

THE MIDNIGHT HOUR

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a person sitting on a bed in a room with peeling walls and a single hanging light bulb. The person is sitting on the edge of a metal bed frame, looking down with their hands near their face. The room is dimly lit, with the light from the bulb casting long shadows and highlighting the textures of the walls and the person's skin. The overall mood is somber and mysterious.

Neil Davies

14 Tales Of Dark Imagination

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Midnight Hour*, my first collection of short stories in book form. Nine of these tales have been published previously, either online or in print, and five are being featured here for the first time.

What follows is a brief background to each story (some have more details than others) for those of you who like an insight into how these things come about. You will see that several have their genesis in real-life incidents or situations while others come purely from the imagination, often from the peculiarly vivid dreams and extraordinary imagination of my long time collaborator and inspiration, my wife, Cathy.

The title story, *The Midnight Hour*, is unique in this book in that it is the only story written for a specific audience, in this case the 2004 Midnight Hour Halloween competition from the online writing site, *oncewritten.com*. At that time I hadn't been doing much writing, and hadn't sent anything off to an editor or publisher for several years, having all but convinced myself that I would never be published. But, for whatever reason, this competition sparked my imagination. The story was written over several days, sent off, and then forgotten about. No one could have been more surprised than me when I received the email telling me I had won the grand prize of \$500! It was the first time anyone outside my family and friends had shown an interest in my writing, and the fact that they thought it good enough to hand over money was a revelation! That one act of belief, and the kind words that followed from the site's owner, Monica Poling, inspired me to once more make the effort to achieve what I had always wanted – to be a writer.

Recently, this story, with an alternative ending, has been accepted as a reprint by the US magazine *Trails Of Indiscretion*.

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The idea for *Argument* was planted in my mind several years previous to my first writing success. Driving home from work one winter's night, I happened to find myself behind the same model, colour and year car as mine (a white Renault 5 at that time). I found the similarities uncanny and the thoughts spread out from there. I actually wrote the first draft on my work computer the next day (that company no longer trades so it's safe for me to reveal this now!) and then took it home on a disk. After the success of *The Midnight Hour*, it was one of the stories I dragged back into the light and rewrote.

Ribbons Of Blood was Cathy's idea. I had been explaining to her how I wanted to do a vampire story, but with a difference. After some thought, she described the opening scene to me, the ribbon creatures floating in over the town, and the rest grew from there.

The Shadow also grew from an idea of Cathy's, possibly because she works in the eye department at our local hospital. We discussed it further and the basic storyline for *The Shadow* was created. So, as with several of the stories in this book, although I wrote it, the storyline is very much a joint effort between Cathy and myself.

When The Fires Die is the oldest idea in this book. Although the version printed here was written in 2005, the original version was written back when I was in school and was printed in the school magazine (*The Anselmian*). It was my first 'published' piece, and also my first (and so far *only*) brush with censorship. I still remember getting my copy and excitedly turning the pages to find my story, only to discover that whole passages had been removed without my knowledge. Basically, all references to 'virgins' had gone, and that ruined one of the main 'jokes' of the story (well, I was only a teenager at the time!). I was angry as I felt my work had been emasculated without concern for the underlying meaning of the tale. An

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overreaction I'll admit, but I was young. I never submitted anything else to the school magazine and have liked to blame the experience for preventing me sending anything anywhere for many years afterwards (although I think I was just looking for a scapegoat for my lack of self confidence). When I started to get pieces published in 2004/2005 I dug this story out, or at least the idea, rewrote it from scratch and got it published, this time without censorship! It's unusual for me in that it's not set in the 'real world', but I've always had a soft spot for this story and, personally, I think the editors of the school magazine were wrong all those years ago. After all, are there any teenage boys out there who *don't* know what a virgin is? They might not have met many of them but...

Photographs came, once again, from the imagination of my wife. Cathy wanted me to write something closer to a ghost story, rather than a horror or a thriller, and this idea was her suggestion. As is our common way of working, she gave me the idea, we discussed several possible plot points, and I ran with it from there.

The Perfect Marriage was not inspired by my own marriage, honestly! I liked the black humour possibilities in the inept struggles of a man trying to kill his wife (and that probably goes right back to an old Jack Lemmon movie, whose exact title escapes me, that had a similar premise). This one was kept short and fun.

Road Rage is the most recent story in the collection, finished a week or so before the offer from Screaming Dreams came in the email. This is one of those cases when the title came first. Driving home from work one day I just decided I wanted to write a story called *Road Rage* (the reasons are probably fairly obvious to any driver) but, of course, not road rage as most of us know it. The rest developed over several hour-long drives to and from work over the next few days. Well... you've got to

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do something with all that time, right?

Virgin Flesh is written in a style heavily influenced by the work of R Chetwynd-Hayes (The Monster Club). It is the only story in this book that sets out from the start to be a broad comedy, although a certain black humour does permeate other tales.

