him remember that these were people - not just case numbers. He'd imagine a kid playing basketball with his buddies; imagine the smile of a woman making dinner, while her body was being carted off. It was hard on him, but it kept it real, kept him from becoming desensitized to violent death.

As he had watched this morning though, something hadn't been right. The eyes of the dead had looked back. He hadn't been able to make up any stories. Since the corpses were all naked and mass buried, there were no clues to go by, no Nike sneakers to play basketball in, no jeans or hairclips or anything. And the gazes of these dead weren't vacant - they seemed to be looking directly at him, assessing him. The dead seemed to almost recognize him. They looked at him as though they should know him, but couldn't place him.

He had shaken it off at the time, thought he was just overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of this crime, and no longer used to seeing death so prominently displayed. Their gazes, now that he had time to think about it, reminded him of his mother. She had looked the same way.

Dan had been born and raised in Brooklyn, by his grandparents. His grandmother was a devout Catholic, his grandfather a good man, but indifferent to God. Dan's mother had been autistic and never left home. She had become pregnant at 24, but Dan never had any idea who his father was. His mother had died giving birth to him, but he used to talk to her picture, and the look in her eyes, that faint recognition, but not knowing, was always there.

"We followed you, we believed you," they said, melding together and apart again, "You betrayed us. We have been waiting for you." Dan awoke suddenly with the corpses screaming at him, and a banging on the door.

Dan tried to shake the sleep out of his mind as he stumbled to the door. He was drenched in sweat. No, not sweat. He swiped at his forehead, and his hands were covered in blood. He glanced at the couch - there was blood all over it.

The door banged again. "Just a second!" he yelled, heading for the bathroom. He splashed water on his face, and wiped down quickly. He couldn't see where he was bleeding, and it seemed to have stopped.

"Dan! Open up!" Alex sounded frantic. Dan jerked the door open and Alex barged in - the rain was coming down in buckets.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" asked the young deputy.

Dan glanced around. "Um, I guess I didn't hear it. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Really? Wow, I must have been bagged. Want some dinner?"

"Eight in the morning, Dan!"

The sheriff was stunned - he'd just slept about twenty hours. "Oh. So what's going on at the site?"

"Sheriff, are you ok?"

"Fine. Why?" Dan answered wearily.

"Because the whole county's going ape-shit is why. Those corpses are alive." Dan's head reeled. Alex looked around and saw the bloodstained couch. "Dan, I mean it, are you all right?"

"Alex, I think I'm the one who should be asking that. What do you mean 'alive'?"

"I mean alive. They finally got them all out - they made the ER into a morgue, and then took over the gym at the high school. There's 253 all together. Examiners have been brought in from all over the state. At four o'clock, one started breathing. Now, most of them have vital signs."

"Holy shit."

Alex nodded, "And then some. Thompson's been frothing at the mouth, wondering where you are, and the feds are here now

- he's mostly been bumped, but they want to talk to you."

"I don't know anything they don't."

Alex shrugged, "I know, but they still want you there. Big dog's a guy named Mendelson, from Washington, and they have a priest or something, consulting. He keeps asking for you."

Damn it, thought Dan. Fucking church. After what they put his grandparents through... "All right," he said, "Let's go."

Alex drove while Dan smoked, and thought. He tried to remember what he had blocked so long ago, tried to recall everything about the church that he could. He knew for sure that his grandparents had been banned from the church, formally excommunicated, because of him.

He knew that a priest had molested him, or tried, and that the priest had committed suicide. He was very young at the time, but there was a big stink about the whole thing. After his grandmother died a couple years later, he and his grandfather had moved into an apartment in another neighborhood. But the rumors followed them.

Alex screeched them into the hospital parking lot, slowing a bit as a soldier halted them. He was still rolling when he yelled to the soldier, "I have the sheriff, Mendelson wants him!" The soldier waved him through.

Dan turned in his seat, looking back, "National Guard?"

"You know it, Sheriff. Governor thinks we got us an Armageddon."

They went in the hospital main doors, past more soldiers, state police and agents, as Alex led Dan to the administration office, where Mendelson had moved the operations base.

As they entered the office, two more agents at the door stopped them. "This is Sheriff Jackson," said Alex. They checked Dan's ID and sent him in

"Ah, Sheriff Jackson, I presume." Mendelson was a balding man, short and sweaty with a respectable middle-age spread. He looked more like an algebra teacher than a federal agent.

"Fuck you," said Dan good-naturedly. Mendelson was surrounded by three more feds, a couple of state guys, not counting Thompson, who was pouting, and Darven. "I know when I'm over my head, and I know if you needed me, you'd call. Looks like you've got plenty of help here."

