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AND THE
DEAD SHALL
SLEEP NO MORE

Short Stories About Vampires

And the Dead Shall Sleep No More

Volume I

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Birth of a New Species

By Matias Travieso-Diaz

When in doubt, blame the dark elves.
Kevin Hearne

Modifications will add to the beautiful and harmonious diversity of nature.
Charles Darwin, *The Origin of the Species*, Chapter 5

“The important thing,” said Dolniss once again, “is to drain all the blood from a human’s corpse before consuming it. I favor making three cuts, one across the neck, another below the groin, and the third down the chest, by the heart.”

“Ay, love,” mocked Ellvar. “You’re getting pedantic in your old age. *Everyone* knows that.” The young elf pouted at his lover derisively.

Dolniss tried not to let his irritation show. “It’s a lesson that must not be forgotten. Human blood is rich in iron and salt. Both substances are harmful, and potentially lethal, to us elves. Drained human flesh is nutritious and tastes good. The choice is clear.”

Ellvar felt argumentative that evening. “It’s old-fashioned folks like you that keep us from making progress. Who can deny that a little blood enhances the flavor? I’ve tasted human blood more than once and it has done me no harm.”

“Don’t confuse luck with wisdom,” replied the older elf. He stopped honing the edge of his sword and came forward, placing a caressing hand on his ward’s shoulder. “There are only a few of us left to continue waging the war. Can’t risk losing anyone to poor eating habits.”

Ellvar shook his shoulder free and snorted. “Don’t blame the state of the war on the young. We’ve been begging forever for a change in tactics. You insist on trying to lure humans into our underground caverns so we can ambush them. That strategy might have worked well at some point in the past, but now humans don’t fall for it any more. They aren’t as stupid as you seem to be.”

The insulting remark irritated Dolniss beyond endurance. He turned his back on the insolent whelp and moved his weapon honing to another hall.

2

Dolniss hated to acknowledge that his lover’s point was valid. The dark elves perennially fought the creatures of the surface, mainly the humans and the light-skinned elves known as the Ljósálfar. The surface dwellers possessed an advantage: they could move freely during the day, without being impaired by the sun’s cruel rays. On the other hand, they all lacked night vision and the humans’ senses of hearing and smell were poor. Humans also fell easily into traps, were vulnerable to magic, and could not match the endurance and agility of either of the elven races.

“Men rule the skin of the world, but the rest of the world’s body is ours,” went an ancient boast of the Dökkálfar, as the dark elves were called by friend and foe alike. That boast may have comported with reality once, but later the balance of power shifted to the elves’ detriment. Instead of penetrating into the dark elves’ domains and risking extermination, humans now

saturated the entrances to the underworld with fire bombs and depth charges, and sometimes tried to block the elves' "rabbit holes" and trap them beneath the surface. The hated Ljósálfar also made occasional forays against their erstwhile relatives, causing great losses of life every time they launched such an attack.

Mother Arvees, the High Queen, received briefings on the changing face of the conflict, but after many hundreds of seasons as sovereign she was set in her ways. "I'll send no patrols above ground to have them slaughtered. Give me another alternative and I'll consider it." She would not be moved easily, and the precarious status quo remained in place.

3

As it often happens, the war between humans and dark elves came about by accident. A millennium or two ago, a band of primitive humans exploring the edges of the North Continent discovered a hidden cove to which unending streams of sea creatures were attracted. The humans started bringing their fishing vessels to the cove and setting nets that would trap the abundant fish. Unbeknownst to the humans, however, the cove was a magical creation of the dark elves, who emerged to the surface of its waters on cold evenings to chant their prayers to the moon and conduct arcane rites that ended in mass bacchanalia.

So, it came to pass one night that the fishing and the carousing coincided, leading to a clash. The humans flung harpoons at the strange, flimsy creatures that responded with eerie wailings as they were wounded. The elves retaliated by gathering beneath the humans' vessels and forcing them to overturn. All but a couple of the humans perished; the survivors managed to swim back to safety and alerted their brethren. Skirmishes between the two species ensued, ultimately growing into organized warfare.

On that fateful night, long since forgotten, the dark elves tried human flesh for the first time. In their fight they captured an injured man and dragged him to the cove, where they began tearing him apart with their sharp claws, ripping gobs of bloody flesh off the body, and tasting them. They found the still warm meat flavorful, though the blood carried a disagreeable metallic undertaste. Sampling the flesh of other humans, either dead or still alive, confirmed that killing man constituted a necessity in wartime, but also provided good nourishment.

Opinions were divided whether the flesh of a living prisoner tasted better than that of a corpse. Dolniss agreed with those who felt that, while some enjoyment could be derived from witnessing the terror and pain of a human while strips of his flesh were being cut off and eaten before his eyes, the harrowing experience prompted the release of chemicals in the body of the victim that impaired the taste of the morsels. Others held the opposite view.

4

Another dispute that would not lend itself to easy resolution involved the growing feud between Dolniss and Ellvar. They continued to have sex and enjoy each other physically, but copulation ranked relatively low in importance to the dark elves. On the other hand, the daily sessions in which Dolniss tried to impart the wisdom of the ancients on Ellvar became increasingly tense. Ellvar held antagonistic views towards the official canon, and challenged every point of dogma propounded by Dolniss – even the standard theory that the Dökkálfar and the Ljósálfar were once a single people. "No way that can be true," argued Ellvar. "Those light-adoring snobs are more like humans, not at all like us. They are merciless killers that have responded to our requests for peace with violence."

While their differences were raised in the context of abstract issues, it became abundantly clear that Ellvar no longer wanted to receive learning from his lover and master, or even desired that much to be with him. Affection among the Dökkálfar, when it exists, can be easily throttled.

It therefore should have come as no surprise when one night towards the end of the cold season Ellvar came to Dolniss' quarters and announced: "Goodbye. I'm leaving the depressing caverns that the Dökkálfar call home and moving up to the surface."

Dolniss received the news with astonishment and more than a bit of sorrow. "Have you lost your mind? How are you going to survive? The surface lands are full of deadly traps for us Dökkálfar. Not a cycle of the moon will pass before you die at the hands of the humans or are captured and enslaved by the Ljósálfar!"

Ellvar smirked. "I haven't been idle. I've been looking for ways to make it up there... And I've found them."

"What ways?"

Ellvar gave a mysterious wave of the arms. "I'm not telling you. Suffice it to say that they involve magic. Through them, humans will provide nourishment for me and my kin, without having to engage them in battle. I'll continue to hide by day and hunt by night, but my ways will be safer, for they are the ones I have invented."

Dolniss realized that it would be fruitless to attempt to dissuade his former ward from whatever erratic course of action he intended to pursue. For a moment, he considered restraining Ellvar by force; violence by a dark elf upon another could be exerted only in cases of need, and the current situation did not qualify. He bit his lip to restrain tears from flowing, gave the young elf a last embrace, and let him go.

5

Ellvar's absence lasted a long time; so long that many in his own House no longer remembered his existence. Therefore, his reappearance in the main Cavern elicited shock and fear among even the few who remembered him, for he appeared to have undergone a profound change. The most visible manifestations of his transformation were physical. He was very tall, such that he stood about the size of an average adult human, and his body seemed wiry and very muscular. His dark gray skin exhibited a reddish undertone and his hair, formerly white, now shone silver in the torch light and flowed in rivulets down the small of his back. But the greatest change leapt out of his eyes: once pale, they glowed scarlet, and were matched by crimson gums that contrasted with razor sharp, gleaming teeth. But, beyond the physical signs, Ellvar's new persona came across by the self-assurance of his stance, the arrogance of his movements, and a palpable malevolence that radiated from his body like a dark cloud that enveloped him.

He did not come alone. He had brought along two fierce looking female Dökkálfar and a gaggle of young cubs of all ages. In all, he arrived as the leader of an imposing, fear-inducing knot of dark elves, in comparison with which the rest of their kin seemed diminished.

Dolniss, at work in his shop, went outside in response to the hubbub of voices in the plaza. Ellvar appeared headed for the lofty palace of the Mother, but did a double take upon recognizing his former master and changed course to meet him.

"Hail, Master!" he greeted, in a tone that lacked even a trace of respect for his old master.

"Welcome, Ellvar," replied Dolniss soberly. And then: "You seem to be in good health."

Ellvar could not wait to gloat. "Yes, Master. Despite your dire warnings, I've survived above ground, and even prospered." He ran a large hand over his muscular chest.

Dolniss would not rise to the bait, and instead of inquiring further he replied, nodding in

the direction of the Mother's palace: "Arvees will be glad to see one of her children return to the fold."

"Yes, I've come to see her, but don't intend to grovel or, as you call it, return to the fold. I'm here to seek recognition."

Dolniss could not refrain from asking: "Recognition for what?"

"I've created a new species, which I demand be counted along with the races of the higher beings such as the Dökkálfar, the Ljósálfar, the humans and the dwarves. I'm starting here, for I hope my fellow dark elves will be the first to acknowledge and admire my accomplishment."

Now drawn in, Dolniss asked: "What species is that?"

"I don't have a name for it yet. Let me describe what I have done and perhaps you'll help me name the new creatures." He stopped to gather his thoughts and then continued:

"You were right in warning me about the dangers posed by the humans and the Ljósálfar. I never could figure out how to defend myself from the Ljósálfar, other than engaging them in mortal combat, in which I could easily be killed. For that reason, once I ascended to the surface, I made it my practice to hide during the day and emerge only at night, when the Ljósálfar are dormant.

"Humans are less of a problem, because among other things they are vulnerable to magic. I'm not a practitioner of the Higher Arts but, like every elf, I've learned the basic spells that may help me survive an encounter with an enemy. One simple spell that I can cast upon a human is the *abasement of the will* spell, that forces its victims to yield to the suggestions or orders of the spell caster. Of course, every Dökkálfar older than an infant knows how to resist such a spell and render its commands mere suggestions that can be safely ignored. For humans, though, the *abasement of the will* spell can, in many instances, force a human – particularly a young or weak one – to submit to the demands conveyed to him under the spell.

"Our discussion many moons ago about the savoring of human blood and its potential consequences stayed in my mind as I began considering the possibility of leaving the Underworld. Despite your warnings, I continued ingesting human blood in ever increasing quantities and succeeded in mastering its ill effects, such that my kidneys became capable of disposing of iron particles with only a slight irritation upon evacuating. By the time I went around to say my goodbyes here I was immune to the adverse effects of human blood.

"Then the inspiration hit me. If I could, by means of the *abasement of the will* spell, induce a human opponent to allow me to drink his blood I could get nourishment without combat risks and could incapacitate, and ultimately slay, my opponent. I dared not try the spell to suggest more drastic actions by the human, such as killing himself or offering his body as a sacrifice, because the self-preservation instinct that every living being has would thwart my efforts and put me at risk of discovery.

"When I went up to the surface, I hid near a settlement of humans. I started appearing in their quarters at night, seeking in the darkness for suitable victims. I soon discovered that the very young, the very old, and some weak-willed females were the best targets. I tried my hand with growing youth and even older men, but generally failed. I'm still working on that problem, and have every confidence that I'll succeed soon.

"So, the short of it is that I've created a new type of creature, of which I, my wives and my children are the first specimens. We are the *improved* Dökkálfar, creatures of the night that live off the blood of humans. Because of the change in our diet, we are getting to look more and more like humans and someday we will be indistinguishable from them and become even more

of a threat.

“We are on our way to finally overcoming one of our most hated enemies. What do you think of that?”

Dolniss remained silent for a long while. At length, shaking his head, he replied: “What you have done is wondrous but foul. You’ve transformed the noble race of the Dökkálfar into blood-sucking leeches, cowards who don’t overcome their enemies through strength and cunning but by the use of vile stratagems. I’m sure there will be some among us that will applaud you, but I predict that the majority of the Dökkálfar will reject you and the new kind of loathsome being you represent.”

“I regret that you feel that way, but no matter,” replied Ellvar, turning his back without more on his former friend.

6

Dolniss’ prediction proved accurate. A passionate debate ensued among the Dökkálfar, in which not only the nobles but the clerics, the foot soldiers, and even the lowest commoners took part. The vast majority of the dark elves rejected the views of Ellvar and opposed changing the time-honored ways of the Dökkálfar. A few, however, sided with him and demanded that the dark elves move to the surface and vanquish the humans once and for all.

Matters degenerated into verbal, and then physical, encounters between the two groups. Finally, Mother Arvees intervened and decreed that there be a trial by combat to resolve the controversy.

The two sides chose their champions. Ellvar’s supporters nominated him; his opponents could not find anyone willing to oppose the menacing youth in combat, until Dolniss volunteered to put his life at risk just to end his pupil’s dire scheme.

They clashed at midnight in the plaza by Mother Arvees’ palace. Elves were gathered all over the area, standing in the porticos of palaces, staring out of windows, even hanging atop the stalagmites that dotted the cavern’s rocky floor.

The combatants entered from opposite ends of the plaza. Anyone could see at a glance the great disparity between them. Dolniss, the older, had trained to become a cleric and received extensive fighting instruction. He wore an expensive armor made of *mithral*, light and flexible so his movements would not be impeded. Ellvar’s armor was made of cheaper adamantine, which offered less protection and weighed more. The same could be said about their weapons of choice; Dolniss, an expert warrior, came with two long *mithral* swords, whose coordinated use required much talent and practice. Ellvar carried a single sword, which he supplemented with a variety of auxiliary weapons, including a whip of fangs, a short lance, and a spinneret. A sack attached to his back contained light pellets and other distracting devices.

The fighters approached each other gingerly, each measuring up the other and trying to anticipate his attack. Ellvar struck first, casting a blow at Dolniss’ chest and retreating quickly, counting on his liveness to avoid Dolniss’ riposte. Dolniss parried the blow and advanced, brandishing both swords simultaneously and drawing intricate patterns in the air that changed too fast for the eye to catch.

From that point on, the fight proceeded predictably. Ellvar felt overmatched, and only his agility saved him from receiving a fatal wound. He tried each of the auxiliary weapons on Dolniss, who severed the whip with a single thrust of one of the swords, forced the lance out of Ellvar’s hand with a series of well-directed blows, and ignored the light pellets that Ellvar cast at him.

Ten minutes into the fight, Ellvar found himself growing tired from the relentless chase by Dolniss, and felt his movements become slower and less coordinated. Dolniss, who continued to press inexorably at his opponent, finally uttered an angry cry and wrestled Ellvar's sword from his hand with a devastating blow from both his weapons. He pushed the defenseless Ellvar down to the ground and readied to deliver a death blow.

"Please kiss me one last time. I want to die with your taste on my lips," pleaded Ellvar to his enemy, who stood menacingly above him.

Dolniss hesitated but then, remembering the times when he had clasped the boy in a joyful embrace, bent over his former ward to reach his lips. Quick as a viper, Ellvar angled up his head, sunk his sharp teeth on his lover's neck, and bit with a ferocity driven by malice and despair. Before Dolniss could react, a deep gash opened below his chin, and a stream of red blood issued from the wound. Ellvar started slurping it greedily, smacking his lips as he swallowed.

Pandemonium erupted in the plaza. Cries of anger, shock and disgust resonated, and half the spectators rose to their feet, shaking their fists. In her presiding box, Arvees issued a sharp cry and motioned her guards down to the floor of the plaza, where they seized Ellvar, blood still dripping from his half open mouth. Behind him, Dolniss convulsed one last time, as life escaped through a severed carotid artery.

The guards brought Ellvar before the livid Mother. "You have committed an unforgivable crime! What do you say in your defense?"

Ellvar remained silent, a self-satisfied expression on his face.

"I can have you executed for killing one of the senior members of my staff," she started.

"No, my lady, you can't. We engaged in a trial by combat, where death of a participant is a permissible outcome."

"Still, I have the power to order your death. But you have caused enough grief to our people already, and your death could bring about worse things. This I will do, however. I order that you, your family, and anyone who supports your cause be banished forever from the Underworld. Return to the surface and lead your depraved life whichever way you choose. But pray your path doesn't intersect with that of the Dökkálfar people. You are no longer one of us, and we disown you!"

Ellvar bowed his head so that the Mother would not see the surge of regret that suddenly drowned him. He turned around quickly and headed for his quarters, anxious to depart.

The new species would need to prosper without any help from others.

The End.

The Tale of the Vintner's Daughter

By LindaAnn LoSchiavo

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a foreign bachelor,
in possession of a drafty castle, must be in want of a wife.”

She overheard her parents mentioning
A vast estate, long vacant, just changed hands.
Inheritance. Fortunate foreigner,
Related distantly. A gentleman — —
Aristocrat — — whose bloodline staked his claim,
Will take possession soon of Mount Ardeal.

Townsfolk with daughters gave approval, sight
Unseen. A bachelor! Well circumstanced!
Considering an heiress gets respect
At any age, she was insulted when
Her father dared to call her “an old maid.”
Inspecting manicured and chaste white hands,
Aware there's merit in matched wedding bands,
Realities of warring unmet needs
Upbraid the tight lips of virginity.

Receptions will be held, bite-size buffets.
This heir, unknown, is suddenly “a catch.”
The vintner's daughter can sense life's about
To change once she's in a relationship.
Enchanting friendships could lead to courtship.

Her early childhood memories were filled
With bone-dry men admitting they had come
To slake their thirst, which is unquenchable,
She learned, while watching mother pour and pour.

Vacationing at vineyards tutored her.
She watched the women kneeling to tie off
Vines — — how their expertise was in the knots
Not grapes — — enduring, bending, bowing low,
And salving calloused hands at quitting time.
Admiring the fruitfulness of their
Harvest on horseback, they see an ornate
Black carriage pass, its curtains tightly drawn.
It must be him, the heir they've heard about.

Born in Romania, this bachelor
Inherited five castles, acreage.
Unlike the grapes, their ripening athirst
For sun, he shuns daylight, potato like,
Basks in his soft cocoon of native soil.

Their fete won't start 'til red horizon's drained
And autumn air's electric with decay.

Assuming his disguise, Count Dracula
Arrives, polite, attired properly,
Seductive, well turned out considering
He can't see his reflection. Mirrors won't
Hold him. Avoiding long engagements, he'll
Tell ladies he prefers to sleep alone.

Echolocation guides his strong black wings
To candle-lit bed chambers. Milky white
Breasts, pleasure's playthings, don't stir his manhood.
Sharp fangs seek virginal smooth necks. Always
His type, blood's sustenance is what he craves,
Imagining the process from the grave.

He's parched when entering the ballroom.
Delaying satisfaction sweetens it.
Unmarried females study him, inspect
His gold ancestral jewelry engraved
Impiously. Flirtatious words affect
The vintner's daughter, nodding glassy-eyed,
Intoxicated. His gaze penetrates
Until she's under his hypnotic sway.

The heiress has arranged to meet the Count
In private. At eleven they will mount
Their horses, undetected, take a ride.
Discreet, she'll hide in the orangerie,
Alerting him to the romantic grove
By a rose petalled trail, a daring ruse.

Excited to imagine his caress,
The dark dissolving inhibitions, she's
Startled by flapping wings overhead.
Peculiarly, her petals were consumed.

Spotting a white handkerchief on a chair,
She rests her rosebuds there — — a silent prayer.

The Manager of a Chicken Franchise in Vinland

By B. Patrick Lonberg

The night is as thick as crude oil between the trees that have spilled over the shoulder of the road, suckers worrying their way through the cracks in the crumbled asphalt. There is nothing but trees and deteriorating road. For as far as the eye can see. Even the moon has given up the sky. Brent expected to see stars out here—out in the middle of nowhere—but light pollution seems to have a funny way of ruining the countryside as well. And what the light pollution isn't fogging over is being overpowered by the crazy xenon bulb upgrades to the Saab's headlights. They seemed like a great idea at the time. That was until Brent got the first ticket, the aftermarket package evidently being illegal back home in New Hampshire.

There it was by the side of the road—Civilization—and you just drove on by. You've been looking for it for hours, and yet you just drove on by. Your ass hurts. Your whole body is craving food and rest. So, what are you doing? There were people there! You saw them by the bus stop in front of that chicken place. You should have stopped.

Brent has been driving for nearly five hours since his last break. That was before Mars Hill and the ill-advised but ultimately successful off-road foray that secreted him into New Brunswick. He didn't realize when he'd set out four days ago that you now need a passport to get into Canada. Even if he had been in the right frame of mind—even if he'd known he was headed to the Great White North—he didn't have a passport. And he very much wasn't in the right frame of mind. Alcohol and Doctor Reyes-King's barbiturates will do that to you. Family will do that to you.

By now, Brent is starting to doubt himself. He is doubting having seen that chicken place. He cannot manage to get his eyes to focus enough to interpret the geometry of the clock on the dash—*who puts a damn analog clock in a car?*—drinking and driving is complicated enough without keeping the little hand and the big hand straight.

The further Brent gets from the chicken place the harder it is becoming to believe it was ever real. Harder still to turn around and go back. But if he is sure of anything it is that the lights of the big roadside sign for the chicken place were off.

But the lights on the inside were on. You know you saw them. And there were people out front. Lots of cars, too. Don't be stupid. And don't be afraid. We aren't in Compton here, we're in rural Canada.

Brent lets the car coast to a stop by the overgrown side of the road. He puts on the hazards and immediately feels stupid. He hasn't seen another car on the road. Just a few creatures skittering by his tires.

Now that he can focus his eyes he sees that the hands of the clock on the dashboard are praying together, nearly all the way to the eleven. He turned down this country highway over a half hour ago if the dashboard clock is to be believed, though Brent is doubting everything including that clock right now. The next town—Burnt Church—was only supposed to be five kilometers down the road. But the geography of everything has seemed fuzzy since he veered up the Acadian Peninsula.

He reaches to the central console between the seats and hits the button to lower the passenger window. He throws out depleted cans of ice beer until he finds a fresh one to wash down the last of the sample packs of the Butobarbital Doctor Reyes-King originally gave Brent

for his insomnia.

Window up. Hazards off. U-turn.

Thoughts of his daughter Mary Jane are one of the first things to emerge from the dark woods of Brent's mind as sobriety withdraws further. Mary Jane and *Chris*. Brent cannot believe how quickly *Chris's* name comes up.

Back in New Hampshire it had been coming up more and more frequently from Brent's wife Jane's mouth. Damn if *Chris* hasn't infested Brent's own mouth like the fruit flies that never seem to leave your kitchen if you let just one banana go a little too brown.

Jane has been working at a cosmetics counter since she went back to work five years ago when their daughter, Mary Jane, started junior high school. *Chris* was a co-worker. Brent assumed that she had meant at the cosmetics counter as well, and therefore that *Chris* had been another of the *ladies* of Coco Chanel and Cartier. But the department store was a big place. And Jane never corrected him.

Jane had mentioned to Brent that *Chris's* marriage had been getting rocky. That *Chris* had been over one evening because *Chris* couldn't handle homelife anymore. Behind his eyelids Brent can see his living room back home. A living room in which he came home to find Jane with a *man*. Nothing untoward was happening, but it was clear both that *Chris* was a *man*, and that something shortly would be happening.

He and Jane talked about *him* later that evening, and Brent was prepared to offer forgiveness, until Jane told him that *Chris* was going to need to stay with them for a while because *he* was getting a divorce. It wasn't even a question for her. Brent didn't seem to have a vote.

What is left of the rumble strip at the edge of the road shakes Brent out of his stupor. He jacks his neck up from where it was starting to loll over his left shoulder. His cheek is slick with thick, reeking saliva; he hasn't brushed his teeth in as long as he can remember. He has never been his dentist's friend, even if he has been one of her best customers.

His bleary eyes are telling him the clock says midnight, but that's impossible. He is on the same road. He has to be. He rubs the sleep from his eyes. He is horrified to see how much of it has managed to form in the scant moments he imagines himself to have greyed out. He looks up and sees the house with the tire swing tied to the giant oak tree; it seems so precariously close to the road.

You know that tire swing! Slow down! The chicken place has got to be just ahead. You see the sign? Is it off? Yes, but it was the last time too, remember? You'd better hope to God it is still open.

Brent slows to a crawl as he nears the chicken place. He can see lights on inside through some kind of darkening film the proprietors have plastered over the windows. The effect makes the scene look like a photographic negative of an Edward Hopper painting.

He passes the restaurant.

What are you doing? You can't drive by! Not again! You have nowhere else to go. Please. Please eat something. You're getting out of hand again.

Something runs in front of the Saab and Brent swerves toward the shoulder, sliding

through the crumbling edge and into the mud and sedge at the tree line. His tires spin in the muck. Just ahead, a possum sits in the road. It hisses a curse at him in some forgotten forestland tongue. Brent cannot look away until it lopes off toward the trees.

He will have to hoof it back the hundred yards to the chicken place.

As he trudges up the shoulder opposite the chicken restaurant, the first car Brent has seen in hours sloshes past him, kicking some road mud onto his pants leg. “Great,” he says to himself, turning his face up into the misty rain. *Just great.* Having seen a car, he bothers to look both ways before crossing the road, and he laughs at himself for doing so.

You are so very well trained, Brent.

Now that he’s next to the big roadside sign, Brent sees the chicken place is called *Geezil’s Fry & Chicken*. The man who splashed him pulls up to the front door and is out of the car as soon as it is in park. Brent thinks the man must be in a worse state than he is and decides not to pick a fight, though if he were being honest with himself, his fear has precluded him from being the one to start *any* fight in his life.

Taking in the parking lot, he notices that all of the cars seem to be beaters a decade or two old—out of the eighties or nineties—just like his beloved Saab. A pair of eyes glint out at him from under a van parked by the dumpster. Brent sees that they belong to yet another possum as the gangly white vermin weasels out and clambers up into the bin.

The man runs back out of the restaurant empty-handed, and in his weaving stupor runs into the side of his own car. He claws his way in and speeds off in the Dodge Monaco, clipping Brent in his rampageous fervor. Brent falls onto the ground with a wet *splut*, hitting his head.

Brent can hear pattering water. Behind his eyelids Brent can see the door to the upstairs bathroom back home. When he heard the grunting coming from the bathroom he had assumed he had come home early to find his wife and his new lodger *Chris* going at it like his subconscious had warned. Instead, after he worked the feeble lock open with the pin tucked above the doorframe, he exposed not wife Jane, but daughter Mary Jane, busy in the shower with *Chris*.

But that wasn’t even really the last straw. The real last straw happened two nights later. The family: Jane, Mary Jane, *Chris*—because *Chris* was now apparently considered family—and Brent went out to a bean supper at their local Methodist church before a night of candlepin bowling, trying to pretend everything was still normal. Or to force everything into normalcy. Mary Jane excused herself at Dela Lanes to go to the bathroom between frames and vanished. She walked out of her life and never looked back, shedding it with no more remorse than a snake would its old skin.

Mary Jane had walked out. But *Chris* had stayed. *This* was the last straw, and when the bottle of Rurple Minze he had stashed above a ceiling tile in the laundry room ran out, so did he.

The bell that is only barely still fastened to the door tinkles Brent’s arrival. The old man at the back of the line at the register looks at him like there is a spinach quiche stuck in his teeth. Brent wants to ask—*what?*—but can’t be bothered once the smell of fried food tickles his nostrils. He is ravenous, having subsisted mostly on discount whiskey and schnapps up until this point. With a bag of Hawkins Cheezies pitched on top.

His eyes close up as he takes in the whole bouquet of the place. There is fried food for sure, but then there is also the sweet smell of old crusty catsup dried onto the chair legs, and mildewed mop water that's left a soap ring around the corners, and the other under-washed clientele out past any reasonable bedtime.

His own inhalation is the only sound over the hush that has befallen the room. He opens his eyes again. It may only be the old man ahead of him that is looking at him, but the rest of the people in Geezil's are *pointedly* not looking at him. The room is awfully quiet. The small hairs on his neck are suddenly ready to stand up and run.

Behind him, three of the bedraggled tables are peopled. The first, a table in the back that advertises its unlevelness with a regular *thump-thump* as the bodies move around it, contains three men of very different ages. All look Native American, or whatever Native Canadians call themselves. The second, a booth on Brent's right far opposite the door, holds what is presumably a couple. They are extremely thin, and sitting silently, looking absolutely anywhere but at each other. The last is a two-top table in the middle of the restaurant where a man in a blue mesh trucker's hat, hunting jacket, dark dirty jeans, and mud-choked boots sits staring unblinkingly at Brent. As soon as he catches this man's eye Brent spins right round.

Brent can't help but look back at the man; he continues to stare right at Brent.

"Oh, don't worry about Old Jim," says the man in front of Brent in the line. So surprised is Brent that he nearly meets his own ghost. He turns around slowly so as not to pass out, his heart still out of its rhythm. The man in front of him is older than *Old Jim* by at least a score of years. His eyes look dangerously jittery, like rabid macaques throwing themselves around the cage of his head. "He just gets peevish when he can't get what he want." The old man licks his lips and continues to mostly look at Brent.

"Alright," Brent says. "Sounds reasonable."

The man gives a dry, cracking laugh. "Reasonable is a funny word for Old Jim. But yeah, I'm back in line trying again to make it alright for him, you know? '*Don't just accept what life or anybody else gives you. Take what you want for yourself. That's the Viking way,*' so says the manager of this shit pot."

This statement stings Brent in a surprising way. He is not sure he has ever just taken what he wants before. He has often felt that he isn't even the main character in his own life's story. Before Brent can say anything in response, the cashier yells, "*Next!*" and the old man steps forward. Brent turns around to find Old Jim still looking at him. Now *he's* licking his lips. Brent desperately wants a drink.

Why the fuck did you leave your flask back in the car? This place isn't right. Keep looking straight ahead and don't talk to anybody else. There is something not right going on here. You were right to worry. Get your chicken and get out.

The old man is arguing with the cashier, then abruptly stops and turns and heads into the dining room, pointedly not looking at Brent this time while side-stepping him. Brent forces himself to not follow him back with his eyes, and instead looks up at the cashier, a towheaded young man of maybe nineteen, his face a red sore of acne bloom. "*Next!*" the cashier squawks at Brent impatiently.

"Um, hi," Brent says. He instantly realizes that he hasn't even looked at the menu board, which is outdated with graphics from a different era. Several items are scratched out with black permanent marker. It is mostly what you'd expect from a KFC or a Popeye's, though it looks like most—*all*—of the actual chicken items are scratched out.

