

ESTRONOMICON

FANTASY ✦ SCIENCE FICTION ✦ HORROR

Dark Desires Edition : August 2009

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FISH FARM

by David Gatward

FEATURING

Jeff Gardiner

Shaun Hamilton

Mark Howard Jones

Dominic Lyne

John Miller

Dean Drinkel

Pedro Escudero Zumel

Nearly dead eyes looked up at him. He wondered what the fish was thinking, if it actually could ...

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The stories in this eZine are works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Screaming Dreams

INTRODUCTION

STEVE UPHAM

Those with sharp eyes will notice that the date on the cover of this issue reads *August*, when in fact it's now just turned October. Yes, I'm late releasing the eZine, as usual! What happened this time, I hear you ask? Well, in a word, FantasyCon. You can read more about that in the next issue though, so I won't go into detail here. But I will say there was a LOT of work involved in the run-up to the convention and so the eZine didn't get released as originally planned. But we are here now, that's the main thing.

I've titled this issue the *Dark Desires Edition*, purely because it features some slightly darker and more violent tales, or includes stronger sexual content than I usually allow in the eZine. It's probably still very tame by some of your standards, but thought I'd better warn those who may not be expecting such things in this publication!

Most of the submissions I receive are ideal for *Estronomicon*, but occasionally I do get the odd story that's a bit too graphic in detail for what I consider a general audience of all ages. I normally reject these tales but thought for once I would gather a few together and see what readers think.

I know it's a short issue, but I hope you enjoy reading the stories. The first tale, *A Gospel of Anguish*, inspired the cover art this time. Not a specific illustration of anything within the story, just a general feeling it gave me while reading it.

Keep those submissions coming in, by the way. I am always on the lookout for more material for future issues. Not just fiction either, so if you fancy writing a book or film review, or article on anything fantasy, sf or horror related, then please feel free to get in touch and send it along for consideration, thanks. Plus if you have any feedback or comments please let me know anytime. Don't be scared to make suggestions on how the eZine could be made better in future. I'm all ears (not literally!)

Watch out for the next few issues of *Estronomicon*, which will include a FantasyCon Report issue, a spooky Halloween Edition, possibly a themed Science Fiction issue and of course the Christmas Special. So lots to keep me busy here over the coming weeks!

Thank you all for your continued support with Screaming Dreams. I always enjoy hearing from readers and viewing the great submissions that come in each month. Remember, don't be a stranger... keep in touch!

A GOSPEL OF ANGUISH

DEAN DRINKEL

"There is no heaven of glory bright, and no hell where sinners roast. Here and now is our day of torment! Here and now is our day of joy! Here and now is our opportunity! Choose ye this day, this hour, for no redeemer liveth!" – The Satanic Bible: The Book of Satan IV:2

And to think I almost let you get away with it. The thud thud thud of the blades wake me from my slumber. For a moment, caught between the conscious and sub-conscious I see concrete boulders crash into the side of your face, pulverising the bone, smashing the eye socket, spreading the nose across your cheek. The teeth are broken, falling from your bloodied gums...but as I wake fully and reality evolves around me, I guess I shouldn't get too far ahead of myself. After all, the games have just begun.

Throwing the fetid water upon my parched skin, I sit and stare as the metallic dragonfly hums its last over snow covered mountain tops. I am not in a hurry for what will inevitably follow, so rest my weary body against the trough. Reach into my jacket, find the small pouch: quickly the familiar aroma fills my nostrils and the scales fall from my eyes. The Salamander appears all bronzed and transparent, naked save for a gas-mask upon the snout. It dances before me. The sinews stretched, the muscles taught, its arms and legs speak in a language before words, before sound, before imagination.

This jig has done its trick. My body begins to quiver, but don't fret for I'm in total control. As time appears to freeze around the dancing creature, I know it is trying to confuse me purposely. I stick out my tongue, which has the desired effect: the Salamander divides into the Four Elements and then again into Four Beasts – a fish, a vulture, a scorpion and the final fiend something I can't quite fathom, but its wings are fiery golden and from the beak a stream of lava rivers flow. Each of these spirits sing to me in dialects I can and cannot understand – but I guess that's all part of the plan – I just have to catch as much as I can.

Like a butterfly, the sunlight flutters over my eyelids. As my eyes droop then regain their composure, the Salamander is whole again, turns its back on me and slithers away into the undergrowth. For a moment that lasts an eternity, the world is quiet. But this eternity is just a passing moment however, and a cacophony of echoes rapidly explode around me: first the screams, then the

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shrieks, the yells, the squeals of the dead and soon-to-be-dead. I clap my hands and the silence returns but I have to steady myself for now is the time of commencement. The time of Anguish.

From every pore a bead of sweat drops. I am awash with the stuff. The salt eats into me. My flesh is red and raw. I start to scratch at myself. The nails cut deep into the skin, leaving bloodied grooves across my body. Highways for ants to travel. I start to invoke chants that have got me through times such as these before, but I know today is such a special day (the day the Calendar turns its last) that we have to be careful – we must be reverent. We must re-invent.

With all my might, I draw a circle in the dirt with my boot and wait. As day becomes night and night becomes day, I express no surprise when the jackal appears. In the mouth sits a head, severed fresh, jugular still pumping. I watch agog as a vision forms before me – a wolf, which can only mean the best of luck.