Death By Popcorn was written as a twist on the 'damsel in distress' genre, and also because I've always thought a darkened cinema, after the patrons have left, is a very creepy place. The title came afterwards. I liked the twist on 'death by chocolate.'

Frozen Food is yet another idea from Cathy, although her original story was quite different from the one presented here. What I took from that original was the freezer – I just loved the image.

It's strange sometimes how just one small, fleeting incident can spark off a stream of thoughts and ideas that end up as a story. *Away With The Fairies* began with just such an incident. I was on my way, one evening, to pick Cathy up from her mother's in Wales (quite a few of my ideas seem to come while driving) when I thought, for one moment, that I saw something small moving at the roadside. As I got closer it turned out to be nothing but a small bush... but what if it *had* been a creature of some kind? What if that creature had suddenly run out into the road in front of the car? And so it began...

The inspiration for *Bonding* came from a real-life situation at an office where I was doing some freelance computer work. Two of the girls in the sales office were not getting along and management decided to finance a 'bonding' session for them. Everything else in the story is my imagination, but you never know... I didn't hear how the *real* session went!

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In *The Extreme Makeover Of Helen Watson* I set out to write a slightly more traditional vampire story, although with a modern twist. Undoubtedly part of the inspiration (and the title) came from the many plastic surgery programmes we were watching on television at the time. After all, what makeover could be more extreme than the conversion from human to vampire? And why should it always be seen as a bad thing? The story itself was written while on holiday in the Lake District (thank god for laptops!)

Finally, before you get to the stories themselves (presuming, that is, that you've bothered to read the introduction this far) I'd like to mention a few people who have been instrumental in whatever success I've had: Cathy (my wife) for her ideas and inspiration; Monica Poling of *oncewritten.com* for giving my self confidence the boost it needed to start sending stories out; Tony Longworth, friend and musician, who has been a long-time supporter of my writing; Steve Gerlach, writer of the excellent *Lake Mountain*, among others, for taking the time to email me and read my novel and for giving me such an excellent quote to use on my website; Richard Laymon, Douglas Clegg and Frank Herbert, none of whom I have ever met but whose books inspire me to write every time I read and re-read them; my children, Jonathan and Rhianne, for occasionally giving me the *time* to write (!); and last, but certainly not least, Steve Upham of *Screaming Dreams*, both for publishing me in his excellent free pdf magazine *Estronomicon* and for giving me the opportunity to be the first publication in his new venture.

I hope you enjoy reading these 14 tales.

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November 2006

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00:00am. Midnight.

The first shuffling of feet in the hallway outside.

Right on time, as always.

Clare raised a hand to her forehead, felt the damp heat of her skin and ran shaky fingers back over her black hair, severely pulled back and tied with an old elastic band. It felt greasy. How long had it been since there had been enough hot water for a decent shower? Every morning she bathed as best she could in the freezing water that spurted erratically from the taps in the bathroom, but still she felt dirty, sweaty, *gritty*.

From the other side of her hotel room door more shuffling, the first hesitant mumbling of voices.

Clare looked at the bedside clock. 00:01am. Their confidence seemed to be growing quicker these nights.

She swung her feet to the floor and sat up on the edge of the bare mattress. Her t-shirt clung to patches of sweat on her body as she clasped her hands on her lap, fingers pressing tight against each other to try and stop the trembling. It seemed a little easier each night, as if her fear took longer to grow, longer to dominate her every thought. Just as their confidence came to them with ever increasing speed, so her fear became more sedate in its insidious crawl through her body. Strange. She had always thought it would be the other way round.

00:10am

The bang on the door startled her, jerked her body upright from where it had slumped. For a moment she didn't breathe, waiting, listening. There was a suspicion of laughter and light, running footsteps but the door remained silent and, more importantly, locked.

She hadn't realised she had fallen asleep sitting on the edge

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of the bed. She had to be careful. She was vulnerable if she fell asleep. Later she could sleep, now she must be awake, alert.

She unravelled her fingers. They ached.

"What to do to stay awake?"

The same question every night, spoken in a whisper but spoken nonetheless.

She had long ago abandoned trying to read a book. Somehow concentrating on words on the page was more inclined to make her sleep than keep her awake. Play music? Walk around while listening? Maybe even dance a little? It was a possibility, but she knew that before long the rampant *thud thud thud* of their music would begin shaking the walls, rattling the door on its hinges. She only had a portable CD player. She couldn't compete.

Perhaps if their music had been clearer she could have used that? But all she ever heard was the bass, the beat, the savage rhythm, the carnal raw power of..... she snapped open eyes that had once again fallen shut and pulled her hand back from where it had crawled beneath her t-shirt, over the sweat of her belly, up to the curve of her breasts. She knew the effect their music had on her, could only imagine what it must do to those nearer to it. No. Best not to imagine. Imagination led to temptation, led to weakness. She had been there once. She did not want to visit there again!