Mendelson grinned, and Dan found it hard to hate him. "Good. I'm glad you're not another one of these back-woods cowboys. And you're right. Ordinarily, I'd send you on vacation, but your presence was requested by Father Darven here. And now, I don't think anything will be 'ordinarily' for awhile."

Dan ignored the priest, who looked at him earnestly, almost hungrily, and focused on Mendelson. "What's the priest doing here?"

Mendelson shrugged, "Father Darven is an expert consultant from the Vatican. He was leading a conference in Washington, and was passing through Bethel when our shit hit the fan. He has very graciously agreed to help us in this matter."

Bullshit, thought Dan, but he said, "What kind of consultant?"

"Father Darven is an exorcist."

Dan looked at Mendelson, but he didn't think he was kidding. "What exactly is the situation?"

"I'm sure your deputy filled you in on the way over here. We have 253 corpses, or former corpses, I suppose, in various states of decomposition. Their bodies are intact, but their skeletons appear to be crushed. All of the corpses were exhumed before we began examination, at approximately 0330 this morning. At 0405, the first corpse began breathing, and at present, we have 149 corpses -- " he broke off as an agent poked her head in the door, holding up two fingers, "--make that 151 corpses with vital signs."

"That's impossible."

"Yes, Sheriff, it is. But...I'd appreciate it if you kept what I'm about to say under your hat, but we don't have a fucking clue what to do."

Dan sighed, still not sure why he was here. "You think an exorcist is going to help?"

Mendelson laughed, "I'm Jewish, Sheriff. But I'll take any help I can get at this point."

"You think I can help?"

The fed pointed at Darven, "He does."

Dan sighed again, "All right, priest. What do you want to know?"

Darven started a troubled look on his face, "I wish you had spoken with me yesterday, Daniel. I would have kept this confidential, but we're running out of time."

"Say what you have to say, but I am not Daniel to you or your pack of wolves. If you address me, call me Sheriff."

Darven nodded, "Very well, Sheriff. You are Daniel Jackson, correct? Grandson of Harold and Mabel Jackson, of Brooklyn, New York." Dan bristled at the priest's tome, but he nodded.

The priest continued, "You are stigmatic, and you have performed miracles." The room was silent, as all eyes turned to the sheriff. His head swam, but he managed to murmur, "I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Yes, Sheriff, you do. When you were six, one of our priests tried to touch you, and you threw him out of a fourth story window. You bled as a child, bled with the wounds of Christ."

The others in the room were unreadable, except for Thompson, who smirked, and Alex, who was staring at Dan in horror.

"We've kept track of you - since the excommunication, which was largely due to your grandfather threatening to go public with the unfortunate Father Isol's ...indiscretion. We have made some mistakes, granted, but we always kept track of you, Daniel."

Dan rallied his shaking nerves, "I don't know what you're

talking about, priest. Mendelson, you're not taking this clown seriously, are you?" But Dan was betrayed by his own hands, which both started to bleed.

Thompson stopped smirking, and Mendelson said simply, "We have to know what it all means, Sheriff. And you're the closest thing to a saint we have."

They entered the gym, where a dozen medical examiners were making the rounds of the corpses. They wore gear borrowed from the fire station - hazardous material gear, and the examiners were likewise attired in body suits from the CDC.

They communicated through microphones in the headpieces.

"These aren't human bodies, gentlemen. They are the seraphim, angels if you will, who followed Lucifer when he was hurled from Heaven. They landed on the earth millennia ago, and were eventually covered by the earth itself. But we have uncovered them, and now they wake from their slumber." Darven's voice droned on in their headsets. Dan glanced at Alex, and twirled his finger next to his head.

Alex flashed a wan smile, but his eyes held fear and distrust. Dan sighed.

"Doubtless, the Adversary will want these angels, perhaps come for them as he begins to gather an army, to start the end times."

"Or maybe they're aliens," said Dan into the headset. "Mendelson, you can't tell me that this guy is stamped with government approval."

"Just following orders, cowboy. The big guys don't know what these freaks are, but they're not taking any chances. What do your saint powers tell you?"

"That I need a beer, a burger, and a shave, and not necessarily in that order."

"Cowboy," Mendelson's voice was firm now, "Something's going on here, and you have to admit. If inspiration hits you, please for the love of God, don't fight it."

Suddenly there was a muffled scream from across the ER.

One of the corpses sat up and with a negligent gesture, casually ripped a medical examiner in two.

Yells and curses filled the headsets, as agents drew their guns and opened fire on the corpse. Their gunshots didn't even phase the creature, which seemed vaguely male. He had some trouble with his locomotion, and seemed almost to slither towards them.