But then comes treetop warnings through clouds tinged with orange. God is crying; His tears stain the dramatic canopy, my own life flashes across the sky. Wiping my face, both the jaguar and wolf vanish and I can finally see through the rain. There, the demons tear at themselves wildly revealing fleshy undertones as you wail into your outstretched arms. On a post nearby, the severed head is skewered, watching, waiting, illuminated by such an inner light: a tuneless song ensues – eyes darting this way and that, lips in constant movement, a silent lullaby mouthed. Terror is etched upon your face, your hands shake, hover above the wooden slat forced between your legs – stained with your own fluids – the sticks and string that had only seconds before been tightened around your fingers to extract the truth. How those words had flowed – like an ocean. The ends of your fingers too, rid of the tips you had prized so much. The tongs lie nearby, strips of you attached and glistening. If only we'd known that pain could be so ecstatic, though now we do and how we revel in it – inspiring us to greater things. The black-hooded demon bows and walks away from you, his name forever scorched into your soul: Tean Zu.

Have you seen enough? Do you want us to stop? Don't you want to play anymore? This is real, this is happening, this isn't a dream, do you not see? This is ourselves and here in the jungles of brick and mortar people trust the strangest of things. All of them true. Naturally.

The lesson is thus: in the beginning, more than you trod these paths. That is the way of things – why take one soul when six, seven even eight will suffice?

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More fingers, more toes, more guts: more glory for the fat-bellied Buddha whom we don't worship but who protects us anyhow. Go on, be my guest, try your luck, stroke that belly. Even here, in the distance, I can sense your emotions, taste your desires, drink your aspirations. Their stench is impalpable. Your pleas are ignored, they won't save you. The noose of mortality is tightened around your neck...

...wait, what was that you screamed? Now now, don't be so entranced by the scene between us. The Buddha can't hear you. He's our good fortune, not yours. Go worship your own alien. Yet there is something about you. Your magic has worked itself into me. Why did you need to be so God-damned beautiful? Are we not bound by the same rules? I guess not.

Your lingering stench lifts me to my feet. I pass through the enclave like a farmer spreading his seed. I can only pray that what I sow will be fruitful. To my right, the old man who spoke of voodoo. Lying there, impaled by the nails fashioned from his wife's rib-bones. His arms and legs spread wide under the sun, such deep burns already upon the desiccated skin, the flesh ripe and peeling. Not bad for two hours work, not bad at all – finally silenced by his own cries as he drowned on the fluids that simmered within his body. The retinas of his eyes detached, blistered. The tongue hanging loose, saturated by the flies giving birth to their young, biding their time for when their own feast can commence.

To the left: a lesson learnt from our Catholic forebears. She was His Bride so should have known better – her lips too eager to pleasure those that paid big bucks. I had no choice but to evoke La Veille: The bitch beaten, bound by the ropes, brass weights hung from her ankles, lowered ever so slowly upon the pyramid shaped stool, itself still smeared with the previous occupant's fluids. Such pain, such torture as one leg is lifted and she is dropped once, twice, three times onto the device. Of course she isn't dead, though the pyramid burrows deep within her. She looks at me as her saviour but I signal for her torment to continue – there will be no respite even if for now we hold the rats at bay. Their time will come – the time to satiate their hunger. Who guessed the bitch had that thing growing inside her? Should I feel sadness? Why? its not as if I ever asked her to propagate.

I spit out the phlegm that had been generating in my throat and head towards you, but then stop when only inches from your face, sensing

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movement behind me and watch your eyes as you follow something on the horizon. I turn, just in time to see what you had seen: freedom! I scratch my forehead, what has got into people today? Do I need to do everything? Did he really believe he could escape just because my attention was devoted to you? Such an unlucky boy, devoid of all hope. From my waist I pull out the Peacemaker, take aim and ready to shoot – but then as I'm about to lose sight of him, I change my mind – pulling the trigger would be far too easy. I yank your arm, release you from the hook (apologies, I saw you wince just then, the hook must have bit you – even though, come on, it was such a small bite) and we commence the chase. The hunt is on!

Through the mortared foliage, the metallic trees, the jewelled fauna, we run. Even though the glass-like branches dig into me, scratch me, stab me, as we go and I notice the blood trickling from your similar wounds, I just know you've never had such fun. Taking a breather (but keeping my eyes forever on the prey) and with all my might I bang my chest, scream unto the world: a primal scream so terrifying that winged creatures scatter rapidly into the sky; too frightened to look back, too scared to ever return to the lair of this lycanthrope.

I pull on the umbilical that binds us. The thin leather strap, cutting into your porcelain flesh. And I make a mental note to remember to gorge on that once delicate yet now raw and tender wrist. You must think my guard is down as you go to slap me. But I'm too quick and you're easy to out manoeuvre. My fist connects with your jaw in between the blink of your eye, breaking one or two of your veneered teeth in the process. The tears well but don't you see you stupid bitch that I was trying to save you? To prove the point, I grab you by your matted hair and drag you to what was almost your demise: it is deceptive for sure – the way the ground gives way to the rapids....but didn't you hear the water screaming at us? It's feasting now and wants to eat alone.