"Never seen you around here before," the cashier says in a reedy voice. He's missed a

small patch of incongruously black corkscrew hair on the tip of his chin while shaving, and Brent has a hard time looking anywhere else. “What would you want?” the cashier asks.

“Umm,” Brent says, buying time. “You don’t have any chicken,” he says with a mostly implied question mark.

“Ah, nope,” says the cashier.

“And that’s a regular thing?”

“Ah, yep.”

“So, the chicken in your name is more of a suggestion?”

“Well, we used to have chicken all the time, but we—”

He’s cut off by a very tall Nordic-looking man in a dated-looking tan suit. He puts his hand on the cashier’s shoulder, and seems to press down. Hard.

“Nonsense Jon,” the man says in a bit of sing-song cheer. “We’re getting a delivery just now. The truck just arrived.” He smiles at Brent. “*It is a miracle,*” he intones very slowly.

Brent can feel ears perking up all throughout the restaurant. There are grunts and the hot feeling of eyes are on the back of his head. He looks at his wristwatch. A delivery at 11:15pm? Who delivers at this hour?

Your watch stopped. Didn’t it? It is a lot later than 11:15pm. What was it the clock in the car said?

“It’s just going to take a minute to get everything unloaded,” the manager says obsequiously. “How about I get you a complimentary fountain drink, and you can take a seat for just a few minutes?”

“I really need something to eat,” Brent starts, but is quickly interrupted.

“Of course you do. Why else would you be out here in the middle of nowhere at this late hour? Alright Jon, help this man out. Get him some of our famous curled fries going. Again,” he said taking an ostentatious pause, “*on the house* for our newest customer. Whatever he want.”

“Thanks,” Brent said, not sure what else to say. The cashier slid him a semi-crushed paper cup across the finger-smudged counter. He was about to take it when the manager thrust a larger, un-crumpled one at him.

“No Jon, give this man a large. He’s been waiting an awfully long time already. He needn’t bother himself for a refill *too soon*. Did I mention, free refills on the house? When you’re ready.”

“Thanks,” Brent says again stupidly, and slowly turns to the soda fountain. The manager is smiling at Brent in a way that leaves him feeling rather witchy.

Brent decides that of the options, sitting closest to the couple in the booth should be his best bet. They are quiet, and sitting in the back should keep Old Jim’s attention facing the other way. He takes the corner booth behind the couple.

He looks down at his cup. A little untrustingly. Brent has never heard of most of the pop that Geezil’s has on offer. The fountain dispenses KIK Cola, Cott Black Cherry, Marco Spruce Beer, Brio Chinotto, Red Champagne, Sussex Golden Ginger Ale, and Slow Cow—calling itself an *anti-energy drink*. The only thing he is familiar with is the Orange Crush. He doesn’t much like Orange Crush, but that’s what he poured himself. Now he takes a drink, and wishes he had something to mix into it to cut the cloying sweetness.

The young woman who’d been at the head of the line when Brent had entered Geezil’s has been standing at the fountain a long time: the entire time Brent had been speaking with the

cashier, had been speaking with the manager, had been pondering the odd pop assortment, had been filling his cup, had been deciding on his table. She is still standing there now. She is filling her cup with the Red Champagne. Chugging it down. Refilling it again. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. She is living for the free refills. There is something very familiar about her that Brent cannot put his finger on.

Thump-thump goes the table to his right, breaking his trance-stare at the woman. He can't help but look at the men at the table. When he turns back, the man in the booth ahead of him is looking at Brent.

"Evening," the man says. He looked thin from across the room, but up close he is positively starving. He scratches his rough chin, appraising Brent like he might a sandwich.

"Yea, hi," Brent says, taking another sip of the vaguely orange sugar water and placing the cup defensively between him and this man.

The man looks away and the woman he's with turns around to Brent suddenly; if he is extremely thin she is emaciated in the third world kind of way. She is all elbows and shoulder blades and head. "You eatin'?" she says.

"Yea, I think so. I hope so," Brent says.

"They have you waitin', too?" she says.

"I suppose so. They seem to be out of chicken. That seems really weird, doesn't it?"

"Does it," she asks. "It seems they always are." She looks away quickly.

"They always are," says the man, once again facing Brent. It is as if they are performing some choreographed dance number that Brent isn't privy to.

"Are you eating?" Brent asks, as there does not appear to be anything on their table.

"We never eat here anymore," the man says. He turns. This time the woman does not turn around to face him in return.

Jon the cashier walks up to Brent with an overflowing basket of curly fries. He half sets, half drops them in front of Brent. "Enjoy your curled fries," he says. "You like some sauce?"

"Maybe some catsup," Brent says, eyes stuck on the missed patch of dark corkscrew hair on the man-boy's chin.

"There yonder," Jon says, indicating with his chin hairs the table the fountain pop machine is on. The woman is still drinking; her chin and the front of her shirt are stained a pale apple red. Jon the cashier wanders away almost aimlessly.

Brent decides he doesn't need the catsup that bad. As he is about to take his first bite, he notices the woman in the booth ahead of him is facing him again.

"You want that fry," the woman says, looking at a lone fry that fell overboard when Jon the cashier plopped the basket down.

"Um, you go ahead," Brent says. The woman quickly whisks the fry away as if it were never there.

Thump-thump. The table to his right is otherwise quiet. They're looking at him. Their eyes and their mouths glint with moisture. He smiles at them awkwardly.

Brent is chewing his *curled fries*—trying to find anywhere to look other than into the faces of the other patrons—when all of a sudden the manager is sitting down in the booth in front of him. He is just *there*. Brent wonders whether he has greyed out again, but finds it unlikely. He looks down to find his wristwatch reads 10:20pm. When he looks up into the face of the manager, he notices for the first time that the man's eyes are different colors. One blue and one a light yellow-brown. It reminds him of his dog back in his youth. In a different life. How had he missed it?

You should not look into his eyes for too long. This man is wrong. This place is wrong, generally. But this man is very wrong. You have to get out of here. If the chicken isn't ready, well, fuck the chicken. You be the one to cross that road.

The manager is one of those men who seems to have been middle-aged for most of his life. And yet at the same time, he looks like his own ghost. He seems almost translucent beneath his pale, waxy skin. Brent is nearly convinced he's a creation of Tussaud. That blond hair with its razor part must be a wig. It is too, too perfect. He is only missing the polished boots and Death Star uniform to fit in with the rest of a Schutzstaffel exhibit.

"Good news friend," the manager says with his sing-songy good cheer. "The chicken is indeed here. Jon is hard at work getting some cooked up for you. What would you want, light meat or dark meat?"

"Um," Brent says, forcing his eyes away from the manager's, "a breast and a couple of legs, please."

"My man," laughs the manager. And then, "is that what will bring you happiness at last?" Brent looks at him uncomprehendingly. It is just chicken after all.

"I thought this place would bring me happiness, you know?" the manager says, sweeping his hand in a way that seems to indicate not the chicken place, but somewhere broader.

Brent is distracted by a glint off of the gold charm on the manager's tie clip. It is a hornpout—a sport fish Brent long ago caught with his dad on those summer days his old man could pull himself away from his bottle. The dog with the two-toned eyes by their side.

The manager looks down and notices what caught Brent's attention. "You eye my catfish, yes? My charm shows only the fish half of the Sabawaelnu. The water spirit, yes? Control the weather. Control many things. But those are not my gods and this is not my land.

"I thought this place would bring me happiness," the manager says again. "But I have been here a very long time. My people left me here a very long time ago. I have watched empires come and go. And by today—well as you can see—I am stuck here in this manager's role. Rotting but still in my flesh. The people of the First Nations would say I am denied the Ancestor's Lodge. My people would say I am denied Valhalla. But I do not know how to move on. *'Life would be so wonderful, if we only knew what to do with it.'* I believe Greta Garbo said that once." The manager smiles wistfully. "But for me—alas—there is nothing to convey me to the next world."

Brent sits. Stunned. Stupefied.

"How do you get here, friend?"

"I'm on a... an adventure, of sorts."

The manager gives him a knowing look, squinting his eyes.

"I wasn't planning this trip. I sort of blew up my life. Right after it was blown up for me."

"Are you happy to be gone?"

Brent runs his hands over his pants legs, caked in mud from his fall in the parking lot. "You know... I don't know? It takes me five years at least, I think, to know for sure if I've been happy or not."

"I know all of the automobiles in the parking lot, and you don't seem to have one with you. I find it awfully difficult to believe that you've walked all of this way."

Fuck. Your car is still stuck in the muck, isn't it?

Brent laughs at his luck. "Oh, my car." He swallows and looks down at his hands, somehow embarrassed on top of his fear. "It is just down the road. I got it into my head that you'd be closed, and I drove by before I decided to take a chance. I drove by twice actually."

Brent has no idea why he just admitted that to the stranger.

He's getting into your head, Brent. Be careful.

"My Saab went off road—it has been doing that a lot recently, and I guess it couldn't handle it this time—and it's stuck."

The manager's eyes widen a little. "Saab," he says, drawing the word out into syllables not denoted by any diaeresis. "Saab... Who makes your automobile?"

"Saab? Well it is General Motors now, but I have one from back in 1990. It's of legal drinking age, sure, but it's real Scandinavian steel, made by the original aviation team in Sweden. The originals, they last forever. They just aren't the same anymore."

The manager seems to moan with pleasure at this description.

"Are you a car guy?" asks Brent.

"Umm," the manager seems to think carefully before answering this question. Smiles. "I am a *car guy* for the right conveyance. You say it is stuck out in the hinterlands?" He sweeps his hand towards the window facing the parking lot.

"Sure. It is going to be a bitch to push out with all of this rain coming down."

"Oh, the rain is over. I will get some of my better regular customers to help you push it out. Now. While your chicken cooks." The gentle background sound of rain that had been ever-present stops as soon as the manager says these words.

"Oh, that's awfully kind, but I am really hungry, and these fries aren't getting any hotter."

"Yes, but do it now. Your hunger can wait. You do not want that precious car towed while you're sitting here eating your potato." With that the manager is up and clapping his hands in the direction of the table with Old Jim and the man from the line. "Jim, Daniel, a little help please."

Brent is about to argue that no tow truck is likely to be out on this road at this late hour—*how late is it really?*—when the manager's iron hand grabs Brent by the collar and *helps* him out of the booth. Without further comment, the manager ushers the three men towards the door. Old Jim doesn't stop smiling.

Very soon Brent is driving the Saab into the driveway of Geezil's Fry & Chicken. The two old men had no difficulty pushing the car out of the mud and the weeds. The men are shockingly strong. They left him to drive back on his own. It gives Brent a chance to take a long-awaited-for pull from the bottle of whiskey he stashed under the passenger seat.

Why are you going back? You saw the man's eyes. He doesn't mean you well.

As he drives he fumbles around in his crumpled jacket for his pill bottle. He digs out a pair of red Seconal tabs just as he pulls up to the chicken place. The manager is standing behind the glass door. Waiting. Vibrating like a child does for his daddy to come home after a long day at the office. Brent pops the pills into his mouth, and leans forward to hide the fact that he's washing them down with the whiskey bottle.

You don't owe this man anything. Get your chicken if you must and get out as quickly as you can. Things are about to go really wrong. Can't you feel it?

The manager opens the door and steps out into the high white headlights of the Saab. He gives a shriek that, even through the windshield, comes across like a bat's ultrasonic scream in Brent's ears. The manager lifts his hands to his face and dives back into the restaurant. Brent stops the car but leaves the headlights pointing at the door. He looks at the clock on the dash. It says it is 4:25. Is that the sun starting to rise? Why does his wristwatch read 09:00pm?

As he gets out of the car and slams the door, he turns to find the manager standing behind

the car. His hands stretching out over the trunk. His face in something of an ecstasy. “It is beautiful,” the manager says in a voice that sounds like he’s reciting a holy prayer. Then he whispers something else that Brent cannot make out. All of a sudden he sounds like a dark version of the Swedish Chef. In the next moment he is looking at Brent, though Brent is sure he never moved his head.

Those Red Devils you just took sure are acting fast. That was a very bad idea, Brent my man.

“Let’s get you that chicken that you would want so badly.”

Instead of going in the headlight-illuminated front door, the manager walks purposefully around the back; Brent follows. There is the cough and sputter of a diesel generator churning out its last volts into what appears to be a large walk-in freezer out back. The restaurant’s back door is open, covered only by a ripped and fraying fly screen net.

The back is in tatters. Caution tape hangs over the employee restroom. The doors to the employee lockers hang loose on their hinges. Two of them are over-stuffed with disintegrating clothes. The walk-in fridge inside the kitchen stands door open and dead. Bad smells linger therein. Under the three compartment sink in the corner there appears to be a rat’s nest of old towels and blankets with the permanent, sweaty imprint of a human form. The breeding station looks like a baker’s AP bomb gone off. An adjacent bank of fryers sits empty of oil, save for one that pops and smokes with what Brent assumes to be his long-awaited meal.

Jon the cashier is balling up a bloody apron. He tosses it into a garbage bin. Just before the fabric shrouds the rest of the mess, Brent notices something like a white pelt laying at the top of the rotting mess in the bin.

You don’t want to eat here, Brent. Get yourself out of here, Brent.

The manager ushers Brent around the counter, one hand around his muddy waist. He grabs a puke green colored tray with his other. The steaming chicken—*Brent’s steaming chicken*—sits in a pristine glossy box bearing an updated logo for Geezil’s Fry & Chicken.

They walk past the front door illuminated by the headlights of Brent’s still-running car. The view through the film-darkened glass is a photo in negative of a sunrise illuminating an arcadian forestland.

“MMMmmmm...” Brent drones to his food.

“Yes. We are glad you are here, too. Isn’t that a pretty box? We have a lot of updating to do. But, we haven’t been able to put in the work without new customers. Like you.” The manager eases Brent down into the booth in the corner. The restaurant is silent. All eyes are on Brent. “But everything is going to change now. Yes. It is.” He slides the tray in front of Brent.

Don’t eat that Chicken. You cannot trust his food. His own customers don’t trust it. Not really.

There is an emaciated breast and two willowy legs tucked into the box with a dry biscuit. Brent can’t keep his hands from moving to the box. The chicken is hot on his fingers. It steams against his face. The smell is rich, and yet somewhat earthy. He takes a bite.

The juices run over his chin. This is chicken. Rich, moist, earthy, gamey, dirty, rancid, delicious, chicken.

That dirty-snow pelt. It had a kinked and ratty tail. Jon the cashier caught you a possum, Brent. Stop eating.

Brent could feel all the eyes in the restaurant greedily watching him eat.

Brent ate. And ate. Brent felt warm inside.

Brent's eyes cross as he looks down at the empty box of chicken. His watch reads 7:05pm. Worry knots his grey matter and his stomach lurches. It feels as if the chicken is eating him from the inside.

You shouldn't have eaten that.

Brent runs for the bathroom. Clear across the restaurant. He passes the couple in the booth next to him—both asleep, or something akin to it; he passes the table with the ever-smiling Old Jim—the other man is nowhere to be seen; he bumps into a table before skittering past Jon the cashier. Jon looks up from mopping the hall in front of the bathrooms with black water and a blank look in his eyes—the overlooked black corkscrews of hair on his chin seems to point the way. He pushes past the man. Careful now on the wet and yet somehow still sticky floor. Into the bathroom.

There is just one light shining in the grand darkness inside the men's room. In the corner by the sink stands Daniel, the old man from the line, and the young woman who'd been chugging the Red Champagne. She looks so much the same as Mary Jane. "Get your hands off my daughter!" Brent screams.

That couldn't be your daughter. She's nowhere near this cursed place.

Brent shakes his head, trying to clear it. Okay. It isn't Mary Jane, but she does look shockingly like her now. The old lecherous man is grinning at her like a toothy hyena. He seems not to have heard Brent's shouting.

"Come my dear," he says, tipping down the changing table on the far wall. "Sit down here for me. We would have a lot of fun together." His eyes do their private dancing all over her body.

"Don't touch my daughter!" Brent yells.

Get ahold of yourself! He's doing this to you—the manager—he's got to be. He's distracting you from something.

It is all he can do to point his mouth to the trash can before he heaves out whatever it was that this restaurant served him.

Get out of here before you're trapped!

He stumbles out the bathroom door. The first thing he notices is the dark that has fallen upon the restaurant. It isn't the near-Stygian black of the bathroom, but many of the lights in the restaurant are off, as if they are closing up shop at last. But the real darkness, Brent realizes, comes from the lack of the car's headlights. His Saab's ridiculous headlights. He lurches towards the door. Hands fumbling at his pockets. He has no key there. The restaurant is empty now, save for Old Jim at the table in the center of the restaurant. He smiles stupidly at nobody.

Brent bursts outside, the bell tearing from its failed moorings and clattering to the floor. He shields his face against the early morning sun. It can't be. The parking lot is empty. All except for an old Dodge Monaco parked on its rotted-out tires. The manager stole his car and sailed right out of here.

The sun practically screams at Brent. The sky is so clear you can almost see the flames licking from the sun's face all that distance away. The light feels good on Brent's skin.

Don't just accept what life or anybody else gives you. Take what you want for yourself. That's the Viking way.

He goes inside. Into the dust and quiet. He steps on a letter stuck to the ancient film on the floor. It is from the restaurant's corporate offices in Montreal, and it bares the updated logo. It is addressed to Björn Eriksson, Manager of Geezil's Fry & Chicken. Brent places his thumb over the name of the man who stole his car. His conveyance of old Scandinavian steel. *Manager of*

Geezil's Fry & Chicken. He smiles, pocketing the letter.

Old Jim sits alone inside. Moldering at the same central table. Staring straight ahead. Smile gone.

Brent begins to peel the dark film off of the windows to lighten the place up. He thinks he should call and order some proper chicken to be delivered. But he'll have to get the power reconnected first.

The End.

The Lifted Veil

By Matthew Barron

This tale took place about 250 years ago in the tiny central European village Ombra. The village sat at the foot of a big hill, and on top of that hill sat a ruined castle. Looking at the crumbling towers, you might think it abandoned, but at night, a light appeared in a single window.

Count Renaud kept to himself, but on rare occasions, he would appear in the village at twilight to buy supplies. Merchants didn't object to his money, but villagers crossed the street to avoid passing next to him. Being such a recluse, it was natural for the villagers to spread rumors about him. Every time a sheep died or a woman miscarried, they blamed it on Count Renaud.

Mae was a lovely villager of fifteen years with curly black hair and rosy cheeks. Her mother had died in childbirth. Her father adored Mae as though she were the most precious thing in the universe. With her older sister already married off, Mae took care of their little cottage. She did the laundry, cooked the meals, all the duties that a wife would usually do.

One evening, her chores all done, Mae strolled over cobblestone streets to the market in the center of town. She stopped to sniff blood red roses at a merchant's cubicle. She had a few extra coins and thought they might make the house smell nice. She didn't notice when a horse up the street got spooked and took off at a full gallop, dragging an empty cart behind him. Villagers scattered as the cart swung to the side and crashed through a vendor's booth. The world seemed to stop as the cart careened toward Mae. The wheels squeaked and the vendor reached out to her helplessly. If the cart didn't kill her, it would tear her clothes and break her bones when it hit.

A strong hand caught the rein and a man in a velvet coat took the impact of the cart, stopping it inches from Mae's face. You can imagine Mae's surprise when she looked up into Renaud's pale blue eyes. His wavy blond locks bounced when he turned his head, seeming to fall around his face in slow motion. White lace rose from his velvet coat and hugged his neck.

He glared as he handed the reins over to the owner of the horse. "You should be more careful!" Then he turned to Mae. "Are you hurt?"

Mae's heart raced as she tried to catch her breath. "You saved me, sir!"

"It would be a shame to see something so beautiful trampled."

She nodded. "The flowers are lovely."

"I was talking about you."

Mae's cheeks blushed as red as the roses. No one had ever talked to her like that before.

"Allow me to see you safely home."

As they walked, Mae talked to Renaud about her family and the other kids in the village. Renaud told Mae how life had changed in the village over the years, how his family had all left and how lonely life was in his castle. Other teenagers turned their heads and whispered as they passed. The attention made Mae feel special. At fifteen she was considered almost an old maid, but none of the village boys were as fascinating as Count Renaud.

They continued talking in front of her simple cottage until Mae's father finally called to her.

Renaud took Mae's hand and kissed it, sending a tingle through her young body.

"I wish there was some way I could thank you for saving me," she said.

"There is," he said. "Allow me to walk you home again tomorrow night."

When Mae left the house to get water the next morning, she found a single red rose tucked into the doorframe.

Night after night, Renaud regaled her with amazing stories, describing life in the village as it used to be.

Her Papa and older sister warned Mae to stay away. “Nobles have no use for commoners,” Papa said. “You are just a plaything to him.”

Mae shook her head. “Renaud cares for me. If you could see the way he looks at me with those amazing blue eyes, you’d understand!”

Papa folded his arms. “He looks at you like I look at my lunch! Stay away!”

“What about the rumours?” her sister whispered. “That he has lived in the castle forever. That he is the reason our animals and children get sick and die.”

Papa implored, “I have a sister in the city where Renaud won’t find you. She can look after you.”

“Why can’t you be on my side?” Mae said. “Don’t you think I’m good enough for a man like Renaud?”

“We are on your side!” Papa said. “We are always Team Mae.”

Mae clenched her fists at her waist. “Being Team Mae means being Team Renaud too!” She slammed the door and sulked in the garden. They couldn’t possibly understand how she felt. Papa had been alone ever since mother died, and Mae’s sister, only seventeen, bickered with her husband like an old woman. That wasn’t love.

Renaud walked her home again that evening. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“My family doesn’t approve,” she said. “They say that you’re...” She hesitated.

“Different?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Why don’t they say this to my face?”

“They’re afraid you will bite off their heads.”

A smile crept across Renaud’s face and he began to chuckle. “I am known for my temper. I would never hurt you Mae, never raise my voice to you.” He grabbed her hands in his. “But they are right. I am different. You’ve noticed how I only meet you at night, how I never share a meal with you.”

Mae’s heart thundered in her chest. “I don’t care. I love you, Renaud.”

His face lit up. “I love you too, Mae.” They shared their first gentle kiss.

They continued their nightly walks until the morning Mae did not return home. In those days, when a woman moved in with a man, they were considered married, and Mae became Lady of the castle. They softened the stone walls in two upper level rooms with curtains and couches. Lanterns and a blazing fireplace bathed the rooms with warm light, and her bed was covered with quilts.

They made love for the first time early the next morning. The cock didn’t crow until the first rays of sun peeked over the horizon, and Mae was spent. Her fingers lightly danced across Renaud’s flawless cheek. He smiled and pulled away.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I must return to my crypt by day. You have the run of the castle while I am asleep, but be careful. The building is old and can be treacherous.”

She grabbed his arms. “Can’t I come with you?”

He shook his head. “That is not possible. You must promise never to come to me while I am sleeping.”

“But—”

Renaud raised his voice to Mae for the first and only time “Promise!”

Mae nodded, and Renaud kissed her on the forehead. “The day will pass quickly. I will see you tonight.”

Renaud had not been exaggerating about the state of the castle. The rough walls were bare and furniture rotted. Only Mae’s rooms were warm and furnished. After the long night, Mae slept the day away in her big, comfy bed.

Renaud pushed in a wheeled table with roasted quail and potatoes. It smelled and tasted wonderful. While Mae ate, Renaud went out for supplies. When he returned, they made love again, and again, he pulled away to sleep alone.

Night after night, the pattern repeated. Renaud brought Mae food, kissed her gently, and made love to her in the morning before retiring to sleep alone.

Mae spent her days sleeping and exploring. She mapped the castle. Down in the depths of the fortress, even at noon, no sunlight reached her. She carried a lantern down the narrow, twisting stairs. Decades of dust covered the floor, but there was a clear spot in front of an arched door where it would swivel if opened. She tugged at the door, but found it locked. She knew the sun would be setting soon and returned to her bed.

The smell of bacon and eggs woke her, and she discovered Renaud smiling down at her.

“You were sleeping so soundly,” Renaud said. “I let you sleep in.”

They exchanged the gentle evening kiss as they always did. She was hungry, but not for bacon. She pulled him over her.

“Your breakfast is getting cold,” he said.

“But I’m all warm.” For a moment Renaud seemed overcome with passion. He pulled her close, almost devouring her lips, and she didn’t care if he did. She wanted to be consumed in body as she was in spirit.

But he pulled away, as he always did when night began.

“I must go into the village to gather supplies.”

“Not yet.”

“I must.” Renaud leapt to the window and turned to her, saying “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” before leaping into the night.

Mae ran to the window and gazed out at the stars. Far below in one of the flickering windows, her family was sitting down to dinner.

Mae ate her bacon and picked at the cold eggs before falling asleep with her plate only half empty.

Cold hands slithered under the sheets and pulled her close. She embraced her lord without completely waking. Renaud had returned. Normally they would make love, but she was so tired. She merely turned and latched onto him. She didn’t awaken until he pulled away again.

“You just got here,” she said.

“I’ve been lying with you for hours.”

“Make love to me,” she begged

“It’s too late now. Tomorrow.”

“But I want you now!”

He gave her a gentle kiss. When Mae opened her eyes, she was alone.

She lay pouting for a time, but she had a plan. The next night began the same as always. Renaud prepared her meal and went out to run errands.

Mae followed the twisting path down into the depths of the castle. She found the old door

and discovered, as she had hoped, that it was unlocked. She nearly gagged on the stale air within the musty room, but amid the dust was the lidless coffin she hoped to find.

Renaud returned and made love to her like he always did, but there was something even more special about it tonight. When he pulled away, she did not resist. She turned an hourglass over and waited... and waited.

The sand was not even halfway through when she descended the stairs once again.

The old door creaked open. The wax she had placed in the lock had done the trick. How surprised Renaud would be when he found her in the coffin with him the next morning. He would see that there was no harm in it, and from then on, they would be together night and day.

She brought her lantern over the coffin and saw the familiar velvet jacket, but the hands were not the smooth hands she was accustomed to. The fingers were long, and the nails like dirty razors. A bloated stomach bulged though the buttons of the faded velvet, while the rest of the body within was nearly a skeleton. A few wisps of blond hair graced a dry brown scalp. Above the moth-eaten collar, thick lips curled into a circle like a suction cup lined with concentric rows of tiny, sharp, white teeth.

This wasn't Renaud! It couldn't be!

Mae ran from the room. The echoing clang of the door made her heart jump for fear the ghoul would awaken and chase her up the steps to the warm refuge above.

She threw another log on the fire and huddled under the quilts.

It couldn't have been Renaud. She must have gotten the wrong room. When evening came, there would be some reasonable explanation, and they would both laugh.

It was no surprise when the cart rattled and Renaud's graceful steps crept into the room. She wanted to be reassured by his handsome face, but she couldn't bring herself to lift the blanket. Rough hands slid under the sheets and caressed her. It was the same familiar touch, but she had never realized how cold and dry his hands had felt before. The velvet arms of his jacket wrapped around her, and he exhaled a cold breath smelling of moldy meat. Mae clenched her eyes shut and pretended to sleep.

At last the arms retreated, but Mae remained frozen in the bed for some time before she finally turned around. A sumptuous feast sat before her, but she was not hungry.

When Renaud appeared in the window, skin stretched over his gut like a balloon ready to burst. Long fingers reached for Mae. His glistening red lips pulsated with a wet, slurping sound as he moved in for a kiss.

"Why do you pull away?" Renaud asked.

Mae's mouth quivered. She could not answer.

His dry, skeletal face cracked with sadness. "You went to the crypt, didn't you? Why? I told you not to."

She finally managed to stutter out, "What happened to you?"

He looked away from her horrified gaze. "This is the real me, Mae. What you saw before was a glamour, an illusion."

Tears dripped from Mae's eyes. "Bring it back!"

Renaud shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mae. You can't unsee what you have seen. I really do love you, Mae. I wish it didn't have to end like this."

Mae sniffled and stared into the undead face. "I love you too, Renaud. I don't want it to end."

"Can you really love this face?" Renaud moved closer. Mae leaned toward the pulsating lips and rows of sharp teeth. These were the same lips that had been kissing her all these months.

Those wisps of blond hair had formed the same golden mane she had caressed when they made love. As their faces neared, she closed her eyes, wanting to let the tiny teeth caress her lips as they always had before, but at the last moment she turned away.

Renaud raised his hands into the air and howled like a dying animal. A burst of cold air blew out all the torches and candles in the bright cheery room, plunging them into darkness.

That morning, Mae appeared on her father's stoop with a suitcase. No one asked her what had happened, and she never talked about it. Any gossip about the castle's lord hushed when Mae appeared.

She sometimes gazed longingly at the castle on the hill, but the window remained dark.

Mae was still young and beautiful, but sadness now tainted her big eyes. The boys never came around, but she didn't mind. No one could ever match the illusion of love she had felt with Renaud. She dreamed about kissing Renaud as she first saw him, but when she pulled away, she faced rows of teeth and throbbing wet lips on a dry, lifeless face. She wished she would have had the strength to kiss that dead face and embrace those skeletal arms, wished he had never discovered she could see the real him.

When Papa died, Mae moved in with her sister. She doted over her nieces and nephews, and they loved her very much. Her nieces and nephews had kids of their own, and they doted over Mae. She was a graceful old woman, but no one lives forever... well almost no one.

The family cried at the funeral, but they understood the nature of life and death. A handsome man in a velvet coat watched the funeral from a distance. When the crowd dispersed, Renaud dropped a single red rose onto the grave.

"Did you know Great-aunt Mae?"

Renaud gasped when he saw the rosy cheeked girl and her curly, dark hair. "You look just like her!"

The girl chuckled. "That's silly. She was an old lady."

"We were all young once. Your aunt was a remarkable woman. What is your name, young lady?"

"Amelia."

"I am Renaud, lord of the castle."

Amelia gazed at the lifeless ruin on the hill. "No one lives in the castle."

Renaud nodded "No one has truly lived there for many years."

"You're funny," she said.

Renaud smiled for the first time in decades. "Allow me to walk you home."

Transplantation

By Deborah L. Davitt

On the horizon,
a dark smudge of a storm
louring over the thin pillar
of a distant lighthouse

while a ship with paperwhite sails,
seeming frail and delicate,
dares the fury of the dark sea,
the coffin shape of the clouds.

