

ABOGADO
ALI
BINDI
BRUCE
DABROWSKI
DEBRAAL
DORITY
HAMMOND
HAWLEY
HOSKINSON
LIANG WEI
MONTOYA
NEOBY
SAINI
TILLMANNS
WALLER
YUSUF

STORIES
ART
POETRY
REVIEWS
MUCH MORE!



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Masthead

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The World of Myth is published for anyone interested in quality Fantasy, Horror, Humor, Action/Suspense, or Science Fiction and related genre materials. All issues are posted on the Web.



INTRODUCTION

August a time of reflection

By: Stephanie J. Bardy



Stephanie J. Bardy

Stephanie J. Bardy is an accomplished author, poet and editor. She is Editor in Chief at *The World of Myth Magazine* and has held an editing position with them for over 5 years. She is also Editor in Chief for *The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company, LLC*.

Her published works include *Eternally Bound*, *Eternally Bound PCE Exclusive Edition*, *The Chosen*, *The World of Myth Anthology Volume 3*, *Full Moon*

Hey Mythketeers!

Well, it has happened. What most of us fear, what some of us, the insane crowd, wait for with bated breath. What happens every year around this time? The cold creeps back in. The leaves start their slow dance with the fading color and begin their gentle descent to the ground. Fall is coming. Then Winter. But I won't go THAT far ahead. Fall is far enough. It always happens at the end of August. The leaves lose their luster, the nights become sweater weather, and blankets get added back onto the bed. I have to admit, I hate August. For so many more reasons than just the weather. It signals the end of so many things I love and have loved. The biggest being my Dad. I lost him 17 years ago now, and every August, I allow myself time to remember the pain, the anguish of the loss. Grief is a part of life. It is how we recognize the good. It is how we acknowledge loss. Grief is a powerful emotion, and when it is smothered, it can destroy people. I grieve openly, loudly, and sometimes, proudly. I wear my grief like a badge, because it means I loved. I loved hard enough and deep enough that I feel that loss as a physical pain. I feel the grief.

August is full of sadness, but it also carries so much joy. My granddaughter's birthday, my niece's birthday. My nephew's birthday. So much love and growth, it tempers the sting of the loss. The loss of green in the leaves is just another smaller grief that I feel. I am a child of the sun, one who thrives when it is warm, and hibernates when it is not! Grief, or any strong emotion, can also be a great tool to use to write or create with. Heavy grief can pull some of the most poignant and powerful work out of people. But it can also be a barrier if you let it. Use that pain, harness that anguish, and create something from it. Give it a purpose beyond that of moving through the stages. I found that when I created out of that grief, my father lived for one more moment and became immortal through the words that I put out there. It may not have always been obvious, but the emotion in the piece was very, very real and was drawn from the anguish of the loss. I know that sadness and grief can be debilitating; no one wants to write, paint, or create anything. They just want what they had before the pain. All I can suggest is that you try to use it like any tool. You may find that it helps. It was cathartic for me to talk about it on my podcast, to draw on that pain when I was writing a particularly emotional scene, or when I had to describe the loss of death. It is a tool I still use today. Every August,

& *Howlin: A Werewolf Anthology*, *Monsterthology 2*, *Full Moon & Howlin: A Werewolf*, *The Chosen*, *Natural Instincts*, *The World of Myth Anthology Volume 4*, *Musing From Me*, *Unwelcomed: Stories of Hauntings and possessions*, *Penance* and *The Monster Within: Tales of A Tortured Mind*.

She has several short stories to her credit on *The World of Myth Magazine*, and several works of poetry.

She has edited thirty books and all of the works on *The World of Myth Magazine* for the last five years.

I create something. Over the years, it has changed from the dark, violent pain to a more tempered, gentle pain. Everything we are, everything we have, and everything we experience are tools to improve and expand our work.

Use them and use them well.

I do apologize for this not being my usual upbeat, encouraging introduction, but I like to keep it real. This is a very real thing for me, and I wanted to share what I have learned from it with you all.

I hope you never have to experience that kind of loss, but if you do, I hope that you can turn it into something positive.

Until next month,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephanie J. Bardy". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Stephanie J Bardy
Editor of all the Emotions, even the sad ones.

Drabble & Flash

The Night Creeper

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

Kate MacDonald-Dunbar is a retired septuagenarian who started to write just over sixteen months ago. She has many hobbies, but writing helps to fill an insomniac's dark quiet hours. She has had seventeen poems and six short stories published, online and in print: Chris Fielden's "Nonsensically Challenged," for charity. High Shelf Press volume XXIII. WinglessDreamer. Spillwords Press. 805 Lit and Art. Funny Pearls. Little Old Lady Comedy. Dillydoun Review. The World of Myth Magazine.

The sudden chill in the air

lifts the hairs on my arms. So it begins, as danger closes in. The Night Creeper is back, I know by the noxious smell. There can be no escape now. Paralyzed by fear, I whimper, ashamed of my cowardly mien. Now I must hide away.

As I run through the hallways, I hear the click of claws on stone floors. Ready to rip. Will the future show my eviscerated shell, blood drained, a look of agony on my face? That's when I hear your soft beloved voice, within the ether, whispering. "Stop. Fight!"

I then heard the words I dreaded. "You are my daughter, remember my gift to you, a pointed silver cross. Into its heart" I sob, "I cannot look into those blood-red eyes, fangs gleaming, ready to rend me asunder. " Your aim will be true, I will guide your hand."

Its black heart will implode,

dissipate forever.
You will be free!"

Drabble & Flash

Little Red Riding Hood and Her Grandmother

By: Andrea Tillmanns



Andrea Tillmanns

Andrea Tillmanns lives in Germany and works full-time as a university lecturer. She has been writing poetry, short stories and novels in various genres for many years.

People blamed everything

on the wolf. But what happened really, when Little Red Riding Hood visited her grandmother in the dark forest?

"Grandmother, why do you have such big ears?"

"So that I can hear every creature a mile away."

"Grandmother, why do you have such big eyes?"

"So that I can see better at night."

"Grandma, why do you have such big eyeteeth?"

"Come closer, then you'll feel it ..."

Since then, hikers have repeatedly disappeared in the dark forest. The women hunt together, they say, and no one has ever escaped the young woman dressed all in red.

Drabble & Flash

Day Or Night

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



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Kate MacDonald-Dunbar is a retired septuagenarian who started to write just over sixteen months ago. She has many hobbies, but writing helps to fill an insomniac's dark quiet hours. She has had seventeen poems and six short stories published, online and in print: Chris Fielden's "Nonsensically Challenged," for charity. High Shelf Press volume XXIII. WinglessDreamer. Spillwords Press. 805 Lit and Art. Funny Pearls. Little Old Lady Comedy. Dillydoun Review. The World of Myth Magazine.

At last, it becomes my time once more as the sun begins to sink and another day dies. I hear the sullen moonlight's siren song. Which tells me I am free from this wooden prison, I can now arise.

My prey, all unknowing, slumbers on while riotous rivers of scarlet cascade through their veins. Each heartbeat, a loud echo, tempts me to drink, and I feel the impatience growing. The night is mine; I could quench this thirst in moments. But with age, my bloodlust is tempered, and I no longer need to kill.

When I was a Newbie, a newly made vampire, I did not leave a victim alive; now, with wisdom gained comes greater skill. Firstly, I glamour my dinner date, which means I control the human mind on whom I will dine. It's a stark contrast to my early days, a time I can only recall with a tinge of nostalgia. Then, at that moment, while the scent and warmth of that elixir

gives me the illusion of pseudo-life, I feel divine. All too soon, the chill creeps over me again. I am bereft. I feel disquiet, disgust, and dismay as I recall my sins.

Is it time to face my Final Death and walk into the light as I atone for my wrongdoings?

Drabble & Flash

The Science

*By: Christopher T.
Dabrowski*



Christopher T. Dabrowski

Christopher T. Dabrowski is a Polish writer and screenwriter. His books have been published in Poland, the USA, Canada, Spain, Germany and India.

Jerry regretted he didn't rebel. He was an obedient son, and didn't manage to do what he dreamed of - and he wanted to travel the world. His father repeated like a mantra: 'Learn, learn, or you'll be sweeping the streets!' Jerry took the warning seriously and studied day and night. He went to college and took two majors. Then he became a master's degree, besides completing many courses of all kinds. He should have been sweeping his rivals the job market - instead, he was sweeping... the streets. It was the only robot available, for those professionally excluded by the AI...

Drabble & Flash

Somnaphobia

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

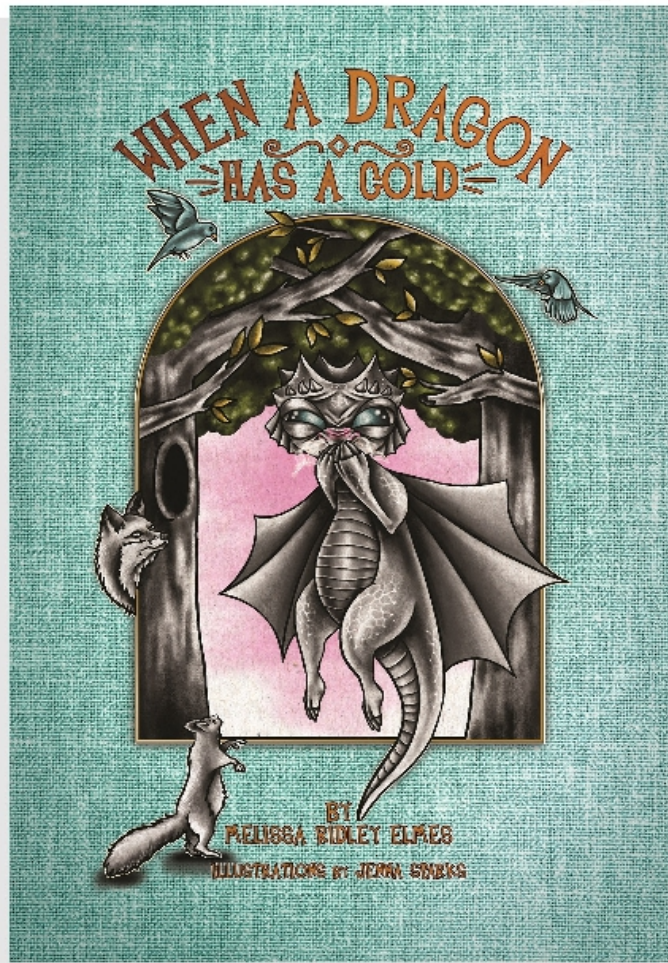


Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

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I have a weird love/hate relationship with sleep it seems. I love it when I'm awake, and I hate to fall asleep; it's all about avoiding dreams. A normal day is twenty-one hours long, on a good day it's twenty-four. I like to think I'm high on life, but look like death is knocking at my door. I'm short on sleep, my mind's chaotic, my ID's in meltdown, Ego's curled up tight. Super Ego's sobbing in a corner of my mind still I'm left with lotsa time to write.

WHEN A DRAGON =HAS A GOLD= ON



BY
MELISSA RIDLEY ELMES



Children's Literature

Ripples - Part 1 of 3

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

Monday, September 3

"Do any of you remember what today is?" Mrs. Webb asked her third-graders.

"Monday," Brad said from the back of the room.

"Thank you, Brad," she replied. "It is Monday, but I meant something else, something I'd mentioned last week."

Turning to the chalkboard, she grabbed a piece of chalk, and wrote "Book Reports" there in big letters.

"Do you remember now?"

Melanie, who sat on the front row, shook her head.

When no other student spoke up, Mrs. Webb said, "That's all right. I'll tell you again. Today we're starting *The Wind in the Willows*. Has anyone heard of it?" Two hands shot up and she beamed at the students who'd raised them. "Excellent, June and Billy."

Opening a box on her desk, she pulled out piles of books and handed them to her aide. "Miss Banks, would you please pass these around? Class, we're going to take turns reading aloud.

When we finish the book, I'll ask you to write a report about what you liked or disliked about it. But I'll say more about that later." She gazed at the children and noticed something.

"Joseph, no sleeping in class. This is Mrs. Webb shook her head.

"Unexpected medical issues are the worst kind. That's what I think,

your second warning, and I don't want to have to tell you again."

Lifting his head from the desk, eight-year-old Joseph opened his bleary eyes, blinked owlshly, and yawned. A few of his classmates laughed. He sat up straighter for a moment before slouching down in his chair. Rubbing his eyes, he yawned a second time.

"You can read first, Joseph," Mrs. Webb instructed, "since you're having trouble staying awake.

Miss Banks whispered, "Mrs. Webb, did you know...?"

"Just a minute. Please begin on page one, Joseph."

Staring blankly at her, the boy then reached for the book on his desk, opened it, flipped to the right page, and read aloud.

"Very nice, Joseph," Mrs. Webb told him when he'd finished. "Do you like the story so far?"

"Yes'm." His voice barely rose above a murmur.

"I'm glad. Be sure to stay awake in class, okay?" He nodded. "All right, class. We'll go from the left to the right, so that means it's your turn next, Brandi."

As the next student started, Violet Banks motioned for Mrs. Webb to join her at the teacher's desk and asked in a barely audible voice, "Did you hear about Joseph?"

"Hear what?"

"His mother's in the hospital."

"Really?" Mrs. Webb exclaimed, her eyes going wide. Hastily glancing at beat the level."

the boy in question, she saw he was staring into space with a vacant expression. "I didn't hear anything about that."

"She had to go in on Friday, three days ago. Her family goes to the same church I go to, so I heard about it yesterday. The pastor set a special time for us to fast and pray for her recovery."

"Ah, poor boy. If I'd known, I wouldn't have gotten on him like that. He's probably not getting enough sleep. At least, I have trouble sleeping when I worry about things."

"Me, too," Violet agreed.

"Is he an only child?"

"No. His parents have several kids, but I think he's the oldest. The family lives with the father's, or maybe it's the mother's, elderly parents.

Mrs. Webb briefly focused on her class. "Good job, Brandi. You can stop. Seth, it's your turn." Returning her attention to her aide, she asked,

"What's wrong with Joseph's mother? Did something happen to her, like being in a car wreck?"

"I was told Margaret — that's Joseph's mother — found bruises on her leg. They'd appeared out of nowhere, along with a little bit of swelling. The family took her to the hospital. After tests were done, the doctor said she had an aneurism."

"Oh, my. So the bruising was actually bleeding under her skin?"

"I guess so. She went into surgery which supposedly went off without a hitch. But she didn't wake up afterward. They did more testing, thought she had blood clots, and a piece of one might've broken off and reached her brain."

"How awful. And she went into the coma on Friday?"

"Everything happened Friday. All at once. Boom, boom, boom"

anyway. It's different when someone's been ill for a while and their loved ones see them deteriorating over time. You know, when people know death is inevitable, like with my father's cancer."

"I remember you telling me about it. But nobody saw this coming at all."

Mrs. Webb noticed how quiet the room had become. Seth, who was a slow reader, had stopped. "You did well, Seth. Please start where he left off, Gayle." The teacher turned back to Violet. "Can I do anything? To help the family, I mean?"

"Maybe. In fact, I'm sure of it. In church, they asked for volunteers to fix meals, help with yard work, vacuum, do laundry, that sort of stuff. A sign-up sheet was passed around, but I don't know who's taken which jobs. I tell you what, though. I'll give you my pastor's number. He'll know what's needed."

"Thank you."

Wednesday, September 12

Mike's shoes lay discarded on the living room floor, one off to the left, the other several feet away to the right, and Joseph bent to pick them up. One of Izzy's was under the coffee table, the second on the couch, and he grabbed them. Searching for Ben's and Sofi's, too, he put theirs and all the rest in their usual spot on the shelf by the front door. Then he walked to the foot of the staircase and called upstairs, "Mike, Sofi, Ben, come here. You, too, Izzy."

"Izzy's asleep," seven-year-old Sofi reported when she reached the bottom of the stairs. "Mike's playing something on the Game Cube. He says he won't stop because he's about to reported. "She ate cereal awhile ago."

"That sounds good to me." Grandma

Joseph nodded. "Okay." He knew how determined five-year-old Mike was. Grandma often kidded him that he was part-donkey. "Where's Ben?" Sofi shrugged, and he let that go, asking her, "Will you vacuum in here, please?"

Sofi frowned. "The vacuum's old and heavy and hard to push. Grandma can use it later."

"No, she can't. She doesn't feel well." Fear darkened Sofi's eyes. "Does she have an ano, ana... thing like Mama?"

"No, nothing like that. Don't worry, okay? It's her arthritis. She says her knees and back hurt. And the vacuum will be much easier to push this time. Grandpa said the setting was wrong before."

"What do you mean?"

"He said the bottom was too low to the ground. That made it hard to push, since the carpet's thick. But he raised it up to where it should be."

"Okay."

Joseph saw her vacuuming a few minutes later and was glad she usually listened without arguing. He remembered Mama had always encouraged him or his siblings when they helped out, and he echoed the words to his sister. "You're doing a great job, Sofi."

She smiled at him.

A thumping sound caught his attention, and he went into the hall to find what was making the noise, even though he already had a good idea. Sure enough, it was Ben. Four years old and always loud, he stopped on every step, jumping up and down on it, as he made his way downstairs. He carried his checkers set under his arm. It was a present from last Christmas, and he told his brother, "Daddy promised to play a game with me."

Joseph bit his lip, remembering their

"Yeah, we all do," Joseph told them.

Sofi just looked down and sniffled.

father's extra-slow footsteps when he got home from work earlier. He knew what that meant, planned to distract Ben, but the younger boy dashed toward their parents' bedroom.

Joseph followed and they saw Daddy lying on the bed, fully-dressed, boots and all. He was snoring.

"He's *asleep*." Tears filled Ben's eyes.

"I want him to play with me. He *promised*."

"You know he's been working a lot, so I'm sure he didn't go to sleep on purpose. But I'll play with you. And how about we play *two* games?"

"Really and truly?" Ben's eyes lit up.

"Yeah, but I want you to set the table for supper first, okay?" Ben nodded, and Joseph led him out of the room.

"Don't try to get anything from the cupboards. Just use clean dishes from the drain rack." Their grandmother had left food in the oven and microwave, so he planned to dish it up once the table was ready. Sofi had mentioned having homework tonight; he figured he should look at it later. Mama or Daddy usually did, but not lately. Squaring his shoulders, he headed for the kitchen behind Ben. Twenty minutes later, footsteps sounded in the hallway, and Grandma limped into the kitchen, leaning heavily on her cane. Seeing the table set up with all of the children seated around it, and Joseph spooning food onto their plates one-by-one, she tousled his hair. "You're such a good boy, Joseph. The best boy ever." "What about me?" Mike demanded. "And me?" Ben chimed in. "Yes, both of you are good boys, too," Grandma told them, winking at Joseph. "Even though you're part-human, part-donkey, Mike." As usual, he grinned widely. "And you're the best girl, Sofia. Where's Isabelle?" "Izzy's asleep on her floor," Sofi

smiled at her, then sat in a chair. "You don't have to serve me, Joseph."

"I don't mind," he said.

"Okay. I only want small portions, and would you please put some on a plate for Grandpa also? His back's hurting him something fierce, so he's lying down. I'll take dinner to him in our room." When Joseph got out empty storage containers and began putting away the leftovers, she questioned him, "Aren't you eating, sweetie?"

"I'm not hungry. I'll eat later."

After dinner, Joseph filled the sink with hot, soapy water. "Bring me the dishes, okay?" he told the others and slid everything they handed him into the sink. "Hey, help me pick up stuff while the dishes soak. I saw a bunch of toys lying in the hall and front room."

"Izzy got them out," Mike complained.

"She should put them away."

"She's asleep," Joseph stated. "And she didn't take out the Legos or the Spongebob puzzle. The small cars or those movies on the rug, either."

"I'm not cleaning up after Izzy." Mike

scowled at his brother. "And you're not Daddy. I don't have to listen to you."

Trying not to get frustrated, Joseph stared at him. "Don't be a pain."

Nearby, Ben said nothing and chewed his thumb as he watched them.

"Just leave the stuff where it is," Mike suggested. "Izzy can help tomorrow."

Joseph's head hurt. Ignoring that, he spoke quietly. "Grandma or Grandpa could step on something and fall. Or Daddy could fall."

Mike scowled. His brown eyes met Joseph's, which were the same shade as his own, and he mumbled, "I don't want them to fall and get hurt."

"Me, either," Sofi agreed.

"I miss Mama," Ben whispered.

"So do I," Mike admitted.