And yet, we wait there a moment longer. I want you to witness what the fates had in store. We stare down. Ah – there is the child, bayoneted upon the stake. How his body shakes so! He still lives, I almost envy him; existing and non-existing in the same instant. I don't believe you see the relevance of this so kick you in the back of your legs then pull you to your feet by your wounded chin. Insolence! How dare you beg me to finish him off, to spare him from his misery – aren't you getting this, even now?

I grab your neck, lift you into the air, dangle you over the edge, just for a

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few seconds – how I wallow in your screams, the fear that emanates from each and every pore of your petrified skin. The shit stink as your bowels loosen and the contents spill down your thighs. Then, as the child finally expires and is motionless the enjoyment passes and we turn back. We must return to the fires and the delights only the flames can offer – I can sense the fear, hear your heartbeat – you have never felt so free.

Like the others, you have had your clothes ripped from your trembling body. No modesty required, no hiding that flesh beneath the labels. The women, the men, the children – just meat to us. As I tear the last of the lace from your breasts, I lick the moisture from my lips – fine, so it's true: some meat is more tasty than others! I hear a cough and I slant my head, something, *someone* has caught my eye – I drop you back onto the hook and turn to the boy with the fair chest. I run my fingers over his ripped muscles, drum a short symphony upon his body – I like the timbre, the sound he makes as I do this. His mouth has parted slightly and I see the soft tongue within. As I look at him he smiles and flutters his eyelids – why? Does he really believe I will free him? Does he think I might untie him, take him back to my den and ravish him? Of course not! It is only his magnificence that is my aphrodisiac, nothing more. He is but a vessel for the feeding of my soul. It is me that is laughing, me excited at your vomit when I slice away those sweet lips from his face and gouge on his tongue with a pair of pincers I have rusted just for such an occasion. Your eyes widen as my hand hovers between his legs – but then I move away having done nothing there – I'm no sadist. Anyway, this isn't about sex....I'm more powerful than to be driven by that primeval urge.

The youth falls to the ground, delirious to have kept his balls. We watch him roll about on the leaves, his hands cupped around his genitals – I frown because I'm confused – he savours them more than his lips? Doesn't he understand that words create more than semen? There is something about his lack of vision which disgusts me – I fire two rounds in him: one to the scrotum he favoured so much; the other to the torso I once enjoyed. It is as if God Himself breathed upon the human, catapulting him into the air and throwing him somewhere into the distance. There, he lands awkwardly, but offers no complaint – he has departed this world. It is true what they have written: I am indeed the Alpha and the Omega.

Once the dust has settled and I can drink in the scene, I am ecstatic.

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Between his legs, nothing more exists than a useless mass of hanging flesh: blood and other dark fluids pour. In the centre of his torso sits an almighty hole. I wonder what Mercator would make of such a sight, it surely would be a great testament to his powers of cartography. I approach the corpse with caution and admire the lipless face – an expression torn between sublime agony and total surprise. As my knee smashes into his skull I realise (not for the first time, it has to be said) how much I love my work.

An echo explodes through the leafy awning. Apes roar as they chase their prey, swing from the rafters. Faster and faster, horses' hooves pound terra firma – whoever they have loosened, there will be no escape. Like a mouse, an almost skinless man hangs, a twine (fashioned from what once sat safely inside his own stomach) tied around his midriff. Our eyes meet but for an instant as there is a beating of thighs and the net closes: The mouse is caught, rocketing skywards in complete dread. Then, as the twine is sliced, tree trunks fly this way and that – us, the acolytes, showered as he is split apart. Momentarily (but oh, such a sweet moment), the sky turns red and the downpour ensues. Be like us, open your arms, your mouths, taste the tempest! Who knew the human body contained so much scarlet nectar?

Why do you weep so? No need to be morbid, no need to be fearful, for we love you also. The apes applaud as one of our fellow fiends (himself not much older than the boy I killed) decides to remove his own fur. Someone has taken his fancy, it seems. He stalks through the fields where the bodies are buried, grabbing the old woman and yanking her from the sand, throwing her against the ancient redwood – knocking the wind straight out of her. He pounces, yet she's strong, not taking the bait – doesn't want to join our party. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. I warn him to be careful as he tries to force open her mouth with the monster protruding between his legs – she looks the type of dog to bite.

Which she does! Stupid boy, I scream at him. Yet he's not listening, he's writhing in agony. She spits something from her mouth. Her lips, her cheeks, smeared with more of the red stuff. He must be missing a good inch or two, which he won't miss and normally I'd leave him to his own vengeance, but not today. Quick as a flash, I'm there. Blade between my fingers, unleashed. Teeth tear into her throat, her ancient saggy breasts. The flesh is stripped within seconds. I bend down, listen to her heart: the bitch still breaths! I pick her up,

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DEAN DRINKEL

throw her to the shrubs, leave her to the maggot, the leeches, the spiders. The jungle must feast too.

But if she is the entrée then you my dear, are the main dish. I clean the knife, turn back to face you. I know you're frightened, but there's no need for I have something special just for you. Something I've wanted to release from captivity for a long, long while. Euphoric, I skip to my den, return but seconds later, dragging the metal along the forest floor. Oh yes, this blade is heavy, going to take all my strength to wield it. Why do you recoil so? It likes you, isn't it obvious in the way it shimmers and shines? That's right, bow before it. Such desire of the steel as it glints in the sun.