Aboard she mourns alone in the hold,
head bowed and hair flowing,
skeletal feet rooted
in her native earth

as if she were a delicate orchid
readied for transplant
into foreign soil
rather than the revenant that she is.

She knows she brings no life with her
just the cold grays of death
and dissolution,
yet she's immured here in this hold

a captive wrapped in silver chains
clattering with crosses
safe from sunlight, safe from men's hands
(and the men safe from hers)

but still a captive, nonetheless.

She knows they plan to release her,
hungry and hankering
to turn her into a siege weapon of night
against some foreign shore.

She knows her hunger will defeat her
cause her to turn on the first creatures
that she sees, to slaughter them.

And if such as she could pray,
she'd pray that it would be her captors
that she turned against in her frenzy
rather than any innocents

but she knows that won't be;
they'll be careful, canny,
not to mention miles away
before she'll be able to break free

of whatever trap they'll leave her in.
No, she knows that she's being primed
for murder, for slaughter,
and blood tears trickle down her cheeks

knowing what must surely come.

Daddy Christmas

By Paul Wilson

Silent Night

I'm going to tell you a scary story. It's not a scary *Christmas* story, though it takes place in the snow and involves a sort of Santa Claus. Did you know that was once a tradition, scary stories on Christmas? That was back when you took an actual sleigh ride to parties where people gathered around the tree, or the fireplace, and frightened each other with tales of unquiet spirits—some horrible, some revenge-bound, some evil.

This story takes place in Pecan Grove West.

The Grove is a community composed of squat brick duplexes littering the hillside and attached sunken valley. Light grey sidewalks weave between buildings. Light grey parking lots form lakes glittering with frost. Light grey stairs flow between all.

The city council calls the Grove a *Societal Renewal Project*. The surrounding populace call it *The Projects*. Those in the Grove call it *The Ghetto*. No matter who names it, no one outside its low brick walls ventures near. Pecan Grove West is shunned, a perpetual shadow, an un-space avoided. Degenerates go there, those looking for drugs, women, or weapons.

The Grove is a nest of darkness that pools between clotheslines, apartments, and scraggly trees. Some fool thought the trees would be good for beautification but nothing beautiful lasts in the Grove. The trees are only good for attracting yellow jackets. Tall and muscled black men grow in their shadows. Mexicans are scattered, overweight lugs full of jailhouse tats. A Korean family lives at the end of the last row, backed up against a gray dirt yard and leaning fence. There are white people too. Trashy single mothers add spice. A rare old widower sits on his porch and hopes everyday his son will visit.

Rumors and stories are rampant. Talk is cheap so the residents buy in bulk. What else is there to do while waiting on the EBT card to recharge or the next SSI check? Stories grind the time, and no tale is more passed than that of Daddy Christmas.

Some say he's a ghost. Others call him *that crazy white man*. Some call him angel, others demon, but all believe. The cold weather calls him. If the South produces a rare snowstorm, that's a guaranteed visit, like rubbing a genie's lamp. But any cold excites the expectation. When the nights grow frosty, cardboard signs are placed in windows and porch lights are changed to blue bulbs. He arrives in a fancy car that gleams in the silver-gray sodium arch lights. He drives carefully, blacked-out windows raised, the soft sounds of white-people music coming from his cabin. He cruises and slows at corners where people gather. As he creeps, Daddy Christmas lowers his window just enough to hold out his hand. Once extended, he drops money to the pavement. Sometimes it's handfuls of paper bills, sometimes the hard, bouncing clink of gold coins. But there is never a rush for what drops. No one tries to gather everything. All money is shared, any group dividing as evenly as their education allows. The sharing is civil, everyone happy to be blessed. In a place where a man was once stabbed over a wax-wrapped pickle, the sight of dozens of hundred-dollar bills keeps these men orderly. Respect? Awe? Fear? Yes, yes,

and yes.

No matter what people think Daddy Christmas is, all in the Grove *believe*. People remember each visit. Terrell Simons paid off his car and proudly tells anyone about it. Others have finished Christmas shopping or settled medical bills. Children receive clothes, shoes, even toys with the money Daddy Christmas leaves. Drink and drugs are obtained of course, as well as new televisions and rims, but most use the money with respect.

Occasionally a new Grove resident tries to alter the tradition; usually young, full of themselves, they try to prove something to people who know better.

A few years ago, a thug decided to rob Daddy Christmas. He showed his gun to a corner crowd, but never got the chance to use it. At the first cold wind, a group of men set upon the would-be robber and beat him bad enough to be taken away by an ambulance. The last thing he heard was a guttural curse: “Be damned if you gonna kill our golden goose.” His hospital stay was paid for with what Daddy Christmas dropped that night. The lesson was not lost on him.

But there is another side to Daddy Christmas. Gratitude and fear of losing favor is only part of the resident’s motivations. There is fear of a different kind. Angel, demon, crazy man—no being performs free miracles. Daddy Christmas gives but also takes. What he takes are women. And Pecan Grove West accepts the trade.

Young women receive a different education about Daddy Christmas. Their lessons are taught in hushed tones, always at night, always woman to woman. It is sacred, what the passing of sex education might have been in those long-ago sleigh ride days.

While the men are taught to respect, protect, and be orderly concerning Daddy Christmas, young women are told to watch for him, wave and smile with straight backs and presented bosoms. They are taught to dress nice for him and do what the men cannot: approach his car.

“You’ll see his window open, like he’s gonna drop money, but his hand will be empty. He’ll beckon you. You’ll know you’re chosen because you’ll go numb all over, like an electric shock. And if it does happen, then girl, you *go*. Don’t dilly-dally or open your mouth ‘til he speaks. You go and wait for what he says. Stand up straight at his window and smile. Then he might invite you into his car.”

Specifics break down here. Some mothers claim that a young woman should get in his car because Daddy Christmas always rewards his chosen girls. Other mothers tell their daughters *never* to get in his car, only talk at his window. It’s said he keeps the girls he likes, but those he doesn’t like—those he finds lacking—he eats. He eats them as surely as Santa eats cookies left out on Christmas Eve. For women, the message is clear: approaching Daddy Christmas’s car is serious business.

“Does he ever bring back the ones he takes?” Young girls inevitably ask.

“Sometimes,” comes the answer. Many claim to know a girl who returned. Some swear it was just last year, or that it happened when they were little, their best friend or the sister of someone’s boyfriend’s cousin. They say those girls come back hollow, bow-legged, *different*. Still others say they are better for having been with a man of sophistication. The rumor mill grinds steadily. People stare into the night and make-up pleasant lies and little girls go to bed wondering, questioning, swearing they will go if summoned because they’re mad at their parents, or because they crave adventure . . . and perhaps that’s why Daddy Christmas never calls them. Those girls lack from the start and that could be a blessing unrecognized.

No one in the Grove can agree when a girl last entered his car. Some say it just happened.

Others say that girl was a runaway. No, you're thinking of that Bennett whore who needed to hide a levitating belly and left with her boyfriend. It was really that no-account who wanted to get away from her parents. No! No! It happened last November, not January! Don't you remember that Faye girl? Naw, she didn't just *move away* . . .

The arguments and recollections wind on and on. No one knows for sure. The Grove is big enough to hide. They only know Daddy Christmas came and the next day a girl was missing. But in a community that keeps itself to itself, a girl can be missing for days before anyone notices. Then stories begin, everyone swears they were there, and truth is swept away like tracks in the snow. Gossip grows rumor grows legend.

Grove residents only agree that it will happen again. Soon Daddy Christmas will stop his car in the blue-black cold, his window will lower, and his hand will emerge to call. In the glow of cheap sodium-arc lighting, a girl will come forward, scared and hopeful, and change her life forever. Maybe she will be rewarded. Maybe she will be destroyed.

Descriptions of Daddy Christmas differ, but certain details remain constant. He is an old white man. He is short, round, sporting a wide smile. He has a beard, white as the snow that summons him. The interior of his car smells of cookies. Discrepancies creep in after that. Some say he can't get out of his car because he is paralyzed from the waist down. Some say it was a car accident, others say he is a war veteran. Others claim he is only a man on the top half—the half you can see from the driver window. Where his belly should be is a teeth-filled mouth that drools peppermint sludge. To this someone always asks how he drives if he has no legs. The answer comes that the car is specially made. By who? (Never *whom* in the Grove.) By the government! *That's bullshit!*

Some say he wears a small black hat. Some say a bowler, some say a driving cap. Some claim to have seen a red and green scarf, some say he always has coffee steaming in a cup holder, and you can smell its expensive funk on the air. Some say he wears glasses. Others swear he has pale blue eyes.

Some say he's a sex pervert cruising for young black strange. Others say he's a city official come to lord over his creation. Some believe he's a modern-day Santa, a kook who gets off helping the poor. But the most persistent rumor, the one people believe in their heart, is that Daddy Christmas is something from the dark folds of reality, some angel or demon come to judge, mark, give or take for its own peculiar reasons. Pecan Grove West is its hunting ground, where it takes women and leaves money tracks. In a society where cash means food or heat or survival, the populace is willing to trade. Those in the Grove know how to live with darkness. They know how to look the other way, to keep their mouths shut. If a girl goes missing now and again, whether he is carving them up or just filling them with old pervert jizz, there is an unspoken understanding that everyone accepts it. The sacrifice of one means survival for the rest. The Grove is a shunned and forgotten society. If someone wants to help them, they will pay the price. These people's focus is always about the next meal (or coin or drug) and such lofty ideals as selling their souls for a little gain is of no consequence to them. If it did occur, they would still accept Daddy Christmas's deal. Besides, no one really knows if he harms these girls. People move all the time. Girls run away all the time. The money is the certainty. The need is the reality.

Snow was forecast. Weathermen said it would be a good-sized storm covering most of the Jericho Falls township and that meant Pecan Grove West was dead center. There was excitement but there was also a hushed reverence in the Grove. The women waited inside by electric heaters and at kitchen tables, gossiping quietly. The men huddled under awnings and around trash can fires. All talked about old times, recounting well-worn tales. Cardboard signs appeared in windows. Lightbulbs were changed to blue. At 7:53 pm the snow began. In quiet whispers the men began to say it was time for the Christmas Man. The snow brought him without fail. Everyone waited. When he arrived, Daddy Christmas stopped for a girl on the edge of the Grove, Rebel O'Hara.

Holy Night

Rebel O' Hara sat in her living room, smelling the phantom aroma of the fried bologna sandwiches she had for dinner, and smoked a cigarette. It was a good night. There had been food. There wasn't always.

One of her mother's bar-hookups left half a pack of Salems last week and Rebel took them against the inevitability of the empty fridge. But even with food, she needed a cigarette now. She lit it from the gas ring on the stove like her mom often did.

Daddy Christmas had called her to his car.

She was on the porch when he came, enjoying the snow. The forecast dominated everyone's thoughts today. Teachers didn't even try. Rebel felt calm, waiting for something great coming soon. It was a pleasant change from fretting if Mom would come home, if there would be food, a fight, or a drunken mess to drag to bed. Concentrating on the snow was better than wondering if one of her mom's dates would try to touch her.

Rebel hated the men her mother brought home. She could hear their guttural groanings through the thin walls, her mother begging for more and telling the stud how good he worked it. And why was Mom so desperate? The answer was all around. They lived in the Projects because she couldn't keep a job or sobriety. At least she had stopped talking about the mystic *someday*. "We'll get a real home someday. We'll get our break someday." There was no more future, just the now. The realization made a crushing depression.

Rebel closed her eyes against the worry of her mother. She had a bigger issue now. Daddy Christmas called her to his car. That's where she needed to focus. Rebel took a deep drag and blew smoke towards the ceiling.

Is this my someday?

Hard to believe. Her thoughts wandered.

School was canceled for the rest of the week. People made plans to enjoy the rare winter blessing. There were no plans in her home. Did her mom know about the weather? Would the bars operate? The Catholic Center's food pantry was supposed to open tomorrow, but would the weather stop that? If that avenue was closed, there was no hope for decent eating in the next week, not until the EBT card recharged next Friday.

There was some food left: a pack of bologna, bread, and potato chips. Her mother was MIA, so someone somewhere was still buying.

After eating, Rebel sat on the porch. She only wanted to wait for the snow, but Dion saw her on his neighborhood rounds. He offered cash if she'd give him a blowjob, but Rebel politely declined, even when he pushed.

"You know Daddy Christmas is coming tonight."

Dion suddenly lost the will to argue. He nodded in companionable agreement.

“Yeah, the snow brings him fo’ sure.” Then he brightened. It made him cute. For a moment Rebel considered changing her mind. The money meant she wouldn’t have to stretch the bologna as far, but she remained quiet. The solitude was a rare treat. Besides, if she needed money she knew where to find Dion. His rounds were set.

“You gonna go if he calls you to his car?”

“Hell yeah!” Rebel faked bravado. Daddy Christmas wouldn’t want her. Her own father hadn’t stayed, why would this Daddy? Unless he just wanted some young stuff. That was one of the rumors.

If that’s all you’re worth, just take Dion’s twenty.

“Be good girl,” Dion said. “Got to get ready myself in case I see him.” Dion ambled up the street, stopping to call to someone. When he was gone, Rebel turned her attention back to the gray sky.

Daddy Christmas is gonna call me over . . . yeah right.

Then he did. Now she was smoking and trying to figure out what to do.

Rebel had been idly thinking about nothing when the snow started. The Grove grew quiet. The booming bass of competing music faded. Residents melted into the shadows, leaving only the whisper of falling flakes. The night darkened. The snow thickened.

The night whispers.

Rebel was overtaken by simple joy.

It’s not fair this peace is so rare!

She cried quietly. Time passed.

Then the quiet was taken by the low purr of an engine and the slow crunch of tires over the newly frozen ground. A black BMW swept around the curve. No one in the Grove had such a car. No one visiting would drive such a car. Smoke puffed from the back. The silver headlights were searching eyes. Rebel held her breath. The car approached and slowed. Time froze. She waited, not blinking. It stopped at the curb below her duplex. The stretch of snow between them glittered, a field of diamonds—or tears.

As she looked, his window lowered like water flowing.

He called me.

Back in the dark of her living room, Rebel smoked. She thought. This was the most important thinking of her life. Daddy Christmas called her. She blew smoke, having no idea how much she looked like her mother.

He picked me. He really picked me. Holy fuck.

She lit a new cigarette. A second was an indulgence, but it was needed. Before she sat on the couch, Rebel went to the bathroom and darkened her make-up. Was that her answer then? Was she going to Daddy Christmas when he returned?

He wants me. He saw worth in me.

The rumor was Daddy Christmas gave money if you got in his car, much more than what he dropped on his rounds.

I could get out of the Grove. If Daddy Christmas gave me a few hundred, I could get a bus ticket and go down towards Charleston, sleep on the beach. Get away from Mom and her men. Start over. Start my life!

Am I worth a couple hundred? Does he even give money for real? What did he say exactly? I was so fucking scared, so freaked!

Rebel closed her eyes and tried to remember.

His voice was deep. Beautiful. If a whisper could echo into musical notes, it would sound

like Daddy Christmas. When she stepped close to his car, Rebel smelled spice. Cinnamon? Gingerbread? Warm orange light glowed from the interior, a blazing fireplace. Rebel shivered in the memory.

“Hey little girl.”

She came quickly when he beckoned. She knew the rules. More, Rebel knew she was being watched. She felt eyes from the shadows, from people watching through blinds and behind curtains. She knew that skin-crawling feeling because men in Pecan Grove watched her constantly. She was the only white girl, a unicorn among horses. But they were watching for a different reason now, for greed, for jealousy, for hate.

“You look very nice.”

“Thank you.” Snowflakes collected in her hair. Her nose grew numb.

“You don’t have a coat?” He asked innocent and concerned. She tried to look inside the car. The window crack was a quarter inch. She saw only that flickering orange light and suggestions of features: pale blue eyes, the fluffy white of a moustache.

“No sir.”

“Hmmm . . .”

Rebel’s nipples hardened. She crossed her arms as if trying to stay warm, but she was attempting concealment. She wore only a thin hoodie in a snowfall, and her nipples were big and obvious. At times like this she hated them. They plumped when she was embarrassed, angry, or cold, so there was no hiding them now. She was sure Daddy Christmas could see them. The feel of her arms against them made her tingle.

“You should have a coat.”

She could only shrug.

“You know who I am?”

“Yes sir.”

“You have good manners. Excellent. I have an offer for you.”

Rebel swallowed. She expected sex. Why else would a man call her? The men her mom brought home tried. Was she surprised? Then he spoke and she blinked.

“What?”

She felt him frown.

“Watch your language little girl. Don’t speak stupid.”

“Sorry.”

“Speak up! Don’t mumble!” His words were a whip crack.

“Yes sir.”

“Good. You are trainable. That is worth more than immediate good habits.”

“Thank you.”

“I asked if you wanted to be my elf.”

Rebel didn’t know what to say so she simply stood and moved her arms for warmth. Her teeth chattered. She wanted to question but didn’t dare. Be his elf? Was it some kind of sex game? What did it mean? She shivered and waited for him to judge her.

“I can see you need time to process. Tiring but necessary. Get out of the cold. I’ll be back at eleven. I don’t beep my horn because that is a vulgar sound. You come out at that appointed time. Like all good job interviews, you should promptly arrive. Have my answer then. You know you will be rewarded, don’t you?”

Come be my elf.

“Yes sir.”

“Good. In the meantime, ask what you gain by saying no.”

Come be my elf.

Rebel crushed out her cigarette and went back to the bathroom mirror. *He wants me?* Rebel studied her bowl-cut bangs. She had to cut her own hair because there was no money for a salon. Her make-up was thick because she tried to hide her face. In the harsh glow of the fluorescents she looked like her mother and suddenly Rebel hated herself. The feeling was clean and clear and cold. Her nipples plumped before her eyes.

I don't want to be my mother. Was there a point she could have turned things around? Is this my chance to turn? Is this my way out? I don't want her future. Can Daddy Christmas save me? I know he gives money. I know what he'd want for it. Just like Dion. Would that be so bad? I'm not a virgin. I know what to do. Can I do it? He might pay enough to get out of here if I'm good enough. Sell my body to save my soul?

What do you gain by saying no?

The answer stared back at her from the mirror.

Yes. I can be his elf.

Rebel stood on the porch. She now wore an oversized sweatshirt and jogging pants, her warmest clothes. Daddy Christmas came around the curve. She waited, hands clasped in front. When he stopped, she immediately went to his window. It did not lower this time, but the passenger door opened instead. Rebel walked around and got in his car. She closed the door behind her. The inside was wide and comfortable. As she adjusted herself, Rebel saw the seats had electric warmers and the middle console was dominated by a ten-inch screen showing a film of a roaring fire.

A cozy fireplace. A baking hearth. That's why I smell cookies.

Then Daddy Christmas claimed her attention.

“Why did you say yes? You don't know what being my elf entails.”

Rebel looked at him. She squinted, trying to understand what she saw. An older man. White hair. A hat . . . black . . . glasses? Turtleneck? It was like looking at a reflection in a silver Christmas ball, distorted and reversed. Looking hurt her eyes. She closed them as she answered.

“I want to save myself,” Rebel said. It was warm in the car. It was already better than home. It was easier to think. She opened her eyes but still couldn't see him clearly. That was funny. She stared at the fire on the screen. That was better.

He frowned. “Just save yourself? Isn't that selfish?”

“No one ever helped me. I see a chance to save me.”

“How so?”

“You . . . I heard. You give money. If . . .”

“I drop treasures to the residents here, yes. Is that what you mean?” His voice teased. This wasn't going as expected. What did he want? Her nipples grew. She pushed her chest out. That's what he wanted. It had to be.

“You want me, right?”

He nodded.

Her voice dropped lower on each word: “Then you'll give me money?”

“For what?”

“For me. Sex.”

“I look for people to help. You only wish to help yourself. Do you understand the

difference?”

“I don’t want to be like my mom. I’d rather die first.”

Daddy Christmas smiled. “With your tits presented and your whore’s make-up painted thick, you are like her already. You’d rather die?” He stroked her hair. Rebel let him touch her. He wore leather gloves. She couldn’t see his hand.

“I wonder. I wonder if you can be healed.”

“Please . . .” She cried. The dam was breaking. “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

He nodded. “Okay then.” He tilted his head. “But your mother? You would leave her behind? You would abandon her?”

Daddy Christmas waited for the answer. The fire crackled. Rebel asked herself the question. She thought of giving a pleasing lie, but instead told the truth.

“Yes. I would leave her. Fuck her.”

“Oh.”

Rebel saw his disappointment. She tried to call it back, but he shook his head, dismissing her.

“That’s too bad. You should always help. Especially family. That’s my philosophy. I had hoped to make you family.” He sighed.

The interior of the car grew hot, hotter, and Rebel learned the inside of his car was no warm, pleasant fireplace.

“Wait! Ow! OWWAHHHH!!!!”

The inside of his BMW was an oven. She was his cookie.

Daddy Christmas pulled away. The red pulsing light from the flames erupting under the dash bothered him not at all. Smoke swirled inside the cabin, a white cloud that filled the space, but he could see just fine. Rebel screamed, pounded on the window, but the noise sounded to anyone who might hear like white-people music. Eventually those sounds died, and the BMW cruised through the silent night.

Now the smell in the car was less baking cookie, more roasting turkey.

In their homes, the residents of Pecan Grove West watched the snow fall and crafted details for the stories they would begin telling tomorrow.

That is our scary story. It wasn’t a scary *Christmas* story, though it took place in the snow and involved a sort of Santa Claus. Did you know that was once a tradition, scary stories on Christmas? The township of Jericho Falls knows it. Pecan Grove West knows it. Now you know it as well.

The End.

Night Falls First at the Cottage

By S.C.R. Hill

He came down again last night, from the forest on the hill. I didn't hear him. I never do. He just seems to get here, always late, but I never mind. He lets himself in, and I'm there to see him. We sit for hours and just whisper to each other. He soothes me when I cry. I never remember him leaving, but when the sun wakes me up, he's gone. The door is shut, the windows closed. The whole night seems like a waking dream. Sometimes, I falter, and I wake up to him already there, whispering in the shadows of my bedroom. The moon sends its tendrils in, and he can be a terrible sight draped in those dirty winding sheets. But I remember him then, and he looks better each night.

When I go to work in the market, the women at the stalls tell me to go home and get some rest. Poor thing, they call me. But I smile very full and they keep me there. I don't tell them about seeing him in the night, but if I did, they would know my smile really is happy, because I get to see my husband again. At church, I feel like the Father worries about me when he glances in my direction during a sermon. But then he sees my hands clasped tight and my face serene as I pray to see my husband again in the night, if He would be so kind, if He could bless me again when I've been so greedy.

When I tend to the garden in the nice light just before dusk, and before I sit down to eat, I keep looking back to the valley path. It's covered with forest debris, loose dust, leaves, and stones which crunch and shift at every stirring of the wind, but never with his steps. Lately, it has been stifled with the snow. I look along the whole path, or rather where it should be, and follow the trail with my eyes as it fades into the forest. At dusk those woods are a great black smudge, like the night sky descended to mingle with the earth. There are no stars in it, though.

When the shadows reach the garden I head inside. Night always falls first at the cottage. I kindle the fire with darkish hill wood and stir my broth, pray, and bundle myself in a rug in the chair. I fall asleep here a lot. The bed is often too far away these days. When the moon sends inquisitive rays through the small windows and wakes me up, I strain my ears and hold my breath to try and catch the faintest sound of crunching gravel coming down the valley path. Just when I think I've heard something, my door opens.

When he comes in the night, my heart beats faster than I think it has since we got married. Faster than when they told me what had happened in the woods with those men. Faster than when news came back from the gaol about my husband. It beats even faster than when the kindly constable told me that he couldn't be found after the land was disturbed. For a long time, I went up to the forest once a week and told no one what I did there. I always returned with the scent of the pine needles and loam upon me. He leaves some earth here every night that he visits. I've been collecting it, bit by bit, crumb by crumb, and put it in our empty stable. One night I hope to have enough so that he can stay here, in our home. And the earth, it smells like pine needles and loam.

Tonight the snowfall was heavy, and late into the year. I haven't been able to go to market for a few days. In the failing light, I sit dozing in my own wound sheets. In a warm haze my senses drift, and then the snow crunches slowly and deliberately, unlike the crackle of the low

fire. My chest thrums. I have never heard him come to me before. He has never even left a trail, not even when the snow ceases to fall for a day. I think it is a secret between us. My eyes dart open and heat rushes to my face. He tries the door, and I remember I left the chain on it out of old habit. It only opens a little ways, but he doesn't mind. The dying fire makes most of the doorway quite dark, but beyond that is the moon. In it, silhouetted by the frost-light, I can see him pass through effortlessly, arms first, pulling the rest of him in. He slides down onto the floor and rises on his hands, pulling himself along the wooden planking. I have always had to shut my eyes when I see this, but tonight, I think, is going to be different.

The End.

The White Death

By G.A. Miller

I call it the white death.

Sure, we have our blizzards (or nor'easters as the locals up here like to call them), but those are usually marked by the howling winds that go along with the snow. It's the winds that cause the drifting, and the breaking of tree limbs that take out power lines and so on. All that fun stuff they like to talk about on the evening news.

This isn't that.

No, what *I* call the white death is when there is no wind to speak of, just the heavy, steady fall of snow from the sky, covering and burying everything in its path. As the snow blankets everything, there's a deafening silence that fills the windless air. That complete silence outside is eerie, unlike any other kind of quiet I'm familiar with, and let's not forget the deep cold that settles into the bones, a chill that simply won't stop.

Much like how I imagine it would feel to be buried in the ground.

That's what's going on out there tonight. As I sit here enjoying my book, I look out the window now and then, but there's no change. The snowfall is constant, and it's heavy too. This one's going to take a while to clean up after. Curious how much we have by now, I set a scrap of paper in my book and close it before setting it on the end table and heave myself up to walk to the window.

Damn, it's cold out there. I'm wearing lined mocs and a bulky Irish knit sweater, the thermostat is set to 72, but as I get close to the glass, I can feel that pervasive cold trying to push its way in. The kind of cold that sinks into your core, leaving you shivering uncontrollably for hours cocooned beneath your blankets.

There's got to be nearly four feet out there now, based on how much of my fence is still visible. I'm about to turn away when I notice something up the road. Is that...? Yep, sure looks to be. Some poor bastard is walking down the road out there! Probably needs something and couldn't get his car free, so he's heading past my house toward the main road.

Wait a sec... he's closer now, and it looks like he's not even wearing a coat?

Just a white shirt and dark pants? Who in their right mind would go outside in this cold like that? Wouldn't take long at all to get confused, then lost and finally exhausted enough to need to just sit a bit and rest, and *that's* how you wind up like those steaks in the freezer, the ones marked down as manager's specials the day before the sell by date.

Damned fool, that's what he is.

OK, he's real close now, walking under that cone of light from the street light above... how in the hell is that even *possible*? Now that I can see better, he's just walking along on *top* of the fresh snow? His legs ought to be sunk above the knees in it, and he's not even leaving footprints.

"What the *hell*?" I mutter softly as I watch, and he stops walking. He turns his head and looks right at me through the window as if he somehow heard me speaking.

And then he grins.

That hellish grin is the look of a lunatic... or something far, far worse. I don't even realize I'm pissing my own pants as he turns and walks slowly toward my house, that horrific grin widening as he approaches.

I step back away from the window now, and walk to my chair. Before I sit, I open the drawer in the end table and pick up the gun that I keep in there.

I drop heavily into the cushion, hefting the weight of the Smith & Wesson .38 Police Special in my hand. I pop the cylinder and glance down, verifying the gleaming brass cartridges in each of the six chambers and snap the cylinder closed.

I know all the doors and windows in my home are closed and locked, but I have a feeling that's not going to matter much. If my gut is right, they won't even slow *this* intruder down.

My chair sits in a corner of the living room, facing the picture window that looks out onto the road and the doorway that leads into the hall, so I'll see him no matter which way he chooses to come in, and I'll be ready. I rest my thumb on the hammer, pulling it back until it stops, the gun now cocked and ready to fire with very little pressure on the trigger.

One of the last things my wife asked me to do before her heart attack was to oil the hinges on our front door because the squeaking used to drive her nuts. I never did get to it, and now that I have all the time in the world, I *choose* to leave it as it is. Every time those hinges squeak, I think of her and miss her terribly.

Well, those hinges did *not* make a sound, which means the door remained closed, and yet... there he is.

As he steps silently through the doorway to my room, his red eyes wide and drool falling onto his shirt from that nightmarish grin, I lift the gun and set the short barrel against my temple.

I know shooting *him* will have no effect at all; he's already dead.

Hell, I went to his funeral.

No, the gun's for *me*. The alternative would be worse.

Much worse.

Madam Mina and the Man from Amsterdam

By Scott Harper

Where there exists the most ardent and true love, it is often better to be united in death than separated in life.—Valerius Maximus

A brisk breeze swept through the cemetery trees, scattering yellow-red leaves and sending them spiraling to skip across the ground as the old Dutchman made his way through the forgotten graveyard. A rough medley of chirping crickets and hooting owls echoed in the night as small creatures scurried in the surrounding foliage. The headstones he passed were stained with age; vein-like vines crept across their uneven surfaces. He walked up the ivy-crusting steps to the mausoleum gate, a waxing gibbous moon lighting the dark. The temperature seemed to drop with each step he took, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

Bitter memories came unbidden to the Dutchman, flooding in and overwhelming his iron will despite his resolution not to dwell on the past. He thought of his close circle of friends and the victory they had achieved against overwhelming odds: his proud pupil Jack, who had the good sense to call upon his old professor for aid in his time of need; the gallant Arthur, a man able to fight on despite losing what was most dear to him; and friend Jonathan, the quiet brooder who dealt the final blow to their malevolent foe.

But not before the darkness claimed a bitter toll.

The old man recalled the angelic smile of young Lucy, his patient—how her eyes glimmered with hope in the morning light when he made her believe he could save her from a mysterious illness. He also remembered the agony that shook him when he failed her, how he wished his heart would stop beating as he lifted her severed head in his bloody hand.

Lucy had not been the only one he let down. The bold Texan, Quincey, had believed in him as well—Quincey, who battled bravely against staggering odds and died before the Dutchman's very eyes, bright warrior blood staining the mountain snow.