The priest stepped forward, brandishing his cross, and began to chant a sacred text in Latin. The creature paused in front of him, flashing a crooked smile. It spoke, with a dusty voice, "Your words cannot harm me, cross-man. I see the betrayer standing before me." He looked past the priest, who was still frantically chanting, straight at Dan. Blood filled Dan's visor, and he felt suffocated. He tore the thing off, wiping blood off his brow. He aimed his gun straight at the head, "What do you want of me?"

"What we have always wanted, since the beginning. We followed you and you left us. We have waited. It is time." So saying, he lifted the priest off the floor, and bit Darven's head off.

Alex turned, heaving into his helmet, and the rest of them opened fire on the creature. Mendelson was screaming for the rest of the examiners to evacuate the building, as more of the creatures began to stir.

As soon as the examiners were out, Mendelson ordered a retreat. The creature came on, their bullets still not phasing it. As they went out the door, soldiers were rushing in, with flamethrowers and grenade launchers.

The flames seemed to slow the creature, which retreated toward the far wall. But it didn't ignite. In the hallway, Mendelson cast an accusing look at Dan, "Well?"

Dan shook his head, "I...I don't know."

"Well, you better think of something. Now. Get your man outside."

Dan grabbed Alex, and Mendelson called the Guard back. Once outside, Mendelson ordered the building destroyed. "Keep launching grenades into that motherfucker," he told the captain of the guard. "I want smoking rubble in ten minutes." Dan was helping Alex get out of his suit when Mendelson

approached them. He signaled Dan, and walked away.

"It recognized you," said the fed as Dan approached.

"Mendelson..."

"Are you a religious man?" When Dan shook his head, Mendelson continued, "Well, if what that priest said was true, I can understand why not. Listen to me a minute, though. There is some weird shit going on around here."

"Can't argue with that." Dan grinned, despite the apocalyptic setting. Explosions rattled through the air.

"Your priest in there, he thought those things were fallen angels, and if that's so, then what does that make you?"

"I'm not a saint, Mendelson."

"Just the opposite, is what I'm thinking. That...thing recognized you, called you the betrayer. Who'd you betray?"

"Jesus, Mendelson, are you saying I'm the Antichrist now?"

The fed shook his head, "I don't know, cowboy. But those things are pissed, and looking to you for direction. Doesn't your book say that Lucifer betrayed God, and took a third of the angels with him?"

Dan shook his head, and blood spattered the ground. "I don't think it's in the book, exactly, but that's the story."

Mendelson sighed. "My crowd doesn't have a Lucifer, did you know that?" Dan shook his head. The fed continued, "Oh, there's a Satan, but he's not your devil with horns and all, he's just the adversary, the challenger. He sort of wanders around, pointing out men's faults to God."

"Satan's a tattle-tale?"

Mendelson nodded, "More or less. But yours is the ultimate baddy."

"With what's going on around here, I'm more inclined to go with our version."

"But what if it's somewhere in between, cowboy? What if you are some kind of antichrist - in the strictest sense? A Jesus mock-up?"

Dan shuddered, "What if I didn't know who my father was?"

Mendelson just looked at him.

"What if I got tired of telling on men, and decided to walk in their shoes for a bit? What if I got tossed out of heaven, but ditched my buddies? Are they who I betrayed? Which story is it, Mendelson?"

A nearby explosion rocked both men out of their philosophical discussion. They turned, and saw the hospital burning. Soldiers were firing flames and grenades into the blaze, but a hundred smoldering corpses kept advancing.

Blood poured off of Dan's face. He sighed. "Either way, I guess it's show time."

"Hey, cowboy."

Dan turned. "Yeah?"

"If I'm right, could you maybe not tell the big guy about some of my filthier habits?"

The sheriff grinned at him and shook his hand, "Done."

Dan walked to the rubble that had been the hospital. He walked past the soldiers, waving them back - they retreated gladly. The creature that had first woken led the rest through the ashes toward Dan. Bodies of men, women and children slithered around each other, their flesh intermingling and separating again. Their eyes burned. Dan stopped about thirty feet from them, holding his hands out, palms first. Blood flowed freely from his hands, dripping onto the ground. The lead creature spoke, "Do you recognize us?"

Dan nodded, "I do."

"We followed you, and you left us."

"Yes, I left you until the time was right. I had much to

do first." The thoughts of his conversation with Mendelson swirled around in Dan's head as he tried to come up with the right answers for an exam given in a language he only half-understood. He meshed the two mythos together, taking the best parts and mixing them with pure bullshit.

"And is the time right now?"

"Almost, but I need to ask you to follow me again. Will you?"