I'm loving this. The way you look skywards, towards your heaven maybe. Still the tears drop from your eyes, ride the grooved tracks already deep in your cheeks. The Apes are cheering, the scattering of monkeys. Chattering. The universal chatter. My eyes close, blocking out the music, I have to concentrate. Yes. This is the way it must be. Not with a bang, nor a whimper. With the divine arc of triumph. I go to say something, some final words – but the defiance you display, even now, inspires me to greater things. I wipe the spit from my face, ignore the barrage of insults from your bloodied mouth. You are almost smiling and I almost lost my composure, but it doesn't take long to right myself.

My eyes are wide. Wild. I'm silent – I'll let the sword do the talking for us both. The word of God screams loudest as the blade falls. A golden halo. Metallic the aroma, the power. My veins pulsating. This is what I dreamed of, right from the beginning, right from that first kiss. I am John and I am the Revelator. You are my saving grace.

I have become alive in your frailty. A moment of Epiphany. When your head falls from your shoulders, the expression on your face does not betray you: it is not shock nor fury – seemingly contented. I knew you wanted this too. I was right to select you from amongst the gaggle of humanity. We had a mutual understanding didn't we? Then when it starts to tumble down the slope, slow at first then much, much faster – we applaud, cheer, root for you. This is a sign for the noise of the jungle to return. More shots are fired, dispersing the secret wildlife that had hid itself amongst the highest of foliage (like angels on branches), watching with sadness the dancing figures below. A bizarre ballet for sure, jolting movements – drunken marionettes.

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As the blind hyena – insanity laughs. I turn once more to your remains. It has taken on its own movement, the eternal shudder as the throes of death approach. I beg for one last chance. Let me get this bit just right, we'll both reap the benefits. I swing the blade again. Almost in slow motion, we watch as your body lurches upwards and the ground soils quickly as the innards spill. I'm crying, so happy. I hope you are too. I reach inside and pull out the intestines, hold them high. Letting your blood drip upon me. I look around. The forest is turning red as the monkeys, revel in their carnage. I swear I see halos around them. With your guts wiped across my face, my toothless smile beams across eons. I turn and leave them to their fun.

Later, as I lay down to sleep, exhausted, I wonder: how did I almost let you get away it? Simple, I must have liked you. I pull the blade close – our love making over. In the reflection I see the words scorched into my arm and for a split second, I remember when I lived another life; that of a teacher. I run my finger over those words and chuckle, they were never so apt: *Hell is empty and all the devils are here.*

The light dies. Today is done. Tomorrow fast approaches. I wonder what marvels it will bring. Whatever they are I will be grateful, for here the lesson ends.

Amen.

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Dean M Drinkel is a published horror author, poet, performed playwright and short film writer / director; runner up for the 2001 Sir Peter Ustinov Award. Upcoming projects include the feature film *Web Of Destruction* (written by Don Eminizer) and the short film *The Torturer* (written by Paul Kane).

DOWNLOAD THE BACK ISSUES

Did you know that *Estronomicon* was first released in January 2006?
You can still download all the PDF issues from the [eZine](#) page.

The tights constricting my breathing still hold your sweat on them. A musty scent with a taste of lemon - it casts me back to the moment I took them from you; that moment I left you on the bed and knew you would never wear them again. They cling to my skin, scraping against my chin's stubbled landscape, soaking up my own perspiration, bringing us together once more. Sounds are muffled - the only true noise is the thick wheeze of my breath. My sight is distorted by a dense mesh of satin blackness. I'm blind, with sight.

I sit in the woman's bedroom, gently rocking on the chair secreted between the window and the wardrobe, holding her toy clown like an orphan baby. I know I risk waking her - the chair's bracing emits a gentle creak if I lean back too far - but I enjoy the threat - it adds something enticing to the evening. I keep myself hidden in the alcove, my skeletal frame wrapped in black - but should she wake, she will know she is not alone.

The moon's lamp struggles to penetrate dark cotton curtains, unable to create any shadows. The night's blanket smothering the room is so dense it repels any encroachment. Yet I can see her perfectly; her undulating outline wrapped within the folds of a thin duvet. Long, slender, taut; an athletic physique carefully toned with dedication. She lies on her stomach, her face covered by a web of dark hair that reaches past her naked shoulders towards the stiffened mounds of her buttocks. It stretches out over the duvet like a million worms, all dormant; hypnotized by the night's eyes. Her arms are stretched out next to her head as though she is being held at gunpoint.

Not quite.

Her breathing is deep. She sleeps. Oblivious.

I tighten my grip on the clown.

I no longer feel like its foster parent.

Its cotton neck feels very fragile in my hands. Easy to tear.

Easy to break.

She reminds me of you. Of that first time I sat in your bedroom, watching you.

Alone.

I sniggered as you spoke in your sleep, when you called out the names of those who stalked your dreams. You spoke sentences that made no sense; words that had never been formed before, in any language. You drooled; warm spittle tributaries slipping into your soft hair and soaking through to the

WISHFUL OBSESSION

SHAUN HAMILTON

feather of the pillow beneath. You unknowingly licked at it, the pink snake of your tongue separating thin black strands. Though your face was covered by your hair, I knew you grimaced as you tasted something unnatural. Mousse perhaps? Lacquer? Or maybe just the flavour of your own curls was enough to make you cough and spit. But you didn't wake. You could have, but you didn't.