Quincey went to his eternal rest, believing they had succeeded in eliminating the evil that plagued them. The Dutchman now wondered if that victory were pyrrhic: Had all their sacrifices been for naught? Did Lucy and Quincey die in vain?

It was the fate of the final member of their circle, the woman who had most touched his heart, that drew him here tonight.

He dug into his coat pockets and withdrew a key ring with numerous skeleton keys on the bunch. He selected one and carefully inserted it into the lock, then twisted. The gate opened with a loud, grating noise of long disuse. Access to the crypt was his.

Using a small flashlight, the Dutchman illuminated the cobwebbed interior of the mausoleum. The tomb he sought rested in the center of the shadowed crypt. He cautiously approached it, the noise of his booted feet resounding off the stone walls. The Dutchman withdrew a crowbar and began displacing the heavy lid of the coffin.

He had begun to break a sweat when the sweet, haunting laughter of a woman descended upon his ears, causing him to look up from his work. An ethereal mist seeped in through a barred window opening in the rear wall, seeping seamlessly through a matting of spider-webs, billowing down and coalescing into the striking form of a beautiful woman he had not seen in many years.

Her hair was darker than it had once been, framing the symmetrical lines of her attractive

face. It flowed down her shoulders and across a pale silken nightgown that seemed wove out of the mist. She was thinner now, the bones of her face standing out more prominently than when she lived. Bright dots of crimson sprinkled her lips; her eyes sparkled sapphire in the darkness as she spoke.

“Abraham—how I’ve missed you,” she purred softly. “I’m afraid you’ll find that tomb quite empty.”

Abraham perspired even more, despite the cold, his heart pounding in the chest. His hands shook as an ominous chill ran down his spine, a sensation he had not experienced since the last time he encountered an Undead.

“Madam Mina,” he said, doing his best to sound unperturbed. He rested the flashlight in an upright position on the tomb lid to provide some ambient lighting.

“No flowery greeting? I’m surprised, Abraham—you’re never at a loss for words.”

He paused for a moment, carefully considering what he was about to say. “It heartbreak me to hear of your passing, Wilhelmina.”

“Well, my friend, your words do provide a modicum of comfort. Surely, you with your great brain realized that the conclusion of the Borgo Pass Incident all those years ago was not as final as we wished it to be?” the pale woman inquired.

“Not always was I sure, but I suspected,” Abraham replied curtly.

“Perhaps I was the only one who truly listened to your words that night in Jack’s study. You meticulously described every power and weakness of the Undead. ‘He come on moonlit rays as elemental dust.’ How poetic you were in those days, Abraham. And prophetic.”

She languidly strolled toward him from the back of the crypt, her feet not making a sound as she seemed to float closer. He noticed the plunging opening of her nightgown exposed the inviting sculpture of her breasts and toned stomach, trailing down into the seductive shadows of her womanhood. Abraham struggled not to stare at her exposed flesh as he felt sexual excitement surge in his loins, a feeling he thought he would never experience again.

“As I recall, that was how the Count’s brides entered the window of Jonathan’s room at the castle before fornicating with him, no?” she teased, temptingly tracing a long-nailed finger across her lips.

“Come no closer,” he ordered. He withdrew the stout wooden stake from his overcoat and brandished it before him. “It is your voice and your body, yet not it. I will not allow you to return to your hellhole.”

“We both know,” she continued, “that the Count did not die when Jonathan and Quincey stabbed him with their metal blades; that would have been too simple an ending. With the onset of night and the return of his full powers, he transformed into dust and fled to fight another day.”

“I suspected grave misfortune had come to pass,” Abraham admitted. “In his dust form, the Count flee to another coffin he stash somewhere in that God-forsaken land.”

Mina stopped her approach. “Then why did you, the great sage, not say anything at the time?”

“For twice reasons. Again, not always was I sure, being blind after the manner of man, and the fell events transpired with great quickness, no? Our good friends were so joyous in their imagined triumph, and I, too, craved comfort in the joyful certainty that their blows had struck true. My strength ebbed and failed me. We had endured such hell—I could not bring myself to cast darkness on their moment of bliss.”

“The attack weakened the Count,” Mina said as she stepped closer. “The raw mark of the holy wafer on my forehead faded as his power waned. But his blood still flowed in my veins.”

She seductively trailed her finger between her breasts and down to her taut stomach.

“Surely you sensed this! You could have said something! Is it not so?” Abraham countered, seizing her cold hand. He felt the incredible power latent in those tiny long fingers, reminding him of the tremendous strength these creatures possessed. He immediately let go, his hand suddenly numb where it had touched her. The woman’s dead, icy grip had leeched his warmth and strength in the brief moment their flesh made contact.

“As time passed and he grew in strength, I felt the power of his curse grow in me. And I embraced it, Abraham, more passionately than you can imagine! Jonathan was a good man but simple in his ways. The ordeal with the Count had taken a great toll on him, much greater than we understood at the time. The loss of his hair color was a sign of what was to come; I knew he would not be with us much longer. Jonathan was a man of his time—he saw me as little more than a useless housewife, a trophy of sorts, unworthy of any other position in life. And I had been exposed to something far greater than any mortal, someone who opened the gates of the world before me.” Her eyes glowed in the mausoleum dimness, becoming twin points of crimson light.

Abraham noted a strain in the air, like the electric calm before the storm, cold and thin and drained of life.

“Don’t force my hand, forget not that I am well-schooled in the butchery of your kind,” the Dutchman threatened as he wielded the stake before him with both hands.

“Come, Abraham,” she said gleefully. “You’ve wanted to impale me ever since you first set eyes upon me in London and not with a stick of wood. You think I didn’t note the way your stern face always lit up when we were together, how your eyes teared uncontrollably whenever my health worsened? I welcome your wood, Abraham. Let me feel your strong hands cupping my breasts, your hot breath steaming in my face. Thrust your stake into me, professor, with all the righteous power at your command!”

Abraham bellowed as he shoved the stake into her torso with great force. The sharpened edge found no purchase. Mina dispersed into a billowing mist, surrounding him, cold air and fog on warm human flesh, before reforming behind him with incredible speed. Her small hand seized the back of his neck in an iron grip, lifting him from the floor so that his feet dangled in empty air. She snatched the stake from his grip with her free hand and effortlessly crumbled it to splinters.

Mina leaned in close to his ear and spoke, her breath both sweet and foul. “Dear Abraham, surely you of all people recognize the futility of confronting a vampire at night, when I’m at the peak of my power? Or did you not pay attention to your own lecture?”

“Of course I know. The role of geriatric buffoon is not suited for me! Unhand me, devil!” Abraham demanded, his legs kicking futilely in the air. He wrapped his hands around her forearm and tried to dislodge it, but her flesh seemed made of marble.

“As you wish,” Mina replied, her voice low and hollow.

She released him. Abraham’s knees buckled with the impact of his booted feet striking the stone ground, but he quickly regained his balance and stood resolute.

“But I am no devil, as you know, Abraham Van Helsing,” the vampire asserted in apparent distress, as though what remained of her soul had been hurt by the callousness of his words.

“Bah!” Van Helsing scowled.

“Why would the great Van Helsing, world-renowned philosopher and metaphysician specializing in rare diseases, confront a vampire at night? I wonder,” Mina continued.

“Do not trifle with me! I am set to grim purpose,” Abraham seethed.

“And what is that purpose?”

“I needed to know what become of you. I saw the notice in the papers. I needed to make certain it was the true death that embraced you,” Van Helsing responded.

“You could have come during the day and safely ascertained the answer to that question, just as you, Jack, and Arthur did with Lucy when she died under the Count’s fangs. No, Abraham. Despite the stake, you came at night because you did not want to destroy me.”

“*Mein Gott*, how know you it? I know not what I think,” he admitted. “It is madness, all madness. I have been a madman ever since I set foot in Whitby at friend Jack’s request.” He recalled how she had once lectured him on the criminal nature of the Count’s brain. Mina accurately predicted the details of the King Vampire’s retreat from London and how it mimicked his withdrawal from Turkish lands as a mortal when he yet breathed and blood flowed in his veins. In death, she had transcended Abraham in so many ways—he was now the student, and she the master. She knew his own heart better than he did.

“I know what you intended, Abraham,” she shared. “You were always my defender, my rock when Jonathan was weak. It was you who stood toe to toe with the Count the night he infected me with his blood after he butchered poor Renfield. It was you who banished him from the sanitarium while Jonathan lay helpless in a stupor. It was you who protected me from the fury of the Count’s brides in the woods of Transylvania. Rage and jealousy filled them, fearing I would take their place in the Count’s affections. And you, Abraham Van Helsing, ended their threat to me the next morning when you heroically entered Castle Dracula alone and cut off their heads.”

Van Helsing trembled, recalling the horror of brutally driving stakes through the shrieking women’s perfect bosoms, shattering bone and impaling their dead hearts. He remembered their plaintive voices in his mind, offering themselves to him in every carnal way imaginable if he would remove the stakes. The voices had ceased when he severed their heads and watched their bodies crumble to dust.

“It had to be done. I was the only one capable of administering the true death to them,” he concluded.

“You are my protector, Abraham,” Mina declared. “After Jonathan died, I felt the Count’s influence come upon me once more, stronger than ever. Brooding and alone in his castle, he called to me, urging me to join him in Undeath. I was weak, Abraham, oh so damned weak! If my son Quincey had been around, I might have resisted. But the Great War took him from me. I was so alone...” Her voice drifted off. “A mother should never have to endure the death of her child.”

Abraham reached out and took her hand in his, trying to warm it.

“The papers report you died of fever,” he mentioned.

“Jonathan’s family covered up the details of my death. I drew a hot bath, undressed, and sank into the soothing water. I opened my veins with a small knife and watched the water turn crimson, part of me wishing to join Jonathan and Quincey, another part desperately hoping for the eternal life of the *nosferatu*. I fell into darkness. When I rose in the mausoleum three days later, the red thirst consumed me and forced me to feed. I was shocked at the new savagery boiling inside me. But I knew you would come to me.”

“The coroner performed the autopsy, as is custom now in this country, no?” Abraham inquired. “If so, your heart was cut apart. How is it that you reincarnate so quickly?”

“The destruction was not complete. My heart regrew as my body restored itself. The

vampire species is quite resilient, as you know.”

“And what now, Madam Mina? That special pabulum that sustain you now is plenty in a city with so many. What does fate have in store for us?”

“I need my protector, Abraham. Dracula will come for me. I have resisted him so far, but I can sense his anger. He will not willingly give me up. He learned so much from his last defeat. I fear the child-brain you once described has now matured. He will cross the oceans again and come for me with all the fury of Hell at his command.”

“Wilhelmina, you are truly the most honest creature I have ever known,” Van Helsing confided as he gazed longingly into her perfect face, his eyes on the verge of tears. She always brought him to tears. “But what can I do to stop him? All our brave friends are gone—Jonathan, Jack, Quincey, Arthur—they are no more. How I outlive them, I know not. And I am old now, long past the bloom that is youth. My knees tremble, and my back is stooped. Help to me! How can I ever aspire to defend you now?”

“There is a way...a way for you to be strong again, stronger than you ever were before,” she suggested, her eyeteeth now long and sharp. “The societal strictures that once bound us are no more. All the people who truly mattered to us are gone. We can finally be together now, as our hearts have always desired.”

Van Helsing looked at her and considered his fate, facing a choice he knew one day would come but kept suppressed and cornered at the back of his mind. There was a time when he would not have considered her offer out of fear of damning his soul, afraid that he would never reunite with his deceased wife and son. But circumstances were different now. He recognized that he had fallen hopelessly in love many years ago with the woman standing before him, and he could not abandon her in her time of need.

“So be it,” he said as he removed his jacket and offered his neck.

“My love,” she whispered before gently sinking her teeth into his neck. Her fangs were so sharp the piercing seemed almost pleasant; his body shook with delight. There was nothing but the sound of his heartbeat, a sound that slowly faded as she pulled life from his body. She felt his life energy float into her, filling her as her skin warmed with his blood.

And as he gave his lifeblood to the one most dear to his heart, Van Helsing recalled the prophetic words he had once uttered to his late friend Jack Seward so many years ago.

A brave man's blood is the best thing on this earth when a woman is in trouble.

He eagerly embraced his fate. He grasped his love and held tight as her kiss inflamed his passion and damned his soul.

The End.

The Donor

By Carys Crossen

The blood donation clinic was shockingly austere. Uneasy grey plastic chairs. Unflattering white-quartz light from the fluorescent bulbs. A receptionist's desk topped with Formica. Beige carpets.

Chloe had hoped for something... darker. More luxuriant. Her half-imaginings had conjured velvet, mahogany furniture, cold stone and high archways. Or something stylish – minimalist furniture, ultra-high-tech window blinds and doorways, everything as glossy and perfect as an unwrapped candy.

She shifted in the uncomfortable seat. The waiting room was crammed with donors. She had to dart in, quick as a bite, to snag this seat.

The donors were mostly female. A coterie of middle-aged women in work clothes, smart skirts and blouses or flowery dresses. A gaggle in their twenties, some with hair extensions and skinny jeans, others dressing for the executive jobs they hoped to have. And several in their mid-teens, dressed alike in tight jeans, tight tops and high ponytails.

Chloe bit her lip, tightly bound in her canvas trainers and midriff-baring t-shirt, hair scraped back to fountain from the crown of her head. The sharpened pencils she'd crammed in her jacket pocket at the last minute – safety precaution, just in case, most women never had to use them, etc. She wished she'd thought to put on something that would make her look... adult. More experienced. She had not expected so much competition.

There was a scattering of men in the room. Some casually dressed in flannel and trainers, probably students. A few skinny, scruffy individuals, grey-skinned and dotted with stubble. A lone hipster, horn-rimmed glasses perched atop a long nose that jutted out over a feeble chin and neat little goatee.

“Chloe Hooper?” the receptionist called.

Chloe glanced up, and the receptionist nodded towards the double doors that led through to the clinic proper.

“Room eleven. Don't keep him waiting.” she said.

The number of blood donors skyrocketed after the vampires revealed their existence. Old-fashioned donation clinics – blood screenings, fluids, needles, snacks – were highly indignant and doctors grumbled about seriously ill people needing blood and the risk of infection. The vampires retorted that they needed blood to live and that there was no proof they could transmit human infections via fang.

The vampires inarguably had better PR. Their spokesman possessed sharp cheekbones, soulful eyes and the large hair emblematic of the species' Byronic element. His skin glowed with an opalescent sheen.

The internet advertisements that popped up regularly on Chloe's favoured social-networking sites offered more of the same. Moody pouts, gentle sighs that hinted at everlasting loneliness, a beseeching glance that promised a desire for connection. There was little pain involved, the website informed her. A quick pinprick, a bee sting. And vampires were gentle, so gentle. Like having molten chocolate poured over your skin.

At school, the inevitable gossip and giggles. Who would be brave enough? Who would offer themselves up, a human sacrifice, to sustain those creatures of the night, who dwelt in darkness (the romantic darkness, of starlight and secret assignations, of bloody roses and silken sheets. Not the scummy darkness that lurked in alleyways, the darkness of drug dealers and perverts peering in windows and throat-chafing cider and the stink of piss).

Chloe, despite having a heart full of love she was desperate to bestow on someone seemed to repel the opposite sex. Boys did not ignore her, for that would imply they were aware of her existence. They simply did not notice her.

She went to the clinic, lied about her age, and was signed up.

Room Eleven, the metal plate on the door read. It was unlocked.

Chloe shuffled inside, the disappointment stinging. It looked like nothing so much as a dentist's surgery. The walls were swimming-pool blue, the floor covered in grey linoleum. A chair upholstered in white plastic, high armrests, tilted back so it was almost horizontal.

And a vampire.

He was sitting on one of the ubiquitous grey plastic chairs and rose as she entered.

"Hello," he said, polite, detached. "What's your name?"

Dismay gripped Chloe's innards with iron fingers, and for a few moments she couldn't answer. The vampire was on the short side for a man, not much taller than Chloe herself. He had sandy brown hair, little twinkly gold spectacles and wore an unremarkable grey suit. His features were neat and unmemorable. Except for his skin, which was white as salt. It was only his shocking pallor that gave away his vampirism. Everything else about him was almost stunningly ordinary.

"Chloe," she whispered at last. It sounded like a question.

The vampire gestured at the dentist's chair.

"Sorry, do you mind if we get on with it? It's been a while since I last ate."

Chloe, stupid with shock, did as she was bid. In hindsight, it would occur to her she could have made some excuse, slipped back out of the room, scuttled away. Grasped for the pencils, even. But, reeling from the meagreness of the situation, she allowed the vampire to take charge.

"First time, is it?" he asked, voice softening a little, as she shuffled forward. "Don't worry, I'm not a heavy drinker. A pint will do me. Now, just lie down..."

Slowly, moving with an arthritic's care, Chloe lowered herself into the chair, stared up at the fluorescent tubes staring unblinking back.

"You'd better take that jacket off," the vampire said. "I'll hang it up for you."

Chloe half-rose, stomach muscles protesting, and slid off the puffy jacket. The fabric was slippery, and it slithered through her fingers to land on the floor. The vampire, unperturbed, scooped it up and draped it over a hook on the back of the door.

"Right," he rapped out, all business. "I like to drink from the veins in the arm, but do you have a preference?"

"Er... I thought... maybe... my neck?" Chloe fumbled.

"No, not a good idea, love," the vampire answered neutrally, his blank expression warning her that this was a stupid idea, a stereotype, something only suggested by silly little girls. "You could lose too much blood from the neck -- arteries. The legs are dangerous too. The arm's the best bet. You right-handed?"

Chloe nodded.

“Then I’ll drink from the left. Okay, just lie back and relax.”

He drew the plastic chair up alongside, the legs scuffing the floor like tyre tracks. He frowned down at her; a restaurant customer dissatisfied with his starter.

“How old are you?” he asked, dubious.

“Seventeen,” Chloe squeaked, realising to her dismay that she sounded about twelve.

“Hmm,” was all the vampire came out with, as he studied her coltish limbs, her obvious terror, her teenager’s uniform – the jeans, the top, the trainers, the ponytail.

Then he shrugged, an eerily human mannerism.

“If you say so, love,” he sighed. “I’m not one of the ones who insists on them being young. There’s a lot of us want young girls – or boys. There are urban legends that go round about virgin blood, though most of us don’t believe that any longer. Blood’s blood, so long as the donor’s healthy.”

His fangs slid out over his chin, so thick and yellowed that, absurdly, Chloe was reminded of a walrus. She cast round, desperate, for a distraction, something to delay him with.

“You’re very pale,” she blurted out, aware of how stupid she sounded. “The ones in the adverts, they were... shiny.”

“Make-up for the cameras, love,” the vampire told her, unperturbed. “Can’t have the ones that look like me in the adverts. We’d never get anyone in here. Now, just relax and I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

He pinned her left arm to the seat with shocking strength and lowered his head to the crook of her arm. She felt the fangs, twin needles, pierce her skin, and the pain glowed through her arm an iota later.

She turned her face away from the sound of slurping and waited, tears welling, for him to finish.

“Very nice, thanks,” the vampire said, ignoring her tears. “Right, sit here for a few moments. I’ll send the nurse in with something for you to drink.”

He wiped his mouth with some gauze, flinging it in a corner before slipping noiselessly out of the door.

Chloe waited for a few moments to make sure he was gone, before she climbed off the chair, grabbed her jacket and scurried away, towards reception.

She crashed through the double doors, and dozens of eyes turned to stare at her, cartoon eyes etched in the background of some silhouette woods, staring at the lost and befuddled child. The crush had thinned a little since she left, but not by much.

She pushed her way to the exit, feeling shaky, hollowed out. Murmurs followed her.

“She’s pale.”

“Must have had an ugly one, poor thing.”

“Looks young to me. What’s the minimum age for this sort of thing again?”

“*God*, she looks *awful!*” (The emphatic horror coming from another teenage girl, of course).

Chloe fled, her left arm throbbing in time to her fractured heart. Of the two, it was the metaphorical injury that hurt most.

She stumbled onto the street and collided with a tall man just approaching the building. She looked up at him – slicked back hair, hooked nose, corpse white skin – and quavered.

He looked down at her and smiled, his lips splitting his skin to reveal creamy white teeth.

“Hello, little girl,” he smirked. “Are you heading in here? Perhaps we could... keep one another company.”

“I’m leaving,” Chloe whispered. “I just... gave blood.”

The smile left the vampire’s face as if cut off.

“Ugh, leftovers,” he muttered. The expression on his face was as lavishly disgusted as if Chloe had just puked all over the shiny pointed shoes he wore. His upper lip lifted in a sneer, and he made to shove past her.

Chloe stared up at him, mouth gaping like a carp, and an outlandish sensation rose in her gullet. It wasn’t vomit, for all that it burned her throat. No, it was something she wasn’t supposed to feel. Not what sweet, loving teenage girls were *allowed* to feel.

Fury. Pure, white-hot, incandescent rage.

“You *shit!*” Chloe howled, and kicked him on the shin.

The vampire squawked. He didn’t yell or shriek, but actually *squawked*, like a parakeet. Then his face changed somehow. Although his fangs didn’t descend, although his eyes didn’t change colour, the humanity drained away from his face and left it as inhuman as if he were a store mannequin or a copper statue. There was no feeling, no reason there. Only appetite, given a human shape.

Chloe wilted. The vampire grasped her arm with almost bone-breaking force. She cried out, and he slapped his free hand over her face.

“You need to be taught a lesson, you little slut,” the vampire hissed, and brought his face towards her neck.

Chloe, corpse-stiff with terror, was unable to move, to think. But as the vampire tugged her up, pulling her onto her tiptoes, the pencils in her pocket stabbed her in the side.

Clumsy, feeble, she managed to grab one with her free hand, and with a little gasp of effort, shoved it into the vampire’s shoulder, the only part of his body she could reach.

The wood slid into his pallid flesh with shocking ease, as a knife would slide into sponge cake. The vampire released her, eyes wide and blank with surprise, and Chloe’s limbs regained their strength. She took off, feet slapping against the ground, fear lending her speed, not daring to look back, half-convinced that the vampire would be tearing after her, ready to subject to all the torments of Hell.

Finally, her searing lungs and scalding legs forced her to stop, sobbing, in a shop doorway, miles from the donation centre. It took Chloe five whole minutes to get her breathing under control, twice that to work up courage to look behind her, for her assailant.

The vampire wasn’t there. Only the usual crowd of Saturday shoppers, grumpy, intent on bargains, on whiling away a few pointless hours buying things they didn’t need. All brilliantly, gloriously ordinary.

Chloe heaved one last deep breath and made her unsteady way to the bus station.

“We’re thinking of giving blood,” her mate Kim whispered to her next week at school, her words interspersed with giggles. “To the *vampires*.”

Chloe slammed her geography textbook shut, the violent motion making the pencils she had taken to carrying clink in her pocket. She fixed Kim with a gimlet stare.

“Then don’t. It’s a con. All of it. They just use the good-looking vampires in adverts to lure you in. You’ll probably get some creep who wants a virgin sacrifice drinking from you,” she spat. Her right hand went to her left elbow, which had begun to throb with ghost-pain.

“How’d you know?” challenged Kim.

“I just do, all right?” Chloe flung back. Kim stared at her, but Chloe took refuge in reticence, opening the textbook and applying her attention to the water cycle.

They went to the cinema that weekend, to see a sci-fi film, as Chloe didn’t fancy anything romantic.

The End.

Summer Schedule

By John Kiste

“Check the curtains again, Tomlin,” I whispered, and pulled the tapestry over my Windsor chair. I knew as soon as he edged back the velvet that it was still too early; one of my boots remained uncovered and two of my toes briefly caught fire. “Enough!” I hissed as he pushed the drapery back into place.

“Damn summer solstice,” he spat.

“Damn daylight savings time,” I replied. “Let’s have another hand of gin.” I dealt the cards onto the broad oaken table that we had set up in the highest turret. Rather, I should say that Tomlin had set up. He did everything around the castle and grounds. Not things like dusting or mowing or landscaping; things like disposing of drained bodies and keeping sunlight from entering cracks in casements or corners. Since the estate had long ago been a Franciscan abbey, he was also tasked with occasionally discarding a stray crucifix or Tau cross. We still stumbled upon one or two a year buried in the dirt of the ground floor.

Dear fellow was the best of familiars. And much cleaner than many of the other minions in my local clutch. He knew tasks like purchasing supplies in the village, including sustenance for himself, unfolded more easily if no shopkeepers suspected his true vocation and actual destination. So he was always bathed and shaved and dressed as a tradesman. If he had not visited an establishment before, he would pose as a tourist; if forced to revisit, he would feign a relationship with a little-known family several villages removed. Such ruses had worked for decades. If a vendor ever got too suspicious (though this scenario had only occurred twice), Tomlin would lie in wait in an alley at closing time, stun the snoopy fellow with a mallet, and bring him back to me in the wagon.

No township within leagues of my castle was unaware of dark forces on my mountaintop, but not even an entire population was willing to storm my domain. Fear is a more formidable weapon of a creature like me than superhuman strength, fangs, the fealty of wolves, or hypnosis. In the fall and winter I often fling my being far into the forests and human enclaves, and feed without hurry on the inhabitants of distant communes. Even spring affords me the luxury of wandering into villages hours from home. Summer, however, is a cruel jailer, and midsummer keeps me confined to the very nearest precincts at the foot of my alp.

Today was the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and I had already resigned myself to poor dinner fare this evening. The nearby townsfolk have surmised based on generations of experience that my travel would be horribly limited tonight, and they have redoubled their efforts to avoid straying close to my limited sphere of influence. For centuries I have felt in my psyche, if not in my absent soul, that were I a townsman with a family, I would hurriedly depart from a land swarming with creatures like me. But they do not. They raise their children here, and their grandchildren, and their great grandchildren. Perhaps in their ignorance they believe every land is like this one, and that my kind presents just one more obstacle to existence, like plague or famine. Perhaps they calculate that we take but one or two a month (I actually take more, but many forest dwellers are never missed) and so justify that the odds are they will never meet one of my ilk. Whatever the rationale, they stay, and so do I, and ironically

they implement the most precautions when they need them least—during the longest days of the year.

Tomlin returned to the massive table with another lantern, a meat and cheese plate of his own, and a cage of live squirrels and field mice for me to snack upon. He sat down and we continued our game. I saw him watching me curiously for some time, and it caused me to misplay a card. “What’s on your mind?” I asked, a bit peevisly, though he did not notice.

His large black eyes squinted, and lines appeared in his tall forehead. He tugged at a somewhat pointed ear. My familiar was not one of the great philosophers of the world. He did not even entertain hopes that one day I would make him like me—nor would I. He liked working for me; my dungeon held many piles of gold and coins and I gave them to him liberally as long as he obeyed. His rough voice sounded confused as he spoke. “I heard somewhere that farther north—much farther—the days never get this long. So...”

“Almost no one lives that far north,” I broke in. “I would starve.”

“Oh,” he said, and shuffled the cards, though we were still in the midst of a hand. I ignored him and got up to wander the tower. Several bookshelves crouched in the dark of one curved wall. The dust on the volumes was an inch thick. I had read every title there, many of them multiple times, but I had not touched one for fifty years.

I turned to Tomlin and motioned to the dusty pile. “You are welcome to these books,” I said, “if you wish to understand more. You can read, can’t you?”

“Sure,” he grumbled. I was not convinced.

“Anyway,” I began as he watched, enrapt. “This planet circles around the sun once each year. But it does so while tilted on its axis.” I saw the forehead furrows deepen. “That is the imaginary bar on which we spin to make a day. And this tilt means sometimes our half of the world is pointed toward the sun, and sometimes it’s pointed away. Right now it is pointed toward the sun, and so the sun rises higher in the sky and the daytime is longer. And here I sit.”

Tomlin rubbed his chin. “Can’t you fix it?”

I smiled and showed my fangs. “I cannot.”

“Oh,” he said and shuffled the cards again.

I continued studying treasures I had not paid attention to in several human lifetimes. Here was my tobacco; I could still recall its aroma and its tang on my tongue and burning in my throat and lungs. My kind does poorly with cigarettes and cigars and pipes; for one thing, we have difficulty pretending to inhale, and even if we manage to find a rhythm, any sense of enjoyment eludes us. We taste nothing. And then we tend to spit up black goo, though none of us knows why.

Above another shelf hung a painting of my wife. She had been a lovely and regal lady. This portrait was the only thing in the turret room that I had ordered Tomlin to keep clean, and he had done so admirably. Her beauty entranced me from the dim corner. I would have him move it to a better-lit wall, or keep a lantern burning below it. But I would tell him tomorrow. It was time now to check once more for darkness. Doing so was a miserable task in the summer, but no clock in the castle had chimed in a century, and contrary to the folklore of some, my kind has no preternatural ability to divine the hours. It was a game of hit or miss and I was grateful that Tomlin was along to play, for the briefest exposure to summer sunlight could incapacitate me for a week, and were I to fall within a bright bar accidentally, I would surely lack the strength to scurry away before bursting into flames. Many of my brood have studied the chemistry that makes sol toxic to us. The conclusion most have reached is that the reaction is beyond the realm of physics and keeps our beings tied to religion and wretched folklore. So be it. Metaphysics and

magic seem to enable our strengths; these provinces clearly delineate our weaknesses as well. I can exist in this fashion, and suspect I have no choice.

“It’s time,” whispered Tomlin from the window. My fangs tingled and my dead mouth salivated. I donned my cloak and burst into the night. An hour later, a fair lass in Lugoj left her cabin for the final time.

Our summer continued much in this vein, as did all our summers. I would spend the short nights stalking dinner, and Tomlin would spend my gold drinking in pubs of an afternoon while I slumbered. He rarely ended the day drunk, but when he did he would purchase a local newspaper so he could prove to me his literacy. In this manner we discovered we were nearing the end of the 1900s; in fact, the humans enmasse had become terrified their society was going to collapse when their computer clocks struck 2000. This tidbit of outside news made me happy all the castle clocks had seized up.