"We will."

Visions of a glittering, shimmering army of 100 million angels swam in Dan's head. He saw himself, alone, wandering, wanting companionship yet not daring to approach a human being. He saw himself in a court, of sorts, with a faceless judge, haranguing a pock-marked man. He saw himself, old, sitting in a café in Paris, with another old man, discussing good and evil. He stood in a desert, offering a man bread, a man he loved.

"Come then," he said, and he walked to the centre of the fire. The angels followed him, the others approaching from over the hill, from the school. He waited until they were close, they pressed around him, close enough to touch him, but they hung back just a bit. He reached into the ground then, and his arms grew, long. He reached through the ground until he found what he sought, a gas line, and he drew it back to him.

As the gas line breached the surface of the smoldering earth, he ruptured it, and the explosion knocked the watching soldiers onto their collective asses. Mendelson gasped as he caught a glimpse of hell, not a figurative place, but all too real.

And Dan led his angels into it.

Three weeks after the fire that destroyed the hospital in Bethel, Deputy Alex Wilson was driving his patrol car toward Johnson's gas station, when he saw a man walking along the road, alone. He wasn't going to stop, afraid that any complication would delay his date with Sheena, but then his conscience pricked him, and he slowed down, pulling up next to the man.

"You okay, buddy?" he asked, then he gasped. The man was

nearly invisible, a melted CDC suit clinging tightly to his ash-caked form, but the light of a street lamp behind him shone through him. "Dan?"

"Just one thing, Deputy," said Dan before he vanished, "If anybody starts a religion after me, I will come back and kick the ever-living shit out of you."

The Jekyll Syndrome
by
Octavio Ramos Jr.

August 14, 2072; Several Seconds After 1923

Dear Franklin T. Barker:

The dendrimer is complete. Through the electron microscope, the tiny ball of this unique artificial protein floating in the mist-like ether looks so primordial, much like living tissue must have at the dawn of time. When the assembly started months ago, the spaghetti-like filaments of plastic resisted my best attempts at cohesion, but here at last is the end result.

With the dendrimer assembled, the next step is to fill the hollow portions within the polymer with the proteins I have manipulated. These proteins, among them ASIC (acid-sensing ion channel), have worked quite well in laboratory animals under controlled

conditions. Only last week Cindy provided me with the latest trials in which mice given my dendrimer-filled cocktail demonstrated learning and memory recall behaviors that were three times the average for mice in the control group. In other words, these mice grew smarter.

Despite these and other clinical trials, Dr. Saunders refuses to even contemplate human trials, much less prepare the necessary documentation for the overseeing organizations beyond Misko Pharmaceuticals. He wants more data, he claims. He also claims that his interest lies in ethics and safety, particularly when it comes to human experimentation. Perhaps he is working behind my back—it would not be the first time. You remember, don't you, Frank?

That's all for now. Please let me know how your research at Tentose Labs is going.

Warm regards,
Enrique Moreno

August 19, 2072; Several Seconds After 2342

Dear Franklin T. Barker:

Good to hear your software package is coming along nicely. It really helped in developing my protein cocktail, the essential formula of which unfortunately remains company intellectual property and thus is proprietary (how I long for academia once again). I would have spent months working on the X-ray diffraction data, but with your package, it took a couple of hours and—bam!—instant molecular model. A few glitches here and there, mostly with the phase-angle calculations, but I am certain you will have those quirks worked out soon.

Things for me are not going as well. Saunders came by the office and told me that under no circumstances was he prepared to present my project to management. What did he want? More trials, of course. The idiot!

I have Cindy and several post-docs working out the logistics for more trials, just to appease the man, but I know that this cocktail is ready. I just know it, Frank.

Do you remember that old Robert Louis Stevenson book titled **The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**? Well, I feel much like Jekyll, only there's a part of me that is also very much like Hyde. This sentiment is in keeping with the reaction of critics to the character of Hyde at the time. As Gerard Hopkins wrote in a letter to a friend, "You are certainly wrong about Hyde being overdrawn; my Hyde is worse."

With that, I close, dear friend. Write soon.
Warm regards,
Enrique Moreno

September 7, 2072; 2342

Dear Franklin T. Barker:

This letter finds me feeling rather sheepish, Frank. And for some reason I also feel that I must be brief. After dashing off my last email, I took it upon myself to prepare the cocktail and its delivery mechanism. I then injected the dendrimer solution. Minutes later, I stepped under a heat lamp to activate the compounds flowing through my system.