You moved as dragging your dreams into reality. Arms hitting out at invisible foes; fingers clawing at thin air as though you were scratching an invisible attacker's face. When you swung out towards the bedside table and came close to knocking over the glass of water standing there, my chest tightened as though I were having an asthma attack. If you had done that, you'd have woken and become aware of my presence.

You did not wake.

She is like you in so many ways, yet different in so many others. I understand the foolishness of such a statement, but my words are true. She makes no noise. Her voice is quiet, her mouth closed, her tongue hidden in its warren. She doesn't even stir as if dreaming. No pictures play themselves in her mind; no images to talk to. Her slumber is too deep, too dense. When the darkness comes, she slips into a coma, lacking only the twisting veins of life-saving wires. Needing only a monitor's steady beep to measure her pulse. She doesn't even growl as though trying to breathe through a snore. Nothing. Just a steady rise to indicate she's something more than a lifeless dummy.

When I took you, when I could no longer stand the anticipation of watching you in your slumber and had to take you, I felt such power coursing through my veins. It was though I had morphed into a bolt of lightening; a surge of energy that could never be stopped. I snatched the tights up from where you had discarded them and wrapped them around your neck.

You struggled, but no more than I expected.

I was sat on your back. There was nowhere for you to go.

You tried screaming but the sounds were guttural; primeval.

Too quiet for anyone to hear.

It was all over very quickly.

That was when I had you.

That was wrong of me. I shouldn't have done that but the excitement took control. I couldn't stop myself. Rape had never been my intention. Whether air resided in your lungs or not, I had not set out to take you in such a degrading

manner. I ruined us both.

But you were so beautiful; so giving.

Utilizing the water you had used to lubricate your throat as my aid, I had you.

I'm sorry, but you were exquisite.

Yet such delicateness does not excuse and cannot erase the guilt. I contemplated joining you; of taking a knife from your kitchen and casting myself into the pits of hell to be at your side. But as my strength returned, as the exertions required to spill my seed eased, I became a coward once more and walked away.

But I cannot stop.

You showed me. I cannot stop.

My skin grows ever wetter within the tights' constricting grip. Glands leak sweat and the scent of your sex is joined by that of my excitement; my anticipation. My breathing grows shorter, faster. My chest rises and falls at an ever-quickening pace; expanding with the stitch pains rupturing my sides. My pressure rises and I hear thunderous waves of blood crashing through my body, flooding my veins. My heart pumps at twice its normal rate. Eyes stream; mouth salivates; lungs scream. The tights begin to itch and I rub at them with arthritic hands that have seized to form the shape of the clown's neck. Stretching fingers scratch at nylon as I feel the first steady steps of the approaching claustrophobia.

I yank the things off my head, no longer able to keep you so close.

You smother me.

I breathe the night in deep, filling the overworked sacks clinging to my ribcage. Capillaries swallow oxygen, carbon dioxide is spat out and still I can taste you. I'm in danger of waking her and I don't care. I need to feel fresh, need to feel something other than you. I long to touch you but when I do, I lose myself in your power; in your spirit.

I must end this now. Must end it so I can leave and find myself; leave and recover.

I throw the doll aside.

Twisting the tights in my hand, forming the perfect ligature, I stand from the chair, no longer caring about the noise it may or may not make. My actions are quick and determined. I leap onto the bed, my knees either side of her

WISHFUL OBSESSION

SHAUN HAMILTON

midriff, my arms thrust forward to catch the space she will create between pillow and skin when she lifts her head at the shock of my approach.

She does not move.

It is I who is hit by shock.

She is you.

You.

I lean forward to inspect and your body turns to mist; drifting up from the mattress as though it were on fire. Pale lips of smoke pass around me as your solid form disappears before my eyes. Disregarding the tights, I try to grab at you; to hold the remaining strands of your presence but my fingers hold nothing. They don't even feel the wetness of condensation as they separate your steam.

Nothing.

And it is in this moment all is revealed to me.

The night.

The knife.

The guilt.

The courage.

The slice.

The blood.

My blood.

We are in the pits of hell; we shall be together always. You will for ever be mine.

My dangerous love.

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At 35, Shaun is a part-time architect and full-time patient of Warrington General's Orthopaedic Department. A number of his short stories have been published, including an Editor's Choice for *Twisted Tongue*. A collection of his work, *The Witterings of an Unshackled Dogsboddy*, is due to be published in 2011 by Screaming Dreams. Under the guidance of Conrad Williams, Shaun recently completed his debut novel, *False Widow*, a dark thriller involving a small-town massacre, a derelict house and pornography. He is now looking for representation or a publisher for that title (any takers?)

As if delivered by a lightning flash, he appears: famous, beautiful and seemingly immortal ... capturing the souls of a whole generation like moths in a net.

The worshippers chant their ritual, genuflecting before the altar. A discordant hum of anticipation becomes the intonation of an arcane creed: to see Him in the flesh, hear the voice, be hypnotised by those gestures and taste the energy - to finally transcend. Some come to be healed, some to be inspired; others to escape their own loneliness. For many He remains their only link with reality and tonight they will find life and sacred purpose, before returning to the hopeless anonymity of their insignificant lives. But this night brings catharsis and fulfilment. They wait expectantly at his shrine - a horde moving as one organism.

Mrs McDermott walked in to her daughter's bedroom. In the darkness she could see the walls covered from ceiling to floor with photo posters of him - most of them practically naked. She stopped when she saw a life-size cardboard cut-out. Underneath, the words "Fuck the System" stood out harshly as he gazed into her soul with his livid cerulean eyes.