"So, not music then."

She tried to force her voice louder than a whisper, to something more like normal conversation. It was difficult when the only person to converse with was yourself.

"Exercise?"

She used to exercise, many years ago, before the plague.

She pushed herself to her feet, trying to ignore the dull aching behind her knees. She reached for the trousers she had been wearing earlier in the day and then stopped. Why bother? The one window was shuttered, the door was locked. There was no one to see her parading around the room in nothing but her t-shirt. She stretched, touched her toes and was suddenly

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very aware of her naked buttocks thrust towards the door. Could they see through the keyhole? Did the door even *have* a keyhole? She'd never noticed. She reached for the trousers and slipped them on. She felt safer immediately. More secure. Strange how certain values seemed to remain when everything else fell apart.

00:15am

She sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor breathing heavily, sweat dripping from the end of her nose.

Was she really that unfit? She could have done no more than 3 or 4 minutes of fairly gentle exercise yet she felt like she'd just finished a marathon. She looked down, noted her nipples pushing hard against the sweat-sodden material of her t-shirt. Why did they do that? She had only been exercising, not having sex!

As if on some invisible cue the music started. No gentle introduction, no gradual build, just the sudden *thud thud thud* of the bass line.

The hotel door rattled, the floor shook, what sounded like the plumbing began to groan in sympathy. And yet despite the pain it caused in her head, despite the fear it engendered from the knowledge that the beginning of the music meant they had overcome their fear of "the mad woman in room 52" and were now fully engaged in their "party hour", it aroused in her feelings, urges that at all other times she kept under extreme control.

She pushed herself angrily to her feet, began to pace the room like an animal, determined to maintain that control.

She had lived alone in this room for almost 2 years before she had finally succumbed, just the once. Once. One mad, insane time.

She had unlocked the hotel door, turned the handle, let it swing slightly ajar. She had lay back on the bed, naked, not even wearing the t-shirt she so often did these days. Someone

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had entered the room. A man. She couldn't remember his face, only his body. Tall, skinny. She remembered thinking "he's not really my type". Then another had come in, and another, maybe even another. She wasn't sure how many. The music had seemed louder than ever that night, louder, wilder, hypnotic. It had been quick, animal, even brutal. She honestly couldn't remember that much about it. She had a faint memory of blood, someone had been injured in the mad abandonment, perhaps it had even been her? Then she had been alone once again, locking the door, putting her clothes on, ashamed and already trying to forget what had happened.

The door had never been unlocked since. Not while they were out there. Not while their music roared.

The small unlocking of the repressed memory, although she still resisted remembering any detail, led her as if by some reflex to the bedside cabinet and the small picture frame that stood there. She picked it up, smiling slightly at the handsome man and pretty little girl who posed there. Her husband. Her daughter. They had been among the first victims of the plague.

Had they discovered the source of that terrible affliction? Had they found a cure? If they had it had not reached out here, to the city she could no longer even remember the name of. The city she had wandered into, dazed from her loss, horrified at the death that lay all around, guilty that she was one of the few who seemed immune. The hotel had been deserted, somewhere to stay before she moved on again. Then *they* had arrived, and she had never moved on, rarely moved out of the room.

From the very beginning it had been midnight. She had no idea what they did before that time. She never saw them if she ventured out onto the streets, into the deserted shops during daylight. But at midnight it began. Every night. Without fail. For over 3 years!

"Clare!"

The shout had a sing-song quality to it, like a child goading a playmate in the playground. She felt her stomach turn over

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at the sound of it, closed her eyes, chewed at her lower lip.

"Can Clare come out to play?"

It was a man's voice. No. More like a child's, a teenager perhaps. Young certainly.

She could hear others, not the one calling, laughing. Somewhere there was a congratulatory *whoop*. A brief smattering of applause.

It was not the first time they had called to her. She guessed it was a form of bravado, almost a rites of passage thing with them. Most of them were only in their teens after all. What happened to them when they grew older? Where were the older ones, the ones who had been there from the very beginning? Perhaps they stayed quiet, in the background. Baiting was a young person's game!

"I've got something for you Clare. Open the door and its all yours!"

More laughter. Several *whoops*. The music seemed to grow louder.

She covered her face with her hands. She would not let them goad her into responding. She knew from experience that if she stayed quiet they eventually got bored and moved on to other things, things more interesting than the mad woman in the hotel room.

Behind her hands the tears began.

00:30am

The floorboards by the far wall were loose. She noted their creaking as she paced the room. They had been loose for as long as she could remember. It wasn't important, it was just something she noticed.