I found him standing over me as I lay dormant one day at summer’s peak. He seemed perplexed and excited. “I m-must have overslept,” he stammered. “It is night.” I had found no stray sustenance on my gambols the previous evening, and was famished. I wrapped my cloak about me and hurled myself at once from the parapets into the darkness. I would eat this night if I had to hide outside a tavern in Petroșani at closing time. The wind rushed by my ears and I smiled at the distant stars, knowing they were far-off suns—so far off they had no effect on me. Not like our sun. Our sun that was—what the hell!—shining suddenly on my arm. My hand caught fire. I shrieked. In an instant sunlight was pouring on me from the cloudless sky high overhead. Heat overwhelmed me. I fluttered desperately to a deep crevice in a cliff face nearby. Inside, I pressed my roasted body far back into the shadows and watched the day progress beyond. Each limb throbbed and burned as I crouched in the dimness confused and furious. Only later did I learn the actual time was 2:00 PM, and that the day had been August 11th of the year 1999.

It took me a week to recuperate and regenerate from my extensive burns. I am ashamed to admit I locked Tomlin in a dungeon room for that week, in a cell from which he could stare at piles of gold but not touch them. He was rather traumatized for a month afterwards. When he recovered, I filled his pockets with that gold and sent him on a journey to Bucharest, where he purchased a fine timepiece, a calendar, and a schedule of future solar eclipses.

The Arrangement

By Georgia Cook

The Janitor arrives at exactly 9:00pm—5:00pm in the winter, when the nights are longer and the days smaller—as the sun sinks slowly behind the horizon. The high street is bathed in sunset crimson, the pool’s pitch-black windows ablaze with golden light.

He turns into the car park, swipes his security pass, and parks in his usual spot—the space right next to the doors, reserved during the day for the pool manager.

There are perks to the night shift, he has learnt, if you look for them.

He gets out awkwardly—his hip has been giving him trouble recently—and stretches, feeling every pop and click. The evening is warm and muggy. The air smells of ozone and old rain. The car park is littered with puddles, reflecting the sunset like pools of fire. The pool building looms overhead, a silent monolith of concrete and architectural neglect.

The Janitor locks the car and walks to the door, whistling a tune he heard in a radio advert once, a long time ago, and has just now entered his head, and lets himself in. The lobby is dark, the reception desk empty and unmanned. The final classes ended hours ago, leaving only the past echoes of running feet and the distant splash-splash of water.

He pauses a moment in the gloom, watching the last of the sunset, the glitter of stars above the city rooftops, smelling the heady scent of chlorine and cleaning products. There is an echo to this world; a waiting expectancy. It is a place built for noise and movement, a place made strange by the absence of life.

Twenty minutes, perhaps, he has twenty minutes.

With a sigh the Janitor sheds his coat, drapes it over the reception desk, and gets to work.

Built in the 70’s and rarely refurbished, the swimming pool is a maze of greying tiles and echoing corridors, twisting and tight, filled with flickering fluorescent lights and harsh shadows. The Janitor knows it better than he knows his own home; knows every second of his schedule here. There are floors to mop, cupboards to clean, the debris of the day checked and cleared for tomorrow morning.

He checks the cleaning cupboard on the ground floor, notes—with annoyance—that they are running low on cleaning solution again. Then he selects a mop, fills a bucket, and starts on his rounds.

He checks the locker rooms first, filled with their walls of tiny doors and hanging keys. The air here is tinged with sweat and deodorant, shot through with the floral aftertaste of perfume. A handful of lockers lie open, he checks the interiors, but finds nothing of interest.

In the changing rooms—a long corridor of little pods, just large enough for a person to stand in, leading down to the showers and then the pool—he bends to retrieve an abandoned pair of glasses. One of the lenses is cracked. The frames are made of dull pink plastic, glimmering with pool water. The glasses are slimy to the touch, like a hardened slug, and he puts them in a locker for safe keeping. Once they’re dry he’ll put them in the lost property box. Maybe someone will come back for them. Maybe they won’t.

Sometimes the Janitor forgets that this—*this*—is his job; the mineautia of the night shift, clearing away all the dropped belongings of other people’s lives.

But it's not the reason he's here.

He walks on past the changing rooms, along the row of metal shower stalls, and turns a corner. Here, the corridor opens out into a cavernous room of tiles and plastic, leading up, up to a ceiling clustered with shadows.

The pool lies ahead of him, waiting.

Heat shimmers across the water, filled with dust and chlorine. Light dances across the bottom tiles, creating strange mesmerising shapes of blue and green. It is a gateway to another world, a bowl of illuminations. The Janitor breathes deeply, relishing the warmth, the cloying weight of sweat and discomfort. It is a sensation full of memories.

Overcome with curiosity—although he knows, deep down, exactly what he'll see—he walks to the edge and peers down.

His reflection stares back at him: A squat old man in a cap and shirt, lost in a sea of lights. He can see past himself all the way to the bottom, to that tumbling, twisting pattern. This close, the heat rising off the water is almost unbearable.

What would it be like, he wonders, for this one evening, to slip off his shirt, put aside his shoes, and give himself up to the water? How would he feel? Would it wash away the machinations of old age? The lines around his eyes, the grey in his hair...

Something knocks on the window behind him—three sharp taps, one after the other—jolting the Janitor from his dream—. Remembering himself, he walks to the window and opens it.

There is a girl crouched on the windowsill, like a cat. She can't be more than twenty. Her face is long and pale in the moonlight, although the hair tumbling around her cheeks is flame red. Her hair has always been red, for as long as he's known her. The Janitor wonders if she dyes it.

"Hello," says the girl. Her voice is soft, like silvery thread. There is a towel tucked under her arm.

"Hello," he says.

They stand for a moment, the girl and the Janitor—awkward, like childhood sweethearts—then she gives him a sharp little nod and slips through the window onto the tiled floor. She makes no sound as she lands. The pool's light dances across her skin.

The Janitor knows her name, but doesn't say it. Just as she hasn't said his name in decades; it is a price he pays, and a price she needs only to acknowledge with a look.

The girl slips off to the changing rooms, and the Janitor turns away, embarrassed, and reaches for his mop, beginning the slow circuit of cleaning around the edge of the pool.

The girl returns five minutes later, dressed in a plain black swimming costume, her pale skin reflecting the glimmering lights. Like him, she walks to the edge of the pool and stares down. Nothing stares back at her; nothing but the strands of light and a shifting green shadow, deep at the bottom..

"Lovely night for it," says the Janitor. He doesn't know why.

The girl smiles at that—a small, pitying smile—nods, and slips down into the water without replying. She lands with barely a ripple. For a moment her hair floats about her shoulder like fine red seaweed, like the mane of some strange tropical crocodile, enveloping her shoulders, then she sinks below the surface and vanishes.

Her form becomes shadow and grace. She flits across the pool floor, her movements sharp, joyous—a blur of movement and fire-spun hair.. Not once does she come up for air.

The Janitor leans on his mop and watches—feeling, not for the first time, that he is

disturbing some sacred moment; that he is a traveller, stumbling upon the altar of a Goddess in a deep warm wood. He is here merely to open the window, as he has opened the window for the past thirty years. After that, he is merely a trespasser. They both know this.

She allows him to watch; that is his prize. Payment for his loyalty. The arrangement that sees him open his little world to her night after night, that gives her the joy of warmth and privacy.

The Janitor read, once, that her kind have been known to take on servants; familiars and slaves, luring them with promises of power and eternal life. She has promised him none of these things, not even when it would have benefited him to ask.

And yet...and yet...

Her kind are human mosquitoes; flitting parasites. They take, they feed, and give nothing back. The Janitor knows this, just as he knows it's useless to pretend she's never taken from him. She takes from him more than anyone, night after night, even if her teeth have never touched his neck, even if his world has never narrowed down into the cold embrace of blood and dirt.

Others have not been so fortunate. He envies them viciously.

The girl's form curves beneath the water, graceful as a fish. She darts to the end of the pool, turns, and darts back the other way—without a ripple, without a blemish.

Only the Janitor's pale reflection, staring down at her.

She has always been so beautiful, so silent and sharp, but he is no longer any of these things, and they both know it. For a moment the Janitor's heart aches, then he remembers himself and turns away.

There was a time when he would have joined her; slipped off his clothes and abandoned the duties of his night time job, left the dust to gather and the floors to sparkle with forgotten puddles; pretended, just for a moment, that she was as in love with him as he was with her.

But not now. Not now.

He has long since resigned himself to the minutiae of old age, swept back the false dreams of eternal life. She lies trapped in her bubble of time, as far from him as the ghosts of his past, whatever life they might have led together—whatever life she might once have stolen from him—shimmering like shadows on the bottom of a swimming pool.

Better now to leave it lying. Better now to keep only their arrangement.

Better that he simply allow her to take, and for himself to be taken.

Better...

Jackpot

By Liam Hogan

The machine makes idiot noises and flashes as coins clatter into the bowl, and even my undead heart gives an appreciative flutter. *Ah, Vegas*. Such an amusing conceit, so perfectly designed for its purpose.

And mine, but that's a happy accident.

A name-badged waitress—*Chloë*, the umlaut added with a Sharpie—appears by my elbow, looking significantly more dishevelled than she did at the start of her shift all those many hours ago. She coos in delight at my good fortune. She and I both know I have fed twice as many coins into these infernal devices as have been paid out, but it would be impolite for either of us to mention it. Not that that stops her other customers, a ragtag of dispirited souls whose bitter anger grows with every lost quarter. Whereas I am here merely to kill time.

She offers me a drink. On the house, *sir*, but I demur. *Later*, I promise with a smile, and her job is done for the moment. She doesn't know I *can't* leave. Not quite yet.

Outside, on the strip, the sun is just setting. You wouldn't know it in this windowless room where no sunlight encroaches. So much less tedious than a coffin. With dusk descending, the night shift begins. Once again, I can venture abroad and seek nourishment.

Perhaps I won't have to go very far.

“Miss?” I say, seizing Chloë's arm as she passes and staring into those oh-so-tired eyes. “I think I'll have that drink now.”

So the Legend Goes

By Monette Bebow-Reinhard

1503 Greece

We were murdered but Mikos was determined not to stay that way. He was angry. I didn't blame him, but I know better than to allow anger to fester in the afterlife realm.

"Mikos! Thine own intellect, which is now voidness, yet not to be regarded as the voidness of nothingness but as being the intellect itself. SAY IT!"

Mikos's essence begins to regain physical form as the demons of the underworld approach him. He reaches for me. "Voidness. Of nothingness." Too late. The shadowy creatures wrap around Mikos's ankles, suck in his anger and his soul back into the ground where his corpse is buried.

"Oh, Mikos. You were not ready to behold the deities and now the true horror of the sangsaric realm has you." Helpless in this spiritual form, I watch as his corpse reawakens and bursts from its shallow grave.

Poor cowardly Mikos. He did not want to be a Janissary Turk soldier so I tried to help him escape. I thought I could convince others that he had drowned in the sea and we could run to freedom. But then we were murdered together on the same spear. From this afterlife realm, I can see I was foolish in thinking we could run. Dimitri knows me too well.

Now I am trapped, too, to help Mikos gain the courage to defeat demonic revenge and return to the grave. Oh bother. The afterlife realm was so pleasing. But I guess I owe him. I must retain a presence in this port area of Greece, my old homeland, until I can aid Mikos in enacting revenge only on those guilty so he can find his way back to the afterlife realm again, where we can await our next lives together.

Why didn't he listen? Anger has no place in the afterlife realm. We are expected to accept death, to rest our souls and repose. Instead he watched those murderers burying his corpse in a shallow grave—dooming him, so the legend goes, to vengeance.

Look at him, a corpse crawling from the grave, puking up the dirt that clogs his throat. I drift over to him. "Seek those murderers, Mikos, and then return to the grave so we can prepare to be born again."

But he hasn't a clue who I am. That's not good. He's in the throes of death amnesia.

The sun is going down. How can I get him to listen? I belong to an ancient race of gypsies, those who lived as their ancestors had, believing women deserve to rule. Dimitri, my brother, and Beck, one of the fiends who killed us, gave me to the Sultan in that continuing effort to destroy our ancient pride. They are, each of them, destined to face their own choices after death.

Mikos can still retain good karma, if he listens to me. If he kills only those responsible for our deaths. If he doesn't, I fear for the world.

Legends of vrykolakas say they return to their family in their desire for acceptance, seeking their place in the real world again. But Mikos was taken from his family at an early age to become a Janissary Turk soldier, and has not seen them since. If he kills any Turk, he will put his family's lives in danger by going back to them.

We were told many tales of evil like this by our church fathers. But though us younger

ones scoffed, my parents believed everything they were told—tales meant to keep them chained to the church.

They feared every rap on the door, their expressions undulating into the expressions and wrinkles of screams, without sound, in the firelight. They never answered the door on the first knock.

I would say, “Mama, someone’s here.”

But they told me to shush and waited. They feared that if they opened on the first knock, they would die. They told their friends, never call their names outside the house at night, but knock three times to be let in. They consecrated the ground of a burial with holy water, and planted crosses over every corpse. If someone died by suicide, they shoved a brick into the corpse mouth to keep them from arising.

Mikos had been buried in unhallowed ground. But I still felt it silly superstition, until Mikos’s hand burst through the dirt. I know now that holy water would not have stopped him from arising—most superstitions were just that.

And yet there are more mysteries to the human soul than anyone alive could ever pen. Legends are a glimpse of these mysteries that I now have full access to here in the spiritual realm.

He is headed now after the murdering scoundrels who walk along the sea. I will make sure Mikos gets his vengeance quickly so that he can return to the grave. He is fulfilling *my* vengeance, too—with his anger because of love for me.

Women in ancient times controlled our men, you see. We are the snakes, in charge of the spirit of life and of rebirth in birthing. But with these various religions encouraging them, men now think they can dominate us. We have learned to control from behind.

Ah, there he goes, after Beck. Thrust and parry, reach him from behind, fling him into the rocks. What a delightful attack! As he sucks greedily at the man’s blood, I wonder if I should feel guilt in this spiritual realm. Hmmm, nope.

No, Mikos, do not let him come back to undeath!

Look at that. His now undead victim pleads to be allowed to remain that way. Oh, what a world that would be. Don’t let him, Mikos. I could not control another.

Mikos stabs him with a stick but only hits his left shoulder. Beck didn’t even feel it and laughs at what he thinks is a puny attempt. Mikos laughs, too, as he grabs the stick and jerks it down to slice Beck’s heart in half. Beck did not know that he could not defeat an Original. An Original becomes undead in one of three ways: suicide, excommunication, or a violent, unresolved death. Beck was a second generation and every generation gets stupider. If Beck were then to suck someone to death, that would be third generation and really getting stupid, almost zombie stupid.

The legend on how to destroy them is true. Piercing the heart is one way. The others are beheading and burning to ashes. Mikos isn’t hiding in the daytime but stays shaded from the rays of the sun. He learned that his undead skin cannot heal, even from sunburn, but has no urge to sleep in any dark place during the sunlit hours. He remains, of course, most active at night. His wounds that caused him to die haven’t healed—he is leaking the blood of his victim. It means he will never stop thirsting as long as he is trapped in that corpse.

Well, we must end this vengeance quickly, then, my Mikos.

Ahead, the two other bazouks who helped kill us are playing with their swords as though not a care in the world. One of them fears *my* vengeance, but the other responds, “Nonsense, she’s dead. Dead don’t return.” Some men don’t listen to that voice of instinct, telling them

there's something to fear on the trail they created. Some men have no guilt, their instincts quieted.

Mikos takes first one down, and then he chases down the other. Toros is staked and Beular's head rolls. His mouth moves as though saying, "This is odd."

Mikos is gaining strength, and a little bravado. Well, I am helping. You know, hand on the ass guidance. I continue to touch his soul with my voice, hoping he hears my endless chatter.

And now to find Dimitri. My brother. The one I shall cheer for the loudest to die. I find him first and we have a nice conversation. Well, nice for me. He is terrified.

I tell him Mikos is coming. I watch him plead for his life.

Mikos catches up to us and Dimitri runs off.

"Go, Mikos. Why are you not pursuing him?"

Mikos stares at me like I am covered with spiritual warts. "Dimitri is your brother?"

Okay, that's one wart. "You knew that, didn't you?"

With eyes wide, mouth open in soundless scream I cannot block from my own ears, he says, "You set us up to die?"

"No! I did not know he would do this!"

He runs off again as though he cannot bear the sight of me.

I chase after him. "Do not let this last vengeance get away from you! If you do, you will be cursed to walk in undeath for all eternity!"

Oh, this is a bad turn of events. I now fear he holds vengeance for me.

I arrive too late. Mikos has allowed Dimitri to slit his own throat and then casually laps at his blood. "Mikos, you will never escape undeath now."

He gives me a bloody grin. "You and your foolish beliefs. Now I have no more need of you." He runs from me as though I had delivered the bloody spear to his last mortal life myself.

Well, maybe getting killed *was* my fault, but I thought Mikos knew who Dimitri was. Dimitri wanted me for the Sultan, not for some lowly soldier. He felt Mikos ruined me.

But now Mikos will keep on killing. How do I stop him now?

Ah, finally the sun rises. Mikos has slipped under an overhang of rock, but blood continues to leak out through his wounds. If he cannot retain the blood he takes, he will keep attacking more and more. I search the countryside, and find one to redirect her path. A girl with a mule. Perhaps that need for acceptance will give him courage to fight his thirst under the sun.

He hears her. He waits. I sense his demons are resting, giving him some control in the daytime. "Can you help me? I am wounded." She asks his name and he can only stutter a derivative of the name Barabas he once chose for our escape, so she calls him Arabus.

She leaves to get some stitching for his wounds and clothes for his "sun sickness." Clever Mikos to come up with that idea.

She is back in no time—or so it seems to us in undeath. What a lovely girl, so helpful to a stranger, using clay and stitching to "heal" him. At least now he no longer bleeds the blood of his victims. Perhaps now he will learn how courage comes with control.

Fitting him with clothes allows him to appear mortal. "Will you come join my family's feast? I'm getting married on the morrow." If only she were Gorgon ... but too many women have caved to their men's religious control. They are meek, doing all men ask of them at the sacrifice of their own spirit.

Stop, Mikos! I jump into the girl's body but she becomes disoriented and only watches as he kills her whole family. I help her get away, but sadly, I could do no more inside this poor terrified girl's body, and leave her behind under the auspices of the nearest town before returning

to follow Mikos.

Poor cowardly Mikos. Now he holds in the blood he takes, but still seems insatiable. Fortunately, he was in the grave only a short time, and his body did not begin to rot. He can thus appear human to others, wearing those coverings to keep his skin shaded from the sun. Undead skin cannot heal, no matter how much blood he takes.

Mikos! You need courage to control your demons! He hears me but waves my words away like pesky flies. And look! He disappears again. How does he keep doing that?

There was another tale of a vrykolakas that I did not believe, who clung to the ceiling rafters, and though the woman swatted at him with the broom she never touched him. It appears his speed, such as has been ascribed to Serbian myth as being vaporous, is part of his demonic talents. One legend often takes in elements of others, while the real truth remains lost to human knowledge, such as I am imparting to you now.

Use the knowledge I share wisely. Accept death when it comes, and leave anger behind.

Vrykolakas is Greek for vampire, as I'm sure you've figured out by now.

I didn't think they took blood, either, but there are different forms of the legend. The longer they are allowed to walk the more powerful they become, too. Mikos gains more strength and power by doing the bidding of the demons, and they hate *all* humans. I add this to the legend, because I saw what they were and know how they evolve in the underworld, from those human souls who never escaped after death.

But who can destroy him? He can be staked, beheaded, or torched until he is only ashes. But he must be reduced to ashes or his bones will still walk. Yes, those walking skeletons you see in your nightmares. I cannot destroy him myself. I have no physical presence. Since he cannot return to the grave, he must learn control. If Arabus, as he is now called, is to be destroyed for his lack of courage, I need another physical presence, someone with my strength of purpose, for me to possess.

At least Mikos stakes or beheads his victims. Destroying others is not part of this legend, so that means that Mikos is listening to me, even when he does not realize his courage *comes* from me. Well, it must come from me. He has none of his own. This I knew from our first meeting on Crete.

Some parts of the legend are just silly. It doesn't matter what day of the week it is. We do not even know what day Saturday is, and his need for blood comes more than once in a week's passage. Days run on like drops of rain for us. He continues to walk as day runs to night and back again, and I continue to pursue and yell at him to stop attacking innocent people as night runs into day and back again, making the two of us endless drops of rain. A hard, thankless task, as everyone he attacks now is innocent.

He and I have no need of time, or dates, or sleep. We pay attention only to day versus night. Night is when he loses control, but he is beginning to walk about more freely in the daytime without attacking to kill. Sometimes when he takes blood, he leaves them alive. A necessary evil but one we can live with. This does not happen often enough yet. And rumors of a scourge on the countryside begin to grow.

I must find a way to impale him, or take off his head, or burn him to ashes. I want to move on to my next life. "Mikos! Cast yourself against the stake!"

Oh, dear, now he's off across the sea, heading for that innocent fishing boat. Another legend dashed. He *can* cross sea water. "Mikos, you make destroying you so difficult!"

I leap to the boat and pound on Arabus, but he grabs hold of the poor fellow, who at first thinks a squid has been hauled on board. Mikos ... Arabus ... turns to the other boatman, the one

manning the oar, so I leap in front of him. Mikos hesitates. He sees my form flicker in front of this second man. In a show of theatrics I rip off my spiritual head and the air is filled with hissing, writhing snakes.

Arabus hesitates, and then lunges. The man I am trying to save jumps into the water, flails and drowns. I weep for this man I couldn't save. If only this had happened to me instead. I could have handled it with more poise. Women are the stronger sex, after all. Ah, but we are also usually smarter than this, too.

Here is a good turn of events—three men related to the dead fishermen are going off to destroy this new villain. I'll tag along. They do not know Mikos, although they know they follow someone filled with legendary vengeance. Maybe as Christian they will think to stake his heart. I was raised Orthodox, but once I learned the ways of the ancient goddesses of Crete I did not look back.

As a reborn Pagan in this most recent lifetime I was fond of the snake mythology, how they come crawling up from under the ground as the earth warms—the symbol of women as the keepers of the moist underground of nutritious birthing blood, and of rebirthing those who had died years before. Yet here I am, stuck in the rebirthing canal because of guilt.

Perhaps I neglected to tell Mikos that Dimitri was my brother. But he did not tell me that Dimitri was the young boy he had befriended when they were taken to the Janissary youth army together. We'd had only those two meetings, and our third ended in death. Not a lot of time to converse.

Drat it. Those men lose his trail. I search out Mikos myself again and am aghast. “No, Mikos. Leave her be! She does not desire your fate.”

I cannot bear it. He takes the poor woman right in the middle of the garlic field. She seems to welcome his embrace, but when she realizes that embrace is demonic she tries to get away. But he impales her, oh, in the most bloody fashion. Poor spinster woman. She did not deserve rape as her only sexual encounter in life. All she wanted was a little companionship, a little love.

Time for desperate measures. I run off in another direction, seeking a physical force for vengeance, as only I can deliver.

There, a gypsy woman in that wagon with her family. A mother and a proud looking soul. I sit behind her. She's a member of my snake clan. She will confront him—I will force her, even if it means allowing him to kill her husband and children. With my spirit inside her, she will understand that she must love him or destroy him. There is no third option.

This is a dreadful plan—those poor people unaware that fate is following them.

But heaven help the world if I am unable to stop him.

The Night Nanny

By Laura Blackwell

Among the questions we asked the night-nanny candidates—the usual about CPR and vaccinations, the less standard ones relevant to our baby’s medical condition—Michael always managed to slip in “Are you a vampire?”

When Michael was tired, he distracted himself with jokes; when he was very tired, he couldn’t tell they weren’t funny. New fatherhood took him into a new world of lame humor.

One candidate laughed a shrill, pandering peal that would disqualify her from working with a healthy infant, let alone one on his sixth week and his second surgery. The best-qualified interviewee, a retired nurse with NICU experience, drew herself up tall in the kitchen chair with a haughty “Of course not, and I don’t appreciate the implication.” The youngest actually cried.

Renata, a stolid, fortyish woman with a few gray hairs, shrugged and deadpanned, “Call me what you want.” She continued to answer questions in an accent of slow vowels and swift consonants, just as if Michael’s joke were normal.

I held Henry close—he was tiny, so tiny—and wished we could take care of him ourselves every night. But although I had maternity leave, Michael had to get back to work. The night supervisor opening wasn’t going to last forever. If I could sleep at night, I could take care of Henry during the day, but I couldn’t sleep without backup. When I woke to Henry’s cries, I felt like a failure; when I woke and didn’t hear him, I ran to his room, terrified he had died.

We checked references between feedings and changings and soothings. A triplet mom called Renata a “baby whisperer,” but I pushed to offer the job to the retired nurse. She declined. I was disappointed and annoyed.

“I like Renata,” said Michael, dripping dish soap bubbles from his forearms. “I think she’s German. Her accent reminded me of my year in Köln.” He put the bottle parts in their special drying rack.

The oily, yeasty smell of poured-out formula clung to both of us. Henry was too weak to nurse, so I pumped milk every few hours, and the doctor had us mix powdered formula in to up his calorie intake. Henry never took an entire bottle.

“She didn’t seem fazed by his health,” I admitted. “I think the real reason that one girl cried was because she saw a diaper change.” Henry had been born with malformations in his gastrointestinal tract, and surgeons had been lopping off parts of it ever since. He had scars a baby shouldn’t have.

The next night, Renata knocked on our door promptly at 8:00. I showed her the kitchen, where she would mix Henry’s bottles and take her breaks. “You can snack on whatever we have,” I told her. “Trail mix, crackers...there’s probably some microwave popcorn in this cupboard.”

“Thank you, but I don’t require anything. I have a very efficient metabolism.” She placed a quart of a pink liquid in the fridge, between the breast milk bottles and the takeout leftovers.

Perhaps Renata’s efficient metabolism explained her slow, measured movements. She held Henry expertly, with gentle firmness, and he calmed in her arms. Henry didn’t eat any better for her than for Michael and me, but at least it wasn’t worse.

I liked getting out and seeing the sun, but since Henry was so frail, we didn't take a lot of stroller rides or visits to the park. It seemed the only place we ever went was into the calculated cheeriness of the pediatrician's office, where smiling nurses in patterned scrubs welcomed us and then gradually smiled less and less.

The pediatrician wasn't happy with Henry's growth. "There may be another blockage," she said. "And I'll order some tests to make sure he can absorb nutrients."

"Is he really such a mystery?" I kissed the top of Henry's head, feeling his warm skin through the fuzz of fine hair. I could see his pulse throbbing in the fontanelle on top of his skull, his ribs protruding with every breath, his spindly limbs that lay too limp. His eyelashes curled above improbably plump, soft cheeks. He was both beautiful and pitiful.

I disliked the doctor's office not just because of the bad news, but because of the other patients in the waiting room. The babies were plump and alert, picture-perfect, flailing with undirected energy. Their parents looked away from us suddenly, superstitiously, as if Henry's condition were something contagious that they could catch through their eyes. I envied them their easy life of encouraging weigh-ins and successful checkups. I hated their unspoken implication that exquisite, fragile Henry was not a real child but a problem better left unmentioned.

The test results gave us few answers and less hope. Normal growth and development were not assured for a child who'd had a quarter of his large intestine removed. It wasn't certain Henry would ever manage much in the way of solid food.

Michael and I were on opposite schedules, together for just a little time in the morning when he came home and in the evening before he went to work. He held Henry whenever he could, even helped with feedings and diapering, knowing how precious every moment with Henry was.

Renata was often there during our crossover time. Michael had a new question or joke for her every night, and she deadpanned them all back at him with absurd answers. If she was German, why didn't she spell her name the German way? Because she was in hiding. How long had she been caring for babies? Long enough that some of them were grandparents. Had she drunk any good blood lately? No, she'd given it up for Lent a few decades ago and never gotten back on the stuff.

"Don't you get tired of all her dodging?" I asked Michael after Renata's thin figure had retreated through the morning gloom to her Volkswagen. "She never answers a question straight, not even the normal ones."

"Not at all," he said, shrugging out of his uniform jacket. "Somebody around here should have a sense of humor."

"Oh, please." I was irritable those days, and his dig set me off. "If Renata's a vampire, you're her goddamn thrall. Are your jokes going to keep up until she grows fangs?"

I was gearing up for a fight, but Michael's face fell. "I'm sorry," he whispered, putting his arms around me. "It's just that I'm so grateful we have a little help. I'm so scared for Henry and so tired I barely know myself."

The cozy parenthood we'd pictured was instead a time of sleep deprivation, fear for Henry's health, and worrying about money. If it hadn't been for the times I'd fallen asleep pumping, or the times I'd nearly dropped Henry, I wouldn't have felt safe spending the money on Renata.

We had enough to keep Renata through the winter, but no longer unless I went back to work. I missed my classroom. At work, I had problems I could actually solve, students who had survived a decade, and normal conversations with adults.

One evening in February, Michael and I enjoyed an unusually quiet dinner. When we were almost done, I looked down at the forkful of pasta on my plate and realized it was our first uninterrupted dinner in months. I ran to Henry's room, fork and chair clattering to the floor behind me.

Tiny, beautiful Henry was not straining for breath. He was blue.

"911!" I screamed before scooping Henry up and laying him on the floor. He was limp, even limper than when asleep.

I was through the eighth cycle of CPR, feeling desperately for a pulse, a breath, any sign of life, when the doorbell rang. But when Michael rushed back into Henry's room, he wasn't with a paramedic. Renata, ready for her shift, was sprinting ahead of him.

She checked Henry's pulse when Michael insisted on taking over on CPR. She shook her head, then bit her lip so hard it drew blood.

"Do you want me to save him?" Renata asked me. "Do you know what it means if I do?"

I looked at her serious face. "You were never joking, were you?"

"Aside from the birthdate on my driver's license, everything I've ever told you is the truth."

Michael's CPR was no more effective than mine. Henry was still and blue. There was no time for questions, only the choice: An even stranger life for Henry and for us, or a life without Henry. "Do it."

Renata placed a hand on Michael's shoulder. "Michael?"

He didn't have a wisecrack. He sagged back into a sit, ran his wrist across his wet eyes. "I'm in."

Renata bent over our dying baby, our almost certainly dead baby, and kissed him on the lips. The blue ebbed away from Henry's skin, and he took a long, ragged breath. I picked him up, felt the long spaces between every breath and every heartbeat.