Ben's lip wobbled and he began sobbing. Joseph put his arm around the younger boy. Sofi leaned on Joseph, and he hugged her, too. Mike hung back, but didn't resist when Joseph grabbed him, and pulled him closer.

When Joseph released them, he spoke words he'd heard his parents say many times. "Come on. It won't take long if we all help." Once the toys were put up, he played checkers with Ben while Sofi cheered them on. Mike wandered off but quickly returned with a hand-held game, played it beside the others, but soon joined them for checkers.

Their grandmother appeared a couple hours later, watching them silently before reminding them, "Tomorrow's a school day and I know some of you haven't bathed yet, because you're wearing most of the outside dirt."

Giggles sounded from here and there, and she smiled indulgently. "Well, it's true. Now go clean up."

Sofi and Ben immediately charged toward the bathroom, jostling one another while claiming their right to use the tub first. Mike followed much more slowly, engrossed once more in his hand-held game. Joseph carefully put the checkers pieces and board back in their box, put it on a shelf, and headed for the kitchen. The dishes had to be done.

Thursday, September 13

"Wake up," Grandpa said. "*Joseph*, you need to wake up."

Joseph felt his grandfather shaking him, but could barely open his eyes, much less keep them open.

"You have time to eat if you hurry," Grandpa stressed. "But you have to

get up *now*."

Blinking a few times, Joseph sat up. He looked around and realized he was on the couch in the front room. Sofi's math homework lay partly on his lap, partly on the floor where it must've slid. Apparently, he'd dozed off while going over it.

"Honey," Grandma said from the doorway, "I let you sleep in a little, but there's no more time. The other children are ready, and the bus will come soon. Lately, our truck's been hard to start, so if you miss the bus..."

Joseph saw her wobble a little as she took a step toward him, and every vestige of drowsiness left him in a flash. She'd been there for him as long as he could remember and he didn't want her worrying. "I'll hurry," he promised, jumping up and running into the kitchen. He felt like he was starving and gulped down a bowl of cereal. He hadn't done his homework yet, but planned to do it real fast.

A few minutes later, Grandpa yelled, "Joseph, where are you? Everyone else is already on the bus!"

Joseph stuffed his schoolwork into his backpack and dashed for the front door, unaware he still wore yesterday's clothes.

End of Part 1 of 3.

Children's Literature

The Puppeteer - Chapter One - How we got into this Mess

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

This is a true story, a story that happened to me and my friend Jess. My name is Sam, and this wasn't our first adventure, but I am hoping it will be our last. You see, what feels like a long time ago my whole world froze and turned to stone when I looked over my neighbor's fence and discovered a strange, hairy man there that did not belong. Seeing this stranger in my neighbor's yard started me on an epic adventure in a wonderful world where nothing was the same as home. I had to learn to be brave, I had to make new friends, and I had to use all of my cleverness and courage to save our world and this new world I had been transported to. I did it. I tricked the strange creature I had discovered in my neighbor's yard. I thought then that everything would go back to normal. It did... At least for a little while. The following year when school started up again, after the winter holidays, Jess discovered that her teacher, Mr. Bright, was missing. That was when she needed to go on her own adventure, to save him, to save her class, to save our world. I was able to help Jess, and, although her adventure was just as crazy and scary as mine, it was also amazing to be able to work together to save the day.

Now it is the holidays again, and I am so excited to be invited to Tammy Tolittle's birthday party. I received the invitation on the last day of the school term, and I placed it straight onto the fridge door when I got home, making certain that my mom and dad could see it.

Even though my friend Jess was in Tammy's class at school, Tammy wanted boys and girls at her party. The excited chatter in the playground was that Tammy's mom had organized for The Amazing Antonio, a brilliant puppeteer to come and perform for the whole afternoon. This was so much better than the clowns and magicians who had done acts at other parties that Jess and I had recently been to.

"Are you going to Tammy's party?" I asked Jess when I called her on the phone on the Saturday.

"I don't know..." Jess replied, uncertain, wary. "What if something strange happens?"

That was it. We had both only recently gone on our adventures, and Jess and I both did not need another.

"Jess," I said, trying to sound convincing enough for the both of us. "I am sure we have both already had our share of adventures..."

"So, Sam, you think that it might be someone else's turn?" asked Jess, less than confident. "I'm still not sure..."

I was going to say next *what could possibly go wrong?*, but both of us knew exactly what it was like to be

thrown into a chaotic and scary situation.
 "It will be all OK, Jess," I said instead.
 "Whatever happens, this time we will both be there."
 "Yeah..." Jess agreed. "Whatever happens it will happen to both of us... OK, Sam... I'll see you on Tuesday..."

It had taken me until Tuesday morning to convince mom to let me go with her to the shops to buy Tammy Tolittle a present. I love, love, love boardgames and the latest one out was an interactive space exploration game called *Star Stealer 3000* I knew that mom wasn't going to buy it for me, but somehow, I managed to convince her that Tammy would love it just as much as I would. It normally cost more money than I get at birthday time and Christmas combined, but since it was the start of the school holidays, our local shop had a special going on for everything in the toy section. Mom liked the fifty percent off discount, and I was sure I had just acquired the best gift that Tammy Tolittle would ever receive. I mean, EVER in her whole life.
 "Hurry up, mom," I begged when we got home from the shops. She was wrapping the game up while I got dressed into something nice for the party and then wrote in Tammy's card.
 "Do you want me to add any ribbon or bows?" mom asked, but I shook my head.
 Tammy had played a big part in Jess' recent adventure, and from what my friend had told me Tammy did not seem then to be the kind of girl who noticed bows and ribbons. I don't think much changed, now that Tammy was turning a year older.
 "No time for that, mom," I said.
 "We're already late, and Jess is

probably waiting for me."
 "Alright, I guess we had better be off then," said my mom.
 It still took us another fifteen minutes to find the car keys, to get into the car, to get out of the car and get the invitation, and then to drive to Tammy's house.

"I thought that you were not going to come," said Jess, as worried as I thought she would be.
 She had a present larger than mine wrapped in her arms. Her mom had gone for gold ribbon and a lovely big bow. I was impressed, but did not say anything. Jess and her family have always been more organized than me and mine. I noticed that there was a van in the Tolittle's drive. It was white with the words *The Amazing Antonio* printed on the side in big, colorful letters, a shadowy figure above the letters had strings coming from his hands that made each letter look like it was a puppet. I nudged Jess, almost making her drop her gift.
 "Do you see that?" I asked.
 "See what?" Jess asked. "It's just a van..."
 To me it looked as though the letters on the side of the van were moving, dancing and swaying. It was weird.
 "You don't see what the letters are doing?" I asked.
 "Stop trying to scare me, Sam," Jess said. "Let us just go in and have some fun."
 "You two be good!" my mom called out from our car. "I'll let your parents know that I can drop you home after and save them a trip."
 "Thank you!" Jess called back. "That would be amazing!"
 "Maybe if we play our cards right, you could stay over for the night," I suggested.
 Jess must have thought that my idea

was a good one too, because she put her gift down and ran back to my mom before the car drove away.
 "Sure, hun, I'll ask," my mom told Jess.
 "I guess we just cross our fingers and hope," my friend said after we waved and my mom finally drove away.
 "Come on then, let's go in," I said and together we climbed up the steps that led to the porch.
 Jess knocked, and then I tried, banging loudly on the front door.
 "Hi, you two!!!" said Mrs Tolittle when the door opened. "So glad you could make it..."
 The passageway beyond the front stoop seemed like a dark tunnel, full of dangers, the yelling and screaming that emanated from the far end doing nothing to settle my nerves.
 "Come on, Sam," said Jess, placing her present on a table where a pile of wrapped treasures already sat. "I guess that the fun is happening without us."
 I added my amazing gift and took Jess by the hand.
 "If there is adventure to be had, we will tackle it together," I said, my confidence returning as my eyes adjusted to the light inside.
 "Together," Jess agreed.

Everyone from our two classes was there, but the lounge room was so large that we all fit with room to spare. The chairs and couch had been pushed to the very back of the room along with a table that had magazines on it, the kinds of magazines that show people with money what they can buy to make their house look pretty. In front of the spot where the display cabinet and television had been set up, there was a rickety stage with curtains pulled shut.
 "Oh, hey there Jess... Hi Sam..." said Elizabeth Estlewood. "I think you

made it just in time.”

“Has anyone seen Tammy?” Jess asked. “I can’t seem to see her anywhere.”

Looking around the lounge room I noticed then what my friend had already realized. The birthday girl was nowhere in sight.

Freddy Flatteries from my class turned around from the row in front of us, a big grin on his face and a starry look in his eyes.

“The Amazing Antonio took Tammy Tolittle behind the curtain about ten minutes ago promising her a special role in the performance...” he told us. “He has promised to teach us all a lesson and I for one cannot wait to learn a thing or two about performing.”

“I could have told them that,” complained Elizabeth. “It is really not that much of a big deal.”

“I would have loved to be up there on the stage,” whispered Freddy. “I wish it was me and not Tammy.”

“Maybe you can have a puppeteer at your birthday party, too,” suggested Jess.

Freddy’s eyes seemed to sparkle even more when he heard those words.

“You know what, Jess,” he said as he turned back to stare at that stage. “I think I might just do that.”

“Shhhhhhhh...” said another child, Tammy’s older sister Tessa. “The performance is about to start.

Inch by inch, the curtains at the front of the stage began to open. There was a hush of excited anticipation as every child in that lounge room longed to catch the first glimpse of the master puppeteer and his wooden creation. Instead, what we all heard was an eerie song, sung by none other than Tammy Tolittle. Now Jess told me once that Tammy loves to sing, sings all the time in the classroom.

Unfortunately, her voice is not very good, she struggles to hold a tune and will often get the words wrong. This song was not one that any of us knew, but the way that Tammy sang it she seemed to know it all too well.

Puppet on a string

My puppet on a string

I will teach you to dance

I will teach you to sing

And then all the children

Who like to run

I shall catch with my strings

Make each one join the fun

Puppet on a string

My dear puppet on a string

A mysterious shadow stepped out from behind the curtains, taking centre stage. Before him, stood a wooden puppet, life-sized, identical to Tammy Tolittle, except that I knew Tammy was not made from wood. The marionette version of the birthday girl had strings dangling from her wooden fingers, and the strings seemed to be alive. They wriggled and writhed in time with the song that Tammy’s voice chanted over and over. The Amazing Antonio jerked his right wrist, and the puppet twirled a perfect pirouette. Some of the kids at the front, closest to the stage started clapping. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw one of Tammy’s strings had twisted around Julia Johnson’s clapping hands and turned them into wood.

“We need to go,” I whispered to Jess.

“We need to leave, immediately.”

“But, why, Sam?” Jess whispered back.

“We only just got here, and Tammy is singing so nicely.”

I looked across at my friend then and saw one of the strings from Tammy’s left hand had wriggled like a sneaky snake through the plush carpet to wrap itself around Jess’ foot. Her

sandshoe had become as hard as oak, and the pair of jeans she was wearing had become solid and shiny all the way up from her ankle to her knee.

“Jess! He has caught you in his spell!” I gasped. “Quickly... We do not have very much time.”

It was almost as if my words of warning somehow woke Jess out of a daze.

“Help me up, Sam,” she begged.

“Please help me to escape the puppet curse!”

I jumped up and grabbed Jess by her arm. Using all my strength I pulled her to her feet. The wriggling string snapped as Jess stood up.

“Look out, Sam!” she cried as the string tried to circle around my ankle.

I lifted my foot out of the way and then stomped down upon that string, as hard as I could. For a second, Tammy’s voice stopped, pausing the song. Her wooden head twisted around to face Jess and me.

“Get them!” the puppet version of Tammy commanded, but this time the voice was low and gravely, like a man who was very angry.

The wriggling string that had tried to transform both me and my friend, now twisted around Freddy Flatteries’ arm. The transformation from boy to marionette was almost instantaneous. Freddy turned his head toward us, opened his mouth and began to chant.

Puppet on a string

My puppet on a string

I will teach you to dance

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And then all the children

Who like to run

I shall catch with my strings

Make each one join the fun

Puppet on a string

My dear puppet on a string

"Come on, Sam," Jess urged, pulling me toward the loungeroom door. I did not have to be told twice. Stepping left and then right in a zig-zag pattern we made our escape in such a way that the puppeteer's magical strings could not snare us and turn us into strange puppet versions of ourselves. Behind us, as we burst through the door the chanting grew louder and louder as more of our classmates were transformed. I knew that soon, all of the boys and girls would become puppets, and it was up to Jess and me to save them.

"Is everything OK, children?" asked Mrs Tolittle as she met us in the passageway. "Why are you leaving the party so soon?"

"Something has gone terribly wrong," said Jess. "I knew we should not have come."

"Oh, but you did come," said Mrs Tolittle. "And now I cannot allow you to leave."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "We want to go home... Can we please call my mom?"

I searched Tammy's mom for signs that she was turning into a puppet too. So glad was I to discover the puppeteer's strings had not yet reached this far.

"You cannot leave the party without a goody bag," Mrs Tolittle continued. "Tammy has been working on them all morning."

She started heading for the kitchen, where I could see the beautiful cake, two tears of chocolate gooey goodness smothered in frosting. I could also spy plates full of fairy bread, biscuits, and other sweet party treats. For the briefest of moments, I considered stuffing my pockets with some of that food. Jess' voice quickly brought me back to reality and the scariness of the situation we were in.

"We really must be going, Mrs Tolittle, thank you for having us..." Jess said, giving Tammy's mom a sincere smile. "I am not feeling the best and Sam has offered to walk me home."

"I guess sweets are probably not good for a sore tummy," Mrs Tolittle agreed. "I'll let both your moms know that you are on your way home."

"Thank you," Jess and I both replied. The front door was just ahead of us, within our reach. One step... Then another... Just another step more... And we were there...

"Oh, my..." murmured Mrs Tolittle. "What game is this?"

Jess grabbed my hand tightly and pulled me along, just in time as four of our classmates had sneaked up behind us. The puppeteer's strings wriggled and squirmed toward us, hunting for purchase.

"Let us all head out to the yard where Tammy's father has organized some party games," suggested Mrs Tolittle, but such a suggestion was ignored.

"No child has ever escaped my performance; no child has ever resisted my promise of song and dance..." growled the voice of The Amazing Antonio.

"No child until us, Jess and Sam!" I replied, as my hand twisted the doorknob and then shoved the front door open.

"Do not let them escape!" ordered the puppeteer, but he was too late. Jess pulled me out onto the porch, and we both slammed the door closed.

"Where are we?" I asked her as, instead of the sidewalk that we expected to see we discovered a huge dark forest sprawled out before us instead.

"I don't know, Sam," Jess replied. "But I am not going back in there."

"Then we have no other choice but to run," I told her. "Hopefully the forest

will hide us."

"Remember, Sam, we run together..." Jess reminded me. "You said whatever happens this time we will both be there..."

"A promise is a promise," I agreed. "Let's go..."

As we ran ahead and into the forest of giant oak trees, I could have sworn I heard the leaves rustling though there was no wind. A faint whisper, as if even the trees themselves were caught up in the puppeteer's curse.

*Puppet on a string
My puppet on a string
I will teach you to dance
I will teach you to sing
And then all the children
Who like to run
I shall catch with my strings
Make each one join the fun
Puppet on a string
My dear puppet on a string*

Behind us our classmates spilled from the front door. That same eerie chant coming from their wooden mouths clacking open and shut. Each of our friends commanded by The Amazing Antonio. They were coming for us. Like it or not, Jess and I had begun another adventure. At least this time we were each not alone. We ran as fast as we could, hand in hand. We ran until we could no longer see Tammy's house. We ran until the chant became silence.

To Be Continued...

When darkness calls, they answer with fire,
steel, and a little bit of sarcasm.



NIGHT EXTERMINATIONS INC

OPEN CONTRACT CHALLENGE WINNER

LORETTA A. STRADLEY

Fantasy

Words in Dreams

By: Andrea Tillmanns



Andrea Tillmanns

Andrea Tillmanns lives in Germany and works full-time as a university lecturer. She has been writing poetry, short stories and novels in various genres for many years.

Sometimes words came to her at night, which solidified in her dreams and rolled off her tongue when she woke up in the morning. “Car battery”, she said quietly, and when she wanted to drive to work, she realized that her car wouldn’t start and the breakdown service that had been called confirmed that the battery was faulty. Some words she knew, others she had to look up. “Do you happen to know what a dodecahedron is?” she asked her neighbor, whom she met outside shoveling snow because she thought the word sounded very mathematical. And indeed, the retired math teacher was taken aback, explained this geometric figure to her with a drawing in the snow and then asked her how she came up with it – it was precisely this piece from his collection of three-dimensional geometric solids that his cat had destroyed

last night.

Coincidences, of course. Luisa was not superstitious, never had been, unlike some of the former colleagues she had sat with in an open-plan office. Instead, she created a spreadsheet in which she entered the words that grew inside her at night, neatly organized with the corresponding dates and real-world events that matched them.

“Spruce,” she dreamed, and when she pulled up the blind in the morning, she could already see the coniferous tree stretched out in the neighbor’s garden, which had probably been uprooted by the night’s storm. She dressed warmly, went out into her own garden and spoke to her neighbor over the low hedge. He was inconsolable, regretting the large spruce, which had been just as old as he was, and at the same time was glad that nothing worse had happened. “Just imagine if the tree had tipped the other way and hit a house,” he said. Luisa nodded, even though she was sure she

would have been dreaming “house”. But of course she wouldn’t tell her neighbor that. Nor would she tell anyone else. Nevertheless, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that her neighbors and acquaintances had noticed over time that bad things happened around Luisa more often than in other places. Perhaps she sometimes asked too many questions when reality didn’t match the words from her dream; perhaps that’s why others remembered Luisa mainly in connection with all the little disasters in life. Pure psychology, no reason to believe in more. And her table, which showed an event from the same night or the night before that perfectly matched every word she dreamed, was no evidence of more than a few dozen coincidences.

And although she continued to believe in coincidences, Luisa began to fear the words from her dreams. “Apples,” she said when she woke up and was glad when she found the rotten fruit in the storage cellar and no longer had to worry about her little apple trees. “Crocuses” was also unproblematic, albeit annoying – she had even thought she heard a bang the night before, but hadn’t noticed in the dark that a car had obviously driven into the large stone on the corner of her

property, shifting it so that the crocuses that had just blossomed around it had been crushed. “Heating pump”, on the other hand, was very stressful and meant that she spent several days sitting in an increasingly cold house, struggling to ward off the winter temperatures with an electric heater while she waited for the technician to finally install the new pump.

“Heinrich,” she said quietly one morning, and even before she pulled up the blind and saw the mortician’s dark gray car on the opposite side of the street, she knew what had happened. She didn’t go out, didn’t want to be associated with this misfortune. The neighbor was well over eighty and no longer very fit, so it was to be expected.

Nevertheless, that was the morning she decided to stop keeping the table.

From that day on, she ignored all words she did not know and all concepts that had nothing to do with her. She didn’t ask the neighboring mathematician about his cat when she dreamed “icosahedron” and firmly believed it was a coincidence when she dreamed “feeding house” and in the morning saw the mess in her garden, which had probably been caused by the raccoons that were becoming increasingly

common in her town. And yet her neighbors seemed to know that there was something different about her. None of the adults said so, but their looks gave them away. The children in the village were more honest and called Luisa a bad luck charm.

But she didn’t bring bad luck, she just saw it coming – Luisa was sure of that. At least of the first part. Everything else could still be coincidence. After all, she wasn’t superstitious and wouldn’t become it at her age. So she ignored the stares and whispered words, started reading more, worked more in the garden, greeted kindly and tried not to dream any more words. But of course that didn’t work. “Blackbird”, she said one morning and quickly found the remains of the young bird, which had probably fallen victim to a bird of prey. “Octahedron” on another day made her smile as she thought of the neighbor’s cat.

As she grew older, she began to get used to the fact that there were many such coincidences in her surroundings, and sometimes she had the feeling that even her neighbors forgot over time that they had thought Luisa was a bad luck charm. “Luisa,” she said quietly one morning, but no sound slipped over her tongue, and so she lay

still and sank back into the
depths of the night.

Fantasy

The Life of Wu Fang

By: Dawn DeBraal



Dawn DeBraal

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, a stray cat and a rescued dog. She has published over 600 short stories, drabbles, and poems in online ezines and anthologies. She tends to lean toward the horror genre because it makes her life seem so much better! Falling Star Magazine nominated Dawn for the 2019 Pushcart Award; she was Runner-up in the 2022 Horror Story Competition, two-time Author of the Month, nominated 2020, 2022, 2023 Author of the Year in Spillwords, Member of the Month in Issues 103 and 115 in The World of Myth Magazine.