They had stopped calling her name a couple of minutes ago. Her name, crude suggestions, eventually angry abuse when she refused to even acknowledge they were there outside her door. Towards the end someone had started hammering at the wood, shouting obscenities. For a while she

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had been afraid the lock would give way, or the hinges, and that they would come pouring into the room. She had backed away to the shuttered window, frightened, crying, trembling.

But it had stopped. The door had held. She had sank to her knees in an attitude of prayer, but she had given up praying long ago. There could be no one worth praying to, not when you saw what had happened to the world.

Carol, her six year old daughter, had been the first. Not just the first in their family but the first in the whole town. It was a notoriety Clare would have gladly done without.

The slim pale girl had died quietly, apparently painlessly, in the invisible, insidious way the plague had of taking its victims. Clare had been holding her. Matthew, her husband, had stood beside her. There was nothing anyone could do.

Matthew had himself died just a week later, but he wasn't the second. By then hundreds had died, perhaps thousands. The town had been decimated quickly, quietly, ruthlessly.

Within a month, when there was only herself and maybe twenty others still alive, she had walked out. No packing, no planning. Just out of her front door, down the main street and away. Away. That had been all that was important.

By then bodies just stayed where they fell, in the middle of the street, on their porch, in a shop doorway. There was no one left to clear the corpses away. At least, no one who cared.

The loose floorboards creaked underfoot again.

Some hidden part of her mind shouted at her, called to her. The floorboards *were* important.

Why?

She slowly got down on her hands and knees, placing her palms against the worn carpet. She could feel the floor vibrating with the bass of the music outside.

"There's something here I should remember."

She whispered the words, not even realising she had said them aloud.

A drop of sweat dripped from her forehead onto the back of her hand. Her breathing grew heavy. She could feel more

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sweat running from her back, down her sides, under her breasts.

She felt ill.

"Perhaps the exercise wasn't a good idea after all!"

But she knew it wasn't the exercise. It was a memory. A memory fighting its way to the surface through barriers that had been strong and impenetrable for almost 2 years. Since the last time these floorboards were lifted. Since just after the one time she had let people into this room.

She scratched at the edge of the carpet, managed to get a hold and pulled it back. She heard little popping, tearing noises as the worn material snapped free of the edging strips it had settled back onto all that time ago. Dust rose into the air, into her lungs, making her cough, but she kept pulling until the bare floorboards lay before her and the carpet was folded back under her knees.

Three strips of board side by side had been broken and placed back at some point. Now they lifted easily as one by one she pulled them up and placed them carefully to one side.

Her heart was thumping almost as loud as the music as she reached a trembling hand down into the darkness below the floor, muscles tensed for quickly pulling away if anything should move.

Her fingers found the soft cloth of a bag and, clutching it tightly, she lifted it into the light. A grey cloth bag, heavy with whatever was inside it. She shuffled backwards, allowing the carpet to fall back over the bare floorboards, over the hole she had made.

The bag made a metallic noise as she placed it on the bed, metal on metal.

Taking one deep shaky breath she pulled open the bag.

00:50am

Clare stood before the bed, one hand covering her mouth, the other twisting nervously at the bottom of her t-shirt. In a line

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before her lay the contents of the bag. Three knives. A wide-bladed hunting knife. A serrated edged army knife. A machete. Even after all this time they shone, clean, polished. Without touching she knew they were razor-sharp.

As she looked at them the memories, painful, horrible memories, came screaming back into her head.

Death from the plague was not quiet, peaceful like she remembered. But she had not been able to watch her daughter die in the agonies of that terrible illness. Instead she had decided her daughter would die quickly, in her sleep, with her mother by her side. Her daughter had been the first.

When her husband had shown the first symptoms of the plague it had been a relatively easy decision to show him the same mercy she had shown her daughter. And then the neighbours had been infected, then the families down the road that she knew by sight but not by name.

It had got easier the more people she released from their agonies. She had realised she had a calling, a gift even. In this time of panic and fear she could bring peace and calm. She knew then that she had to go out into the world and help all she could.

But things had gone wrong here, in this city, this hotel room. Wrong when she had let those others into her room, into her body. Even though she had released them from their anguish afterwards it had not been the same. She had sinned. She had slipped from her path.

She had hidden the knives and her mind had conveniently forgotten the rest.

Until now.

00:58am

The army knife was tucked into the waistband of her trousers. The hunting knife was in her left hand. The machete lay on the bed.

She turned the key in the door.

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She was ready. She had rediscovered her purpose in life, her reason for living. Her *calling*.

She didn't need to hide in this room anymore.

She pulled open the door, reached back and grabbed the machete in her right hand, smiling as the *thud thud thud* of the music grew suddenly louder, filling her body with a sensuous pleasure she had not experienced for so long.

Clare danced out into the plague-infested world slicing and stabbing to the beat.

If you've enjoyed reading this sample then
please consider purchasing the book!

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