Then the door flung open and the light came on, making Mrs McDermott jump. She hadn't heard the front door open.

"Who said you could come in here?"

Under her wild purple hair, heavy Gothic make-up hid Emma's freckles, emphasising instead her eyes and lips. She wore a short leather skirt and a white crop-top with a plunging neckline vividly revealing her red frilly bra. Emma's high-heeled sling-backs made her totter precariously.

"I'm going to bed. Are you just going to stand there?"

Mrs McDermott checked her watch again. 3.37 am.

As the lights dim, a profound silence reigns: an eerie electric tension. Shadows move in the gloaming as each individual joins in the irresistible incantation, "Dionysus! Dionysus!" All eyes strain to pick up a slight movement through the dry ice spurting on stage as a figure appears. A rapid scream of guitar scales sings out into the night as thousands of devotees shout in veneration to the avatar now visible in a spectral glow; there He stands - the apotheosis of a

million dreams. His eldritch features are handsome and arrogant, with a body strong and lithe like a dancer. Barefoot and with unkempt hair he wears only cut jeans, showing off his perfect torso; his arms encircled with golden filigree bands.

“Come on, Embo!” Mr McDermott called from the bottom of the stairs. “Did you hear me, you little scamp? I’m coming to get you.” Bounding up alternate steps he opened her door and peered into the darkness.

“We’ll be late, Emmylou,” he called to her. After a discernible movement, a dark head emerged from the duvet. The voice sounded hoarse and edgy.

“Go away.”

Mr McDermott’s intuition told him to laugh. He moved toward the bed. “Come on, poppet, you’ve still got time.”

“I’m not bloody going.” Emma’s voice became harsher and more determined.

Mr McDermott grabbed the bottom of the duvet and snatched it off the bed. To his utter shock she lay stark naked on the mangled bed sheet. He stood there speechless.

“Piss off, dad,” she spat, as she lay there unselfconsciously exposed. Mr McDermott looked away quickly.

Shaken and confused, he left her alone.

The guitar crashes into a thumping, familiar riff as the bassist follows with two huge chords signalling the introduction to ‘Sexual Exorcism’. Thousands of voices sing the opening lyric, “From gentle seduction to eager temptation ...” Dionysus doesn’t bother to start the song; no need when adoring fans will do it for you and pay for the privilege. Eventually, he joins in and the crowd listen to their hero.

And love exists behind your screams
 As I enact erotic dreams.
 I’m touching you explicitly,
 To exorcise you sexually!

“What can we do to stop her?” Mrs McDermott couldn’t help weeping. “She’s

changed so much – I just can't understand what's happening."

"I know," her husband replied as he comforted his wife.

"It's that concert. That ... man – what's he called? Dionysus? She's got pictures everywhere."

"That bloody concert. We should've been stricter and stopped her going. We're too soft on her. You've always been soft, spoiling her and letting her go out at all hours."

His words hurt deeply, but she had no energy to argue.

"She certainly won't be going again." Mr McDermott slammed his hand on the table and moved over to his desk to switch on his laptop.

Emma screamed and danced, forcing her way to the front so she could reach the stage and once there she stood with her arms out begging. If only he would touch her, then she would know it to be a sign. She pleaded and implored with her eyes; stretched her fingers as far as they would reach; she screamed the words not caring about the tune. At the end of the song, the singer walked up to the surging crowd and gave one fan a high five and then let his fingers run along the outstretched hands like a boy knocking a fence as he passes by. Emma felt his light touch on her own fingertips knowing that when he sang the next song he would sing it for her.

Dionysus' voice hits the final note with a perfectly pitched screech and holds the note longer than anyone else in the arena. The wild applause drowns out the beginning of the guitar solo in which Dionysus' fingers glide and flick with supernatural dexterity sending the crowd into paroxysms of delight. His guitar is a magic amulet of paranormal power perfecting subtle changes and intricacies, twisting and turning through impossible sequences, with the sound of a demented banshee.

She knew she must have him. Before leaving the stage Dionysus looked into her eyes; she felt him gaze deeply into her very soul. She had made herself beautiful for him and one touch was not enough. Her aching grew more frantic. She must get backstage and do anything to meet him face to face.

Desperate to show their adoration, they mimic the bewitching gestures of

Dionysus and share his every mood and feeling, from passionate to the hauntingly melancholic.

Then the well-known anthem – the latest hit single - called ‘Law of Chaos’ begins with a sudden explosion of sound and keeps up a manic tempo of sustained punk-like aggression.

Faces licked by tongues of serpents
Bacchae dancing in the dust,
Galloping in hungry madness
Gorging on the wine of lust.

“Yeah, I can introduce you to him,” said the fat security guard. “I’ll get you into the after show party. You stick with me.”

Thrilled to find it so easy, Emma shook with anticipation and followed him through the doors marked ‘Strictly no access to the public’.

The crowd willingly succumb to the chaos and madness of the music – laughing and weeping in ecstasy. ‘Fuck the System’, had become the anthem of its age. It broke all previous sales records as soon as it was banned and then stayed at number one in the charts for more than four months.

Some blame the churches, others the schools
But I blame politicians – they’re all fools!

His voice sneers and snarls as thousands of fists pound the air.