"Torch the wagon," trail boss

Henry Wade reluctantly gave the order. Wu Fang, a Chinese Medicine man grabbed a piece of wood from the campfire and held it to the wagon that had been taking Claire Hadley and her family, west.

"No!" The young girl cried. Her mother and father died of the fever, so far, she showed no signs of sickness, but everything they touched had to be destroyed.

"What are you going to do with her?" Wade's assistant asked, tossing his head in Claire's direction.

"Only thing I can think of, is to take her back to Silverton and drop her off at Miss Nellie's. I'll take her to California if she still wants to go, when she's older.

Henry put the young girl on the back of his horse instructing his right-hand man, Marcus, that he'd be back in two days. "In the meantime, keep moving west, I'll catch up with you."

Claire was given a small satchel with clothing that was donated by several of the women, as her things had been burned in the cleansing fire. Mr. Wade said he would pay Claire for her father's mules since the girl was unchaperoned and no one from the group stepped up to take on her care. Folks were afraid she could be carrying the fever and not showing signs of it yet. They shunned her, Claire wouldn't be going to California with the people

she had been traveling with.

"Miss Hadley, I have a friend, her name is Nellie Pearl, I'm sure she'll take care of you, we will ride back to Silverton to drop you at her place of business. I'll give Miss Nellie the fee your ma and pa gave to go to California, in exchange for your care." Henry Wade could not have been kinder at that moment, but Claire felt alone in the world.

Henry and his ward rode back to Silverton. Mr. Wade walked into Miss Nellie's saloon, while Claire sat outside, per his instruction, to wait. When he returned, the woman who accompanied him was beautifully painted with red lips and cheeks that matched her friend Wu Fang's wagon. Miss Nellie looked the girl up and down before responding.

"She can work in the kitchen and clean rooms. I will provide for her." Miss Nellie motioned for Claire to step forward. The frightened child looked at Wade with sad eyes, wearing a dress that was much too large making her look all the more pitiful. Wade was overwhelmed with empathy, but as a single man, he couldn't take the responsibility of a young girl, on.

"Claire, Miss Nellie is going to care for you until you are older. I promise that when I can, I will come back for you and take you to California when you are older. Go with Miss Nellie, now." Wade pushed her toward the painted woman.

Claire had no choice, her parents were gone, all she had was the clothing in

her bag and the necklace her mother wore. Mr. Fang, the man who burned their wagon, took the necklace before setting the wagon on fire sneaking it to her.

"What a beautiful necklace," Miss Nellie commented, then suggested Claire take it off so that it wouldn't get lost or stolen and put it in the jewelry box the Madam had in her room for safe keeping.

Claire grew up in a house of many women, all of them cared for her like mothers. She scrubbed floors and dishes, did laundry, and changed bedding all the while learning a lot about life from Miss Nellie's Gentlemen's Club and Saloon.

The job she enjoyed most was visiting a woman who was lovingly known as "Old Grandma," in a little house in town where Claire learned to make potions from herbs to help the girls in the house when they were ill. As the years went by, the girl blossomed into womanhood.

"Miss Claire," the cowboy came from behind, she whirled around.

"Oh my, you startled me." She moved away from the cowboy, but he regained the ground she had ceded.

"I would like your services." The smelly man stroked his finger down the side of her face trying to coax a kiss. Claire slapped him across the face.

"I am not a working girl, least the way you think." The man was about to strike her when Miss Nellie walked into the bar.

"What's going on in here?" She demanded. The red-faced cowboy tried to defend himself.

"You can tell by the way she is dressed that she is not a working girl. Leave my business immediately." Miss Nellie was not a woman to be reckoned with. The cowboy left without saying

another word.

"Those men are not the kind you want to be around, Claire. You will have a better life than this." Miss Nellie told her. She was very fond of Claire; the daughter she never had and saved all the money Claire made, providing everything the young woman needed. From that day forward, Miss Nellie banished Claire to the kitchen when men came for comfort.

On her eighteenth birthday, Claire received the money Miss Nellie had saved from her earnings, along with the mule sales and the payment for her parents' trip west that Henry Wade had given Nellie for her care.

"Happy Birthday, Claire. I purchased Old Grandma's house in town now that she's gone, we still need someone to carry on her business, I hoped you would be happy doing that.

"But I love you, Nellie."

"You can't stay here any longer. You have become a distraction and the girls are jealous. I never wanted this lifestyle for you. Make your way in the world, child, we will still see one another." As a parting gift, Nellie opened the jewelry box and hung Claire's mother's necklace around the young woman's neck.

"I'd forgotten this piece. It's beautiful." Claire whispered as she touched the dragon medallion necklace. With hugs and a few tears, the now grown woman moved into town where she continued to grow herbs and make concoctions, love potions, salves to cure rashes and ills. Her business was brisk, because the people trusted Claire, who had been trained by one of their own.

In restless dreams, Claire saw a wagon with a painted dragon on the side. There was a name that she couldn't make out, but something tugged at her memory when she woke. Later

that day a customer told her there was a medicine man who had come to Silverton and was selling wares on the outskirts of town.

Intrigued, Claire was anxious to see what the man had for sale, especially after finding out he was Chinese. Her necklace was warm around her neck, and she felt the pull to go to him. With great anticipation, she walked to the outskirts of town and found his wagon, excited when she saw the dragon painted on the side along with the name Wu Fang, Proprietor, as seen in her dreams. The memory came flooding back, could it be her mentor, Mr. Fang was still alive?

She came around the wagon and there he stood, stirring a pot hanging over the fire. He turned and smiled, "Miss Claire," as if he were expecting her. Claire ran to the man embracing him. "You came for me?" she asked, remembering Henry Wade's promise. "I came to find you, Claire.

Unfortunately, Mr. Wade died a few years ago, and he won't be coming for you."

"I found my place here in Silverton, I am content." Claire told Mr. Fang, who looked old and tired to her.

"Sit, have a meal with me." Mr. Fang offered Claire a chair. She sat and listened to his tales over the last ten years of places he'd been, sights he'd seen. It seemed like a glorious way to live.

"I am old and can no longer do this job, and I need an apprentice to carry on my legacy. I must pass my knowledge soon, or it will be lost to the world."

"What does that entail, Mr. Fang?"

"It is taking my knowledge on before I die."

"I would be honored to learn from you. You have always helped a lot of people."

"I helped travelers, and folks in the

towns, we passed through. Now my time here is ending, I came to Silverton hoping to find you. I am so pleased to see that you have fared well. I understand you deal in potions and tonics, just as I do."

"I have taken over for a woman they called Old Grandma, who died a few months ago. She taught me many things."

"What you have learned, are tricks that barely scrape the surface. What I can teach you will astound you."

"Mr. Fang, how do you know what I know?"

"The necklace you wear. When I saw in your mother's future that you would become an orphan, I gave her that necklace so that her memories would be imprinted in it and you would remember her when you wore it, and I could find you again. But the necklace went dark for many years. A few months ago, it lit up again and I followed it back here."

"Miss Nellie pulled it out of her jewelry box and gave it back to me when I moved out of her place. I'd forgotten about the necklace."

"Many years ago, I chose you, knowing you would be an orphan and not have an obligation to family. I return to ask you to take my place in this world. I cannot leave until I find someone to walk this journey. You see, I have been doing this job for many years."

"Claire, what are you doing here?"

The young woman turned to see Miss Nellie's rig parked before Mr. Fang's wagon.

"I am visiting Mr. Fang; we were on the same wagon train many years ago. Did you know Mr. Wade died?"

"I did." Miss Nellie looked embarrassed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was important."

"Mr. Wade promised he'd come and get me and bring me to California to fulfill my parents' destiny."

"I'm sorry Claire, I had no idea."

"Mr. Fang is offering to show me the world and to learn his trade."

"But we need you here, Claire."

"I feel I must go with Mr. Fang."

"I knew I shouldn't have given you that necklace. I suspected it held some kind of power over you. But it didn't seem right to keep it from you anymore."

Come with me, Claire, I will help you pack." Mr. Fang whispered in her ear; Claire saw through Miss Nellie's lie.

"There is nothing I need from Old Grandma's house. I am leaving with Mr. Fang, today."

"Claire, what about your reputation?" Miss Nellie asked.

"I don't think that matters anymore, Miss Nellie." She hiked her skirt and climbed into the brightly painted wagon seat. Mr. Fang bowed his head toward Miss Nellie.

"Thank you for all the care you gave Miss Claire."

"Claire, will I ever see you again?" The young woman put her hand to her heart knowing they would see one another again, but Claire would not be in her present form, and Miss Nellie wouldn't recognize her.

"We shall see. Goodbye, Miss Nellie, thank you for everything." Claire hardened her heart toward the woman who kept her in darkness from her former life, and future. She was a selfish woman.

Mr. Fang slapped the reins on the backs of the horses turning west, the place Claire had dreamed of going, and where her parents had planned her future.

"When does it happen?" Claire asked Mr. Fang while sitting at the fire he'd built later that night.

"When you are ready or, when I die,

whichever comes first. I feel it will be the latter. I will absorb your body into mine, and you will also know everything that I do."

"Is it lonely, the life you lead?"

"It can be. You meet people from all over, and you can always get a dog. When you are tired of this way of living, and believe me, you will love this life, find the right person and give them the necklace. I am a patient man; I will wait."

Claire's hand went to the dragon around her neck. She saw it all before her, the process, the change, she was not afraid.

Mr. Fang was as old as life, living the last one hundred years, but there were many others in the same vessel who had taken the job before him. A world of mysteries before her, all questions answered, and yet she hesitated. Mr. Fang threw a piece of dry wood onto the campfire, and small sparks flew about them.

"Stick your hands in the air," a disconnected voice came from the woods. Mr. Fang attempted to pull the pistol from his belt. Before he could aim, he was hit in the chest and fell to the ground.

Claire screamed rushing to her mentor whose body shook in the throes of death, when life slipped from his mouth in the form of a tendril, snaked along the ground toward the cowboy who fired the shots.

"What's that?" the killer screamed in fear. Claire could not answer because she saw a dragon, not this long

writhing thing that pulsed on the ground. The other end dropped from Mr. Fang's mouth taking form. First, a long neck and wings popped out and then the dragon stood on two legs with a spiked tail trailing behind it. The dragon roared in anger.

The cowboy fired again; flames shot

from the creature's mouth lighting the robber on fire. He didn't last long under the intense heat and sunk to the ground in a melted heap.

Claire was mesmerized, as she watched the dragon rise swirling into the air, then growing to an immense size. Streams of flames and sparks rained down onto the ground in a beautiful spectacle. She could hardly breathe at the wonderous display of power and light.

The dragon filled the sky around her flying in circles as if it had been penned for too long of a time. When it tired, it began to shrink and slowly descended to the ground.

Claire was not afraid and reached to touch the creature when it landed. All the memories of its life flooded into her.

She was filled with visions of dragons flying across the sky, hunters who hunted them to near extinction, one dragon took on the life of a human in order that their kind would survive.

The human was called Wu Fang from an older time who sheltered the dragon within him, and now Claire Hadley lived within that same shelter of the man whose name, Wu Fang, meant five directions. Everything around her closed in on Claire, compressing her and the others inside Mr. Fang's body. She kept calm and allowed the change to take place.

The following morning, Mr. Fang, with a quicker step, loaded things into the wagon and hitched the horses who were skittish at first. He asked them to keep calm in Chinese, and they understood it was him. The hardest part would be to remember to live life as a man and to act accordingly.

The old man in the brightly painted wagon came out of the woods stopping at a well-worn path running perpendicular to him. He watched a

raggedy dog run along the trail with his tongue hanging out, excited to see the wagon. Panting, the dog stopped and stared questioningly at the man on the bench with a nodded head. Wu laughed at its comical face and patted the wagon seat. The tired lab gratefully accepted the ride seating himself next to the medicine man. Wu closed his eyes while stroking the dog's head listening to the wind, waiting for instructions. When it came, he turned right, onto the road before him, heading toward his destiny.

Fantasy

Soup, Schnapps, and Snow

By: Jayant Neogy



Jayant Neogy

Writer, Photographer and Traveler, I have a Master's Degree in Engineering from Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur followed by 40 years of work experience in India, Germany, Switzerland and the US.

Thereafter, I had over 5 years of teaching and consultancy experience.

As an author of non-fiction, 9 of my books have been published in India so far.

I write fiction for Substack, Medium, Wattpad and Tumblr.

A blizzard had already stolen my Sunday, now, looming over my table was a giant, about to steal my soup. Startled, I looked back to see a head twice my size, perched on a massive body, staring down. A glimpse of red veined eyes under bushy eyebrows made my protests die in my throat. It was much later that I saw the twinkle in them.

That Sunday, the village of Heimiswil Switzerland, woke to a gusty, freezing morning. On bright days, immersed in its picture-postcard beauty, I'd forget gnawing home-sickness. Today, her beauty was snow covered, treacherous.

My options? Brave the intense cold, or go hungry. Those days, fresh from home, I was boarding at the Pension Franke while I learned to make welding machines in the nearby town of Burgdorf.

On Sundays, the kitchen shuts in the Pension and the guests week-end at home. But, born in sunny Calcutta, 5000 miles away, that luxury was denied me.

The kindly lady of the Pension, Frau Franke suggested the Café, "It's close by and they make a great *Schweinebraten mit Kartoffelsalat*— But your clothes—" She looked doubtful, then dashed away as her husband called.

"My clothes? Aye, that's the rub," I thought. While pork with potato salad

sounded enticing, my Calcutta-bought cotton-lined jacket and monsoon boots, were no match for evil Jack Frost rampaging outside.

"Better live with hunger pangs than die a frozen snowman." I thought.

Gritting my teeth, I lasted through breakfast and lunch. By late afternoon however, my starving stomach defeated common sense and I sallied forth, clad in the finest winter gear that the city of Calcutta could supply.

An icy blast reminded me that Berner Oberland freezes solid in mid-winter. As strong gusty winds drove piercing, painful snow in my face, I stepped forward resolutely. "No turning back," I said sternly through chattering teeth.

My uphill progress was painful. I slipped and fought for balance as I felt ice crystals form inside my nose.

My home town boots leaked, and arctic cross-winds laughed at my leather jacket. As I struggled, I saw locals in winter gear make light of the snow. Some egged me on, with cries of "Hoop-la, hoop-la," as I shimmied around, imitating a dying swan.

Their banter, though good-natured, felt humiliating. How I missed my home town's crowded warmth.

At last, my petrifying snow-walk ended as I crossed the threshold of the Café. It was bright and warm inside, cheery and welcome. I felt like a returning prodigal son.

I forgot my misery seeing the landlord's wide smile. The snickers and pitying glances were forgotten too.

Looking me up and down he said, "Hmm, a hot bowl of soup will set you right."

He called out the order as I looked around. Lighted by a Pine scented cheerful blaze, firelight danced on wood paneled walls, while smoke curled up to the rafters. Sinking into a chair, I noticed an incongruity, a Japanese digital wall clock, where I'd expect one with a Cuckoo.

Facing the fireplace, my back to the door, I thawed. Curled toes relaxed and clenched fists opened. Touched my nose. No frostbite.

Comfortable at last, only my gnawing hunger stopped my nodding off.

Someone entered, casting a huge dark shadow on the floor. But with my eyes fixed on the cheerful waitress, I didn't look around.

She carried a large, steaming bowl. I was about to eat.

The aroma of a hearty beef broth wafted to my nostrils, and salivating, I hastily gathered salt and pepper shakers. The waitress reached the table.

Then disaster struck, for the bowl was pushed aside, upsetting the waitress and shocking me.

I should have jumped up to protest, call the landlord or yell loudly at the presence behind me. I did nothing. Instead, for the first time in hospitable Switzerland, I felt gut-wrenching fear.

Then a huge fist holding a bottle of Schnapps swung into view. A giant, eyes crinkled by laughter lines, walked around to face me. His Tyrolean clothes looked dull and well-worn. A leather harness looped over a faded plaid shirt held up scuffed leather pants. Incongruously, a bright peacock feather stuck out at a jaunty angle in his faded hat.

As his face broke into a wide grin, he

spoke in a voice that rumbled like a Swiss Federal Railway train roaring through a tunnel.

"I saw your teeth chatter." He rumbled, as his grin widened. "Colder than Calcutta?"

He had guessed my country from my dark skin. But Calcutta? I almost fell off my chair in puzzled surprise.

"What, how?" I stammered.

"Easy", he said, "I saw the tailor's label on your leather jacket. Anwar Ali, Park Street, Calcutta." His voice echoed as if the room was a cavern.

Then his eyes turned back in time.

"*Kalkutta liegt am Ganges*," he suddenly thundered, shaking the rafters.

I knew that song, "Calcutta lies on the Ganges." Putting the bottle down, he stuck out his right hand engulfing mine completely. With ponderous gravity, he bowed.

"Hans Zimmer at your service." He said, in best old world Bavarian style.

"Ah! You are the Indian who imitated Charlie Chaplin climbing Matterhorn.

Lucky, you didn't break your neck."

I looked at him dumbly.

He said, "You are too cold for hot soup to thaw you. Drink this instead."

He wasn't stealing my soup. He was offering a potent drink instead.

Hans Zimmer, my newfound friend settled himself, making the table tremble.

He said, "I was buried under a snow drift climbing Zermatt alone. Couldn't contact my rescuers. Sniffer dogs found me 24 hours later. Why didn't I die?"

"Why?"

"A bottle of Schnapps, and warm memories of Calcutta!"

He had been a watch salesman, traveling around the world when Swiss watches were all the rage.

"But when Japs invented the digital

watch" he said, pointing to the wall clock, "the bottom fell out of the market." He lamented in his deep rumble. Like me, he seemed to be out of place in the world he found himself. "But Calcutta?" I asked, hanging on to that tenuous connection with my birthplace.

"Ah! The Second City of the British Empire! I made a big sale there, long ago." He replied, his eyes far away. "To celebrate, we went to Park Street, the most happening part of the city. At a night club, the singer crooned that song in German. Moved, I clapped long and hard. She came by our table and pulled out this peacock feather from her costume." He said, tapping his hat. I had come seeking soup. I found a story, a bottle of Schnapps, and the friendship of a German-Swiss who hadn't forgotten my city or its song. In spite of the blizzard, the soup warmed my body. But it was the Schnapps and the shared memory of Calcutta that thawed my solitude. I felt I belonged, at last.

The End

Fantasy

Soft Sweet Song

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

A girl is living under my bed. I

saw her eyes peering back at me as I reached down last night to pick up my teddy bear that had fallen to the floor. I cried out in surprise as I saw those eyes, shining in the darkness. "Who are you?" I asked, frightened. The eyes closed and the girl was gone. "Who are you talking to, Matt?" asked my little sister Grace.

"I saw a girl," I replied to her question without thinking. "She was hiding under my bed."

"Liar!" my sister said. "You're just trying to scare me."

I was scared, it would have been good to have someone else to be scared with me, even if it was only little Grace. You see Grace and I are five years apart. Often we don't see eye to eye and I don't get why she loves to get me into trouble all the time.

"Mom! Papa!" Grace called out that night as she calls out every night.

"Matt's trying to scare me!"

First our mom, Steph appeared around the bedroom door, and then came Dave who we both call Papa.

"Matt, please," began mom as papa stifled a long and loud yawn. "That movie we watched for family movie night is enough to give Grace bad dreams."

"Yeah son," Papa Dave added. "What

are you filling up your sister's head with now?"

Papa Dave is Grace's dad, not mine, but I let him pretend as it makes our mom happy.

"I am certain that I saw two eyes," I swore to both mom and papa.

Mom shook her head and Papa Dave stifled another yawn.

"Can you check under the bed, please?" mom asked Dave.

"Is that ok Matt?" Dave asked me, he is very modern in his thinking when it comes to kids' rights and stuff like that.

I nodded, giving my ok.

Papa Dave crawled on the floor and fished around in his dressing-gown pockets until he found a little torch. It was pink and shone a Fluro pink light. Grace had given papa the torch for Christmas last year, not a very manly present but Dave loved it and used it as often as he could. As the torchlight switched on I hung my head down so I could look too.

"I saw the eyes around there," I told papa as I pointed to the general area. Papa Dave flashed the light and reached under my bed.

"There," he said triumphantly.

The torch beam caught the head and body of one of Grace's dolls.

"Now what was this doing under Matt's bed?" papa asked Grace.

"Matt stole it," Grace accused.