"I can stay as long as you need me to stay," said Renata, wiping the blood from her fangless mouth. "I was a cook, back in Germany. Before the change."

"When was that?"

"Before the war." She corrected herself. "Before the first war."

Henry nestled against me, skin soft over his thin body. "What will Henry's life be now?"

Renata's tone was matter-of-fact. "He'll always be more comfortable in the dark; his night vision will be strong. He'll never be able to eat solid food. He will grow and he will age, but it will be slow. I was twenty when I changed."

A hundred years that wore like twenty. "So, home school." Educating Henry alone was infinitely preferable to losing him.

"And moving house. State to state is good. Country to country is better, but that's hard to do now."

"But he'll still be a child when we die," said Michael, no trace of a laugh in his voice. "Who will take care of him?"

"I could," said Renata, "but don't you want to be there for him? I can change both of you."

"I'm willing." Michael took my hand. "What about you?"

For Michael, it was a no-brainer. He could still work at night. He could live on protein shakes, and no one would be the wiser. For me, though...I still wanted a normal life, or as normal as I could have. I wanted sunshine. But no matter what Henry was, I was his mother, and I would take care of him however I could. "What about thralls, Renata? Are thralls real?"

"Not like Renfield. Just a servant or a friend with a special bond. They can't leave, even if they want to. When times are bad, sometimes they offer blood." Her eyes grew distant. "I haven't had a thrall in a long time. Are you offering to be one?"

"Not for you," I said to her, and then to Michael, "Not for you, either. For Henry."

"Are you sure?" Renata sounded surprised. "You'll always be close to each other, but it's not always an easy life."

I set my hand on Henry's head, feeling his pulse through the fontanelle. He was growing warm. "Maybe not. But the way I see it, I've been in thrall since he was born."

Henry opened his eyes then, and I was lost. I cradled him close and loosened my robe. I had milk, and I had blood, and he could take them both for as long as I had them to give.

The End.

The Empire of Sleep

By Davin Ireland

Serendipity. The faculty of making happy chance finds. I wonder if Arnold Bright would have named the cottage so had he foreseen what violent caprices retirement had in store for him. Certainly, the aging clockmaker did little to deserve the untimely lot that befell him. Just toiled his whole life, saved whatever change he could spare, and patiently nurtured the ideal of a place in the countryside and a fitting epithet to his dream.

I can see the name clearly now, branded into the little cherry-wood plaque mounted above the letter-box as I wade through the gathering dusk. It is framed by an untended stand of rose trees that bracket the path to the unlit porch like ushers in florid evening wear.

Knowing that the door is always locked, I step forward and grasp the handle anyway. I jiggle it with my hand, the urgency of my efforts rattling hollowly among the eaves. A fluid stream of squeaking, frenzied shapes swirls forth from the shadows, membranous wings copperplating the air with a series of loops and meaningless curlicues.

It occurs to me that time is running out. As if to confirm this, the last of the daylight haemorrhages from the sky. The moon emerges; the bats go berserk. Then the furtive scrape of metal on wood issues from deep within the house. Yeghnazar has risen once more. Courage deserts me at this point. Retreating, stumbling, I discover that the sharpened stake at my belt has vanished along with the sinking sun.

This is only one of several recurring themes.

I emerge from this nightmare heavy-limbed and weary, like a castaway regurgitated by a restless sea. Giddy and nauseous, I stagger from bedroom to hallway to the narrow galley kitchen beyond. My eyes hurt. My throat is constricted. I down glass after glass of water then vomit a mixture of diluted blood and bile into the sink. If I don't bring this fiasco to an end soon, exhaustion will kill me as surely as any demon.

This is only to be expected. I am a reflection of that which surrounds me, and the parish is dying on its feet. During the hours of daylight, the living scuttle dazed and frightened between shops and houses like spring run-off after sudden rain. At night, jeering rivers of the undead flood the streets, seeking nourishment and amusement in equal measure. They never give up, never tire of their jaded gallows humour. Their thirst remains unquenched.

Larcombe told me I was insane to stay. He told me to flee while flight was still possible. Only the aged, the infirm and the sick will survive until the winter, he added, for those already touched by the promise of death are as shadows to the blind. Conversely, we who retain the irrecusable tang of life will be hounded into the shadows and consumed with the rapacity of aphids gobbled by a ladybug. Who can say he is wrong?

All I know for sure of is that the situation is getting desperate. There are too many of them for any one man to stop, yet my contingency plan is our only hope of salvation. If I can destroy Yeghnazar—eliminate the host, as it were—then perhaps his brethren will expire of their own accord. I have no evidence that this be the case beyond folklore and fairy tales. But still I must try. And I have a weapon to aid me. The prophetic quality of my dreams.

Thanks to those nightly visitations, I was able to sense Yeghnazar's presence the moment he entered the village. Clawing aside the drapes at dawn one morning, I peered into the raw light of summer, blood zinging, a taste like shorn metal at the back of my throat. A fat August sun

peered back at me over the sagging roof of the old Calverton homestead, its shadow the shape of a rotten molar straddling the lane that separated our opposing properties. That's when I saw him. Propped in a wheelchair, bandaged from head to foot like an inmate from a sanatorium, my new neighbour mewled like a tormented kitten as the rays of the newly-risen sun pierced his wrappings.

A week later, the live-in housemaid departed at a similar hour. A single word chalked on the pavement before her employer's abode served as her notice. *Stregoa*. This curious item of graffiti piqued my interest, and I set about verifying its meaning without delay. Variations on the word crop up in several European languages, but they all possess a common source. The nearest *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* comes is *Strigose*, which means "covered with short stiff adpressed hairs." I puzzled over this at first. Italian, French, Romanian, Hungarian—all reveal an association with hairs, bristles and brushes. Only the original Spanish provides the first hint of a deeper meaning. A supplementary interpretation of the word, plucked from a reference library archive, reads 'stiff-bristled brush; *blood-sucker*.' Unsurprisingly, it is the latter part of the definition which harks directly back to the Latin cognate.

Yeghnazar vacated his new home not long after this, and went to ground—quite literally, I was later to learn. The members of our local constabulary found him near the village outskirts, curled up in a natural hollow at the base of a dead whistle-wood tree. Badgers and foxes had further excavated the hollow before being desanguinated and despatched for their troubles. If the rumours are true, their matted husks were strewn about the twilit clearing like spent waterskins. Draped in roots and dry clods of soil, the emaciated form of the Master was in marginally better condition. Naturally, he bested the villagers and fled again, but by that time a pattern had been established. Yeghnazar was vulnerable, he could be hurt. His perpetual flight since proves this beyond doubt.

And so to the present day.

The dream of Arnold Bright's retirement cottage—poor, dead Arnold Bright, whose rural idyll was taken from him so savagely—has revealed our adversary's current lair to me. A happy chance find, indeed. And so enough is enough. I have a personal score to settle with Yeghnazar, and I have bluffed and fretted and procrastinated on this issue for far too long. The time for words is over. I must now achieve that which I have failed to realize in every dream sequence thus far: namely to confront and vanquish he who would submerge us in eternal darkness.

I gather my wits.

Murky grey light streams through the fanlight at the end of the narrow hallway. I know not if it is dawn, dusk or noon of an overcast day. It matters little. The strength returns to my limbs by slow degrees, but it is a cycle of diminishing returns. As I collect my canvas tool bag, with its cargo of sharpened stakes, I am forced to appreciate the irony of the situation.

I am the last of those able to fight the scourge that has invaded our community, yet in appearance I lack even the vitality of a freshly interred corpse. My sore eyes itch from lack of sleep; my jaw is fuzzed with week-old stubble; the ashen face I last witnessed this Friday morning can have grown no healthier in the interim. But I need not fear. The good Lord has spared me the horror of my own countenance. As I move through the hallway, the gilded mirror opposite reflects only stained wood panelling and the sunburst clock I inherited from my parents aged seventeen. Any sign of my physical aspect has long-since faded away.

Once again I am reminded of what Yeghnazar has taken from me and why he must be destroyed.

Sleep, Sleep, Little One

By Gerri Leen

There by the stream, by the road
By the church, dirty feet and a tear-

Encrusted face, you're crying but
Not too loudly because I've taught

You better than that—victims
Girls are always that and I will

Not have you abused, even if I
Can't rise, can't claw my way

Through this earth to hold you
Not until the sun has set

Little One, why won't you listen?
Why won't you sleep during the day?

So we could spend the nights safe
Perhaps not warm since my skin chills now

Instead of bringing comfort but
Together, we could be together

If you'd just go down, stay down
Tell the nightmares to go away

Yes, the shed I left you in is dusty
And there are spiders and the wind

Whistles strangely but put that aside
Sweet child that I cannot—will not

Give up no matter how hard it is to
Keep you with me in this unlife

Please, go back to safety, go back
To sleep and I'll be there when

The sun sets and the moon rises and
Bats fly past the shimmering stars

The Best Dentist in Orange County

By Tony-Paul de Vissage

The pain jerked him out of *Unsleep* like a fish being hooked from a lake.

What the Hell?

For several seconds, he didn't understand what was happening. Then the sharp burning stab again shot through his right upper canine.

I have a toothache?

It was a new sensation but not one he'd care to have for very long, Domingo decided. Since pain was little more than a vague memory, he had no idea what to do or how to stop it, so, as always, as he did when he was alive, he turned to the one person he was certain could help.

His sister, Liseta.

He was out of the black satin sheets and through the door, quite literally—Domingo never bothered with the inconvenience of *opening* a barrier—before he realized he was still naked. Materializing back to the bed, he found the robe at its foot, hastily shrugged it on, belted it, and again appeared outside in the hall.

Waving a hand, he disappeared in a trickle of dust motes.

Ysbella Liseta de Leyenda y Castillo was in the sitting room, knitting as she had through the centuries no matter where they resided, plastic needles clicking merrily.

She began the habit while they were in Spain, fashioning warm sweater-like garments for the children of the *servios* living on their father's *estacio*, and later in Paris, donated the fruits of her labours to the Little Sisters of Charity. After their hasty escape from the City of Lights one step ahead of those nasty Nazis, she continued the practice. When they settled in Orange County, following a slow progression across the United States, Dom informed her now that they were in California, no one needed heavy-weight bulky-knit pullovers. Adaptable as ever, Liseta switched to a lighter yarn and began knitting tank tops instead.

Goodwill Industries seemed particularly grateful.

As he limned again into visibility amid a swirl of mist, one hand against his right jaw, she looked up and smiled brightly.

That always annoyed him.

How could anyone be so cheerful this early in the evening?

Domingo was a midnight-owl; he didn't really get his fangs out until just before the witching hour.

Well, they were definitely out now, and aching savagely.

"Good evening, *hermanocito*. You're up early..."

Capitana Obvious.

She nodded disapprovingly at his loosely belted robe and tousled hair. "...and not dressed, either."

Brushing his hair out of his face, Dom dropped into one of the Queen Anne chairs and sprawled languidly. "Don't start, Lisi. I think I'm ill."

"*Ill?*" That startled her. The clicking needles stopped their motion. "What do you mean?"

It should be obvious, he thought. *Do I always walk around with one hand clamped to my face?*

"My fang hurts. I think I have a toothache."

"How could that happen?" She looked worried. "Have you bitten anything tough lately?"

"No." He thought a moment, grimacing as the eyetooth again sent out a vicious throb. A memory of the night before returned. "... wait... yes."

"When? Where?"

"Well..." he hedged.

"Where did you go last night?" Her tone became suspicious., much as their mother's had whenever he was faced with the consequences of some boyhood prank. "Dom..."

Domingo had a habit of lurking in the most disreputable places, close to bars and pool halls. Lately, he'd started hanging out near escort agency entrances.

He shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "Over to Laguna Beach. They were supposed to be filming a movie there and I thought it would be easy to find some prey."

"Did you?" She didn't try to hide the exasperation in her voice.

He shook his head. "Not really. I got my dates wrong. The filming's not until tonight, so the beach was nearly deserted. There were only a couple of late-night surfers available." He looked a little sheepish. "I waylaid one of them. Guess that's when I injured my fang."

The surfer had been a muscle-bound, bull-necked oaf whose jugular was iron-tough. He practically had to *gnaw* through it to get a single drop. And the bastard had the effrontery to actually put up a fight.

"Dom!" Her expression as well as her voice held irritation.

As if he were five instead of five hundred, he thought resentfully.

"I wish you wouldn't go to the beach. Who knows what the ocean could do to you? All that moving water, and salt and..."

"...the sad crying of the gulls...the whisper of the waves...the silver of the moonlight on the billows," he added, softly. "You know how I like to watch the fog roll off the water and creep slowly across the Pacific Coast Highway. And the cold, seeping into my bones, making them ache with longing. Doesn't that give you *una tembladera deliciosa*?"

He shivered with intense exaggeration.

"Such pretty sentiments, *chico*," she agreed. "You always did have the heart of a poet."

"Not any longer," he corrected, shaking his head sadly.

She looked surprised. "But of course, you do. It's in that little carved teak chest in your bedroom..."

She stopped as Domingo continued shaking his head.

"It was getting rancid. I fed it to one of the wolves on my last trip to the San Diego Zoo."

"That's too bad." Liseta looked sympathetic. "It took you so long to find the right one." She patted his shoulder comfortingly. "You'll get another, I'm certain."

With business-like concern, she dismissed his present lack of a poetic heart. "Now then...to the problem at hand. There's only one thing to do."

"And that is...?" It was becoming difficult to talk without causing more pain. Impatiently, his fingers beat a devil's tattoo upon the arm of the chair.

"You need a dentist."

"Dentist." He repeated the word as if he didn't know its meaning, giving her a slightly baleful stare. "How do you expect me to do that?"

"You simply make an appointment, and—"

"An *appointment*?"

"Is there an echo in here?" she asked with asperity. "Yes, an appointment."

"Unless I'm mistaken, *mi hermana querida*." He snapped at what he considered her obtuseness. "Dentists, like most medical people, have office hours in the *daytime*." He slapped

himself on the chest. “Hello... Vampire? Nightwalker? Keeping day appointments strictly prohibited?”

“I’m certain there must be one who has evening appointments,” she replied calmly, with the lack of concern of someone who could still walk around in daylight.

“Very well. Find one for me. In the meantime...” He stood, walking away.

“Where are you going?”

At the open doorway, he paused. “Back to bed. I feel a terrifically foul mood coming on, and I’m certain you’d rather not be subjected to it.”

Silently, Liseta watched Dom fade from view, then shrugged and returned to her knitting. *Brothers, especially baby brothers, are a pain in las nalgas.*

She was grateful Domingo had chosen her as his human servant, bestowing the prolonged lifespan accompanying that honor, though she hadn’t really appreciated the discomfort of having her blood drained to near-death to accomplish the fact. In spite of the gift of her now-extended youth, sometimes he was such a pest she wished he had actually died in 1527 instead of becoming a vampire.

Reappearing in his room, Dom was soon submerged in *Unsleep*, his pain and consciousness numbed with the aid of a half dozen aspirin tablets and a large gulp from a bottle of blood brandy filched in a detour to the wine cellar.

That was always good for any ailment.

As Castilian Jews in Ferdinand and Isabella’s Catholic-ruled Spain, the Leyendas managed to survive by pretending conversion. They flourished under the protection of their pseudo-religion—though some lamented they would’ve been better off simply declaring themselves Moors and leaving the country for *Arabia Saudita*. When the youngest son of the then-present *conde* was turned by an Undead *turista* passing through on his way to France, their actual Faith held him in good stead as young Domingo began his nocturnal depredations. While Dom fed, the *peones* bled, wielding their crosses with fervor, wondering why their holy relics had no effect against the foul fiend.

Their ignorant minds never once thought of the obvious.

Things might have gone on like that forever if something called World War Two hadn’t come along. When mortal Jews in Spain began disappearing, Dom, having no desire to be hauled away to a concentration camp minus his coffin, decided it was time to become a refugee. With the aid of his sister and their faithful servant, Emilio, they escaped first to France, then to England, and finally the United States...

...and was crossing the Atlantic ever a bitch!

When at last they arrived in California, the state had already acquired the reputation of being tolerant to unusual life forms, and was nearly overrun with actors, dancers, and other exotic denizens of the night. The Leyendas simply put their own spin on the already existing eccentricities and settled in.

They purchased real estate on the slope of a slightly isolated little foothill near the ocean and watched the town of Laguna Beach grow up around them, the Pacific Coast Highway transforming from a small road into a state-length highway connecting one end of California with the other.

In this environ, Dom roamed far and wide, loving the life-filled cities, the semi-tropical countryside, and the solitude of the beaches. In LA, he drank in the vitality as well as the often alcohol- and drug-laden blood flowing in its inhabitants' veins; in the little underground clubs, he became the ultimate Goth, enthralling vampire wannabes while luring many of his imitators within biting range.

When the beaches grew crowded with sun-worshipping surfers and frolicking, volleyball-player golden girls, he watched with envy from the shadowy safety under a pier. Often he was tempted to slather on sunscreen, pull on a pair of swim trunks and discover exactly what, if anything, salt water would do to his centuries-old body. Or, more privately, attempt swimming at night in a chlorinated pool.

Thus far, Liseta had managed to talk him out of both foolhardy ventures.

They'd been in their little California retreat for seventy years now, blending in remarkably well, and probably would have stayed that way for several seventies more if Domingo hadn't decided to munch on the iron-hard neck of that surfer.

It seemed only a few minutes before a violent knock on the door dragged him into consciousness.

"Dom? Wake up."

When he appeared barely two feet away, dishevelled and half-out of his robe, Liseta drew back with a quick hiss.

"I wish you wouldn't do that! Why don't you simply open a door and walk through?"

"It's much easier this way." His answer was sullen, both from lack of sleep and the pain now progressing from a dull ache to a high, sharp stabbing whenever he spoke. One corner of his upper lip was also displaying a noticeable swelling.

"You should open the locks once in a while. Otherwise, they're going to rust shut."

"Good," he snarled. "Then I can be certain no one gets in. What do you want, Lisi?"

"I've found you a dentist." She held up the *SBC Yellow Pages*, one acrylic-tipped finger tapping a classified ad.

Dom snatched the book from her, turning it over so he could read the advertisement.

Chanet Dental Clinic... Dr. Teissedre Chanet, DDS... Catering to the evening crowd, night owls, and daysleepers...

"You've an appointment," Liseta informed him, ignoring his bad mood. "At five o'clock."

"Lisi, darling sister..." He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "It's still daylight at five o'clock. *Daylight Savings Time*. Remember?"

Sometimes he felt as if that particular mortal contrivance had been invented specifically to inconvenience him.

"The sun won't set until at least eight."

"Then wear a coat and hat."

He considered that. “Very well.”
“And have Emilio drive you.”
He studied the ad again, and the address.

The Spectrum, Irvine.

That area held a particular fascination for Dom because it contained a large white obelisk illuminated at night by multicolored lights. It reminded Domingo of Cleopatra’s Needle, the giant four-sided monolith brought to the *Place de la Concorde* in 1833 from Egypt. He’d been fortunate to be in Paris when that antiquity arrived. Seeing it engendered an interest in *cosas antiguas*. When the King Tut Exhibit visited the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he’d haunted it—literally—for the length of its visit, causing stories of a ghost among the exhibits when he was accidentally spotted by one of the night watchmen.

“I know where this is. I’ll take myself there.”

“I think you should go in the car,” she persisted. “If you have to be anesthetized, you may not be able to fly back.”

“Anesthetized? *Unspeakable Name!* What happened to simply pulling a tooth and being done with it?”

Extractions didn’t worry Dom; his fangs would grow back. Like a snake’s.

Without waiting for an answer, he disappeared, materializing near his bed and stamping into the bathroom to begin searching for his SPF-172 sunscreen.

The white-uniformed receptionist didn’t seem the least disconcerted by the prospective patient clothed in a trench coat buttoned to the neck, its collar turned up covering his ears, leather gloves hiding his hands, sunglasses—even at seven minutes after five p.m.—and a snap-brim fedora turned so low it nearly hid his face. Or that said face was slippery with banana oil-scented sunscreen.

“Good evening...” he began.

“Hi, you must be Mr. Leyenda.”

She was so perky it tired him merely to look at her. Being ill in any form wasn’t something Dom was familiar with. It was exhausting. Briefly, he wondered if he could hang around afterward and extract a little of her energy for himself. She’d probably never miss it.

“You can put your coat and hat over there.” She gestured to a coat tree by the door, and Dom obeyed. When he looked back, she seemed slightly surprised by what he was wearing under his coat.

Ever the one for appropriate dress, he’d agonized for nearly thirty minutes over what to wear to a dental appointment. A suit was too formal, and sweats seemed overly-casual. Finally, he decided on jeans and a black T-shirt *sans* logo.

“First time here?”

He nodded without speaking. His swollen upper lip was beginning to prevent conversation. She looked sympathetic.

“In that case...” She held out a clipboard complete with paper and pen. “I need a little information.”

Dom took it, staring at the printed words and rows of blank lines. He sat and carefully wrote in his name, address, and Social Security number. He was proud of being a possessor of a

Social Security card. He and Liseta owned two so far, the first obtained soon after their arrival in the States, and the second gotten sixty years later, both using names taken from headstones in local cemeteries.

"I hope... your doctor... can help me," he enunciated carefully, reading down the page. The swollen lip was rapidly causing him to lisp.

"I'm sure she can," came her answer. "Dr. Chanet is the best dentist in Orange County. Just ask any of her patients."

"*Thee?*"

"What's that?"

"Dr. Chanet ith a *woman?*" Why should that surprise him? These days, a woman could do almost any job a man could, not like it was in the good old, bad old days.

"Yes." She frowned. "Is that a problem?"

If it was, he knew better than to say so, especially since she was probably the only dentist offering evening hours. He shook his head and concentrated on the clipboard again, signing the form and giving Dr. Chanet permission to perform dental work upon his person. He returned it to the girl.

She scanned it and frowned.

"Domingo Leyenda. That's Spanish for *Legend*, isn't it?" As he nodded, she smiled and went on, "And you live on *Sleepy Hollow Road*? Oh, please, don't tell me—you're the Legend of Sleepy Hollow?"

It was said so triumphantly, he had to laugh in spite of the pain.

"You're one of the few who've ever caught that. You're very obthervant."

...and *pretty too*, he would've added if his injured tooth hadn't chosen that moment to throb sharply.

He stayed silent, resisting the urge to drive his fist through the desktop to distract himself from the pain.

As she looked over the form, he found he was fascinated by her eyes. They were the most beautiful shade of smoky-amber, with little streaks of gold.

"I'm Aneta." As if feeling his gaze upon her, she looked up. "Aneta Florescu."

"That'th Romanian, ithn't it?" Small talk, even with a lisp, was a better diversion since smashing the desk wouldn't be too cool.

"Why, yes, it is."

"I vithited there oneth." In 1798, but he didn't tell her that. "Beautiful country... rugged mountainth... deep laketh..."

"I've never been there. I was born in this country." She became all business again. "What insurance do you have?"

"Inthurance?" *What kind of fool question is that?* "I have no inthurance."

Did she actually look surprised?

"Then... How are you planning to pay?"

"Pay? Well, I—"

This is getting damned complicated.

"Cash, check, or credit card?"

Reaching into the hip pocket of his jeans, he pulled out several folded bills. Dom owned a wallet, complete with false identification, but he rarely carried it, fearful it might get lost in his nightly prowlings and be returned by someone armed with cross and stake.

Counting out five one hundred dollar bills, he placed them on the desk, asking a little

stiffly, “Will this be thuffitthient?”

She looked slightly nonplussed. “You haven’t had any work done yet, but I’ll take this on account. Let me write you a receipt. You’ll need that for tax purposes.”

Solemnly thanking her, Dom placed the receipt in his empty pocket. He was always careful to pay his taxes like the good citizen he considered himself to be. The last thing he wanted was to be audited by some prying IRS-type. He’d bitten a politician once, and the experience was so unpalatable he swore he’d never imbibe in blood from any government official again.

“If you’ll come this way, Mr Leyenda?” She gestured him through a door to the rear of the room.

It wasn’t the mad scientist’s lab he’d expected, merely something resembling a sophisticated barber’s chair with an odd long-armed machine sitting beside it. He looked intently at the row of instruments on the little tray attached to the machine, assuring himself that, though some were pointed, none were constructed of wood or appeared long enough to be lethal.

“Just have a seat.”

When he didn’t move, she pointed to the chair.

Gingerly, Dom obeyed. The next instant, he found himself horizontal as the girl pressed a foot pedal at its base. She wrapped a large paper napkin around his neck, saying, “The doctor will be with you in a moment.”

He barely had time to seize a tissue from the box resting on the tray and swipe hastily at his face, removing some of the sunscreen, before Dr. Chanet appeared.

She was a little brunette in a white smock, as perky as her receptionist, in spite of the fact that she was snapping on latex gloves *a la Dr. Frankenfurter* as she walked through the door.

That didn’t look promising.

“Well, Mr Leyenda! So you have a toothache.” She selected an instrument and leaned toward him. The rounded end gleamed, reflecting the overhead light.

“Ith that a mirror?” He turned his head.

“Yes...?”

“You want to put that into my mouth.” His voice held a hint of a challenge.

“That’s correct.” Her tone held a patience sounding eerily like Liseta’s when he was at his most difficult. “I need to see all sides of the injured tooth.”

“No.” He shook his head, reaching up to push the little reflector away. “I mean, I’d prefer that you not...”

He must have looked distressed because she returned the instrument to the tray, saying a little doubtfully, “Very well.” She leaned forward again. “Open wide.”

Obediently, he opened his mouth, expecting a reaction as soon as she saw what it held but she simply moved closer, commenting, “You have slightly overdeveloped canines. Have you ever considered cosmetic dentistry to correct that?”

He shook his head. “It’th a family trait. I’d look odd if I changed them.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugged.

She leaned so close he could feel her breath, soft and warm, against his cheek. Tapping his fang, she ran her finger gently down its length. “You have a compression fracture of that eyetooth, Mr Leyenda. What have you been eating...jawbreakers?”

“Yeth...” He spoke around her finger. “That’th right...”

His tongue pressed against the digit, practically licking the latex covering as he spoke. Dom stifled a shiver. He'd never before had that part of a woman's body in his mouth. It was such an odd, intimate, and vaguely arousing sensation he found himself looking forward to experiencing it again. Cautiously, he took another quick lick.

She didn't seem to notice, merely straightened, regarding him unsmilingly.

"Can you repair it?" He was just as serious.

Immediately, she nodded. "No problem. But first, I'd like to take an X-ray."

"Why?"

Damn, this dental business is truly complicated. What happened to simply doing what one needed and letting it go at that?

"To make certain there's no infection. You may have an abscess starting. That would call for a root canal."

"I'd prefer not." Infection wouldn't bother him.

She seemed to realize he was going to fight whatever she suggested because she didn't argue, instead nodded. Again. "Very well. I can do a repair using an acrylic compound. It should take about half an hour."

Dom glanced at the window. It was dark outside now. He might still have time to do a little hunting tonight.

"Okay. Let's get tharted."

"There you are. Good as new. Care to take a look?"

She held out a hand mirror.

"No thanks." Again, he shied away. "I'll take your word for it."

It was good to get rid of that lisp.

"You've certainly been an unusual patient, Mr Leyenda. A good patient, but an unusual one." She removed the paper from around his neck, picking up a small box and a little long-handled brush lying on the countertop of a nearby cabinet, holding it out to him.

"What's this?" Dom looked at it as if it were a clove of garlic.

"A toothbrush." She shook it slightly, indicating he should take it.

He refused to touch it. "What do I do with it?"

With extreme patience, she explained how to use the brush, employing a plaster model of a set of upper and lower teeth also resting on the countertop. She insisted he try it on the model, applauding him as if he were a toddler balancing a set of blocks without knocking any over, a fact Dom chose to ignore.

"Do that at least once a day. Before you go to bed or after you wake, whichever you prefer." She placed the brush and box in his hands.

"I've never had one of these." He looked down at them, tapping the brush lightly against the box and saying with sudden sincerity, "This is kind of you."

"I must say your teeth are in fantastic condition, in spite of that."

"Thank you." He startled himself by smiling shyly. He slid out of the chair.

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. "Very white... and strong... and..." She shuddered slightly, before saying in a brisk tone, "Well, goodnight, Mr Leyenda... oh, before you go, would you tell me one thing?"

"Certainly." Now that the ordeal was over and he could make his escape, he was willing to answer her question.

“How long have you been a vampire?”

The box slid from his hands, striking the floor with a loud *thump*. After a long, startled pause in which they stared at each other, he bent and picked it up.

“How did you guess?”

Why bother to deny it?

She smiled slightly, and her own fangs descended. “Takes one to know one.”

“You’re *nosferatu*, also?” He couldn’t hide his astonishment, as he answered her question. “About five hundred and ninety years.”

“Wow.” She looked admiring. “You’re a real old-timer, aren’t you?”

Taking his arm, she steered him through the doorway.

He ignored that little dig, asking a more important question. “What do you intend to do about it?”

“Why should I do anything?” she shrugged.

“Well... territory... you know... if this is your domain...” He copied the shrug exactly.

“Oh,” she laughed slightly, saying *you silly old man!* without actually speaking the words. “We don’t do that anymore. There are too few of us. In fact, we’re pretty social.” She added, almost under her breath, “Except for a few of the really *ancient* ones. Can’t get those old fogies out of their crypts half the time.”

By now, they were in the reception area.

Aneta looked up as they came through the door, getting to her feet quickly. “Uh, Doctor? Your... uh...” She gestured frantically to her own white teeth.

“It’s all right, Aneta,” Dr. Chanet answered. “Mr. Leyenda’s one of us.”

The little receptionist was part of the Brethren also? Well, that killed any plans he had of sampling either lady. To do so was a definite no-no.

Strangely enough, Dom didn’t feel disappointed.

“You know, once, longer ago than I care to remember, I had my fortune told by a gypsy. During my trip to Romania, in fact.” He looked at Aneta as he spoke. “She told me someday far in the future, I’d meet two women in white who would become very important to me... and I think I’ve now met them.”

He seized Aneta’s hand and kissed it, and before she could move, did the same to the doctor’s.

“I couldn’t have asked for two prettier ones. *Mis dos palomas blancas.*”

“Flatterer.” Aneta smiled. She looked at Dr. Chanet. “He has the heart of a poet, Doctor.”