The security guard tore her blouse, pushing her down on the hard, cold floor. She panicked as she saw him undo his trousers under his big, hairy belly, and then felt his stony fingers clamp between her legs. As he puffed and grunted she felt an agonising pain as he pulled her head right back by the hair. But she realised this was how it must be. She must suffer for Him: gradually work her way to her goal – and soon she would be with Him.

Drums crash maniacally as a rhythm for the mass of black swaying leather and whipping hair. Dionysus sings the verse to the accompaniment of simple bass

chords, before developing into the fury of the chorus with its violent imagery of 'mind-fucked automata'. As his votaries sing the chorus line over and over Dionysus lets rip with a guitar break which sears through every heart, as if possessed. His fingers run up and down the fret board effortlessly creating a sinewy mesh of music.

"Fuck the System! My music is the life-force - drink deep of my music."

As the crowd scream desperate pleads, beseeching him to remain with them, Dionysus spins away with an arrogant smirk and leaves them to fight amongst themselves.

The fat man shuddered as if in pain, slobbering over her face, and she closed her eyes and imagined Him touching her. He was her lover, teaching and guiding her. She would bend to his every need and he would always be there to lead her deeper and further into His mysteries.

"Where do you think you're going, young lady?"

"Out. What's it got to do with you?" Emma had never spoken to him like this before. What had happened to his little girl?

"Don't you dare talk to me like that."

"I'm going out and you ain't gonna stop me."

He grabbed her arm and squeezed hard.

"Stop right where you are," he shouted, but as she struggled in his grip her sleeve ripped and she stared at him with malice. Mr McDermott was shaken.

"Fuck off. Fuck you and fuck everybody else. This is my life and I'll fucking well do whatever I fucking like!"

Without thinking he slapped her. She pushed him away with a terrific force and swept out of the house. The slamming door made the house shake to its foundations. Mr McDermott felt more scared than he'd ever been in his life.

Chugging bass then formed a new layer of sound, chanted by a thousand voices:

Because you know you'll never rest

'Til you confess, confess...

You'll never pass the test

And your life will be a mess

DIONYSUS

JEFF GARDINER

'Til you confess.

A pretty teenage girl with purple hair and gothic make-up was ushered on to the stage. The singer touched her with his hands, his guitar and even with his tongue. She gyrated slowly as he caressed her slim, young body. Then she bent over for Dionysus to simulate the sexual act. The singer slowly undressed her and she showed no resistance. Lascivious snarls erupted from the men at the foot of the stage. Hands desperately clawed the air in a palpable form of frustrated energy. The now naked girl knew how to tease them, confidently using her body to arouse each hot-blooded male.

Mr McDermott pressed his thumb and forefinger into the corner of his eyes. All this internet research made his eyes sore. His laptop had revealed pornographic pictures of Dionysus: lyrics of his songs banned worldwide by all major stations; bills and amendments from various parliaments and councils attempting to restrict the influence he seemed to have. After trawling through fansites, webzines and galleries dedicated to this enigma he knew he'd read enough, having found the information he'd been looking for. Grabbing his mobile, wallet and keys, he slipped out of the house.

The recognisable bass and drum intro signalled the beginning of their twenty-minute epic – 'Burnt Offerings'. The first part of the song, called 'Penance', sprung to life as a furious and brutal thrash anthem that segued into part two: 'Atonement'. This section calmed the mood down; its elegant, atmospheric keyboards became a hypnotic tone as the crowd swayed in unison with the words 'reparation' and 'expiation' repeated like a mantra. The mood suddenly changed to one of mysticism. Dionysus, without warning, crashed through this gentle soft mood with a searing crescendo that raised the pulses and the adrenaline levels of the crowd. It created a form of hysteria. People leapt, shook, howled, punched and convulsed their bodies and heads as if walking through flames or dying in violent fits. The finale to the song, 'Salvation', contained irresistible hook-lines and a sing-along chorus.

Full of anger, full of pain
An ancient power will rise again.

Where you stand is sacred ground
But no salvation can be found...
No salvation ...No redemption

The final words kept being repeated with the second syllable elongated in each.

As the band reached the climax of the song, lasers and strobe lighting added to the general feeling of ecstasy. The fans continued chanting 'No salva-a-a-tion ... No rede-e-e-emption...'.

He felt horribly out of place amidst the mass of leather and thrashing arms, especially in his expensive suit. The music was horrifically loud to his ears and he regretted coming. Pushing roughly through the crowd he peered with narrowed eyes at the figures on stage. When full realisation hit him he was startled into a slowly rising panic.

Dionysus screamed for his followers to do his bidding. Emma knew with a mounting and absolute conviction that the words were meant for her. Her body no longer her own, she allowed herself to be taken. External, alien thoughts and images flushed through her mind, displacing all memories and self-awareness. To be at one with Him was her only desire.

"You love me and want me ... now come to me ... inside me ... and live your perfect dream."

A man she thought she recognised stood below her. He gestured and pleaded to her. For the sake of Dionysus she went to this man. In obedience she would serve her Master. Emma moved easily through the crowd as if alone in a frozen world. Emma looked up to the stage and saw Dionysus stare, grin and guide her forwards. As she pressed on the throng gave way to each push.

She felt her heart stirring – responding to words in her head: chants placed there in her unconscious mind. This song was called 'Sacrificial Ritual' - about the necessary punishment of an unbeliever to appease the jealous god.