"Now I think the only thing that has been stolen is our sleep," Papa Dave said as he gave Grace back her doll.

After giving the doll back and giving each of us another goodnight kiss, papa left Grace and me in the dark. "Hey Matt, did you really see two eyes under your bed?" Grace asked me. "I really don't know what I saw," I told Grace. "Liar," she said again before she drifted off to sleep. I took another peek under my bed but saw nothing there. Maybe Papa Dave was right. Maybe it had just been the doll. The size and shape of the eyes looked real though. I tried to fall back asleep again but found I couldn't. For the rest of the night, I just listened to my sister's rhythmic breathing.

#

The next day was Saturday and I had baseball. I found my boots, my helmet but after looking everywhere I couldn't find my glove. "Grace, have you taken my baseball glove?" I asked my sister. Grace just shook her head. "What would I want your smelly, brown glove for?" she asked me as she looked up from the game she was playing with her doll. "Try looking under your bed." After seeing the eyes under my bed last night I was reluctant to search there again. Without any other options, I took a deep breath and got down on my hands and knees. My eyes followed the pattern of my blanket that Nanny Sue had knitted for me. At the end of the pattern was the dark space under my bed. Immediately I saw her, as soon as my eyes got used to the darkness, but I noticed straight away that I could see through her. The girl under my bed looked as though she was trying to tell me something but I couldn't hear a

sound. "What is it?" I asked to which the girl screwed up her eyes in frustration. "Grace, can you please help me?" I asked my sister. I tried to be as innocent as possible but deep down I just wanted to know if Grace could see the girl too. "I'm busy, Matt," Grace told me. "I think I've found my glove but I need to borrow your torch," I asked, sweetly. "I'll give you a coin." Grace loved coins. She was collecting as many different ones as she could. It did not really matter what value the coin had. Grace was collecting coins from all the years before she was born. "Do you have any coins from the 70s or 80s?" Grace asked as she brought over the torch. "Loads!" I told her. "I'll give you one of each."

"Here you are," Grace said with an eager smile. "So where are my coins then?" "You shine it and I'll reach under," I suggested, and reluctantly Grace did. I waited as Grace shone the light over the girl's face and hands. I was surprised when Grace didn't say a word. I was even more surprised when the girl under my bed pushed the glove towards me. Obviously, Grace could not see the girl but the girl was definitely there. She looked around my age, maybe a year older than me. "What are you looking for now?" Grace asked and I realized that I had been staring under my bed, seemingly at nothing. "Oh, sorry Grace," I stammered. "I thought my coins were under there."

#

That day we were playing baseball against the Wildcats. We were the Brumbies and we had a great record

against this team. That day I was feeling off though. My first time batting I just couldn't concentrate and I struck out after three early swings. Out in the field on third base was worse. I felt all woozy and unsteady on my feet. When an easy catch came my way I almost dropped it, almost, but I held on tight for the third out. It was as we were running in to get ready to bat again that I felt like my mind went blank and all I could see was the eyes of the girl under my bed. I dropped to the ground and the ball rolled out of my glove. "Matt! Matt! Matt!" I heard everyone shouting. I felt Papa Dave beside me trying to lift my head. Then our coach was there and suddenly the world went dark.

#

When I woke up I was in the local hospital, Saint Mary's, in the children's wing. My mom was there with Papa Dave. I could see that Nanny Sue was there too, sitting in an armchair with Grace sitting in her lap. I could hear our coach pacing in the corridor and assumed that most of my team was outside the hospital room. "What happened, mom? Papa Dave?" I asked, confused. "Everything is going to be ok, Matt," mom tried to reassure me but the looks she was giving Dave made me worry even more. I looked over at Grace who looked back at me. She had been crying, from the look of how red her face was my sister had been crying a lot. Nanny Sue's face was difficult to read. She was just staring at a spot on the floor under my hospital bed. She looked like she was in her own little world, far, far away.

"Hey Nanny?" I asked. "What are you thinking?"

"Hmmm?" Nanny Sue asked, looking up at me in surprise.

"What were you thinking, Nanny Sue?" I asked again. "You seemed miles away."

"I was just thinking young Matt that the little girl seems lost and lonely."

"Do you mean me, Nanny Sue?" asked Grace in a huff. "I'm not lost or lonely."

"So you aren't," laughed Nanny Sue as she squeezed Grace.

While the eyes of my family were on the youngest and the oldest members I took a quick glance under my bed. The girl was there and she seemed more solid. She had gray hair, almost a shining silver color, and her eyes were milky white but smiling.

"Hi Matt," the girl whispered. "I am here to sing for you, but not until my voice is stronger."

"No!" cried Nanny Sue.

"No, mom?" asked our mom Steph.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No more bony butt," blurted out Nanny Sue.

"My butt is not bony!" Grace complained as she wiggled deeper into Nanny's lap.

"Of course not, darling," assured Papa Dave. "Come and sit on my lap instead."

Although the family all bought Nanny Sue's excuse I had a feeling her shouting out the word no had nothing to do with my sister. I had a glance under my bed again and discovered that the girl was gone.

It was just at that moment the doctor came in followed by two nurses. The nurses both gave me a watery smile but the doctor ignored me. Instead, he focused his attention purely on my mom.

"Mrs. Stephanie McGee," the doctor

barked. "I need to speak with you and the patient in private."

It was not a question.

"No!" I cried. "I want everyone to stay."

When you are only ten years old it is not often that you get your own way. The nurses shepherded everyone out until there was only me, my mom, the doctor, and after a quick check, I discovered that the girl under my bed was there too.

"Mrs. McGee, there is no other way to say this so I'm just going to say it," said the doctor after the room door was closed.

Mom joined me on the bed and hugged me tightly.

"Just say it, Doctor Humphries," my mom demanded.

The doctor nodded.

"Your son Matthew has cancer," he said.

There was no warmth in his eyes, the message was delivered matter-of-factly.

Mom squeezed me so hard so almost crushed all the air out of me.

We were both shocked. I was more shocked though as I felt another pair of arms come around me in a gentler embrace. I initially thought it was one of the nurses or weirdly maybe the doctor himself. I opened my closed eyes and saw my mom was crying but beyond her, I discovered the girl from under my bed had come up and was giving us both a hug.

"What are our options?" mom asked.

"Not many, unfortunately," the doctor began. "Matthew has a very rare form of brain tumor, there really is nothing we can do."

#

Well, the next couple of weeks went by pretty quickly. I got regular visits

from our baseball coach and all the members of the team. Mom, Papa Dave, and Grace came regularly with Nanny Sue occasionally coming along with them. Grace loved the jello desserts which I never tried eating. Hospital food was not my favourite and the cancer made me more tired than hungry. Mom insisted that we try to fight the cancer but all the radiation and chemotherapy did was make my head look like an egg and I got even more tired. I slept a lot, dreaming of the girl and seeing her getting stronger and stronger. Other relatives and family friends dropped in to see me as well, people that I did not normally see. Something else happened too, I wasn't afraid of the girl under the bed anymore. In fact on days where I found myself alone in the hospital room with the beeping machines and my nanny dozing, I would talk to the girl. Her voice was getting stronger and she was excited about the opportunity to finally sing for the first time. Nanny Sue also revealed the truth, she could see the girl as well and hear her. That got me wondering.

I outlived the doctor's predictions of how much time he thought I had left. Mom and Papa Dave got really excited as the year crept closer to Christmas. They wanted to take me home, something that the hospital finally agreed on. When we drove away from Saint Mary's I was happy to have Grace sitting in the back seat with me on my left and Sophie sitting with me on my right. Sophie was the name of the banshee, the girl who used to be under my bed but now sat on top of the covers. Sophie held my hand when thinking about cancer scared me. That happened quite a bit near the end. Christmas came and went and then so did New Year. We had

Nanny Sue stay with us more around that time. Mom and Papa Dave both worked to help pay for the hospital bills. Nanny Sue did what she could to keep Grace and me happy and the family fed. I could see though that all this extra work was putting a real strain on Nanny Sue.

The day that Sophie finally sang Grace was at a friend's house and mom and Papa Dave were both at work. Nanny Sue was sitting on Grace's bed watching Sophie with wary eyes.

"It's time, isn't it," Nanny Sue croaked. Sophie smiled and nodded. Without saying another word she took a deep breath in and gave us both a confident smile.

"Good luck," I whispered to Sophie, a whisper was about as much of a voice as I had left by then.

The song that came out of the banshee was soft and sweet and took all of my pain away. I could see it was having an amazing effect on Nanny Sue also. Nanny Sue seemed to go back in time before my very eyes. The room began to glow softly, a serene scene of peacefulness. As Sophie's song grew louder the light became brighter and my nanny became younger. Hoping off my bed I found Nanny Sue was about the same age as Grace when I took her offered hand. Sophie took my other hand and as one we walked into that beautiful light. There was no more pain, no more tiredness, no more fear. That sweet song was sung for my nanny and me and Sophie sang us all the way to a better place.



DREAMS OF DARK DREAMS OF NIGHT

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Horror

Call of the Kraken

By: Lisa H. Owens



Lisa H. Owens

Lisa H. Owens, a former monthly humorist columnist, resides in North Texas with two rescue dogs, some failing houseplants and a possum named Harry, who's had a cozy burrow beneath the backyard storage shed since he was a leggy adolescent. Her multi-genre work has been published in various media outlets and narrated on horror podcasts. She's not afraid of spiders and snakes and her stories often include family secrets. Visit her website for more:

www.lisahowens.com

I an gazed at the bridge through eyes that had seen a myriad of changes in his lifetime. Some good. Some not so good. He leaned forward to check his compressed air-pump for glitches, the kiss of death for anyone exploring the depths of the sea alone. Shifting the copper helmet in his lap, cumbersome by modern standards, he was startled by his reflection in its glass viewport. An old man, still handsome, whose suntanned face belied how he felt—like death warmed over most days. Then *the diagnosis*, and he'd sailed out the very next morning. Before daybreak, he'd pointed the restored Coble's bow towards the North Star, stopping shy of Colin's bridge.

#

His eyes misted, as they always did, when Colin's untimely end filled his head. They were always there—the memories—buried deep for nigh on four decades. Colin's disappearance on one of their deep-sea dives, a sunken ship salvaging expedition. The state of his body three days later when it washed up beneath the bridge. His dive-helmet gone, his golden hair glistening in the sun in stark contrast to the drysuit shredded like tattered rags, exposing arms and legs, covered in purple suction-rings. The condition of Colin's body led to one conclusion,

but Ian had tucked it away and honored his beloved's memory. As Colin would have wished, Ian forgave his father's denouncement of the couple's *depraved lifestyle*, and lived a charitable life, choosing to focus, not on his anguish, but on the needs of those less fortunate than himself. He'd captained his own modest trawler, ignoring the strong pull of the Kraken. Grateful every day for the sea's generous bounty.

#

Ian's failing body struggled to maneuver the Coble to the infamous Eternal Water Surge, a great distance from the bridge, where he dropped anchor. His helmet rested, heavy on his thigh, while he mentally reviewed the pre-dive checklist. It would be challenging alone, a job once performed by him and Colin. One-by-one, he performed each task: *Buoyancy, Weights, Releases, Air, Final Okay. All check.* Ian gave himself the A-Okay hand-sign, wincing at his ridiculous display of humor. Nothing funny about this—his final dive. He was ready to face his nemesis. He snugged the weight belt, along with an additional item not typically associated with diving gear, then reached to unclip the safety rope securing him to the boat. *Un-check.* His arms trembled as he clamped the bulky helmet onto his orange drysuit's corselet. One final air release valve test. *Check.*

The water churned. "Ian. laaaaaan," she

beguiled, and he rolled backwards over the edge. Hit the roiling water with a thwack, sinking like a stone. Down-down-down—to where the pressure was unbearable—straight into the eight murderous arms of the Kraken. He looked deep into the black abyss that was her eye, his smile taunting. They had waited a long time for this showdown. Ian pulled the pin on a high-explosive hand-grenade, a salvaged remnant of a long-ago war, and counted down from five.

Horror

Camping

By: Doug Hawley



Doug Hawley

The author is a little old former actuary who jumped from numbers to words. He has hundreds of stories published in all of the usual genres and four continents (South America, Africa, and Antarctica are difficult for him). He had two short story collections published in 2023. His home is in Oregon USA with editor Sharon.

<https://sites.google.com/site/aberrantworld/hello> website with location and details on hundreds of stories.

1.

Duke had been dating Sally for a week and decided it was time to get the relationship on a higher level. If she agreed with his suggestion, he thought the two of them had it made. Camping in the same tent seemed like a great idea if only she would agree. Her response amazed him “I’d love to. I like being in the outdoors rather than going to some stupid movie.

“This abandoned road looks really creepy. Are you sure we’ll be safe camping out here?”

“Not to worry Sally. My buds used to camp here regularly. There are no scary animals. The biggest around here is the chipmunks.”

After Duke set up the tent and Sally fixed food, they went to bed early. “Can you relax now Sally? See, it is completely safe.”

“I’ve always wondered, why are these called the Grayson Woods?”

Duke paused before answering “The story I heard is that it’s named after the hermit Cindy Grayson. The old timers called her a witch who lured unwary men to their death. Sounds like a standard myth. I’ve never heard any concrete details. Again, nothing to worry about. Let’s just relax.”

“I don’t think that you have relaxing on your mind, not that I disagree.”

They stopped what they are doing when they hear something tearing.

Duke yelled “It’s coming from under the tent and it’s huge!”

Sally’s parents reported her missing to police two days later. After checking with Duke’s parents, the police checked where they had planned to camp. The only suspicious thing that was found was a burnt area where the tent was presumed to have been. No sign of either of them was ever found.

2

"Hey Jean, let's go camping this weekend. I want to get us all alone for a big surprise. It's a secret location in the Grayson Woods, so don't tell anyone what we are doing."

"Ok Lou, but is this place safe? I don't want to get lost or get eaten by some big wild animal. You heard about Duke and Sally didn't you?"

"Nothing to worry about, I've checked it out. You'll be safe. I think Duke and Sally just ran off together."

Later at night in the tent "Honey, I'm so glad you thought of this" as she caressed his side, "this works out great for me". Her nails and toes turned into talons ripping his flesh." His screams didn't last long.

After eating her fill, Jean dragged the remains of Lou's carcass underground to share with her extended family.

When Lou and Jean didn't return, Jean's adoptive mother told people that Jean had told her that the two planned to elope and would get in touch with everyone when they had settled. Lou's family thought it odd that they hadn't heard anything about it,

but decided to be patient with the young lovers.

3

Jeremy Jordan, a strong outdoorsman and serious weightlifter was the next to go to the woods and not return, a week after Jean and Lou disappeared. In his case, the evidence was more ominous. A femur and jawbone were found by the search party. The bones had been gnawed by some unknown animal.

The sheriff had no answers.

4

The Warren Neighborhood News ran a notice the week after the bones were found "Meet At the Inn Between to discuss the Grayson Woods mysteries".

Warren's Mayor Anderson opened the meeting with "All of you here are probably curious about what has happened recently in the Grayson Woods.

After getting some concerning messages from some of our upstanding citizens, I thought that we should have a town meeting immediately. First, I'd like you to hear from the missing Jean Dekin's mother, Sally Dekin.

"I've always represented myself as Jean's adoptive mother. That isn't exactly true. I was what was known as a spinster when I came to meet the girl that I named Jean. She was carefully deposited on my doorstep by what looked like a giant wolf. I happened to be looking out of my window when it happened. She had been carried in the 'wolf's mouth so gently, she hadn't been injured. I had desperately wanted a child, so I claimed that it was the baby of my unmarried sister. Before the camping trip with Lou, she had frequently wandered off into the woods for days, sometimes coming back disheveled and bloody. She never had an explanation, and I was afraid to pry. She really had talked about eloping with Lou, but now I have my doubts."

5

Mayor Anderson introduced the next speaker "Jason Atkins has some film taken by a drone he flew over the woods."

"Hi, here is some of the film I took at night with illumination."

The film shows a number of animals congregating in the woods, some with human appearance and some appearing like mythical beasts, mixes of

lions, eagles, and snakes. Someone who looked like Jean Dekin looked up at the camera and screamed like a banshee. One of the bird beasts started to fly at the drone at which point the film quit abruptly.

"It was fortunate that I was transmitting the film back to my house where I stored it. You can draw your own conclusions, but I swear the film is unaltered. I later found shards of the drone on the ground."

6

"The last person to speak today before I call for comments is Fred Shear from our local lab."

"This could be more disturbing than the video. The DNA from Jeremy Jordan's bones, seeming left over from whatever ate him, is a mix of known animals such as tigers and squid, but also some which is completely unidentifiable, as well as his own."

The crowd reacted with sporadic muttering. Bushkin Samson yelled "It's the work of the dark forces, an international conspiracy to form a one-world government. They'll take over all of our rights. Arranged marriages, the president of Poland appointed ruler of the

world. All of our guns will be confiscated." Samson made the same speech at every town meeting, so some of the attendees groaned and left, but most stayed including the few fans of Samson and those amused by cranks, while the usual Samson rant continued.

7

"If you have comments, please introduce yourself first. This is being recorded."

"I'm Larry Green from the hardware store. I think the cops should be sent into the woods to check it out."

"Sheriff Akumbo. That does not sound like a police action. Our whole department is four people, including the receptionist. We are not prepared for whatever is in the woods."

"Roosevelt Jackson. Three years ago my dog got loose and went into the forest. I later found his carcass when I was out for a walk. I thought maybe it was wolf or coyote that got him, but looking back on it I have my doubts. There was plenty of meat left on the body of my dog, and the skull was crushed to powder."

"Jim Parsons from the gas station. I was on a hike there and swear that I saw something like Sasquatch in the shadows at dusk. I never said a thing, because I was afraid people would label me a weirdo. With what others have said here today, I'm starting to believe that I did see something strange but real."

"Rose Greer, teacher at Medlock Junior. I was hiking the Graham trail last fall. I saw a guy I'd never seen before a hundred feet or so ahead of me. I speeded up a bit because I wanted to say hello, but never saw him again. What I did see around a bend was a coyote watching me from just off the trail. Could that have been a shape shifter?"

Ten other people detailed incidents which they reinterpreted differently than their original impressions based on recent events.

8

"Larry again. OK, how about the national guard?"

"Hi, I'm Lucy Phillips. I work for the local office of Spacetime, the astronomy network. We have our own gun club with a number of marksmen. I don't know if we

have time to convince any authorities of this danger. The incidents seem to be growing in frequency and deadliness. I think that the town should arm itself and take out the monsters on their own turf. If you don't have firearms, pick up pitchforks, baseball bats, whatever you can grab. Let's take out these bastards on their own turf. Let's take care of this on our own."

"Sheriff Akumbo. I can't authorize."

Lucy Phillips interrupted "Screw that. If you have any balls, grab your weapons and meet at the gun club in an hour. We're going to kick monster butt and make their sad asses sorry that they ever messed with Warren."

Many ran out cheering and others who had no interest in going into the woods left the meeting slowly.

9

After meeting at the gun club, the impromptu army proceeded into the forest. Large bats and raptors immediately attacked the gang from above. Serpents came out of the ground and pulled their victims back into their burrows. Most of the remaining living were rounded up by what appeared to be armored rhinoceroses and

chased into a pit inhabited by large poisonous spiders and millipedes. Very few shots were fired and they were largely ineffective.

Some of the people transmitted videos back to the Sheriff Akumbo while they could. The sheriff had the presence of mind to relay the recorded videos of the killing field to the local Scroot Airbase.

10

Scroot's commander was decisive. Fighter planes quickly appeared in sky and began bombing all of Grayson Woods. The Woods became an inferno killing man and beast alike. When soldiers entered after the bombing, few dead monsters were found, but the forest was filled by human corpses either torn asunder by the creatures or from the bombing.

After the failed invasion of the woods and the bombing, there were few intact families in Warren. The residents that did survive were traumatized and unable to sleep without horrifying nightmares.

11

Real estate billionaire Phil Jones sent agents into Warren soon

after the conflagration. He correctly surmised that the surviving inhabitants, or the estates of families that didn't survive would want to sell and move out without worrying about how much they could get out of their houses and businesses.

Jones tore down all the existing structures and built a new town with premium stores and luxury homes. He turned the deadly horror into a selling point, emphasizing the special nature of the woods, which became "Monster's Woods". Eccentric multi-millionaires and billionaires' bit and paid millions for second homes in what had been Warren, but was now Deth, pronounced death.