Dom’s response was automatic. “Not now, but I did once. I gave it to a wolf at the San Diego Zoo.”

The joke never seemed to get old. *Thank you, Gomez Addams.*

“Was that *you*?” He was startled by Aneta’s exclamation. The smoky eyes sparkled. “It was delicious, though a trifle rancid.”

“*You*?” He couldn’t believe it, looking from the receptionist to the doctor and back.

“But...”

“Aneta’s a *loup-garou*. She escaped about a year ago.”

He remembered the zoo’s hue-and-cry about one of their wolves disappearing.

“—and came here.”

“I went to visit those poor creatures during a full moon, and accidentally got locked in the wolves’ compound. It took me two years to get out,” Aneta explained.

Dr. Chanet placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder, adding, “We supernaturals have to stick

together.”

Dom nodded. He'd thought the same for quite some time.

In today's society all denizens of the night, even natural enemies such as vampires and werewolves, should forget their animosity and band together against the outside world. It would be easy for him, he thought, since he had an instant liking for both the doctor and her employee. He decided to act on that fondness.

“Tell me, Doctor Chanet...”

“Tess, please,” she corrected quickly.

“Tell me, Tess, what do you do after you leave the office?”

“Oh, the usual...” She sighed, rolling her eyes dramatically. “Have a warm cup of low sodium, low cholesterol diet plasma, and curl up in my coffin with a good book before drifting into *Unsleep*.”

“A coffin? I didn't think anyone used one anymore.” He intended to sound a little superior, as if to get back at her for that ‘old-timer’ dig. “I sleep in a *bed*... soil lining the mattress cover... Do you have any native soil with you?”

Reaching into the neck of her smock, she pulled out a black silk cord to which a small bag was attached. “Never leave home without it.”

Dom took a deep breath. Abruptly, he felt another sensation he hadn't experienced in several centuries.

Anxiousness.

“Tess, they're filming a movie at Laguna Beach tonight. A horror movie. I was planning on going. Would you like to come with me?”

“Oh. Well. I...” Apparently, she hadn't expected that.

He mistook her hesitation for polite refusal. “That is, if you don't think I'm too... *old*... for you?”

“I like older men, Domingo.” She smiled again, displaying an unexpected dimple as she whispered, “Most of the male Undead my own age are so... *immature*. Personally, I prefer a man with a few centuries behind him.”

“We can look over the movie star wannabes and pick up a couple to drink, then go back to my place and...” His voice dropped slightly. “...I'll show you *my* bed.”

Behind him, Aneta smiled at Dr. Chanet and gave her the ‘thumbs up’ sign.

“I think you'll like it. It's a four poster. Very strong... and sturdy... and hard.”

Dr. Chanet smiled, and Dom smiled back.

“Domingo, that's the best offer I've had in a couple of centuries.” She took his hand. “Lock up, Aneta.”

For an evening that started out so painfully, it was ending perfectly.

If I ever see that surfer again, Dom decided. I'm going to kiss the muscle-bound ox.

The End.

And All the Days and Nights Are One

By Ray Kolb

I've taken this ride, and hundreds like it, for more than thirty years. The beginning, the middle, and the end are always the same. Always ending with the same result.

Death.

And continual life, of a sort.

Munich to Warsaw

Our train had crossed the border from Austria to the Czech Republic hours before and would be at the Polish border in less than two hours, winding its way through the Carpathian Mountains with a gentle swaying back and forth through the elongated and repeated “S” curved tracks. It was the kind of trip, surrounded by nothing but jagged mountains and snow, wherein the natural mood was to stay in one’s cabin.

But Breanne needed to feed and I needed to find the meal for her.

Sitting alone in the dining car, a man gave me an honest welcoming smile. He wasn’t eating. Only a lonely glass of bourbon sat before him. He was an older man, probably close to my age, but he clearly kept himself in excellent health. He was well groomed, his full silver hair perfectly coiffed. He was dressed in simple black clothes but the attire managed to brighten his face.

I didn’t know if I could send him into Breanne’s arms. I turned away, to continue on elsewhere.

“Have a seat.”

I stopped and looked at the man.

He held a hand out to the chair opposite him. “Please,” he said. “These trips are long enough without company. I’ll buy you a drink.”

We drank and talked for more than an hour. I never caught his name nor thought to ask, instead enjoying the company of someone other than my daughter for the first time in years. I had decided that I would lie to Breanne and tell her I was unable to find a suitable candidate.

But fate had other ideas. The man asked about my family. I hesitated at first but eventually told him about Breanne, stating that she was probably asleep in our cabin by now. His face lit up. He told me about his daughter and how he missed her. He was eager to meet Breanne. I demurred for as long as seemed reasonable but finally gave in.

I should have realized that something was amiss and cancelled the dinner. Breanne was agitated almost immediately upon meeting the stranger in black. She practically hissed whenever the man addressed her or asked her a question. He either didn’t notice the hostility or ignored it. I found myself liking him more and more. Even though I wanted him to stay, to ease the unending sameness of my existence, I had decided to make him leave, for his own sake. But not right away. He could stay, for just a little more enjoyment.

Eventually, I mentioned that it was getting late and perhaps the man should leave. He looked at me curiously and then at Breanne. “Do you want me to leave?” he asked her.

She spit out her answer. “No.”

The man smiled, slapped the table playfully, and said, “Then I shall stay.” He reached for his glass of bourbon and downed the remains.

After several thinly veiled looks and pokes by Breanne, I could no longer avoid my duty. My new friend, the stranger in black, was to meet his inevitability. I excused myself to use the restroom, hoping the stranger would protest. Unsurprisingly, he expressed his pleasure at entertaining Breanne while I was gone.

I suppose in normal circumstances, if I had been a normal parent with a normal child, I should have been curious or even wary of the man’s willingness, even eagerness, at the prospect of being alone with my young daughter. But if he was a pedophile or even a child killer, on this night he wouldn’t be the biggest monster in the room.

In the early years, I’d made the mistake of returning to the cabin too soon. Walking in on one of Breanne’s feedings was a horrible vision, one I still shuddered at when remembering. The victim shaking in convulsions, eyes wide in terror, the momentary look of hope upon seeing me enter, quickly replaced with a growing resignation that I wasn’t a savior, while life was being stolen from them.

I didn’t relish the thought of disposing of the dead and bloodied body of the stranger. Wanting to cherish the illusion that we were friends for as long as I could, I took longer than usual in returning to the cabin. That extra time nearly cost Breanne her life.

The cabin door was locked. I knocked hard on the door, while at the same time uselessly trying to turn the knob again and again. I stood back and kicked at the door with all my strength. The door gave way easily, and I stared in frozen shock at the scene.

The stranger had straddled Breanne, one of his hands around her neck, the other holding a cross to her forehead. He kept repeating himself, in a trance-like state, “God condemns your soul to hell.”

Breanne’s eyes were blood red, her mouth wide in a silent scream, her fangs exposed and seeking flesh. The cross was burning its form into her forehead.

My immediate instinct was to pull the man away from my daughter, the beloved of my life, the only thing I still lived for. But I stopped. She was a monster. She wasn’t my daughter, not really, even though she still had the memories and experiences of before. But she still looked exactly like my daughter. She hadn’t changed in appearance—except for the deadness and moral decay behind her eyes—for more than thirty years.

I remembered a conversation with another parent, before the change, when Breanne was just starting school. Both of us had commiserated woefully that it was too bad our children had to grow up. How wonderful it would have been to keep them as they were. Oh, to take back those words, to never have that desire come true. I should have watched her grow into a young woman, given her away at her wedding, welcomed her children to the world, and spoiled them as the grandfather I’d never be.

I shook myself from my internal reflections. I was her father, no matter what. Even more

so than in a marriage, where you accept the good with the bad, I was her protector. I was her father.

I grabbed the man in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his side, and pulled him away from my daughter. Breanne immediately rose up, jumping on the stranger's head, digging her fangs deep into his left cheek. He screamed and I tried to turn away as my daughter ate his face.

Sometimes, during the daylight when Breanne is resting, encased in dirt that is wrapped tightly within blankets, I dare to ask myself how can I condone and even facilitate the actions of this monster. I don't believe the lies I tell myself anymore. That without me to guide her that she would kill indiscriminately, that far more people would die. Isn't it better that I control her need, allowing her to kill only when her own life depends upon it?

But I don't do it for her, or to control her, but to be with her. I lost her mother forever on a trip to Romania when she tried to save our daughter from a monster who just needed to feed. I cannot lose Breanne, at least what is left of her. I believe, I have to believe, that some part of my little girl is still alive within. Because if she is not, am I any less a monster than her?

Breanne and I depart at Krakow, an apropos point of departure no doubt. The cabin has been booked until Warsaw under a fake name and passport. By the time the authorities realize the crime, if the lax and corrupt Polish authorities discover it at all, both Breanne and I will be on another train leading somewhere else. Perhaps Berlin. Perhaps Kiev.

The destination matters not. All the days and nights are one.

The End.

Anita

By Ewa Mazierska

It was one of the worst days in our lives when mother told me and Patrick that she was pregnant. We didn't want to have siblings; our house was too small even for its current inhabitants and we didn't have a father who would look after us—he was a drunkard, who disappeared from home for extended periods. We were like a family from a Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence novel, except that we were born well into the end of the twentieth century. But it only made our predicament worse, as we felt that we were not only economically disadvantaged, but frozen in time. Another child would render us even more backward.

We were especially incensed by the fact that the pregnancy was planned by our mother – it was her ploy to keep our father at home. She assumed that he would take pity on her and give up his lover. Instead, upon learning that his wife got pregnant, our father left her for good. In due course, his lover kicked him out, but he still didn't return to his wife.

Mother must have been so despondent by this situation that she became distracted and careless, and one day she was hit by a car near our house in Chorley, whose driver ran away. Subsequently she spent two months in hospital, while we were looked after by our aunt and social services, neither of whom we liked. This period made Patrick and me realise that things can always get worse. Lying in bed, we'd invent such situations. For example, Patrick died and I was on my own, or vice versa, or my mother died in childbirth or survived, but returned home in a wheelchair. The child was disabled and mother was unable to look after her (by this point we knew that mother was expecting a daughter). We were put with two different foster families, and never saw each other again.

These stories did not reflect our natural penchant for omens or pessimism, but a need to prepare ourselves for whatever might happen in our lives. We also believed that once we invented the worst-case scenario, we would eliminate it from reality. But even without experiencing these situations, Patrick was miserable and once, in the middle of the night, he said: "I can't live like this. I want to die." But he didn't die. Being only ten, he didn't even know how to commit suicide. Moreover, I wanted him to carry on living, for his and my own sake. This was because I wouldn't have anybody left, if he died. By this point the new child didn't matter; we didn't treat her as one of us.

Yet, not everything was hopeless in our lives. We did well at school and had some friends, although because they were from better families, we kept them at a distance as we didn't want them to know about our situation. We were too proud to stand anybody's pity.

Eventually the child was born, six weeks prematurely. Mother decided to name her Anita. This wasn't a name she liked particularly, but she said that it was the name she was given by the woman who was in the car which hit her. Apparently, this woman didn't run away, as we thought, but left the car, put her hand on her belly and said "Welcome Anita"—and only then drove away. I found the story bizarre and most likely a reflection of Mother's trauma. I wanted my sister to be called Chloe, but mother was adamant that Anita was the right name for the newcomer and so Anita she was. The child and mother stayed in the hospital for almost a month after the birth, due to the poor health of both of them. We were told that it was a miracle that Anita survived as on two occasions it felt as if she crossed the line dividing life and death – the first time when mother was hit by the car and the second time when she was giving birth and Anita's heart stopped beating. Yet, on each occasion she pulled through. The male doctor told us

this not to scare us, but to prepare us for the problems which we might have with our little sister—as if we didn't have enough problems without her.

When Patrick and I saw Anita for the first time, she looked thin, pale and sickly. According to Patrick, she looked like an alien, not a human being. But I thought she looked a bit like me and despite her poor state, there was a certain alertness about her. One could feel that she gazed at us with interest and even attempted a smile. This moved me. I kissed her and cuddled her and asked mother if I could carry Anita on the way home. Another reason why I wanted to do it was that I didn't trust Mother. The accident, the effort of giving birth and the long period of hospitalisation made her weak and unfit to look after a baby. She even couldn't walk properly, but had a limp, and there was a danger that the baby would slip from her arms when her body leaned more to the limping side. Mother agreed and thus, even though I was only eight, I was the one who brought Anita to her new home and put her in her new bed, which was in fact an old bed – one used previously by Patrick and myself. The bed stayed in Mother's bedroom, but she told me to 'sleep light', in case something happened to the girl.

Unlike me, Patrick didn't warm to our sister—he found her disgusting and a nuisance, and he regarded the whole situation embarrassing. Although he didn't say it, he was also jealous of the attention I was giving Anita. I told him that if we both looked after our little sister, this would bring us even closer together, but he disagreed. He kept saying that she came into our life to put a wedge between us.

"How can a defenceless baby come up with such a plan?" I asked, rhetorically, but he answered as if it was a proper question:

"She is not defenceless, I'm not even sure she is a baby," he said, kicking the leg of the bed, as if he wanted to harm the child, but had no courage to do it.

"Stop it," I said, crying, to which he reacted by leaving the house.

In the first years of her existence Anita did not develop as normal children do. She ate very little, throwing up most of the food she was given, and grew little. Neither did her hair grow; she was bald and her nails were as delicate and transparent as thin plastic foil. The doctors and nurses pointed to two problems with our sister. One was the lack of iron, causing anaemia; another was a heart defect, which put her on the threshold of death. Often at night my mother would run into my room, telling me that Anita had died, and it seemed that way, as she was very cold and her heart had stopped beating. But when I brought her to my bed, took off her clothes and put her next to my body, she warmed up, her heart started to beat and her eyes opened up as if she was waking from a deep sleep. So mother used me more and more at night and eventually it was agreed that Anita and I would sleep together in one bed.

At two, Anita was still unable to walk or say more than five words. However, among those early words was my name, "Eve," maybe because it was easy to say or because I was the one who was always checking on her and talking to her. When Anita grew a bit, she learnt to catch my hand over her bed and put it on her heart as if to reassure me that it worked well. By this point Patrick called our sister a "retard" on the account of what she couldn't do, but I had a feeling that she wasn't lagging behind her peers; she just developed differently from them. Still, I felt like she lacked something, which prevented her from reaching her potential.

One day a neighbour came by with something in her bag. It turned out to be a pig's heart. She said that she was in the countryside and was invited to attend the slaughtering of a pig at an organic farm. According to this new fashion, meat-eaters were encouraged to see animals being killed or even do it themselves rather than leaving this unpleasant task to illegal immigrants or the poor. The neighbour, who liked to be in tune with the times, did so and said it was fine for

her to look at the dying pig: it went fast and smooth. What concerned her, however, was that so much of the meat was left to waste, as English people stopped eating many parts of the pig. It occurred to her to request the heart, thinking about our anaemic Anita, as she remembered that organ meat was an important source of iron. Our mother looked on in dismay at the piece wrapped in the blood-soaked paper, as she herself never ate any offal, but I said: “Let’s give it a try. It wouldn’t harm Anita. If she doesn’t like it, she will throw it up.”

We cut two small pieces of the heart and of those one I fried in olive oil and the other I stewed with butter and some milk. I cut the cooked meat into small pieces and waited till it was the right temperature before offering it to Anita. To our surprise, she ate everything and wanted more, so I cooked her more, even though my mother was worried that so much food would kill her, given how little she ate normally. By the time she went to sleep, she ate half of the pig’s heart.

The next day she ate the rest of the heart and so we started to feed her organ meat. By this time, I was myself vegetarian, soon to become vegan and people who stuffed themselves with meat repulsed me. But not Anita, because I felt that she gorged on meat not out of greed, but of necessity. And I was proven right. In the year when she was given the hearts and livers of animals, she learnt to walk and talk. Our conversations during this period were simple, but contained ideas which were unusual for a child of Anita’s age. Most importantly, she understood that sleep was similar to death and she asked me to wake her up when she was about to die. When I asked her how to do it, she showed me my heart – it was my heart which was meant to put her heart into movement, give her life.

At this point my brother stopped calling Anita “retard” and started to call her “cannibal.” It was meant to be a joke, but I didn’t find it funny. Anita didn’t call him names in revenge, but didn’t use his name either. For her Patrick was “he.”

Because of her strange food preferences, weak heart and the sense that she was a child like no other, mother and I were reluctant to send Anita to the nursery, but eventually the decision was made for her to go, as mother needed a full-time job to feed and clothe us. She also needed to leave home, because at home she felt entrapped.

The nursery teachers lacked the time or intelligence to see how unusual Anita was. They only noticed that she was a “shy child,” that she “kept herself to herself,” but this was okay because there were many kids like her in this respect. They also mentioned that she ate little and often fell asleep, paradoxically not when there was peace in the room, but when there was the greatest noise, and her sleep was very deep.

I was worried that due to being so idiosyncratic and unsocial, my sister might be bullied by the other children, so I tried to explain to her that she needed to stay on good terms with her peers. This was unnecessary, as Anita understood it herself. She learnt to imitate and blend in with the other kids, without being truly involved with them. And the other kids liked her, because she was very good at games and solving problems, yet not competitive or aggressive.

Anita didn’t mind the nursery apart from her hunger. Mother asked if it would be possible to cook offal for Anita in the nursery or microwave meat she cooked herself, but both requests were rejected on the grounds of food safety and creating a precedence which would lead to providing a hundred kids with a hundred different meals and thus adding to the workload of already overworked dinner ladies. To cut Anita’s suffering mother and I tried to collect Anita earlier from the nursery. Although I was myself only a child, I was allowed to do so and Anita preferred if it was me who brought her home. This was because we had much to talk about and I allowed her to eat uncooked meat and didn’t restrict its amount. I found my way to an abattoir

where I bought a lot of offal for very little money from Eastern European workers who liked to sell things on the side. To afford it, I earned extra money doing errands for our elderly neighbours.

By the time she was three, Anita had caught up with her peers in terms of size. When she started primary school, she was taller than most girls in her class. She was also more inquisitive. She wanted to know why life was based on killing; why people couldn't be like the gods or angels who populated the books in the Catholic school she attended, who were born without any material urges. I replied that such creatures existed only in the human imagination; real living things were part of a food chain.

"Who made the world this way?" she asked.

"It made itself, most likely," I replied.

"No," she said. "There must be a god."

"Most likely there is no god," I replied. "Can we change the world so we don't need to kill?"

"Maybe, but better leave things as they are and look the other way."

This is what I tried to do when visiting abattoirs, but it did not work that well. Straight after such visits I was sick and at night I had dreams about plunging knives into the throats or hearts of pigs which fell on me with their heavy bodies. And such dreams were nothing in comparison with what happened later.

When Anita was nine, a child was murdered in the school toilet. The hypothesis was that the perpetrator entered the school undetected, did his gruesome deed and then left, again without attracting anybody's attention. But I knew it was Anita.

"Why did you do it?" I asked her, when this information became public.

"I was very hungry and angry, and couldn't control myself," she said.

There wasn't much remorse in her voice; it felt as if she was just stating the fact.

"How did you do it?" I asked, although I didn't really want to know.

"With a knife."

This information suggested that Anita had prepared herself for her act, which on one hand scared me even more, but on the other hand suggested that she was aware of the danger of being caught and took the necessary precautions.

"You don't need to kill people," I said to her. "You can eat animal offal, as before. I can get more of it for you," I said.

"You will have to work yourself to death to get me as much food as I need, and I need what is warm and hasn't been re-heated," she said with a smile, satisfied with her ability to use cryptic language, which she most likely got from me. "Besides, you told me yourself to do what I want to and look the other way."

Seeing me sulking, she added: "Better kill me than make me starve. But I assure you I won't do it at school again. It's too dangerous. I couldn't breathe in this toilet out of fear. And when it was over, I peed myself and had to throw away my pants and tights."

"Hopefully you haven't left them in the toilet," I said.

"No, I put in a plastic bag and left it in a bin near the market." I couldn't kill my sister, but I hoped to contain Anita's murderous urges, in the same way Dexter's father from the famous American series was able to channel his son's need for blood. The thought that I would have to devote my life to this task was comforting, because it meant being liberated from other pursuits which, I expected, would bring me frustration and most likely be futile, such as having a family of my own.

The most important thing was to ensure that Anita remained safe, when following her affliction. Hence, we agreed that she wouldn't kill anybody from Chorley or even Preston. The closest acceptable place she could go in search for victims was Manchester, but she didn't like Manchester, claiming that the city was "too open." Blackpool was ideal, but being socially-minded, she decided to leave Blackpool in peace, as she didn't want to ruin its fragile economy. Hence, she kept going to Lancaster and York, before she moved her operations to London, where her deeds disappeared in the sea of what was labelled "knife crime."

Several years after Anita's first "accident," I chose to study serology, to get access to blood banks, thinking that human blood was what Anita really was after. My sister, however, was dismissive: "I'm after prey, not just blood. You couldn't do anything about it. But maybe you can find out why I am the way I am."

This was, however, difficult. The answer, for sure, wasn't in Anita's blood, as she had O+, the most common blood group in the UK. Maybe it was in the experience of other people with family members like our sister.

The internet was already in existence when I started to enquire, but people did not advertise that they had vampires at home, most likely in fear of losing them. So, as a substitute, I joined clubs for families searching for help with dealing with violent children. However, such meetings only confirmed my suspicion that Anita was nothing like an ordinary psychopath. I was also put off by the ease with which these people disowned their relatives, seeking the most feeble excuses to claim that they did not truly belong to their families, and the pressure to open up, which I resisted the greater the pressure. After several months I gave up, accepting that I would never find out the truth. Still, I never lost interest in Anita's condition, trying to read everything that was available about vampires, past and present. One thing which I learnt was that the ascent of a vampire marked the break of the social order. The vampire, even if himself or herself was not a revolutionary, marked the ascent of the revolution. However, in England at the time there was no sign or even talk of a revolution, only the woolly "greens" talked about a need for a green revolution, yet without offering anything practical.

Paradoxically, once my brother discovered Anita's true nature, he warmed to her. He provided her with the first knife, as she needed one which only adults could buy. He was even proud of her, because she wasn't a weakling like our mother or me. When Anita left home for her he sat at home, drinking red wine, as if he wanted to salute her or even imagined himself accompanying her. He told me that thanks to Anita he felt more self-confident, even invincible, as if he suffered from Munchausen Syndrome. He also suggested that I should bask in our sister's dark glory, because Anita made all of us special.

It turned out that Patrick was more of the "Dexter's father" in relation to Anita than me, as he directed her to potential victims: paedophiles, members of grooming gangs, drug dealers and rich people, who in his view deserved to die. He identified the spots where she could meet them—the rest depended on Anita. The important thing was to meet them one on one, because she was only a girl, even though she was tall and strong as for her age.

Her task was to kill them quickly, suck their blood and free them of their valuables. It was Patrick who exchanged the jewellery, watches and mobile phones for cash; they typically didn't do anything about the credit cards. The earnings weren't huge, but allowed Patrick and Anita to go through the university without taking any jobs or maintenance loans and made them look comfortably middle class. On a couple of occasions when the booty was significant: more than twenty thousand pounds, they put it in the bank. They suggested that I share in their profit, but I refused to do it, as I didn't want to have "blood on my hands." On reflection, it was a stupid

thing to do, because, metaphorically speaking, I had almost as much blood on my hands as Patrick, and my aloofness drew a wedge between me and my siblings. While I shared their worries, I was left out of their joy, consisting, for example, of learning the identities of Anita's victims, which were often revealed in the news, together with wrong explanations of their deaths, which immensely amused them, till they got used to the ineptness and lack of the imagination of the British police. Typically, the deaths were attributed to turf wars and personal conflicts, while in fact it was Anita's interventions which led to subsequent turf wars and personal vendettas. It never occurred to the investigators that there was something highly unnatural in the paleness of these victims, perhaps because a large proportion of them were brown, black or mixed race. In relation to these crimes, the police visited us only once. It happened when our father was found dead. In this case, however, neither of us was regarded as a suspect; we were simply asked if we knew anybody who could hold any grudges against him, given that he had some debts. His death, besides, was different to those of Anita's other victims. She let him die slowly and didn't drink his blood, finding him too disgusting to dismember. There was, however, one case, when we were traced by a relative of Anita's victim: a sister of a drug dealer. This man, whose name was Tom, took Anita's photo in a bar and it was the last photo on his phone and, indeed, the last trace of his activities. For some reason the police ignored it and the resourceful woman decided to trace Anita on her own. Although by this point the technologies of facial recognition were in their infancy, and I couldn't imagine a different way of uncovering Anita's identity, the girl, named Sophia, succeeded and one day arranged to meet her.

I decided to be present at the meeting, even though I knew that my sister had enough intelligence to handle the situation. Indeed, she told Sophia that she and Tom parted ways before having sex and that most likely he had another meeting afterwards which proved deadly. Sophia appeared to accept this explanation, but later she kept stalking me, asking me questions about Anita. She managed to discover that my sister was linked to two more violent deaths: that of our father and a girl in her class. After a year or so, when I asked her to leave us in peace, she caught me at work and told me that she knew it was Anita who killed her brother and it was my duty to report her to the police—otherwise more people would suffer. After this encounter we had a family council and decided that Sophia needed to disappear too. Anita took care of this assignment. However, she did not use Sophia as nourishment, as we wanted her death to be as different from the death of her brother as possible, and also for her to die as dignified a death as the circumstances allowed.

Needless to add, it was distressing to see somebody who cared so much about Anita's victim and learn that this victim was an extremely nice, harmless and talented young man with a life ahead of him. However, being a relative of a vampire means that there is no time for sentimentality, and hypocrisy is something I always loathed.

Several months after Sophia's death Anita moved to Australia, where she got a job at a university, as a lecturer in chemistry. I assumed that she went so far away to prevent me from monitoring her life and also not to cause me extra worry. But instead I worried all the time, about all these people who were my sister's prey and about her being caught. Carrying this secret made me wary of people. I felt like I couldn't be close to anybody because I couldn't share this secret with anyone, yet without sharing it I couldn't be intimate and I would stay lonely. For Patrick this wasn't a problem. He even enjoyed the fact that, except for his blood family (he pronounced the word 'blood' in a special way, to point to its double meaning and make a joke with it), nobody knew who we really were; it gave him power over his friends and girlfriends especially. In fact, he was so proud to have a vampire sister that on occasion he hinted at this fact, making

me anxious that somebody would eventually decide to investigate. Yet, nothing like that ever happened; Patrick's friends took him for a joker.

Anita's departure to Australia also affected our mother. While throughout Anita's childhood and teenage years she avoided her youngest daughter, aware that she wasn't in a position to look after her, once she was out of her sight, she invented stories which were meant to prove she was a good mother to her and they enjoyed each other's company. The longer Anita was living abroad, the closer mother felt to her. To strengthen this narrative, she even attributed to me certain of Anita's characteristics, and vice versa. I became the one who was very fussy about food, while my sister was the one who ate everything which was put on the table, even humble haggis and trotters. On occasion, and especially when her health was ailing, she also mused on the accident during her pregnancy, telling me how much she suffered from it and prayed to save the injured child, although I knew that this was a blatant lie—Anita's survival was a nuisance for mother. The only thing which was of interest to me was that the more time was passing, the more she remembered the accident and claimed that one of the two women who left the car looked like Anita.

Anita was reluctant to return to England and neither did she want us to visit her. Besides, for mother and me it was difficult, because in her old age mother was unable to leave home and I was looking after her.

Yet, there were situations when Anita felt obliged to return. One of them was Patrick's wedding; another was the birth of his first child: a boy named Alan, who was lovely, but caused me to mourn doubly all these lovely boys and girls whom my brother and myself prevented from being conceived. Anita didn't stay for long, though, citing a situation at her work as a reason to return. I knew, however, that it was hunger which she didn't want to quench in England, which made her hurry. I tried not to quiz her about her lifestyle, but once I couldn't resist and asked her how she found her prey.

"In Australia it's easy. There's plenty of space, plenty of people walking without a purpose, tourists and locals, waiting for something interesting to happen. So I happen to them and I feel as if they are happy about our encounter. Sometimes I tell them: "I'm blood-thirsty. Will you be able to satisfy me?" and they say "Yes" and you know what happens next. People there are also juicier and their blood tastes better – it's enough for me to hunt once a month and not to go hungry. They also have better knives – the best in the world."

"That's great," I said, even though I knew this word was inappropriate.

The next time Anita came was for mother's funeral. Although the occasion was sombre and the weather was a typical wet, cloudy Northern English spring, we had a good time. I felt like I finally 'reclaimed' my sister. She slept with me in my old bed, clutching to my back and I heard her heart beating in its typical irregular way, stopping from time to time.

Before she returned to Australia, I came across an article on a website called "New Science," a space for renegade scientists and charlatans, as its very title suggested, which I nevertheless consumed avidly. Its title was "HIV and Vampire Virus as a Response to Overpopulation." Its author, from the United States, had come up with the theory that the AIDS epidemic was a response of some responsible scientists to the threat of overpopulation and in the last instance destruction of humanity. AIDS was a contagious illness which was meant to wipe out large swathes of the world, as was the case before with the plague. But it did not happen, because the disease was so public—at some stage everybody was talking about it and huge resources were put into containing it. So a new virus was introduced, which the author described as a "vampire virus." People who got it needed the blood of fellow humans, but also a certain

way to access it—by drinking it directly from the body. In a nutshell, they became murderers, which is something the sick and their families kept to themselves. Moreover, the cases of vampirism were mis-diagnosed, mostly being attributed to ordinary crimes, hence preventing seeking a cure. Unlike AIDS, the illness spread discreetly, causing a triple reduction of lives: of the vampires themselves, who usually died before reaching thirty, their victims and those to whom they passed on their virus. I was curious how the virus was passed, but this was meant to be published in the follow-up article which, however, was not published.

Shivers went through my spine as I was reading it. I was thinking about contacting the author, but there was no affiliation or an e-mail address. Obviously, he wrote this piece incognito. Maybe he was himself a member of the group of these dark scientists, concerned about climate change, who decided to break rank. I wondered whether I should tell Anita about this, as she always wanted to know how and why she became a vampire, but something prevented me from doing this.