That night, I felt as though the cocktail was working. The functionality of it unraveled in a most bizarre dream. In this euphoric delusion, I could see the dendrimer like some psychosomatic creature. This thing literally opened its circular mouth and like a lamprey attached itself to my brain. Rather than suck at the cortex, the thing unleashed the cocktail from the back of its throat. The cocktail resembled a scintillating array of multicolored specks of light. As these luminescent fragments struck brain tissue, I woke in a cold sweat, my fingers and toes tingling.

Not much has happened since then. I have maintained a strict log of all observations and even conjecture regarding minutiae, but I have seen no improvement in either memory recall or enhanced learning ability. Still, I must be patient.

Talk to you later, Frank.
Enrique Moreno

October 14, 2072; 2:30 am

Dear Franklin T. Barker:

There is something wrong with me, Frank. Little things I have noticed since I last wrote. At least at first they felt like little things.

Cindy was the first to notice. I was eating lunch at my desk one afternoon. I had prepared some peppered steak the night before and was warming it up in the microwave when Cindy joined me. As we ate lunch, she suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "I always thought you were right handed."

All the time we were eating and conversing I had been using my right hand to cut the meat and my left to place it into my mouth.

Frank, I am right handed. At least, I think I am. Or was.

More soon.

Enrique Moreno

November 14, 2072

Dear Franklin Barker:

The cocktail has affected by brain, but not for the good. For one thing, the ASIC channels within my brain are beginning to atrophy. Somehow, the cocktail's ASIC protein has reversed the acid-inducing capability of my brain rather than enhanced it. Without such acid, the neurons within my brain don't fire off as often. That's why I find that I can't remember things.

As for the other compounds, heaven knows. I used so many in an effort to enhance brain function. Something has gone terribly wrong.

I called my mom the other day. She asked if I wanted my old baseball glove. I asked her, "What baseball glove?" She reminded me that I had tried to play professional baseball after graduating from the university. Several days after graduation, I had gone out to the Dukes Stadium and tried out. Although I made it, I instead focused on my biological career. Somehow, somehow, I had forgotten all of this.

When the glove arrived, I was in for another surprise: it was a left-handed mitt.

Take care,
Enrique Moreno

February 14

Dear Franklin Barker:

Read your last email. What's all this talk about cocktails? Of course liquor messes up brain cells. That's why I never touch the stuff.

Saunders keeps threatening to fire me. He's says I have become haphazard in my work. Cindy is worried about me—she says I mumble to myself a lot. And the graduate students: I am so short with them. Losing patience—I can't remember things, so I have to keep looking things up like a freshman in chemistry for morons.

I just may quit and live off my savings for a while. Need to withdraw the cash soon anyway. I keep forgetting the damn PIN number.

Rick

April 14

Frank,

Thanks for your email. Did we go to school together? Graduate or undergraduate? Damn, it's been so many years. Maybe we should get together. Still working at the same old place. Not doing much. I mostly let my assistant work things out and I help publish the results. Can't remember the chick's name right now. Oh, well.

Later,
Rick

July Something or Other

Franklin Barker:

Hit the reply button. Who the hell are you? Stop writing me, dude.

Rick

On August 4, 2073, a courier delivered the following note.

Dear Franklin T. Barker:

Utterson, shall you be Mr. Seek? No matter, I regret to inform you of the passing of Enrique Moreno, the hopfrog who walked in my shoes previously. I am in the process of destroying all correspondence and memorabilia. Except for the glove, which I remain curiously drawn to.

Remember him, for I shall not.
Rick

The Zapper
By Larry Sells

In the hospital, doctors and nurses examined Bud Lee Fly. He was laying on the bed unconscious with machines taking his life measurements. His EEG went flat lined. Doctors and nurses work together to revive Bud, but they could not save him.

Bud Lee Fly's soul saw a bluish bright light and started to float toward it.

In another dimension, a male adult and his son stood watching a white bug zapper. The zapper had a pair of fluorescent bulbs shining in front of a long electrode. They watched as a bug flew toward the bluish light and struck the electrode. A zap and a small rain of spark erupted from the zapper.

The pair clapped their hands together as another bug charged into the electrode displaying another zap and spark. "Dad why are the bugs going into the light." "They are attracted to its warmth, and brightness. To them the light offers freedom and maybe something else." He did not actually know, but felt like he had to give his son an answer. Not just an answer, but an intelligent one.

Bud Lee Fly's soul kept floating toward the bluish light. Suddenly, something made him want to leave the light. At the last second, Bud Lee Fly's soul left the warmth of the light and started to explore other regions of the spiritual realm.

"Dad that bug just left the light."

"Don't worry son, they always come back to the light." A second later, another flying insect hits the electrode, which brings a zap and some sparks. The pair claps their hands and cheer.