The luxury resort had the requisite club house, hundred meter pool, hot tub, golf course, airport for private jets and fees of thousands a month. Everyone there was rich enough that they bragged about, rather than complained about the expense.

The happiness lasted for two years until the club house was burned down and chicken tracks were discovered on the grounds – chicken tracks of a bird estimated to be three meters high and weighing five hundred kilograms. The net worth of those who died in the fire was

estimated to be \$2.7 billion.

That should have been the end of the story, but eighty years later the history of what had been Grayson Woods was largely forgotten or debunked. It was turned into a state park with a swimming pond, playgrounds, and fields for football, soccer, tennis, and picnics. The park was popular because of its many activities and available park food. The Fourth Of July celebration was the biggest event of the year there with fireworks, and lots of games for the kids, or at least is was until the last time it was held. On that day, the former Grayson Woods sank into the ground taking thousands with it.

The End Of Grayson Woods?

From the mind of
WALTER G. ESSELMAN

Our favorite Librarian
turned sniper is back
with a whole new
adventure!



Liberty's
RUN 3
A TIME TO **KALE**



OUT NOW

Action/Suspense

19 20 21 - Part Sixteen

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](http://ParentingExpress.com.au/).

Detective Sonya Fields awoke with a start. "Where am I?" she murmured, but then realized she was in the back of the police car she had arrived in. Thankfully they were still at the house, and the ambulance was gone, with Ray onboard. "Oh, good... You woke up..." said the voice of Constable Tania. "I wasn't sure if I needed to call another ambulance." "I'm fine," replied Sonya. "No medical attention required aside from this sticky plaster you've waked on my head..." "I've been told to take you straight to a hotel," said Tania. "Let you get some proper sleep." "Yes, yes, all that can happen later," agreed Sonya. "Before we go though, I was wondering if you can hold a torch..." "Of course I can hold a bloody torch," replied the young constable indignantly, but she regretted her haughty response immediately. The detective's eagerness told Tania everything. "The chief was pretty firm on his orders that you rest..." she argued, but Sonya was already out of the car. A few wobbly steps proved that the knock to the head still hadn't worn off, but Sonya steadied herself and continued walking. "Where's that torch, Taaaaaania?" she called out to the night. "Bloody hell..." the constable

muttered. "I'm coming... I am coming..." That second bit came out as more of a shout as she hurried to catch up with the detective. The pair entered the front door together; it had been shut but not locked. A handful of officers still milled about the lounge, tiny kitchen, and other rooms on the top floor. "Anybody down in the bowels?" asked Sonya, getting a shake of the head from a few of her colleagues. "We thought we'd leave that to you," stated one of the uniforms. "Good call..." said Sonya with a smile. "The constable and I will be headed down there now..." "Keep dusting for prints, and bag anything you think might be regular use items... Coffee jar... Sugar pot... You all know the drill..." suggested Constable Tania. "Yes, ma'ams..." said the officers, each one in turn, before they went back to doing what they'd been doing for the past hour. "Come on," ordered Sonya. "I need more light down here or else I will need an ambulance for a broken neck." Tania hurried with her flashlight, using the bright beam to help both herself and the detective back down to the room under the house. When the pair had safely navigated the final step, Tania headed back toward where Ray had been found. Sonya had other ideas though. "Bring the light over this way," the detective ordered. "Sure thing, your majesty," muttered the

constable, but Tania was quite quick to do as she had been asked.

"Hold it steady, around this area..."

Sonya continued, not showing if she had heard Tania's mumbling or not. As Tania brought the torch's beam up and around so that it shone brightly upon six glass cabinets, an unexpected find, but not as unexpected as what the pair discovered each cabinet had proudly on display.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Constable Tania.

"Worse," said Detective Fields in reply.

"I see cats, taxidermy specimens each complete..." said Tania.

"No... Look closer..." suggested Sonya.

"Most of the bodies are made up of parts..."

"You mean someone has killed multiple cats and then cut them up..." said Tania, aghast.

"Yep... It looks like it..." the detective confirmed. "See... Here is half of a black cat's head stitched to a calico in such a way that it looks like it belongs..."

"Except the eyes are slightly different heights... And the front paws look wrong..."

"Correct again, Constable," said Sonya. "It looks like a left paw from a tabby has been stitched to the left leg, and a left paw from a ginger Tom has been stitched to the right front leg..."

"So, we are looking for a Doctor Frankenstein who is a decent stitch but can't work out their left and right?"

"I'm thinking this was one of their earlier efforts," suggested the detective.

Tania shone the light on some of the other cabinets, looking closely at the eerie cat creations that stared blankly back at her. The beam made their

glass eyes shine giving each of the unfortunate felines an ethereal look. The constable shivered, and not due to the cold basement.

"See... Here... This specimen..." said Detective Sonya Fields, indicating with a wave of her hand a striped ginger in the central area of the cats on display. "Although we can see this feline is stitched together like all of the others, it looks to be all pieces from the same or very similar specimens..."

"The differences in size and color are minimal," agreed Tania as she put on a brave face and looked closer at where Sonya was pointing.

"This black cat with a white chest and socks could have been one creature, but the chest and back paws are slightly larger than one would expect..." suggested the detective as bent down to look at the bottom row of felines.

"Who does this sort of stuff?" whispered the constable.

"Someone with a lot of patience and a steady hand..." Detective Fields replied.

"I guess that's true... You would probably need to think differently to the rest of us..." Tania suggested.

"If we all thought the same, constable..." began Sonya.

"It would be a very dull place indeed..." Tania finished for her.

"Or a world full of serial killers," the detective suggested.

"I'll get the officers down here to start photographing," offered the constable.

"Not yet," requested the detective, quickly. "Could I get you to shine a light over here too?"

Sonya began walking, a little wobbly, toward a bench located not far from the cabinets.

Tania followed her movements with the light.

"A little closer, thanks," requested

Sonya.

Constable Tania took a cautious step forward.

"What are you going to show me this time?" she asked, in such a way that it sounded as if she did not want to know the answer.

"Birds..." said the detective... "European sparrows to be specific... Or at least mostly sparrow..."

Constable Tania could not help but gasp as the light passed over the tiny models, some with a gull beak, others with the blue feathers of a female wren.

"I think that these were created after the cats..." murmured the detective, deep in thought...

"Do you believe that the human remains were planned to be used for a future project?" asked the constable, shuddering again.

"Likely so," said Sonya. "When you get the officers to photograph all of this make sure they take samples from the tiny tools and then compare samples from those black and decker branded ones on the rack at the back... If we get lucky, we might be able to match up what got used on who..."

"How...?" asked Constable Tania.

"Not how... Who... Or whom if you really wanted to get picky..." replied the detective.

"No... I'm asking how you can do this job without your stomach contents coming up out of you to stain the cement floor..." clarified the constable.

"I can't promise not to spew," said Sonya, her voice level and her face deadpan. "I'm sure you'd benefit just as much as me from some fresh air."

"Do you think that the people who lived in this house knew about what was down here?" asked Tania.

"Oh, most definitely..." the detective replied without hesitation.

There was something that bothered her though about the scene. Ray's parting

comment before the ambulance whisked him away played out in her mind.

"How could I have not worked that out myself," Detective Fields next muttered, berating herself for her slowness.

"What? What have you discovered?" asked Tania.

"Get the officers to dust for prints before they do anything else... Maybe even search for hairs or other samples of DNA..." ordered Sonya. "We need to get back up top before we destroy any vital evidence..."

"You're still not telling me anything," complained the constable.

"I think there may be a third brother... And I've got a feeling that our friend Ray might have met him..." suggested the detective. "I'll get on to the hospital where they sent poor old Ray... We need them to bag up that claw hammer for us no matter what state it is in once they get it out of Ray's chest..."

"Let me guess," said Tania as she and the torchlight headed toward the stone stairs. "This third brother is our artist..."

"Spot on once again, constable," said Detective Fields with a weary, but proud smile. "I think you'd make a pretty good detective."

"Really?" asked Tania, surprised and grateful for the comment. "Thanks..."

"Now, if you could just help me up these steps before my stomach decided to cover them in vomit..."

"Of course," said Tania, hurrying over to put her arm around the detective as Sonya started to fall.

gigantic clown face looked down upon him seemingly laughing at the young boy's circumstances, but Luna Park seemed the most likely place where a boy could get lost and not found in a hurry. He judged that he had about fifteen minutes to a half hour before police officers started to seek him out in earnest.

Where should I go?

The merry-go-round seemed like a good spot, plenty of families that he could blend in with, and Gregory had been taught by Uncle how to be very good at blending.

I'm not going back to him... Never...

"But, what about mom?" the boy asked of himself, and the question caused his legs to stop.

What if he could never live with her again, would that be a bad thing? His mother had been unlucky, Gregory guessed.

You cannot choose your family...

Or could you? The nice girls that Gregory had tried to save, actually had managed to help rescue, didn't they say that they wanted a brother?

Stupid Gregory...

He'd heard those words so often in his young life that he was starting to say them too.

"No, Gregory... You can play this smart... You've got information that the police may want, need even..." the young boy stated aloud.

Some of the families were starting to give him sideways looks.

Time to move one, Gregory...

Just up from the horses, giraffes and elephants that went around all day and all evening, the bell of a strong man test of strength called out, challenging anyone and everyone to prove themselves for a prize. Gregory knew the secret was not how strong you were, more how well you could time and place your strike upon the

panel. He would have been able to get that light to hit the top, but he had no money, except for two gold coins and the side show hustle cost five dollars to play. The boy's stomach growled, and he immediately thought of cake. It was far too far to walk back to the old lady's house and Gregory was not sure he could have found it again anyway. No, if he was going to eat, it would be food he was going to find here amongst the rides and side shows.

"I could kill a bucket of hot chips with some sauce," said a dad, surrounded by a trio of kids.

Gregory agreed that such a treat was just what he needed too. Likewise, the three kids, all boys, showed their own joy at such lunch by leaping up and down and high fiving. Gregory almost envied them for their upbringing. He would not have ever dared ask Uncle for a high five, more likely to end up with a broken finger, or a slap across the face for suggesting something so frivolous.

Well, Uncle is not here now...

No, thankfully the old man was nowhere near Luna Park. For the moment Gregory was free.

"Twenty-eight bucks, thanks Love," Gregory tuned in to hear the lady in the food truck tell the dad.

"Hells bells," the dad whistled. "You sure you boys don't want a hot dog with the lot instead?"

"Hot... Chips... Hot... Chips...!" chanted the trio.

"Alright... You'd think I was made of money..." the dad laughed.

"Thanks, Love," the lady said as she accepted the twenty and ten, handing back a gold coin as the change.

"Damn..." thought Gregory as he looked up at the pricing board.

A plain hot dog was five dollars, and he only had three. He was certainly not going to be able to afford a cup of chips. He would have to find some more

Gregory ran. He ran as fast as his young legs could carry him. The

money somehow. Then it came to him, a thought striking like lightning. The Ferris Wheel. His mom had taught him the easiest way to pick pockets was to wait for it to fall into your hands. Loose coins, change just shoved into pockets fell like rain from the top of the flashing giant wheel as the bucket at the very top swung in the breeze. It was not hard to locate such a ride, in the center of the park, the largest construction, even bigger than the huge clown mouth that acted as entrance and exit to this world of light and wonder. Just like mom had suggested there were a few dollars littering the ground at the base of the Ferris Wheel, begging to be picked up by a young boy happy to risk life and limb.

"Hey, kid, clear off," ordered the ride operator. "You must remain on the other side of the orange cones, for your own safety."

Greggory pretended, convincingly, that he couldn't hear the man, that he couldn't understand.

"Bloody hell," muttered the Ferris Wheel operator, long sandy blond hair pulled back in a rough ponytail. Taking a deep breathe the man tried again, louder this time.

"IT IS NOT SAFE... WHERE ARE YOUR PARENTS...?"

In the age-old way that Greggory had observed actual deaf people responding to people shouting in their faces, the boy pulled a grimace and then tried to block his ears.

"Officer! A bit of help here, please!" called the ride operator, trying to attract the attention of a lady in a police uniform.

That moment when the man's eyes were not on Greggory was all the boy needed. In a flash he bent down and scooped up a handful of loose change, and then just as quickly he

vanished around the back of the ride to blend in with the crowd.

"Yes, what can I help you with?" Greggory overheard the officer ask the ride operator.

"Never mind, he's gone," the man grumbled.

Washing the dirt and grime from the coins in the lavatory, Greggory counted his new haul and happily discovered he now had more than ten dollars, enough for chips and a hot dog both. By that stage his stomach had grown in volume, causing unwanted looks from everyone that stood near him.

"One cup of hot chips with sauce and a plain hot dog, please," he asked of the lady once he finally got to the front of the food truck line.

"That will cost you a tenner, Love," said the lady, not at all happy when the boy handed up six gold coins.

"It's all money," Greggory suggested.

"There will be a ten-minute wait on the chips, OK?" the lady said.

Greggory nodded to say that he was willing to wait.

And that was when the young boy heard the Ferris Wheel operator from behind him say those dreaded words...

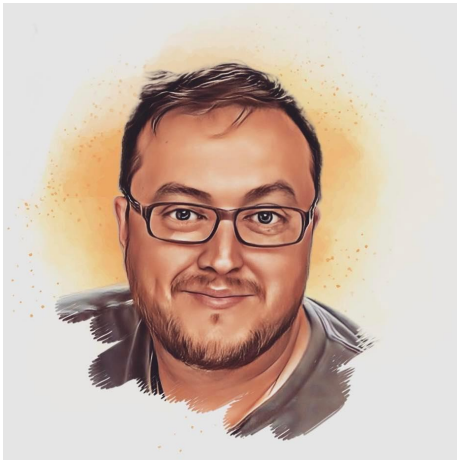
"That's the one, officer... That boy just over there..."

To be continued...

Action/Suspense

Through the Echoes of Madness - Part Seven

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

A fluorescent bulb buzzed

overhead. Marty still trembled while he waited for the officer behind the counter to return with his belongings. His mind wandered back to the moment he found Betty dead, stabbed to death on the ground. He looked down at his shaky hands. There were still bits of dried blood but he was able to wash most of it off after samples were taken and logged.

Marty pulled his black tank top down, the police had taken his shirt and while the darkness of the material disguised the blood, he felt it as he moved. Eventually the officer returned with a small box no more than six inches long by three inches tall. Inside it was a one-gallon bag that contained Marty's wallet, dead cellphone, watch and a keyring. With a *plop* the man dropped the container in front of Marty and held out a pen and a clipboard then said, "I just need for you to sign and date saying that we gave you your things back."

"Okay," Marty said and took the pen and clipboard. With a trembling hand scribbled his name across the paper. He handed it back to the officer and asked, "How do you get out of here?" The officer leaned over forward on the counter and pointed as he spoke. "What'cha wanna do is go down that

first hallway, past the first right and then turn right at the second and it will spit you out in the lobby."

Marty picked up his belongings and quickly put the items inside back to where they belonged. "Thank you, sir."

Marty walked away from the counter, as he moved down the long hallway, he swore that that buzzing was following him but it disappeared as he stepped out into the empty lobby. An uneasiness blanketed him, although he did not know why. He walked to the exit and then realized, *Shit! I don't have a way home!*

Marty turned around and walked over to the receptionist desk and waited patiently until the older heavy set female officer looked up at him. "How can I help you, sir?"

"Can you call me a taxi," Marty asked nervously as he watched the woman's face shift from bothered to being annoyed.

Before he could speak, she said in a deadpan tone, "We don't do that sort of thing, sir. you can use a payphone to call for a taxi."

"Fantastic. Great. Wonderful," Marty said sarcastically. "Where can I find the payphones? I haven't called someone collect in the last thirty years or so, so this'll be fun."

The female officer groaned.

"Outside, sir."

"Thank you so much for your help," Marty said with attitude and walked immediately outside.

The hot air stung Marty's lungs once he took a breath of fresh air outside. He looked around for the payphones and saw that traffic was moving and the sun was beginning to set.

No fucking phone, Marty thought. Bitch! I just wanna go home and forget about this day for as long as I can!

Marty walked toward the parking lot at the side of the building and spotted a single pay telephone and attached to it was a tall, thin, man in his early forties who appeared to be wearing brand new clothes. His blonde hair melted into his beard, and his blue eyes almost glowed against the man's sunburned skin.

Next to him were two men and one woman, Marty noted that they too seemed to be dressed in new attire. The man with the blue eyes made eye contact with Marty and smiled.

"Hmm, honey, please," Marty said to himself and returned with a smile then made his way toward the small group. By the time he reached the others, the man with the blue eyes hung up the phone.

Without breaking eye contact, the man with the blue eyes continued to smile and then said, "Hi there. Do you need to use the phone?"

Marty sighed in relief that the group were friendly.

"Honey, I have had such a long day, I just want to get a ride to the airport and get home," Marty confessed but with a faint hint of flirtation.

"Oh, not a problem," the man said his smile shifted into a welcoming one.

"Where do you call home?"

"San Fran, honey," Marty said. He rubbed his face as the night's events flashed by in his mind's eye and continued. "I am sure that I can exchange my ticket for another one for the soonest flight home."

"My congregation and I could take you to the airport... Oh! I am so sorry, where are my manners. I'm Assistant Pastor Thomas Lowe and this is my congregation. We are from the Fellowship of the Branch church up in the Mojave Desert." Lowe revealed without breaking eye contact. "I was just calling my pastor to tell her of our progress, and we can take you to the airport, as long as you don't mind a little preaching along the way."

"That would be wonderful," Marty said honestly and flashed a tired smile.

#

Kelley aggressively typed in binary code on the keyboard; she was not one for being kept out on secrets and she knew the FBI locked that file for a reason. Multiple windows popped up in front of her demanding a new prompt and she was ready for anything. The glow from the computer screen bounced off of her soft skin as it flickered from window to window.

"How is it, co—"

"Shhh," Calaway interrupted. "Let her think, Steve."

"It's okay, I can multitask," Kelley said with a slight smile. "The FBI has this pretty encrypted with a level nine clearance."

"Why?" Williams asked, while he scratched his head in thought.

"I could only guess at this point,"

Kelley explained without looking away from the computer screen.

"Can you get in trouble for doing this," Calaway said as he leaned in to see what she was doing, although he had no clue what any of the numbers, letters and symbols on the screen meant.

Kelley chuckled.

"They would have to catch me first," she snickered with an equally

confident smile. "When I first got into looking at things I shouldn't have been looking at, I learned rather quickly to cover my tracks."

"Ah, you got looking at porn, huh," Deputy Williams asked with a hint of realization to Kelley's words.

"Steve! You don't ask a woman those sort of things," Calaway barked, his face red and his eyes wide.

"Especially a female employee!"

"It's okay," Kelley said as she continued to click away at the keyboard. "Yeah, I grew up without a mom and it was dad and I. He worked nights at the time, and I would jump on the family computer and look at naughty things. I did this on a regular for a while. That was until my dad went on the computer and it crashed, so he called his brother, my Uncle Glenn to come see what the matter was. Yeah, I downloaded a shit load of viruses from those sites. Lesson learned —"

It was at that moment Kelley froze and watched the screen with apprehension.

"What's the matter," Calaway asked softly, concern lined his face.

"I...got in...", Kelley mumbled. "Level nine was pretty intense."

"Well what the fuck does it say, girl," Williams demanded with excitement. The Sheriff turned to say something, but changed his mind and gave him a disapproving look.

"This woman had a file long as a porn guys dick," Kelley said, then froze when she realized her internal monologue was verbalized. "Hm, it started back when she was kidnapped by the Kopy Kat Killer, some years back."

"Do they have a suspect," the Sheriff asked while he watched Kelley work her magic.

"They...do...", Kelley replied, but when

silence and clicked on the keyboard for a few more moment. "Ah, there we go. Martin Fields, he was Stride's personal assistant. He was the one who *found* her covered in her blood." "Yeah, but they let that piece of shit go," an irritated female voice said. The three looked up and saw Sergeant Amanda Murray as she entered the office. "A buddy of mine at the FBI, Brookes, texted me on the way back here to tell me that they let that little fucker go."

"You look like you need a neck rub, darlin'," Deputy Williams said as he stood up from his seat.

"Not *now*, Steve," Murray said. She now stood in front of the counter; her anger and frustration formed in a glare which was targeted at Deputy Williams.

"That doesn't belong there," Kelley said softly and in almost a chuck and clicked the mouse. "There that is better."

"What was that," Calaway asked while he moved in closer to the screen for a better view of what he looked at. Kelley chuckled.

"It was an empty folder," she explained in an almost playful manner. "It cracks me up that the FBI is the *be all* and they make stupid mistakes like creating a file folder and never even naming it."