The next time when Anita came, she was in no hurry to return. She said that she took a leave of absence from her work to recuperate and she wanted to stay with me longer, maybe as long as a year. I knew what it meant—she would have to hunt. This thought freaked me out but I didn't say anything, as the pleasure of having her at home was greater than any negative feelings I had.

For the first two weeks of her stay I also took a holiday so we could travel together: to the Yorkshire Dales, the Lake District and the Peak District. She said that only in Australia did she realise that she never learned about England. She only knew Chorley and London.

When we were returning from one such trip a woman ran in front of my car and I hit her. I jumped out and noticed with relief that I hadn't killed her. Indeed, she appeared to be unharmed, although was shocked. I also noticed that she was pregnant.

"We must take you to the hospital," I said, to which she said nothing, only looked at me with empty eyes.

"Leave her," said Anita. "She will be fine," and then she put her hand on the belly of the woman and said to what was inside her: "Welcome Chloe. Be brave!"

I knew that it was wrong to leave this woman like that, but had no strength to refuse Anita. When we were driving away, I noticed that my sister was getting pale, but not in her usual glowing way, but yellowish-ashy. Her breathing became weaker and once we reached home, she didn't have enough strength to leave the car. I thus carried her in my arms, surprised how light she was. She reminded me of the day when I brought her home from the hospital, shortly after she was born. I took off our clothes and put her body on top of me, so that our hearts could meet, as I did when Anita was a child. But this didn't help; within minutes she died. I started to cry and was crying for hours, not sure whether more out of sorrow of losing Anita or losing my purpose in life. But then it occurred to me that in a couple of months somewhere not far from my home a pale and sick child would be born. Should I seek the little Chloe or let fate decide about her future? I still have several weeks to make up my mind.

Oh, Madeline

By H.L. Dowless

The rhythmic melody of the seductive sirens' whispering chant rode upon the midday wind. Inviting, enticing, hexing, seizing hold of mortal mind, invading the very heart, and capturing the very soul. It was a low whisper, it was at first, then it increased in its gradual volume, until the very curiosity aroused, and one's resistance to it dulled just as gradually.

This rhythm continued in perpetuity; *enticing, hexing, mesmerizing*, and there was no escape into the secular world about. Indeed, no matter where the physical body raced to find solitude, *there was none*. Be it down the street, into the cellar, into the secluded closet, behind closed doors of one's fortress walls; behold, even into deep, most dark and dreary woods, there was *no escape!* The chanting rhythmic song sang on the very wind, breathed into the heaving lungs, enticing, motivating, employing the brain, the legs, the arms..., *until there was no resistance..* Here, on this very page I shall declare, any desire to fight was literally vacuumed from the soul's deepest pit!

The legs were then forced, compelled beyond imagination, to move into a forced direction with the same compulsion that a magnet bears when near the opposing end of another. Even in spite of the very imagination desiring the body at a specific destination, the legs ambled forward as though going by their own free will, in absence of the mind. The hands may grasp and railings, the arms may wrap the light stands, but the allure grows with more intensity..., and the eyes inform the mind of this new direction..., in absence of any permission from the mind. Soon the mesmerizing song grows in volume and intensity until every sound the ears behold..., is of an eerie, haunting beckoning.

The eyes behold the sidewalk path that leads toward an ancient two story brick home, eerily speaking of wealth and glory somewhat faded. The feet then transport the body forward, to the direction in the song of the occultist siren. Slowly they enter into the threshold, now into the foyer, and the eyes behold the large extravagant, upward winding wooden staircase. The hands feel and grasp the railing as the feet slowly..., *ever so gradually...*, slink their way upward toward the rhythm of the haunting chant..., that spellbinding, rhythmic chant, pulling even at the very heart and soul. Slowly..., ever so gently..., they walk..., one foot in front of the other..., until they take that last step onto an ancient creaking heartwood floor of a spellbinding candle lit hallway.

Now the force of the song, the power of the melody, was so intense, so heavy, that any resistance was out of mind; no thoughts of such anywhere near. The eyes beheld a door ajar in the dreamy distance, and the ears could perceive this melodious song, that chanting, melodious rhythm, so vigorously pulling the limbs forward. The very heart raced with an intensity as though it desired to leap from its very seat so firmly inside the breast. The mind energetically attempted to overpower the attraction of the song, the hands seized hold of the railing tugging the body backwards, now backwards toward the staircase; but the might of the song *always* prevailed..., yes it always prevailed..., until the body found itself standing before the door..., *yes, that very door!* The heart raced with tremendous intensity, to the point that the breath heaved, causing the mind to feel as though it would only cease, and the body grow limp.

The sweating trembling hands gingerly nudged the door, and the door silently..., *thankfully silently...*, eased open, allowing the eyes to behold this specter of a conjuring nymph, as she whispered her enchanting song, riding forth upon the heavenly wind. She sat about in a long sable silky satin dress upon a large lace covered canopy adorned, feather bed mattress, gazing

into a bronze hand held mirror, gently caressing a solid gold crucifix that she bore on a chain of emerald and gold, about her pallid neck. As she spoke into the mirror, she moved her hands about the crucifix in a caressing, loving stroke of compulsion.., as though she were speaking so lovingly unto an unseen presence.

The eyes then beheld a vapor, *a somber mist*, arising forth from the crucifix into the mirror, then moved forth from the mirror into the room surrounding. The mist, this haunting hideous mist.., then assumed the shape of an apparition, whose form the eyes soon beheld and the mind comprehended. The form..,this human form..,developing to the rhythm of the chanting, hexing, song of the nymph..; soon bore a chilling face, a face of intrepid evil, of wisdom but for the purpose of forever incarcerating those poor weeping souls of the damned.

The heart raced harder and faster, the hands dripped with ice cold sweat, then the mind and the legs desired a magnificent swift escape..; but now a strange curiosity compelled the body to simply *stay put*, for the eyes wished to observe, in order that the mind might give divine interpretation.

The apparition then slowly turned it's dark head until it's face met the concealed eyes at the door. It's face was of a horrid description, so dreadful that the eyes could not bear to see, and flowing tears welled up to conceal the face that stood before them. This baneful face had a mouth, a mouth that cracked into a smile, a smile that betrayed the fact it had forced the feeble body of an unfortunate mortal to propel the soul forward into its clutches. *There was no escape*, nowhere to hide, and now the body stood before that evil one, that nefarious mist of perdition, of Beelzebub and those legions of the damned.

The mouth parted, for those forces of evil had compelled the heart to *love*, to tumble deeply into a manipulating power of adoration standing beyond all mortal knowledge and comprehension.

"*Madeline*," whispered the voice from within the breast, yea, that fearful trembling voice. But her ears heard not, and her mind made no response to acknowledgment of the body's existence, as it stood so perplexingly patiently by the door. The mouth parted once again.

"*Madeline!*," but still no response, only the chanting rhythm into the black stone mirror, a stone that was encased in solid brass. Her melodious chanting song still enticing the soul into her somber entwine, as the carving mind beheld this vision of a greatly anticipated embrace.

"*Madeline!*," whispered the voice from the lips and the heaving breast, even though the demon of enchantment still stood before the body, only to smile it's smile of successful capture, it's eternal clutch of mortal soul.

Still no response, no hint of knowledge that the nymph was aware of this body standing concealed behind the door. That befouled nymph, that hazed, damned, tainted, bewitching nymph; but the mind was *innocent!*.., innocent of any condemning judgment, emanating in the desire thrust upon it born from the might of the demon.., and the corroding lust of mortal flesh.

The lust of the flesh now blinded those mortal eyes, and the wisdom to discern that lay within the depths of the mind. The might of scorned desire now swelled within the breast.., the increased racing of the heart, the sweating of the hands, and the tainted sweat of the arms, staining and corrupting the silk shirt of the mortal body.

"*Madeline!*," sharply whispered the parting lips on the wind, but now with more compulsion, more desire. She arose from the bedside, her body turning toward the one who stood behind the door; her eyes now meeting those eyes, her pale face and blood red lips smiled.., a beckoning smile of lucid compelling desire. Her breath blew her enchanted whisper into a stirring wind, having no discernible source.

“*Christopher!*”

The spoken name seemed to echo throughout the contours of the home.

Her mind knew not nor cared not about the demon who once stood before her, nor did it recall her beckoning the forces of darkness. Her pallid hands rose toward her neck, as her feet seemed to glide toward the gently opening door. Softly, *ever so softly*, her glittering satin dress gently glided from her breasts, now gliding upon her hips, and finally onto the floor at her gentle feet. Her totally nude body eased its way into the embrace of the mortal, who now stood breathlessly mesmerized in the opened doorway.

The door now closed by itself behind him, this mortal, and his lips hungrily embraced those lipstick adorned lips born by that wanton angel of the damned. His heart now knew *no resistance*, the lure of her poison was that of the luscious *belladonna rose*; the euphoria, the phantasm and thrill of the moment..., *in spite of the demon's continuing presence!* The eyes of the mortal gazed about, but the demon vaporized, and the mind sought to push the facts of what it so clearly beheld into the closet of deepest repression. This nymph, this befouled scorned angel of the damned, still yet singing her mesmerizing song, compelling his feet and his heart forward into her tainted embrace.

She spoke of love, behold, she spoke of commitment; she spoke only of her soul covenant with him, her forsaking of the past and all others with it! In the mind of the mortal he knew that simply by being in that very place, he was sealing his own fate, the fate of his future, the fate even of his parent's contentment and joy, that elderly joy of completion and fulfillment!; but he could not resist the euphoria..., that carnal ecstasy..., this tarnishing thrill he at times so deeply craved and never totally satisfied. Not so much the thrill of disobeying any rules of the preordained, but the thrill of experience, the thrill of only living the mortal's life in a secular world, and simply making the best out of it.

Her house was a nest of impaired angelic bliss, of nymphs uninhibited, of those who were eternally damned, but dwelt inside the sacred bliss of total ignorance. That dreaded phantom, that angel of death, had seized up her father on the very day of her birth..., or at least the one who she was told had conspired to grant her birth.

Her mother knew no limitations, made no commitments, contenting herself in the trance of roborant herbs and fruitless pondering. She sold the entrancing herb of the ancients, and the pleasures of the flesh for a healthy farthing of gold, or necklace of precious pearl, ring of gem, or diamond decoration'. She bore no limitations, and so those of whom delighted in her company, were compelled to repeat the enchantment, that cheer filled tingle of a crying delight.

The crash of the clear sapphire beach, the cool rise of heavenly smokey hollows, the taste of the virgin agave, were all theirs simply by the asking; the sands of warm island shores..., all for the simple asking and with no limitations. Yes..., the demon was a skillful trapper!

All the while she whispered of love and eternal adoration, that befouled, wasted nymph from tarnished mansion glory. All around were mesmerized, hypnotized by the power of her spell. The glitter of her gold silenced any who knew the truth, and intimidated any of whom attempted to inquire.

By a flowing riverside we walked for hours, speaking of time well spent, of future plans. My mind attempted to chastise my heart and my poor soul, but my heart would never listen to the urgent warning; though the demon appeared right beside us, giving us his shadowy blessing. Though my eyes beheld it, but only to compel my mind to push it inside a repressed closet once again. When my eyes glanced up from our nebulous embrace, that wicked apparition only vanished once more again. His task was well done, our infinite fate was perfectly secured into his

clutch!

In the holy temple she spoke of saintly acts, giving chastisement unto those of whom had so blatantly violated the sacred regulations of the preordained. Her lips spoke only of acts born in the name of kindness, in the sacred name of holiness, betraying no defilement in the company of secular men. Those among the holy delighted in her presence...*as she hugged the children...*, as she spoke such kind words into the despairing ears of the diseased elderly, and those of whom humanity both ignored and despised.

Behold, she did give homage unto the holy cross, curtsying, bowing in humble sacrilege, kissing, caressing that most sacred of books, while singing hymns of praise unto the glorious one on high. In daylight among the mortals she did praise with ardor and solemn vigor, clutching that most holy of holy books with her right hand...; and with the drop of the sun, that dreaded demon of the damned in her left, who freely offered her his own instruction for her part to play in his diabolical stratagem.

Our walks facing the rising sun gave limitless delight as we strolled about near sand and sea, speaking of glory found in the past, and of our pleasure in ambition toward the future. We both had our plans, and our designs were to merge as one, each benefactor unto the other, giving encouragement when there was none to be found, offering new life to perishing aims, when it seemed there was no remaining hope.

As we lay face to face on those distant sands of our hearts delight, each gazing deeply into the other's soul; with that spirit of discovered fortune seizing the lacy boundaries of her soul..., and that dreaded demon of misfortune and despair seizing mine. Oh, how sly he was indeed, so sly that I was to never know until the last..., that very last when all was lost to timeless perpetuity!

Oh, that angelic nymph, Madeline, thou enchanting fairy of my soul, thou grasping child of perceived innocence, thou trickster unto the masses untold. Though my mind is embroiled in a colossal struggle with my body, still I try with all my might! I cannot resist, I cannot win, my fortune is doomed to lay among those lost. Behold, there is only this fleeting moment! I hold it, and only it, in my perpetual cringing grasp. Let all the earth hear me as I speak these words of conviction forward into the wind. *She is mine*, oh Madeline, and I have her here..right now!

On that blustery wind came glorious gifts from venerates untold. There was fine wine, splendid bourbon, silk, lace, and satin. My senses tingle from the spell of frankincense, myrrh, tincture of opiates, brass, and elegant necklace timepieces of pure halcyon. Unto Madeline, ye saint of the moonlight still, only to be betrayed by the light of the day. But of thee I love all still, in-spite of thy burgeoning taint..., *in-spite of the demon by your bedside!*, that demon of the damned who seeks to plunder my life and my soul, binding me into the raging fires for all future posterity. Behold, my dearest, Madeline; my mind knows thy secret plot, but my enchanted heart embraces ye still..., never to let go, not even by a pleading mother's beckoning call.

It was on the dreary twenty third of December, I so distinctly remember, that we made our way unto that decor-ant rose covered cathedral. The scene *was immaculate*, the blooms of holy springtime filled the majestic air with their life giving, luscious scents. The spell was cast, that bedeviled die now tossed; and my body, my dear heart and soul, knew no retreat, only my mind was left to yell. But my feet traveled anyway, my hand grasped her plush hand, graciously taking it unto my bosom, as we two ambled down that timeless blessed aisle!

Soon we stood before the masses, facing the majestic elder, who gave us his honored dedication as we stood before the eternal spirit receiving his permission, anticipating that he will only *touch us*, as we speak the venerated vow. She donned the trailing white of cherished purity,

she dared to don the coveted veil of chastity. She gazed forward into my very eyes, promising to honor her words for all eternity. She stood before the masses speaking her forlorn words of honor and total commitment; and they, standing as her enduring witnesses.

So I placed that golden ring upon her finger, that eternal endless bind, only to symbolize our commitment and the pledge of our hallowed, cherished oath. She was mine, *eternally mine*, and we sealed our pact with that fatal kiss, that kiss of immortal commitment, both in body, mind, and in soul.

We rode away into bliss, into sanctified euphoria, into the arms of each other, across the deep blue sea into hidden enchanted lands afar. We chose a chateau on a lone hillside by the sea as our abode, intending there to dwell in endless harmony.

The days gradually morphed into nights, and these new days into weeks and months, and soon our joys were multiplied by the happy cry of our newly born son. *He was all of my joy and my pride* rolled up tightly into a single unit; my true love, my eternal life, and hers alike. Yea, our joys were like none other to be told, there simply exists no true picture of this heart scene any mortal words may describe.

Oh Madeline..., it has now been seven long years, and where is your heart today? In the disgusting arms of the demon? Is it he, of whom has always held you in his sway? Oh my dearest Madeline, what about our time together, our travels, our many rambling adventures and our good times? What about those bad times secular life is so wrought with, when we stood by each other to give strength and counsel when they came our way? What about our son, our glorious son, who bears a head of flowing gold and the wisdom of the gods?

Hark ye, now, my mind knows of thy covert lusts, yearned for in dreary solitude of the twelfth striking. I beheld thy treasured gifts., the gold watch, the satin clothes, and the host of Teddy bears! Though my heart and mind refuse my eyes, my mind still yet beholds the truth. Oh Madeline!, must you sell yourself to the wealthy., no? No you did not! Your betrayal was in the very worst of ways. I know the filthy beggar. I beheld his repulsive raven arms in your embrace! May all the demons of perdition forever enchain him into the bowls of an endless furnace. You never knew I was there, did you? Oh Madeline, you not only betrayed my faith, but what about the faith of our son? Did you not ever consider him?

My hands opened the sacred book and my eyes beheld the honored instruction, my mind then knew what it must do. My feet walked up, my face now beaming it's smooth emotionless smile. My hands then seized her by her sallow throat without warning, from some unknown avenue sprang that cherished blade., that ever so thin a cherished blade! My eyes never beheld the act, but my knicker-bared legs felt the steamy heat of her oozing blood as it ran down my right thigh, only to puddle upon the ice cold stone floor beneath my bare feet.

Oh my Madeline, what hast thou now done? You have forced me to act in honored vengeance, to restore the sacred virtue of family and name, and that of our dear son as well. These walls have witnessed the act, behold, and the spirits bear our horrible secret to tell. Oh Madeline, the choice that you left me was to forgo it; and unto my melancholy mortal despair, the truth you'll never tell.

As the midnight sky streaked with sapphire fire, a distant thunder rolls and I laboriously pull her corpse into the nearby wood, into that most secret of brush enshrouded clearings. I proceeded to slice the flesh from the bone, then the bone from the ligaments. I completed the dreadful act in some thirty minutes or maybe even less. Soon as this disturbing deed was completed, those grunting feral pigs came a running, hungrily ravishing all of the bloody flesh and the bone. Soon, not even the earth itself bore no trace. I smiled to myself in praise at my tack

and skill. I have effectively done what I knew I had to do.

But the dismal months passed., *and I hold not Madeline*, no, not in honor nor disgrace. Oh Madeline, what hast thou now done, to go from here forever into infinite dishonor and disgrace? How could you cause such pain to our dear son? Did you not even consider how this might affect him? I now damn you into eternal flame and degradation. Be consumed by your dark sins forever more!

Then they came for me, a group of nine emerging from the gloomy mist of dawn. My ears beheld their heavy knocks. My heart raced when they eventually rammed in my solid oaken door. They have found me, I know not how. Did the pigs tell? Did some slight speck of blood on the forest floor? Did the spirits who witnessed the crime?

My weeping eyes beheld the blue of their dress. My wrists felt the clasping bite of their cuffs, and they snatched me away into that swirling somber mist, casting my quivering body upon the cold stone floor of my dungeon tomb, as an infernal wind howled and a distant, macabre thunder rolled.

So today I stand tall here on a towering scaffold of new oak on the courthouse lawn, awaiting my turn at the fall, as a sacrificial hex is chanted by fiendish elves to usher my wretched, quivering ghost forward into a merciless rushing zephyr. As they place my head into that scratching, itching loop of hemp, my eyes behold that wicked demon who had engineered this diabolical scheme, and my ears perceive his heavy roaring laugh immediately before I plunge into a bottomless void. Oh Madeline., what hast thou now done., only to damn mortal flesh into the dust of the earth, and the eternal soul from heaven's radiant sun!

About the Authors

Matias Travieso-Diaz

Matias Travieso-Diaz was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to creative writing. His stories have been published or accepted for publication or use in well over fifty paying short story anthologies, magazines, audio books and podcasts, most recently the Grantville Gazette, After Dinner Conversation, Red Room Press (YEAR'S BEST HARDCORE HORROR VOL. 6), and The Copperfield Review. Some of his stories have also received "honorable mentions" from a number of publications.

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LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Native New Yorker LindaAnn LoSchiavo, recently Poetry Super Highway's Poet of the Week, is a member of SFPA and The Dramatists Guild. Elgin Award nominee "A Route Obscure and Lonely" and "Concupiscent Consumption" are her latest poetry titles.

Forthcoming is a paranormal collection of ghost poems, a collaborative horror chapbook Santa Muerte, and an Italian-centric book, Flirting with the Fire Gods, inspired by her Aeolian Island heritage.

She has been leading a private poetry critique group for two years. For more of LindaAnn's work, follow her on social media:

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B. Patrick Lonberg

B. Patrick Lonberg (he/him) is a brewer and chef who has decided to stop navel-gazing and make a concerted attempt at adding author to his resume. He lives in Michigan with his beloved wife,

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Matthew Barron

Matthew Barron spends his days analyzing human blood as a medical technologist in Indianapolis, Indiana. Matthew enjoys writing in different genres and mediums of storytelling. His short stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies such as *Ill-Considered Expeditions*, *Roboterotica*, *Outposts of Beyond*, *Sci Phi Journal*, *House of Horror* and more. He's produced two of his plays and released three graphic novels: *Temple of Secrets*, *The Brute and Harmony Unbound*. His most recent book is a paranormal mystery called *Buried Curses*, a follow up to last year's *Waking Terror*. His sword sorcery book *Valora*, dystopian novella *Secular City Limits* and children's book *The Lonely Princess* are also available.

He can also be found on Facebook as @authormatthewbarron and on Twitter as @authorMBarron. For more information, visit matthewbarron.com or submatterpress.com.

Deborah L. Davitt

Deborah L. Davitt was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her poetry has received Rhysling, Dwarf Star, and Pushcart nominations and has appeared in over fifty journals, including *F&SF* and *Asimo's*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Analog* and *Galaxy's Edge*. For more about her work, including her novels, short stories, and her Elgin-nominated poetry collection, *The Gates of Never*, please see www.edda-earth.com.

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Paul Wilson

Black Rose Writing published Paul's fantasy western novel *Cassidy Smith Book One* September 2021. He has been published in three *Writer's Unite* anthologies (*Dimensions of Paranormal Volume 1* and *2* and *Dimensions of the Wild West Volume 2*), as well as *Theme of Absence*, *Electric Spec*, *Dream of Shadow*, and *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. His short story collection *Tricks and Treats* and his novel *Hostage* were published by *Asylett Press*. He won the *Aiken Community Playhouse'* first playwright contest which produced and performed his two-act play (*You're Invited to*) *Uncle Fangerstein's Last Show*. Paul Wilson lives in a suburban neighborhood much like the one he turned into a horror playground in his novel *Hostage*. He

lives with his wife, kids, two cats, and one giant dog. He has worked a spectacular list of jobs including retail district manager, a 911 operator, and the head of a college security department. You can follow him on Twitter at @Storydweller102 or email him at trucalling123@yahoo.com.

* * *

S.R. Hill

Sean Hill is a writer, ghost story lover, and fantasy world builder from Dublin, Ireland.

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* * *

G.A. Miller

G.A. Miller takes his ideas from every day, commonplace events that take unforeseen turns down dark corridors, often with horrific consequences. His lifelong bond with horror began in the late 1950s watching Shock Theater on TV and grew from there. When he picked up the first paperback edition of Stephen King's Salem's Lot in 1976, there was no turning back. Once he began committing his own demons to paper, he's had numerous stories published in a variety of publications. His latest novella, "The Shopkeeper: Curios, Curiosities and Rarities" was submitted for consideration in the 2020 Bram Stoker Awards.

For more of G.A.'s work, visit his website: <https://wordsofprey.me>

Or Amazon page: <http://amazon.com/author/gamiller/>

* * *

Scott Harper

The world was just a tad dull and unimaginative for a young Scott Harper growing up in 1970's Southern California. He found a creative outlet in the world of Marvel Comics, fervidly devouring the monthly adventures of Iron Man, Hulk, and Captain America. Later, his tastes turned toward the Marvel black and white magazines' more esoteric horror province, faithfully following titles such as Dracula Lives! and Tales of the Zombie. Influenced by these works and such great authors as Bram Stoker, John Steakley, and Marv Wolfman, Scott's unique writing style combines horror and fantasy elements with superhero-style action. When not writing, Scott spends his time either reading, working out at the gym, adding to his model collection, or walking his two dogs. He lives in California with his wife and son. For more of Scott's work, visit: Official Website: www.scottharpermacabremaestro.com Amazon Author Page: [Amazon.com: Scott Harper: Books, Biography, Blog, Audiobooks, Kindle Goodreads: Scott](https://www.amazon.com/author/scottharper)

Harper (of If I Die Before I Wake) | Goodreads Facebook: Scott Harper | Facebook Instagram: Scott Harper (@scottharper417247) â€¢ Instagram photos and videos * * * Carys Crossen
Carys Crossen has been writing stories since she was nine years old and shows no signs of stopping. Her fiction has been published by Lunate, Cauldron Anthology, FlashBack Fiction, Honey and Lime Lit and others, and her monograph "The Nature of the Beast" is available from University of Wales Press. She lives in Manchester UK with her husband, their daughter and their beautiful, contrary cat.

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* * *

John Kiste

John Kiste is a horror writer who was previously the president of the Stark County Visitor's Bureau. He is a double-lung transplantee and organ donation ambassador, a McKinley Museum planetarian and an Edgar Allan Poe impersonator who has been published in Flame Tree Press's Terrifying Ghosts, Third Flatiron, Halloween Horror 3, Indomitable Ink, Railroad Tales, With Painted Words, A Shadow of Autumn, Modern Grimoire, Dark Fire Fiction, Six Guns Straight from Hell 3, Theme of Absence, The Dark Sire, Jolly Horror Press's Coffin Blossoms anthology, and whose work was included in Unnerving Press's Haunted Are These Houses, and Camden Press's anthology, Quoth the Raven. He recently won The Dark Sire Award for Best Fiction. You can find him at johnkiste.wordpress.com.

* * *

Georgia Cook

Georgia Cook is an illustrator and writer from London. She is the winner of the LISP 2020 Flash Fiction Prize, been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and Reflex Fiction Award, among others, and has written for the horror anthology podcasts "Creepy," "The Other Stories," and "The Night's End." She can be found on twitter at @georgiacooked and on her website at <https://www.georgiacookwriter.com/>

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Liam Hogan

Liam Hogan is an award winning short story writer, with stories in Best of British Science Fiction and in Best of British Fantasy (NewCon Press). He's been published by Analog, Daily Science Fiction, and Flame Tree Press, among others. He helps host Liars' League London, volunteers at the creative writing charity Ministry of Stories, and lives and avoids work in London. More details at <http://happyendingnotguaranteed.blogspot.co.uk>.

Monette Bebow-Reinhard

Bebow-Reinhard earned an MA in 2006 in history. During and around college work and raising three children, she penned her two authorized Bonanza novels and began to research a vampiric character who is now part of a trilogy, being marketed. She has written movie scripts, sold articles and short fiction as well. Find out more about Arabus and Althea and her other works at <http://www.UnravelingTheMyth.com>

Laura Blackwell

Laura Blackwell is a Pushcart-nominated writer. Her stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies including Nightmare, PseudoPod, Strange California, and 2016 World Fantasy Award-winning She Walks in Shadows. She is copy editor for The Deadlands and co-hosts the online reading series Story Hour. You can find her on Twitter at @pronouncedLAHra and at her website, www.pronouncedlahra.com.

Davin Ireland

Davin Ireland was born and raised in the south of England, but currently resides in the Netherlands. His fiction credits include stories published in over seventy print magazines and anthologies on both sides of the Atlantic, including Aeon, Underworlds, The Horror Express, Zahir, Comets & Criminals, Rogue Worlds, Storyteller Magazine and Something Wicked. You can visit his site at <http://davinireland.com/>.

Gerri Leen

Gerri Leen is a Pushcart- and Rhysling-nominated poet from Northern Virginia who's into horse racing, tea, collecting encaustic art and raku pottery, and making weird one-pan meals. She has poetry published in Strange Horizons, Dreams & Nightmares, Polu Texni, Liquid Imagination, NewMyths.com and others. She also writes fiction in many genres (as Gerri Leen for speculative and mainstream, and Kim Stratford for romance) and is a member of HWA and SFWA. Visit gerrileen.com to see what she's been up to.

Tony-Paul de Vissage

A Southerner of French Huguenot extraction, one of Tony-Paul de Vissage's first movie memory

is of being six years old, viewing the old Universal horror flick, Dracula's Daughter on television, and being scared sleepless.

That may explain his lifelong interest in vampires and why he's now paying back his too-permissive parents by writing about those who walk the night. A voracious reader whose personal library has survived following their owner more than 3,000 miles, Tony-Paul has read hundreds of vampire tales and viewed more than as many movies.

Readers may discover more about this author at his Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/tonypaul.devissage> or on Twitter: @tpvissage.

Ray Kolb

Most recently, Ray Kolb worked in Africa, mentoring Liberians prosecuting violent, gender-based crimes. He previously spent two years in Afghanistan training prosecutors and criminal investigators. Ray was a practicing attorney for over two decades, with six years as a prosecutor.

Ray has had more than a dozen stories published, and enjoys reading and writing mysteries, thrillers and speculative fiction. Because Ray's father was career military, the family moved frequently but consider Alabama home. Ray sets many of his stories in Alabama's Deep South. Ray posts way too infrequently on his website at: raykolb.com.

Ewa Mazierska

Ewa Mazierska is a historian of film and popular music, who writes short stories in her spare time. She published over thirty of them in "The Longshot Island," "The Adelaide Magazine," "The Fiction Pool," "Literally Stories," "Ragazine," "BlazeVox," "Red Rez," "Away," "The Bangalore Review," "Shark Reef," and "Mystery Tribune," among others. In 2019 she published her first collection of short stories, "Neighbours and Tourists" (New York, Adelaide Books). Ewa is a Pushcart nominee and her stories were shortlisted in several competitions. She was born in Poland, but lives in Lancashire, UK.

H.L. Dowless

The author is a national & international academic/ ESL Instructor. He has been a writer for over thirty years. His latest publications have been two books of nonfiction with Algora Publishing, a fictional novel by Atmosphere Press, and fictional publications with combo e-zines and print magazines; Leaves Of Ink, CC&D Magazine, a novel with Atmosphere press, Short Story Lovers, The Fear Of Monkeys, and Frontier Tales. He recently signed three contracts with Pen it

Publications. The author has enjoyed a lifetime of outdoor activities from big game hunting, camping, fishing, and trapping, to archaeological field work in various exotic locations. What he enjoys most of all is meeting freedom loving, interesting creative people, who are also regular dedicated fans of his publications. For more of his work, visit:
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