"Anything remotely useful, you can tell us," Calaway grumbled in mild frustration. "Um, Stride's body has been picked up by the coroner, but is holding the autopsy off until...oh wow!"

"What," Calaway questioned wide eyed.

"You remember that guy who rescued Stride from the Kopy Kat Killer," Kelley asked the group.

"Yeah, they called him Mr. Hollywood, or something, because of the court

case," Williams said.

"Copeland," Murray said, in a moment of clarity. "Detective Copeland. Why?"

"Well, he works with the FBI now and is flying in to view Stride's body, before the autopsy," Kelley read from the computer screen. "It looks like brass from the top named him lead on the case."

"Does it say where and when he's landing," Calaway asked, he stood up and grabbed his hat from of the counter. "I think we need to meet Agent Copeland in person."

"He's coming into Ontario at three," Kelley explained. "It's a red eye flight; I'm surprised the Feds didn't slip him in with their own jet."

"No, that sounds to me like they want him to be noticed," Calaway grumbled and placed his hat perfectly in place on the top of his head. "Five bucks says, this is the Governor's call. He likes the attention, no matter if it is good, bad, or hurts anyone as long as he gets time in front of a camera."

"I'm going with you, Sheriff," Murray said as Calaway walked around the counter to meet her.

"I can transfer everything to my laptop and hook it to my hotspot," Kelley said as she stood up from the computer. "I can read you more of what I found, for example, did you know that Copeland was having an affair with Stride when she was abducted?"

"You can do that even while we are driving," Calaway asked and then looked at Murray who shrugged.

"Of course," Kelley replied.

"Steve, stay here just in case there is an emergency," Calaway said as he turned away from the counter.

"Roger that, boss," Williams said and then gave the three a salute.

"Godspeed."

Hot air drifted inside the quiet cab of the old pickup, as the soft hum of tires and an occasional *clink* of something metal rattling underneath. Marty found himself uncomfortably wedged in between Assistant Pastor Lowe and a wiry man in dark sunglasses although it was in the middle of the night.

His eyes lingered upward to the rearview and watched the woman who sat in the back of the truck's hair fly wildly in all directions. He noticed her sunburnt face glowing from the passing streetlights, she looked happy in the moment and he wished there was a peace for him like that. Despite the peacefulness in the moment, Marty realized he clutched his phone. His lifeline, was dead and useless, the moment transitioned into nervousness while he watched the road ahead.

"If you take the next right," Marty said, he found there was a lump in his throat as he spoke, "If you take Archibald Avenue you can get to the airport a lot faster. It cuts through fast and spits you out at Haven. Little bumpy but saves time."

Lowe chuckled and looked over at the man next to the passenger side door. Which in turn he started laughing, an evil tone rung through the cab, it was a deep knowing echo, like two people enjoying an inside joke Marty wasn't in on.

The hair on Marty's arms stood up.

"What?" Marty asked, with a gulp.

"What's so funny?"

The laughter stopped as quickly as it had started.

"Oh, my brother," Lowe said, voice smooth and polite, like he was about to offer directions instead of damnation. "You're *not* going to the airport."

"What?" Marty turned his head

#

sharply toward him.

"You're coming with us," Lowe continued, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "You've been chosen, brother. The Ripper Saint spoke through Pastor Sue, and your name came up. Weeks ago. The Ripper Saint prophesied this very moment."

Marty's throat went dry.

"No, no," he said, he shook his head slowly. "This—this isn't funny, man. I have had a horrible fucking day; I am not up for any fucking jokes!"

The man beside him shifted. "Not a joke, brother, it's prophesy."

"Just the bidding of the Saint," Lowe explained gently. "And you're going to help."

"Fuck you I am! I'm not doing shit," Marty exclaimed, heart pounded in his throat. "Pull over, right now. I swear to God—"

He didn't finish the sentence.

Something sharp stabbed into his upper arm. Marty gasped and tried to jerk away, but the wiry man had already pulled back the syringe and tossed out the window.

"Night, night," the man whispered.

Marty's vision blurred. He tried to move, tried to shout. But everything felt far away.

A slippery disconnect.

"Shh," Lowe said, calm as ever. "It's okay. When you wake up, your purpose will be waiting."

Marty slumped between them, head resting against the dash.

He could still hear them laughing.

Then, nothing.

To Be Continued...

Action/Suspense

In the Midst of Normalcy Part 26

By: Tom Fowler



Tom Fowler

Tom Fowler, 68 years old, retired and lives in Overland Park, KS. Author of several books and numerous short stories. Visit Tom's blogsite at tommyschoice.wordpress.com.

83.

Gary Arranges a Meeting

Gary knew he could call his good friends and fellow detectives Jeff Bearce and Peter Quarles anytime he wished to discuss the Edgmon murder. He also knew his friends were busy with their own responsibilities and he should not do this very often. He likened this to the retired detectives he had known through the years who made the mistake of spending too much time hanging around station houses wishing to visit with former colleagues. The retired guys had forgotten or didn't understand that busy detectives did not have time for frequent visits from former mentors and peers. Gary did not wish to make a similar mistake with his friends concerning the Edgmon murder. He would call them if he learned anything or the case broke, but on this day that had yet to happen.

At some point between the murder and now, Gary realized he was basically alone in resolving the Edgmon murder. It was not a good or comforting feeling.

Cathy Coleman's promise to herself to call the lieutenant was never realized. Gary sat alone in his small office on this first day after Labor Day. He and Elaine had taken a three day holiday and she was still asleep when he arose from a fitful night's sleep. Gary quietly

prepared a light breakfast and coffee for both of them before departing early for the office, leaving the sausage biscuit for Elaine in the oven and set to low temperature. Gary welcomed the silence and solitude of early morning at the station but it was of limited benefit. He continued to acutely feel ongoing unease over the Edgmon murder.

Because of the media attention and presence of Judge Coleman in the continuing drama, Captain Green, at Chief Gilliland's urging, kept Baughman on the case mostly full time. Green assigned him a few minor investigations but nothing to take his mind off of Leann Edgmon. The problem was there was not much to do. Gary had too much time to brood and not enough to investigate. Green and Baughman discussed this last week before the long weekend commenced. Green told him, "I'm not going to leave you on this full time much longer."

Baughman had replied, "There's no reason to. I haven't learned anything new since the day the family went home." Gary felt guilt and frustration over having spent so much time on the case with so little to show for it. These thoughts and more ran through Lt. Baughman's mind as he sipped the strong coffee the Overland Park Police headquarters was famous for. But, the few minutes of quiet he stole each morning before the office area became busy and noisy was his best

and favorite time of the day. During this time, Gary did some of his best thinking and work.

However, it was something not requiring much thought or insight which would lead to a break in the case.

Baughman spoke to Tim and Cathy Coleman several times since early July but always by telephone. He did not have anything of substance to share with them; he was just being courteous to a grief stricken family, assuring them he was still very much involved in finding Leann's killer. He felt it was time to pay them a courtesy call in their home. Perhaps visiting the Coleman home again would shake something in his mind and assist him in the stagnant investigation. Around mid-morning, he called the Coleman home and Tim answered, "Coleman residence."

Softly, Gary said, "Hello, Tim. It's Lieutenant Baughman."

"Well, good morning." Tim liked the detective but did not expect to hear anything other than the usual. He asked, "How was your Labor Day?"

"Not bad. Elaine and I had some much needed quiet time together."

"Excellent," said Tim, adding, "Did you go anywhere?"

"No. Just a stay-at-home holiday."

"Sometimes that's the best kind." As Tim said this, a familiar pang of sadness hit him. He recalled Cathy's long anticipated sentimental journey to Scotland was postponed indefinitely.

Gary recognized the sadness in Tim's voice and remembered how much Cathy looked forward to the trip to Scotland. An awkward silence ensued. Finally, he said, "I would like to come see you."

"Do you have something to tell us?" Gary cringed at the anticipation in

Tim's voice.

"No, not really, but I would like to come over. Perhaps being in the house again will give me a greater perspective."

"When do you want to come?"

"Anytime that is convenient for you and Cathy."

Tim said, "Let me holler at Cathy for a moment." Tim covered the telephone's mouthpiece with his hand so Gary could not hear what was said. Soon, Tim was back on the line, saying, "How about tomorrow morning? We have some plans for today. Cathy wants to catch some post-holiday sales at the mall."

"What time tomorrow morning?"

"How about 9:00 or so?"

That pleased Gary. He would have time for his cherished early morning quiet time at the station. He replied, "OK. 9:00 it is. I'll see you then. Shall I bring doughnuts?"

Tim smiled and said, "No, we'll have something for you."

Gary smiled slightly also, saying, "I'll see you both tomorrow. Enjoy your day."

"We will. See you then." Tim hung up. Gary thought about the call to Tim. Anyone eavesdropping would assume it was a simple call between friends, not an effort on the caller's part to do whatever he could to shed enlightenment on an unsolved murder. This was something else Gary worried about. Had he gotten too close to Tim and Cathy? Was he treating them as friends and not as suspects in a murder which occurred in their home? Gary pondered the situation for a few minutes before determining he maintained the proper attitude and perspective. Still, he realized the case had caused him to lose enough detachment to worry about such things.

Gary went through the motions of the rest of the dull, depressing day. It was the type of day he hated. He hoped Captain Green would follow through on his word and give him more to do. Even so, the discouraged detective had no reason to believe that this day or any other day anytime soon would be any different.

At loose ends after his short visit with Tim Coleman, Baughman did not realize tomorrow's visit to the Coleman home would be the most eventful day of his professional life. After tomorrow, for the remainder of his life, he would recall often and with fondness the old saying, 'What a difference a day makes.'

84. A Visit to the Coleman Home

Gary would think often in the ensuing years after the Edgmon murder of the nature of timing and luck, good or bad. It has been said that good luck happens when hard work meets opportunity. On the day he went to visit the Colemans, you could not say he had worked hard on this case. The detective had not worked hard on it in the traditional sense for several weeks. But, he had applied a very intense focus and, had he not decided to pay a visit to the Colemans and the crime scene on this late summer day, in a few short years the murderer would have died a peaceful death, uncharged with any crime and just one of the several suspects in the Edgmon murder.

None of this was on his mind as he drove slowly through the Coleman's neighborhood. He had not visited the house since the day the family went

home and the memories of those very stressful days in July came rushing back to him as water through a freshly unclogged pipe. Lt. Baughman forced himself to keep the emotion in check. He did not wish to be in a bad mood or affect the mood of Tim and Cathy in any way.

Tim was on the driveway when the lieutenant arrived, holding a cup of coffee. As soon as he was near enough to notice, Baughman saw that Tim looked stressed and puffy around the eyes. Parking the unmarked car in the driveway, Tim opened the car door for him, saying, "Hello, Lieutenant. It's been awhile."

Gary, remembering the concerns over his relationship with the Colemans, answered simply, "Hello, Tim." The lieutenant cursed under his breath and thought, *I do like these people. Someday I may have to arrest them. I hope not.*

Baughman did not know it, but the Colemans felt the same way. They liked the lieutenant and appreciated his efforts in finding Leann's killer, but were keenly aware the day may come when he would arrest one or both of them.

But, emotion is more of a motivator than most of us care to concede in the professional world. Emotion is not limited to our personal lives and relationships only. It is no different in law enforcement or the legal profession. Attorneys, judges, street cops and detectives are all affected by how they feel about the people and situations they deal with. It was because of this that what could have been a very stressful visit from a police detective turned out to be a cordial and, you might say, relaxed visit. It is well it happened as it happened, for if the Colemans and Lt. Baughman had not felt trusting of

each other, the critical moment may never have occurred.

Gary sat at the familiar kitchen table with his hosts. It was too hot to sit outside, something which had not been a problem in July when it was unseasonably cool during those four unforgettable days. He toyed with his coffee and ignored the English muffin Cathy set out for him. He was nervous in an unaccustomed way. He had asked these people for their time, boosted their expectations but could offer them nothing of substance. He knew he had to say something so, after an uncomfortable silence, began by stating, "Thanks for allowing me to come over."

"You're most welcome." Tim did not follow up and Gary realized again this was not going to be easy. He decided the straightforward approach would be wisest and best.

"Like I said over the phone yesterday, I don't really have any news for you. I just wanted to come by, speak with you and absorb the atmosphere in the house."

"Trying to regain the scent of the crime, as they say?" asked Tim. Baughman nodded.

Cathy asked, "What did you find out about the hair sample?"

Gary offered a tight smile and said, "There is no hair sample. That was ruse intended to rattle the killer. I hoped he would tip his hand before releasing the family. I didn't think it would work but thought it was worth a try." This was an extraordinary admission to people who were still official suspects.

To the lieutenant's relief, Tim and Cathy did not seem surprised by this. Tim asked, "What other leads do you have?"

"There are no other leads." Gary felt like a small child called to the

principal's office. He did not like the feeling.

Another question from Tim asking, "Have you learned anything new at all?"

"Nothing," Gary answered. "Allow me to ask you a question. Has the media been a pain in the backside to you?" "They were at first," said Cathy, "but not so much so for the last couple of weeks."

Tim offered, "They wanted to take a picture of my Marilyn Monroe cutout but I drew the line there."

"Good for you," was Baughman's reply.

Gary keenly monitored the news reports on television and read updates concerning the case in the Kansas City Star. As you would expect, they were long on sensationalism and speculation and very lacking in factual substance. All in all, though, there were no complaints with the media. Per the Edgmon murder, they had been annoying but fair. Many times in other instances, they were annoying and not so fair. He took a deep breath and quietly conceded that Sam Dougal and John Smither, two of the reporters assigned to this case which he had personally dealt with, had reported in an even-handed, non-inflammatory way and the national media followed suit. He made a mental note to acknowledge this to both of them.

Cathy noticed the lieutenant's deep sigh and asked, "Anything the matter?"

Gary managed a genuine grin this time and replied, "No, just thinking about the newsies." I have to admit they've behaved themselves pretty well." He took a bite of his English muffin. Cathy was pleased.

Baughman asked another question, the answer to which he already knew.

"How was Leann's memorial service?" Tim answered. "Thanks for asking. It was very nice and dignified. As you know, it was in Oklahoma City last week. The local police helped us with the media."

"How is the family?"

"Coping pretty well, all except for Stephanie. I think adjustment will be long term for her."

The three suffered another awkward silence. Finally, Cathy asked, "So where do you go from here?"

He looked her in the eye and answered, "I don't go anywhere from here. Captain Green, with encouragement from the chief, has for all practical purposes kept me on this case full time. That will end in a few days, simply because there is nothing else to do until we learn something new."

Tim was discouraged but not surprised. It was a strong indication the case would go cold. Sadly, he said, "Maybe we'll see this on one of those cold case criminal shows on cable."

"If you do, you won't see much." Both Cathy and Tim were unnerved by the bitterness in Lt. Baughman's voice. Gently, Tim asked, "So, what do you want to talk about?"

"I realized that we never reviewed in depth with you and the other Colemans what we learned from the interviews with the family at large. Normally in police investigations you do not do that, especially since everyone involved is technically a suspect. But, now there is nothing to lose. The killer will probably remain free until the end of his or her days. Although you are aware of some of what I am getting ready to say, there is much you don't know. Perhaps if I share with you everything I and the other detectives learned in speaking with the family, we may get lucky."

Tim offered, "I guess it's worth a shot."

Cathy said, "Well, OK. Share with us what you will."

The three of them were now sitting up straight, leaning into the kitchen table and eagerly awaiting the conversation which would begin in a short moment. Things happen when you least expect them to. The Colemans as well as the lieutenant would think often of good fortune, timing and circumstance in the years to come.

Within the hour, Baughman would have the name of his primary suspect. Life would never be the same for any of them ever again.

#BITBYBIT200

On a stormy sea of moving emotion

LUPA'S BITS

200

episodes



Science Fiction

The Eye of the Beholder

By: James Rumpel



James Rumpel

James Rumpel is a recently retired high school math teacher who has greatly appreciated spending some of his newfound free time rekindling his love for science fiction and the written word. Writing also provides him with an excellent opportunity to ignore the household chores his wife assigns. He lives in Wisconsin with his forgiving wife, Mary.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing this movie," said Emily. She smiled and tilted her head slightly as she addressed her date. Mitch, nodded. "Me too. I mean, it's gotten 100% ratings on Rotten Tomatoes and every other rating service. According to all the experts, it's the perfect film." The young couple found their seats in the crowded theater. Before sitting down, Mitch pulled the neural link cord from the back of his chair and inserted the plug into the small port at the base of his neck much like the way old-fashioned headphones were inserted into a cell phone jack. He then helped Emily attach her link, gently pushing her hair to one side. Without another word, they both settled into their chairs and turned their attention to the screen; the movie was beginning. One hour and forty-three minutes later, the final credits began to scroll up the movie screen. Nearly everyone in the audience let out an audible gasp. A few of the movie goers were sobbing heavily while others were laughing. Sporadic applause soon grew in to a standing ovation. "Hell, yeah," yelled someone in the back. Emily removed her neural link and let it recoil back into her seat. She turned to face Mitch, a huge smile on her face.

"That was amazing," she exclaimed. "That was the best movie I've ever seen. It was absolutely perfect. I don't think I could have dreamt of a better ending." "I know," agreed Mitch. "It was so exciting." "I don't know if I'd call it exciting. It was romantic and emotional and beautiful but I don't think you can say it was exciting." "Oh, come on," said Mitch. "You have to agree that it was one thrilling adventure after another. I almost lost it when the dragon attacked the city." They stood up and started walking toward the door. "Dragon? There wasn't any dragon." "How could you miss the dragon?" asked Mitch, a confused look on his face. "Beldron was the main villain." "Yes, he was," replied Emily. "But he was the evil land owner, not a dragon. I started crying when it looked like he was going to keep Annabelle and Richard apart." "I don't remember anyone named Annabelle . . . Oh, you mean Mega-Girl." "I guess the neural links that match the sensory input to our specific preferences really do work." Mitch nodded. "I'd say. The last time I saw a movie using neural connectors there were only a few subtle changes. This one appears to have made a completely different movie." As they walked down the street, Emily and Mitchel, eavesdropped on other movie goers comparing their experiences. It appeared that no two

"I don't know if I like this," said Emily. "We can't even compare what we saw or share our emotions. I suppose you didn't even have the picnic scene."

"Well, Beldron did start the meadow on fire and Mega-Girl roasted a marshmallow. I suppose that could count as a picnic."

"Like I said, I don't know if I like the whole neural link thing. It kind of ruined the movie for me. We can't even talk about our feelings."

"I feel bad that you didn't get to see Beldron get beheaded. There was blood everywhere. It even looked like it was gushing out of the screen." Mitch grinned from ear to ear.

Emily sighed. "You know, I might make an appointment to get my neural port removed. I thought it was a good idea at first, but now I'm not so sure."

"It might not matter if you get the port removed or not," said Mitch.

"I've heard they're bringing out the technology to make the neural link wireless."

Emily could only shake her head. She wanted to discuss the strained relationship between Annabelle and Richard's mother but knew it would be a waste of time.

A few minutes later, Mitch asked, "Do you want to grab a bite to eat. The popcorn at the movie was fabulous, the best I've ever had, but I'm still hungry."

"I suppose I could eat," answered Emily. "Where do you want to go?"

Mitch pointed to a restaurant across the street. "That place looks good. I'm really in the mood for a burger. They have the best bacon

cheeseburger."

Emily started to correct her date but stopped. What she saw across the street was clearly her favorite Chinese food chain. Was Mitch seeing something else?

She considered calling it a night and asking Mitch to take her home. Things were getting just a little too weird for her.

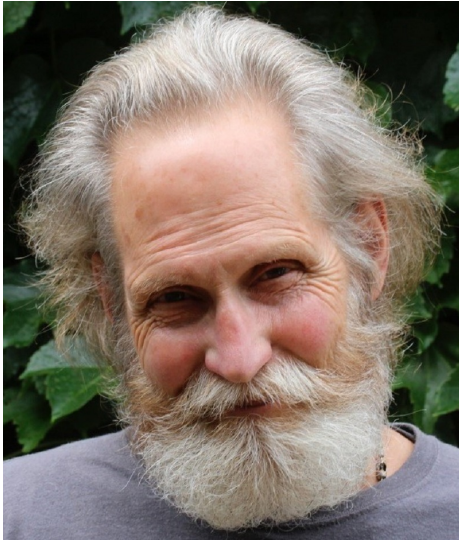
In the end, she decided to continue the date. Sure, her and Mitch didn't seem to have a lot in common and their conversations weren't exactly captivating but she still was having a good time. After all, Mitch was extremely handsome. Heck, he looked just like the man of her dreams.

The End

Science Fiction

Emil's Magic

By: Jim Bates



Jim Bates

Jim is an award-winning author whose stories and poems have appeared in over three-hundred online and print publications. His collection of short stories *Resilience* was published in March 2021, by Bridge House Publishing. *Short Stuff a collection of flash fiction and drabbles* was published in October 2021, by Chapeltown Books. *Periodic Stories and Periodic Stories Volume Two* were published in July and September 2021, by Impspired. *Dreamers a collection of short stories* was published in March 2022, by Clarendon House Publishing. *Something Better* a dystopian adventure novella was published in July 2021, by Dark Myth Publications.

He was standing off to the side of the city Greenway, looking at the sky, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. "Hey buddy. What are you doing?" Emil turned. It was a policeman on bicycle patrol. "I'm just looking at the clouds, officer," he said politely. "That one over there reminds me of a bunny rabbit." Unimpressed, the cop got off his bike and adjusted his crotch. "I see you down here a lot. Where do you live?" "Nearby," he said, and then tried to change the subject. "I just like to walk here," he indicated arbitrarily. The Greenway led from Lake of the Isles, near where they were standing, on the west end of Minneapolis, all the way east to St. Paul, a distance of fifteen miles. People walked and biked on it nearly every moment of the day. "Let's see some identification." Emil fumbled through his pockets and then put his tattered shopping bag down and looked through it and then shrugged off his backpack and looked through it. Then he did it all again before finally saying, "I'm sorry, officer. I seem to have lost it." The policeman smirked, "Yeah, I'll bet." He took his radio from his belt and made a call. "I'm bringing a guy in." He listened for a moment and said, "No, he's not drunk. I think he's delusional.

Let's see how he does in lockup overnight and then we'll take it from there."

Emil couldn't help but overhear the conversation. "Officer, I promise I'm not delusional. I'm perfectly sane. I just like to walk and be outdoors."

"Too bad, buddy, you seem a little off to me. No more walking and being outside for you today."

He called for a patrol car, and they took Emil to the station, where he was booked for loitering and put in a holding cell with fifteen other inmates.

His jailer, a heavy-set black man with a grey beard, said, "Here you go, buddy. We'll come get you for dinner at 5:30. Have fun." He slammed the door shut.

Emil made it a point to avoid eye contact with the other inmates and shuffled to the corner of the cell. He faced the wall and closed his eyes, and concentrated, letting his hunger for the outdoors soar through him like a cool mountain breeze. In a matter of moments, his mind had taken him back to the streets where he belonged. Home. Walking free.

Later, when the jailer came to let the inmates out for dinner, no one could find Emil. In fact, no one even remembered him even being there. He'd vanished into thin air.

Back on the Greenway, Emil brushed himself off, trying to get rid of the stink of the jail said to himself, [I've got to be more careful. I don't know how many more times I can do that].

Most recently, *Periodic Stories Volume Three – A Novel* was published in April 2022, by Impspired. His short story "Aliens" was nominated by The Zodiac Press for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. His story "The Maple Leaf" was voted 2021 story of the year for Spillwords. He lives in a small-town west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of his work can be found on his blog at www.theviewfromlonglake.wordpress.com.

Then he went back to walking and looking at the sky and the clouds, happy to be outdoors once again. But this time he kept a sharper lookout for cops, because being inside? Well, it just wasn't for him. Far up ahead, he saw a figure approaching on a bicycle. He looked closely, thinking that might be that cop. "Probably out looking for me," Emil mumbled to himself. He watched as the rider stopped to question a young couple vaping and walking hand in hand. [Yeah, it was him], he decided, and that was all the motivation Emil needed. He stepped off to the side of the path and disappeared. The cop rode by, looking, but didn't see anything. He kept on riding. Emil smiled.

Science Fiction

Coming Home

By: Timothy Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write. Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

We suited up, ready to return

to an Earth that didn't know us. Were we ready? Hell, no. But it isn't up to us, never was. Those suits on Mars, United States of Everywhere, enough hands went up, and the decision was made. We never looked after any planet we claimed, had left Earth in such a state, and Mars was looking like no pretty picture. "Better the devil we know, than a new planet and starting all over..."

I accepted my silks and the space suit that went over top of them. I was a botanist, one of the oldest on the crew. Farming Mars had been hard, but I knew coming home to the blue planet was going to be harder. They thought they needed smarts to make this work, but what we discovered was smarts only got you halfway.

Voyager Fifteen was the name of our ship, but it should have been called Suicide instead. We landed somewhere near what was once Florida's Emerald coast. Beasts of sand and seaweed waited for us as we floated ashore.

"Friend or foe?!" Captain Mack called out to them over the loudspeaker. They backed away briefly at the sound, and we all thought we had them on

the backfoot. How wrong we were. "Get ready," I told the other three in my boat. "Something's about to happen..."

"We're beaching," Captain Mack ordered, and we breached the shoreline, two or three boats at a time.

Those creatures fanned out in a semi-circle and then sunk back into the gritty, grey of the shore. Seconds later they popped back up, too close, combined. Three or four joined together to make monstrosities that devoured us whole. Those of us who had hung back let fire, a counterstrike of untested plasma rifles, causing more deaths our side than theirs.

"Retreat! Retreat!" called a voice that was not the captain's, I could only assume command had all perished. We had nowhere to go, except forward.

"I'm going in..." I told them. "Cover me..."

So, with a prayer on my lips to the God of War, I left that boat and waded, waste-deep, through a hissing sea.

"We've gotta go back!" the voices behind me begged, but there was no going back.

I knew it, they knew it, even the sand people knew it.

I aimed my shot at the nearest beast's head, and shifted slightly to the left to accommodate for how the atmosphere was affecting light.

BOOM... The thing just burst, then grew back up in five other places... This was a dumb idea. Dumbest thing I'd ever done. None of our weapons were going to make a single dent on how that beautiful Earth had adapted and evolved. I had nothing better to do though, so I kept on firing. It was 'Nam all over again. Beam after beam blasting sand apart, until someone finally hit a tree. And that... Well, hell, that was the moment when the planet got proper angry.



OH, HEY!
DID YOU GET A CHANCE
TO DOWNLOAD A COPY
OF AMERICAN SMASH
#1/2, YET?

SLURP!
SLURP!

Humor

Time Is A Dodgy Concept For Some

By: Tricia Waller



Tricia Waller

Tricia Waller has recently had work published in Vamp Cat online literary magazine, Margate Bookie Reset Zine and on The Essex Book Festival Story Hunters website.

“That's it then! This means war!

So where are they? I only turned my back for the merest nanosecond to partake in a spoonful of honey infused ambrosia and they have all disappeared!

Are you even listening to me?”

Lance stretches, yawns and slowly opens one smoky grey eye.

“Were you saying something my sweet?”

Consuella shakes her golden cornbraids with utmost contempt.

“Forget it you fat faced freak! I'll sort it myself and I know just where to go first!”

Five- and one-half minutes later or thereabouts – time is a dodgy concept for some – Consuella is hammering on the enormous powder blue door in the busy marketplace.

“Can I help you?” asks the wizened old crone who struggles to ease the door open.

“Yes!” replies Consuella pushing past her “Just get out of my way!”

“I did not say to enter! Madam is otherwise engaged at this particular moment. So may I suggest making an appointment!”

“Oh but she Will see me!” hollers Consuella kicking the great door open with her blood and mud splattered hob nail boot.

“Right!” she screams “What have you gone and done with my stars?”

The rather well – endowed lady standing before the arched window dressed in a vivid fuchsia floor length silken dress smiles serenely like the cat who has just sampled the cream and turns to face the livid Consuella.

“I think you will find – you pedant you – that I have not and never in fact would tamper with the stars! Why would I sully my recently manicured digits with those common or garden stars? You have obviously mislaid them Consuella! So get thee gone and search elsewhere for I have more important matters to attend to!”

“Oh no you don't!” and Consuella leaps towards Capricia twisting her right arm brutally behind her broad back.

“That's it then my fine feathered friend. This means outright war! You cannot and will not steal my stars from the night sky; neither will you look me in my celestial eyes and speak lies. You insult my intelligence Madam! How would you like it I messed about with your beloved sun and sunbeams?”

“You would not have the power!” spits back the furious Capricia. “So do not even attempt it!”

“We'll see about that ?” screams Consuella. “We'll see who will outsmart who - youth v old fogey – no contest!” Capricia unused to being insulted in her own sumptuous villa counters with, “Midnight tonight on the Heath. You be there my girl and we shall see who is the victor? Winner takes it all and no second place unless of course you consider death to be worthy of the name runner-up and consider it an honor to wear the tin badge which states ‘ She tried her best!’”

“Done!” answers the younger female proffering her right hand but Capricia gracefully pivots back towards the window and ignores the gesture.

“So that's the way you are going to play

it then! Fine have it your own way!" and Consuella slams every door behind her as she exits the villa for the final time.

"Girls! Girls! Will you please cease bickering! What will it take for you just to be civil with each other?"

"Oh who would wish to be the mother of girls on this godforsaken ill used planet?" she asks nobody in particular as she lifts her bone weary head from today's to-do list and desperately wishes that she had never forsaken cigarettes when she found out she was expecting Capri as she would quite literally die right now for the need of one!

Why oh why did she purchase that big old book of Greek Myths when it had rained solidly for the whole week and they were seeking shelter in that crazy old castle bookshop?

She summons up the last of her strength and begins to pick up the battered teddy bear actors, fuchsia dress from last week's car boot and the trampled over but beautifully illustrated old book.

"Who's for Maccy D's?" she shouts up the stairs.

Oh how she loathes the summer holidays! Roll on September!

THE END

Humor

12th December

By: Sara Ali



Sara Ali

I'm Sara Ali, an academic by profession but a writer by passion; who lives in her own world of words.

"I have a surprise for You!"
30th March today!
And I always get flashbacks of that 30th March. Planning the most happening not-happened party was like juggling flaming swords blindfolded. It all started with the cake. I wanted something elegant, something that screamed "Mom!" so I ordered a cake adorned with her favorite flower, peonies. Simple enough, right? Wrong. On the morning of the party, I went to pick it up and was greeted by a masterpiece of... ponies. Yes, ponies. A galloping, glittery herd across the top. Somewhere in the bakery, "peony" had become "pony." After a heated debate with the baker (and some pleading), they slapped a few edible flowers on top, creating what can only be described as a surreal mash-up of a meadow and a horse parade. The invitations were no less eventful. I'd created a WhatsApp group and enthusiastically added guests—only to realize I'd

accidentally invited someone who shared my mom's first name. This poor woman, a complete stranger, replied, "Why would I attend a surprise party for myself?" Cue frantic deleting and re-inviting the correct people. That awkward encounter haunted me for days.

Then there was the decoration phase, which turned into an unintentional comedy show. I decided to make a handmade banner that read "HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOM," thinking it would add a personal touch. After hours of cutting out letters, I triumphantly hung it up—only to step back and notice I'd spelled it "HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOM." Panic set in. I grabbed markers, tape, and scissors, trying to fix the mess. What resulted looked like something from an art project gone horribly wrong. The "fix" made it read "HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOM." At that point, I figured no one would notice after a few glasses of punch.

The backyard setup was equally chaotic, thanks to Max, our neighbor's overzealous golden retriever. Max decided he was

part of the planning committee and bolted into the yard, toppling the table with all the drinks and running off with a bag of wafers in his mouth. I chased him around the garden like a madwoman, cupcakes in hand, as he gleefully avoided capture, and when he finally returned the pack (covered in dog slobber), I was too exhausted to be mad. Max, of course, thought he was the hero of the day.

The karaoke machine which I had hired had such a mid of it's own.. My genius idea to elevate the party quickly turned into a nightmare as I tried to set it up. My brother, eager to "test" it, grabbed the mic and unleashed a painfully off-key rendition of My Heart Will Go On that had me questioning my complete existence. When we finally figured out the controls, the volume alternated between ear-shattering and whisper-quiet. It was a miracle the machine survived until the guests arrived. Despite all this, as the final touches were in place, I stood back and admired the scene: the twinkling lights, the table laden with food, the mismatched banner swaying gently in the breeze, although it wasn't perfect, it was heartfelt, and that made me forget everything else. The only thing now missing was mom.

And then, the phone call from Dad, when he excitedly informed me about his surprise to her. Her solo trip tickets. And now she was already boarding a plane to Japan. I felt like I was the central character in a sitcom, the comedy of errors. All that effort, and she was halfway across the world! But as we facetimed her at the airport, watching her light up with joy, I realized that everything—the chaos, the mishaps, the pony cake—was worth it.

In her absence, the party became a celebration of her adventurous spirit. We laughed, sang karaoke, and ate way too much food. And as the night ended, I couldn't help but smile. Mom's dream trip had started, and we'd thrown her the most unforgettable party she never attended.

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Poems

Baroque Buildings Reduced to Rubble and Ash

By: Mary Grace Hidalgo

Abogado



Mary Grace Hidalgo Abogado

Mary Grace Hidalgo Abogado was a standout fellow at the 18th Iligan National Writers Workshop, held at MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology, where she was recognized as the Boy Abunda Writing Fellow. She showcased her poetic talent through works written in Waray, including the notable piece "Kinilaw nga Puso han Saging" *Banana Heart Marinated in Vinegar*. Abogado's writing was further highlighted in the book *A Literary Mind Holding Up in Pop Culture: Proceedings of the 18th Iligan National Writers Workshop*, a collection of proceedings from the workshop.

So-Called Proletariat in the Senate

2. Baroque Buildings Reduced to Rubble and Ash

My native land lay in ruins:
bridges shattered, smoke thinning to reveal
cracked cement, twisted steel, charred wood.
Trains reduced to smoldering wrecks,
buildings were sliced in half,
and cities flattened by barrage of bombs,
like ancient Troy burned and laid waste
aftermath of World War II's Pacific Theater.

Like Aeneas after the fall of Troy,
I envisioned rebuilding new structures,
forging Roman buildings from the ashes.
A new house would rise
friends across the sea proud to point
construction as an index of prosperity.

The ruins of Baroque buildings,
once reduced to rubble and ash,
have given way to newly built
neoclassical architecture.

Poems

About the Dark Weather

By: Max Bindi



Max Bindi

Max Bindi is an Italian Author/Translator/Poet. His work has been featured in Poetry Anthologies by publishers such as The SFPA, HellBound books, The Ravens Quoth Press etc. as well as in a variety of international Literary Magazines both online and in print, including: Aphelion, The Horror Zine, The Sirens Call eZine, Lovecraftiana (Rogue Planet Press), Raven Cage Zine, Better Than Starbucks, The Stygian Lepus and elsewhere. He was nominated for the Dwarf Stars Award in 2023.

If you seem
what you seem
don't look so grim
when the lights of the world
start to grow dim
If the darkness
unzips its eyes
in a nightmare alley
if the tarot cards lie
and fate dilly dallies
the devil creeps under your skin
when hell seethes under the floor
well, people cry like the wind
and they are no more
Now rise down, baby fall up
and show me
where you found your sleep
and your black clothes
about the dark weather
tell me more.
If you are what you are
don't brag
about your phantom scars
and joyride through the night
in Death's haunted car
every shadow is on the move
and blood crawls under the door
well, people are wind
and they are no more
Now rise down, baby fall up
if your black money lasts
more than your damned soul
about the dark weather
tell me more.

Poems

The Museum of Unfinished Conversations

By: Mohit Saini



We keep them in glass dioramas:
that talk about the war, halted
by a burning pot roast.
The one where you almost said it,
but the phone rang—its tail
still twitches when visitors pass.
Tourists lean close to hear
the fossilized "*we need to—*"
embedded in resin,
while docents dust the cases
labeled "*Things Better Left
Unsaid (Probably).*"
The gift shop sells postcards
of all our almosts,
blank side up.

Mohit Saini

Mr. Mohit Saini is a poet, writer, and researcher, working as an Assistant Professor at Compucom Institute of Technology & Management, Jaipur. He is also the author of several published poems, showcasing his creative engagement with language alongside his academic pursuits. He resides in the culturally rich city of Jaipur.

Poems

How to Stay Human

By: Steven Bruce



Steven Bruce

Steven Bruce is a writer and multiple-award-winning author. His poems and short stories have appeared in numerous international anthologies and magazines. In 2018, he graduated from Teesside University with a master's degree in creative writing. An English expatriate, he now lives and writes full-time in Poland.

Don't flinch
when your guts
hit the floor.

Love
like your ribs
are open doors.

Recite your failures
like epic poems.

Forgive yourself
even if no one else will.

And when it gets too dark,
remember,
even rats
dance in moonlight
when they think no one's watching.

Poems

At the Plane Museum

By: Allen Ashley



At the plane museum,
I found myself sheltering
under a round-tip wing
as if in the pilot's or gunner's
blind spot.

Marveling later at the cramped
conditions in the cockpits
for the dogfights,
these brave few
of whom fewer returned.

Cursive script in their terse logbooks:
"August 4th. Good visibility.
Shot 3 Jerries."

Allen Ashley

Allen Ashley is an award-winning writer, editor and tutor from the UK and is the founder of the advanced science fiction and fantasy group Clockhouse London Writers. Allen's most recent book is the SF chapbook "Journey to the Centre of the Onion" (Eibonvale Press, UK, 2023). Allen's work has appeared recently in "The Broken City" and online at the British Fantasy Society Blog. Allen is proud to be considered a regular contributor to "The World of Myth Magazine."

Poems

Abode in Art

By: Fhen Em



Fhen Em

Fhen M. was on staff of the publication office in high school and college. He studied the subject *The Literature of the World* at Eastern Visayas State University. Fhen M. was a fellow in a creative writing workshop. His poem "Uyasan" or "Toy" was published in the book *Pinili: 15 Years of Lamiraw*. His English verses "Lighthouse" and other poems appeared in *Poetica* anthology series published by Clarendon House.

Bamboo house began to deteriorate
the internodes dried to a brittle brown
the bamboo's resilience waned and withered.

Illustrations found in Alcina's manuscript:
A monochromatic sketch:
a simple house on stilts,
tree houses accessible by ladders,
a scene from a battle or conflict.

Through the artist's skillful rendering,
bamboo house's rustic charm
transcends mortal limitation
it defies the forces of destruction.

A 1600s bamboo home
lives on through art illustration.

Art and poetry are immortal.
Art and poetry are immortal.

Poems

To the Liars Who Hurt Us *Dedicated to Anyone Hurt by Lies*

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

Gabriella Balcom, who is from Texas, writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, sci-fi, and more. She likes traveling, music, photography, great stories, history and movies. Gabriella says she loves forests, mountains, and back roads. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

<https://facebook.com/GabriellaBalcom.lonestarauthor>

Grievous harm you have dealt me,
Dung piled high so it'd be all I see.

Vicious lies abound from thee —
Awful slander geared to defame me.

I question. I tremble. In secret I cry.
Deep inside I ache, but I do not die.

I hide my anger. Sometimes I quake,
But I do not ever — *ever* — break.

They say time heals. I'm not there yet,
But in my heart I will not let rot set.

I have what you'll never have, the key,
The truth that will always set me free.

No matter your past lies and lying still,
You can't control the truth and free will.

Despite the horrible things you've done,
Guess what? I know I've already won.

The end.

Poems

I Will Remember

By: Stephanie J. Bardy



As I travel from the land of light into the darkness
And the cold wraps my heart in frost, I will remember
As the weight of heavy steps break the muffled silence of a deadened world,
I will remember
Snow white and bitter cold swirls around a head full of sighs and soft touches
And I remember
The smell, the warmth of your skin
I remember
I remember and I am whole until we are once again together

Stephanie J. Bardy

Stephanie J. Bardy is an accomplished author, poet and editor. She is Editor in Chief at *The World of Myth Magazine* and has held an editing position with them for over 5 years. She is also Editor in Chief for *The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company, LLC*.

Her published works include *Eternally Bound*, *Eternally Bound PCE Exclusive Edition*, *The Chosen*,

A DARK CULT. A BURNING BETRAYAL, A WAR WITHIN.

Ayot
アヨット・ノム **NOM**

To Hell
and Back

THE STORY

Trained from childhood to serve a secret order of assassins, Ayot Nom's loyalty is rewarded with betrayal.

Cast into the depths of hell itself, he rises armed only with rage and discipline. Every step to the surface means cutting down another demon standing in his way.



THE LEGACY

Originally self-published in 1997 as a black-and-white one-shot by creator **David K. Montoya**

Reimagined in 2007, becoming a cornerstone of *Dark Myth Comics* lore. Now, for the first time ever, presented as a full-color digital comic, restoring and enhancing Montoya's vision



WHY NOW

This isn't just a remaster—it's a warning. A full reboot of the character begins **February 2026** with *Ayot Nom: Cost/Return*. If you want to know where it all began, this is your chance.



AVAILABLE NOW

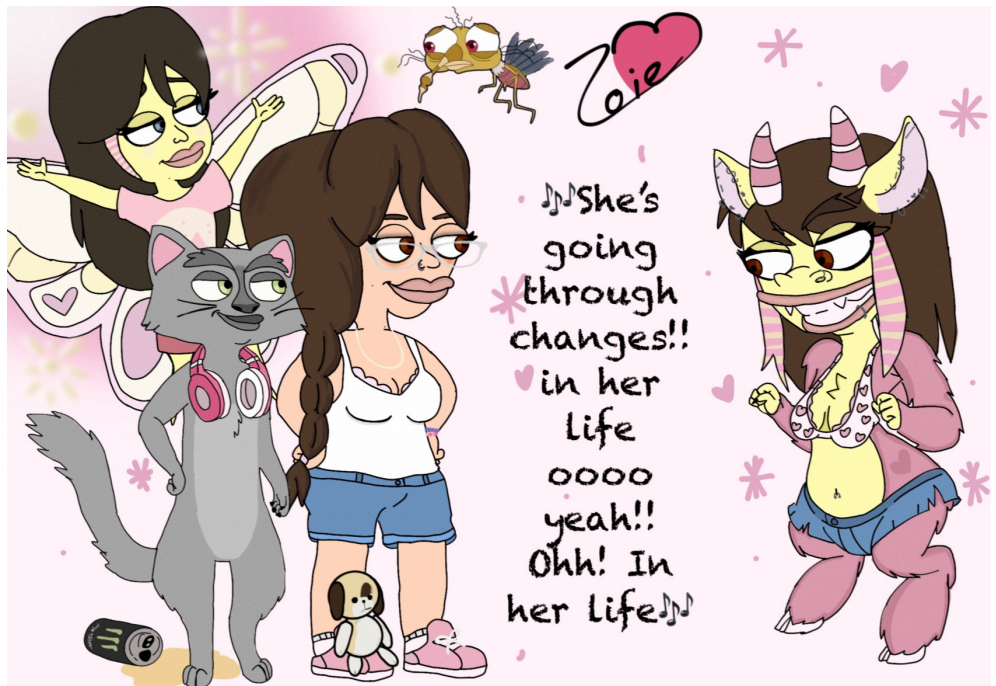
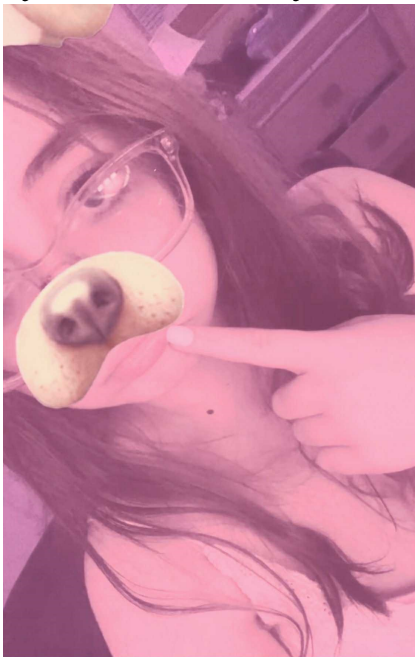
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Creative Youth Art

Gallery

Going Through Changes

By: Zoie M. Montoya



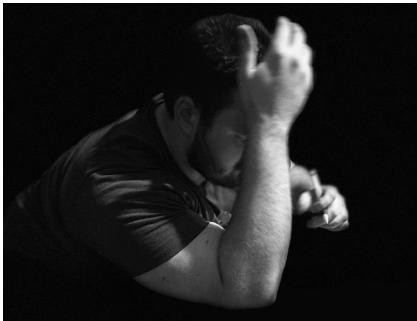
Zoie M. Montoya

Zoie M. Montoya is now a calm teenager, and loves to tell stories, draw, and yelling at people on video game chat! Also loves hangs out with her pookies while being the cool kid.

Art Gallery

The Fraternal Order of Eagles

By: DeWayne Dority



DeWayne Dority

DeWayne Dority is a Family First man, comic artist, and former football player. His work blends discipline from sports with creativity in storytelling. Currently, he's developing his next independent release, *Liar*, now live on [Kickstarter](#).



Art Gallery

Batman Vs. Zombies

By: Dan Hammond



Dan Hammond

Dan Hammond hails from Fergus, Ontario, Canada. At the age of 40 Dan attended the Toronto Fan Expo and was impressed with the talent that he saw in the Artist Alley section. Dan then took up a pencil and has been drawing ever since (he's 46 now) Since then, Dan had provided cover art for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Captain Canuck and Northguard comics. Dan has also provided art for kids books, movie posters, novel covers, logos, t-shirts and decals. Dan is also the creator/publisher of his own original series titled, Seth the Elf and Alien Hillbilly.



Art Gallery

A Storm is Coming

By: Idris Yusuf



Idris Yusuf

Idris Yusuf is during the day a teacher of art and in the evenings a professional artist from the country of Nigeria. He has a long standing history with *Dark Myth Comics* actively working on forthcoming projects due out soon.



20 YEARS IN THE MAKING



THE WORLD OF MYTH
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Movie Reviews

KPop: Demon Hunters

By: Kevin Hoskinson



Kevin Hoskinson

From humble beginnings working the box office at his local movie theater, he's worked his way to becoming a loving family man and professional bug exterminator. Growing up, he wanted to become an astronaut, a Ghostbuster, a dinosaur, and a Disney animator before he found his passion for writing as a teen. He studied film at Los Angeles Valley College with an emphasis on screenwriting and film criticism. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife and two kids. You can follow him on Facebook, X [@Kevin_Hoskinson](#), and Instagram [@kevinhoskinson](#).



Netflix has done very well with their original animated films over the years. The Mitchell's Vs. The Machines, Guillermo Del Toro's Pinocchio, Nimona, Wendell & Wild, and Klaus are just some of the highlights that the streaming service has licensed. The newest entry in that lineup is KPop: Demon Hunters, a musical action film that is highly influenced by anime, Korean folklore, and K-pop culture. Going into this film, I knew nothing about it other than it was a Sony Pictures Animation project, the same studio that brought us the aforementioned The Mitchell's Vs. The

Machines and the Spider-Verse franchise. For me, that made it a must-watch, but there was also something else. My daughter. Although she listens primarily to what is commonly referred to as "Emo" music, she has a soft spot for K-Pop also. She had mentioned that she wanted to watch it, and it gave us the perfect opportunity to watch something together, which is rare nowadays with a very social thirteen-year-old.

From the moment we started, we were completely transfixed by what was on screen. It begins with a brief history of demons and their evolving role in society throughout the years. Right off the bat, the animation is stunning, and it serves as a great lesson for those unfamiliar with the role these entities play in Korean culture. These demons are agents of chaos out to devour souls to feed their ruler, Gwi-Ma. Eventually, three women rise as demon hunters and seal demons away from the human world behind a barrier known as the Honmoon. They pass this down generations, with each trio using their voices to maintain the Honmoon. The story revolves around a K-Pop group known as HUNTR/X, consisting of members Rumi, Mira, and Zoey. Since childhood, they have trained in the ways of demon hunting and are pros at everything they do, including their rise to the top of the music charts. In the underworld, a demon

named Jinu hatches a plan to steal HUNTR/X's powers by stealing their fans. To achieve this, they form their own K-pop group, known as the Saja Boys. The plan works for a bit before the girls find out they are demons, setting the stage for an epic battle that can only be fought using the power of music.

Considering the world it's based in, this is one of the most Rock N' Roll animated films I have ever seen. It's full of demon-slaying action sequences that are fluid, and each one is accompanied by either a bombastic score or a musical sequence performed by the group. It is so fluid and kinetic, bringing you into the fights with such ease and, oddly, believability. Most importantly, they are a lot of fun and stay within a family-friendly PG rating.

As someone who knows very little about the subject matter, it was a fun ride from start to finish. The animation is gorgeous, along with a wonderful soundtrack and voice cast. Sony Studios Animation has had their share of hits and misses, and this one falls into the hits category. In many ways, it reminds me of Pixar's *Turning Red*, a film that is deeply specific and personal but one that everybody can enjoy and relate to to an extent. There are many allegories in this movie that are hard to ignore, especially in the times we are living in today. They aren't in your face about it, but they are there, and it's a beautiful thing. It's a movie I wasn't expecting to like as much as I did, and I'm glad I gave it a shot. It's good!



Rating: 3 out of 5 stars!

Book Reviews

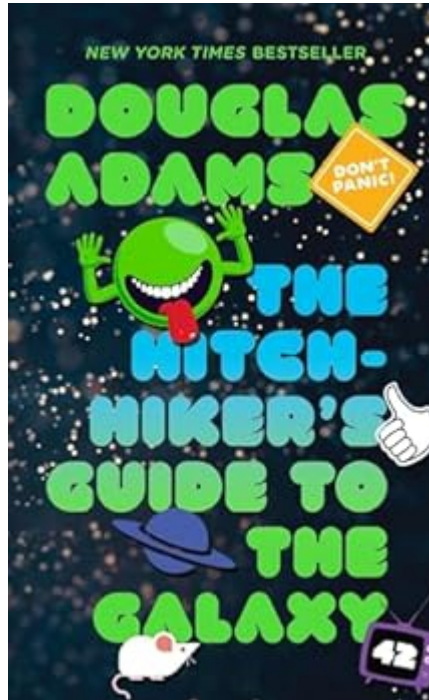
Review of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.



DON'T PANIC!

The other night, I finished rereading *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. First time in almost thirty years. Last time I cracked that book was 1994, when my aunt let me borrow her copy. I was around seventeen. Back then, I thought it was weird. Quirky. British. And while I liked it, I didn't get it, not the way I do now. This time around, the whole thing hit different. The humor, the pacing, the absurdity, it all landed harder. What struck me was how it wasn't just a

sci-fi comedy. It was a machine of running jokes wrapped in sharp, dry wit that aged better than most fiction. Every chapter felt like Adams was playing with the reader on purpose. The jokes aren't just punchlines, they're part of the structure. And buried underneath it all are some sneaky truths.

Let's start with the Earth getting destroyed for a hyperspace bypass. That was always funny in concept. But now? It hits deeper. That kind of over-complicated, logic-free process feels way too familiar. You do all this work, follow every rule, and boom, vaporized by someone who says you should've checked the public notice board in Alpha Centauri.

Reading it again, I caught stuff I never noticed before. Adams' use of language is sharp. He hides observations inside nonsense. It's a trick. You're laughing, then suddenly you realize he's actually saying something. And then you're laughing again. But now it's because you feel slightly targeted.

I read the book in three nights. Not because I had nothing else to do but because I couldn't put it down. Every night, after work or whatever else the day threw at me, I made time to read. And in doing that, I was seventeen again. Sitting on the floor with a dog-eared paperback, laughing at Marvin the Paranoid Android and pretending like I understood the meaning of life, the universe, and everything.

Spoiler, I still don't. But it felt good to go back. I needed the reminder that fiction can be smart without being preachy. That satire can be silly and still land hard. And that humor, when it's honest, can survive the decades without breaking down.

Douglas Adams created this masterpiece that has been translated into television series and a couple of motion pictures, but when it comes right down to the meat and potatoes of the matter, his words still reign as the best at creating this galaxy. Like some many greats, when their mortal life has concluded their imagination which was translated into words lives on, and if you are ever at the cafe at the end of the universe, you just might run into Adams' free roaming ghost updating the ever evolving Guide.

So, with everything said, and if it's been a while since you read Hitchhiker's Guide, give it another shot. You'll get more out of it now than you ever did before. And if you've never read it, bring a towel. Whatever you do, don't panic!

Art Reviews

Review of *Incognito Tab* (2024) by Caroline Amond

By: Michael Liang Wei



Michael Liang Wei

Born and raised in Beijing, Michael Liang Wei developed a deep appreciation for both contemporary and traditional Chinese art before moving to New York City to broaden his perspective. With a background in art history and journalism, he writes insightful critiques on both emerging and established artists, bridging Eastern and Western artistic philosophies. Passionate about avant-garde movements and classical aesthetics, Mike frequently contributes to major art publications and curates discussions that connect cultures through visual expression.

Sometimes, writing about art

feels like swimming in an ocean of information: everywhere you turn, there is scholarship, articles, think pieces, and blog posts filling the space. Other times, it feels like staring at a nearly blank page, trying to pull threads from thin air. Caroline Amond's *Incognito Tab* (2024) put me firmly in the latter camp. I had to dig deep, sift through scattered mentions, chase down exhibition notes, and even read a stray Instagram caption or two before I felt like I had something coherent to share. And honestly, I loved that part of it. (It is strange, isn't it, that the hunt itself can feel as rewarding as the final analysis?) The piece itself is deceptively simple. At first glance, it appears as a digital print that plays with the visual language of internet browsers: grayed-out bars, subtle typography, and the infamous incognito icon. But it is more than a wink at online culture. Amond is pushing us to think about how technology reshapes not only privacy but also identity, and how the "hidden" parts of ourselves are mediated through screens. What struck me most is how little commentary exists on this work. We live in an age where nearly everything is dissected and re-dissected, yet here

is a piece that feels both timely and under-discussed. Art history classes still spend months on Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, Rothko, what I call the "golden oldies." (Don't get me wrong, I love Rothko as much as the next person, but how many times can students really stare at *No. 61 (Rust and Blue)* before glazing over?) Meanwhile, living artists like Amond, whose works capture the anxieties and realities of today, barely register in the educational canon.

I think that is part of the charm of *Incognito Tab*. It is not flashy in the way of monumental canvases or marble busts, but it quietly nails something very contemporary: the uneasy mix of anonymity and surveillance that defines our daily existence. Most of us know the *incognito tab* as a place of escape, where browsing histories vanish and our actions feel consequence-free. Amond's piece confronts that illusion head-on. The work makes you ask: if you are "hiding," who are you hiding from? Yourself? Corporations? Governments?

In tracking down commentary on the piece, I stumbled across an interview where Amond mentioned her frustration with how "privacy" is marketed as a product. That hit me. (Isn't it strange that companies offer us privacy as if it is some sort of luxury brand, when it should be the baseline of our lives?) Suddenly, the work clicked even harder. The muted

palette, the stripped-down design, the almost sterile aesthetic: they are not about freedom, they are about how manufactured the idea of privacy has become.

What really lingers, though, is how Amond captures our complicity. An *incognito tab* does not absolve us of the structures we operate within; it just gives us the illusion of control. And that illusion is powerful. It shapes how we move, what we consume, and even how we define morality. The work is not judgmental, but it holds up a mirror. (I found myself thinking about my own internet habits while writing this, and that was uncomfortable, to say the least.)

This is the kind of art we need more of. Not because it is “innovative” in the superficial sense, but because it speaks directly to the cultural fabric we are weaving in real time. It does not require you to know 19th-century brush techniques or memorize a family of Flemish painters; it just asks you to look at your own screen and think.

And yet, because art education tends to favor established legacies, works like *Incognito Tab* often slip through the cracks. That is frustrating. (Maybe that is why I felt compelled to dig so hard for material; the gaps in the record felt like an injustice in themselves.) When teachers and critics lean so heavily on the past, they risk alienating students who are desperate for art that reflects their world. Imagine being eighteen, learning about the French Impressionists while your entire social life takes place online, and never being shown art that deals with that reality. No wonder so many students think art history is irrelevant.

Caroline Amond may never replace Picasso in the textbooks, but she

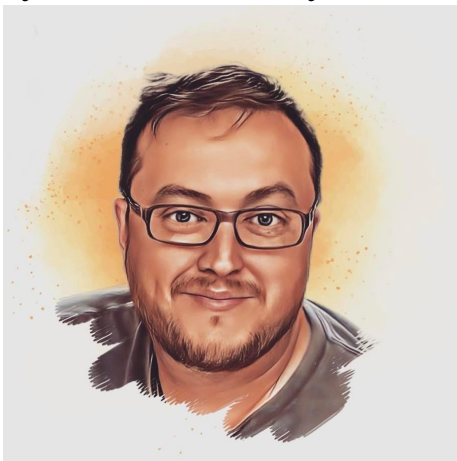
deserves a seat at the table. *Incognito Tab* may be a quiet piece, but it speaks volumes about the way we live now, the false freedoms we cling to, and the systems that shape our every action. It is an artwork that sneaks up on you, just like the little icon in the corner of a browser window.

As I finish this review, I cannot help but think that more people should know about Amond’s work. (It is almost ironic, isn’t it? An artwork about invisibility is itself half-invisible in the larger art discourse.) Maybe that is fitting. Or maybe it is a reminder that the voices we do not hear often say the most about who we are.

COMMENTARY FROM THE FOUNDER

Sayin' hot, hot, hot!

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

For a good part of two decades David K. Montoya was an active writer, artist and business entrepreneur in the micro-publication world. In 2013, turned his pen in for a microphone and became a podcaster for the following five years—and even did a small stint in independent Hollywood. But, now, he's come home and is ready to begin weaving new tales for this magazine.

Hey Boys and Girls! Welcome to

this month's commentary. I've been going non-stop, busy working on new products and making new deals to keep our little company alive. That's just the way it goes. You keep pushing, keep building, and you find ways to make it work.

This month I locked in a deal with *Dubby Energy*. They'll be advertised on the *JayZoModcast Network* in audio form, and they also picked up the *back covers* for not only this magazine, *but for Dark Myth Comics' upcoming release, Dark Myth Graphic Novel #1 – Chronicles of the Unknown*. That's a big move for us, and I'm excited to see how it plays out.

Now, you may be asking what the heck is *Chronicles of the Unknown*? This one means a lot. It's eight, 8-page comic stories packed into a single book, and it's our ode to the pulp magazines from the 1940s like *Detective Comics*. It's due out *October 7, 2025*, and will be released nationwide through our newest division, *Outsider Distribution*. Another thing people told me couldn't

be done, but here we are, and all systems are a go. *Outsider Distribution* is up and running, and it's proving to be the right move. On the book side of things, I also want to highlight *Terry D. Scheerer's 20th Anniversary Edition of Dreams of Darkness, Dreams of Night*. This one's personal. Terry was my mentor. He taught me the art of writing short stories. I wouldn't be where I'm at without him, so bringing this edition out was about honoring his memory and what he passed on to me. And big news from the *Open Contract Challenge: Speed Edition*. Our winner, *Tate Dousette*, signed his contract this week for his manuscript, *Ungodly*. That book is set to hit on *November 25, 2025*. It's a great win for him and for us.

We've also got another OCC title on the way. *Linda M. Sauve's Little Red*, our *2024 Paperback winner*, is on track for its September 9 release. That's two winners coming out back-to-back, which is pretty exciting. Speaking of September, over on the *JayZoModcast Network* we're working on a new show called *Devil's Advocate*. The idea is simple: a conservative, an independent, and a liberal talking about hot-button

topics. Everyone gets their say, no interruptions, just real conversation. I'm waiting on everything to line up, but my plan is to have it out next month. All and all, this month has been full of new things, and I am fairly sure that I am forgetting somethings. Keep your eyes on *Myth Mart* for a promotional for September as we celebrate another year of The World of Myth Magazine! Remember, even if you can not afford anything from the store, please share the promotion with people who you feel might find something to meet their fancy! Thanks for coming by and reading this month's issue of *The World of Myth Magazine*. I appreciate the support. Until next time!

David K. Montoya

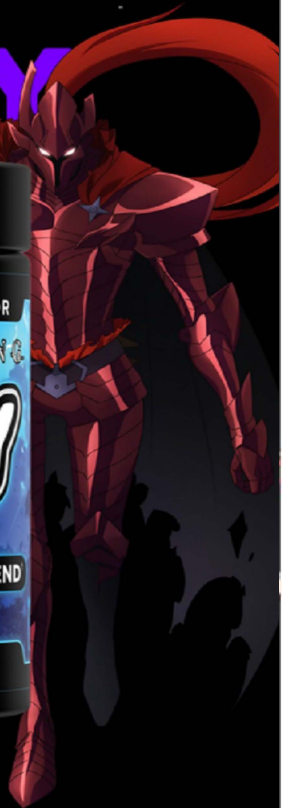


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