Dionysus screamed to his followers to do his bidding. Emma knew with a mounting and absolute conviction that the words were meant for her. Her body no longer her own, she allowed herself to be taken. External, alien thoughts and images flushed through her mind, displacing all memories and self-awareness. Dionysus now whispered something about vengeance ... insult

... atonement ...

The man saw the girl approaching him. His face expressed anger and then pity. His gestures indicated sorrow and became a semaphore of pleading. When he tried to shout he knew his words would not reach her.

Emma strode towards the suited man's awkwardly balanced body – motionless and vulnerable. Something almost stopped her – but then she heard his voice once more. To only please him.

“For denying me even though I am God – for that there is no salvation!”

The girl brought up her hand, which gripped a vicious blade. She clasped the victim's hair in both his hands then jerked the head back to reveal the length of his smooth white throat. With a single swipe the girl slit open the soft, naked skin. Then she dropped the dagger which skidded away against a still pair of feet.

Just then, at a gesture from Dionysus, the world sprang back to life and crimson blood spewed from the falling man's neck.

A ghastly whisper echoed through the hall as the crowd became suddenly reanimated.

“No redemption.”

The events that follow were caught on cameras and mobile phones, which the news stations managed to piece together to make sense of this sensational, terrifying story. The video clip was uploaded onto the internet and watched by over a billion people.

The film shows a young girl murdering her own father. His collapsed and prone body has blood gushing from his hewn-open neck. Next to him stands his daughter –naked - with a malicious grin contorting her face, clumps of hair in her hands. As the drumming continues, she dances and shrieks in ecstasy. The crowds around her appear confused or stoned, as they begin to sway and slowly turn inwards. Her face suddenly changes to one of terror and confusion as she looks down at her hands. Recognition spreads as she kneels beside the mangled corpse, pulling its head towards her. She mouths a scream and convulses horrifically. Here the camera begins to shake and swing violently until it is clearly dropped and ignored, half-cocked on the floor.

DIONYSUS

JEFF GARDINER

A CCTV camera shows the mob all now focussed on the girl and the prostrate body of her father. The naked girl looks up and seems to welcome the stretched out hands. Her face is serene as she is engulfed by voracious ripping and tearing and biting. The death is fast and vicious. When the baying crowds pull back there are just chunks of raw meat and pieces of limbs scattered over the blood-spattered floor. The dead pair are both unrecognisable and indistinguishable. Ragged tatters of cloth are also strewn in the gory mess. When the police and medical rescue arrive they are met by a hall full of thousands of hysterical people, screaming, shaking and weeping for the end of the world. First-aiders comfort some and wrap them in warm blankets. Others are stretchered off into ambulances.

Television stations receive thousands of complaints after showing the coverage.

Dionysus and his band disappeared, unseen by individual or technology. But his influence increases greater than ever. Myths and conspiracy theories appear regularly on the Internet. Movies, TV series and books continue to be commissioned and never seem to quench the worlds thirst for their voyeuristic pleasures.

Six months after Dionysus' baffling disappearance, a journalist received an unmarked CD through the post. It contained twelve brand new songs from Dionysus. Each one brilliant: raw, original, provocative and irresistible.

I am your god. I am your deity.

Forget your sorrows when you bow down to me.

I am your fate – now I will set you free ...

The thirteenth track plays as a DVD showing Dionysus' face in a close-up shot - his face painted crimson and his eyes completely black. As he speaks his white tongue protrudes lasciviously. Watching him you have no idea if you are being seduced or mocked. His voice is a velvet bag full of golden serpents.

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Of all the jobs Matt had ever done, this was the goddamned shittiest. It was a Saturday.

It was hot.

And he was up to his elbows in fish guts.

Crap.

The fish on his lap was a mutant salmon. Twenty pounds in weight. Artificially huge. A monster that had lived in a covered, lit tank of pumped sea water pulled from some crappy, cold West Highland coast, was fed on pellets that left a whore on a stink on you for days, and that was about to get its three years of life – and its bellyful of eggs – blown out of its arse like a great theatrical spray of tiny pink balloons.

Matt held the hypodermic needle in his hand. It was attached by a hose to a tank of compressed air. Squeezed it, listened to the sharp hiss.

He'd lost count of the number of fish he'd done that day. Madame Guillotine had nothing on him, not in fish world. And there were more to come, all belly up in the tank outside the metal shed, drugged up on Benzocaine. A great, fat wash of almost death. Fish death. And stinking.

Nearly dead eyes looked up at him. He wondered what the fish was thinking, if it actually could.

You poor slippery bastard...

'Fuck, you gonna kill it or kiss it?'

Matt looked up. Baz was staring at him, head cocked to one side. Like everyone in the shed, he was zipped inside a dry suit. Blood and mucus glimmered and shone on it, a big oily death slick.

Matt hated Baz's hair. He wanted to grab the pointless rattail that stretched down from the muppet's shaved head, drop it in to one of those mechanical shredders used by the Forestry Commission to turn trees in to saw dust.

'What?'

'Get a move on, dick splash.'

And that was another thing. Baz's insults were rubbish. Dick splash? That belonged in a school playground, not in the killing grounds of aquaculture.

Matt said nothing. Stared back at the fish.

It twitched, flicked a fin.

Then he went in with the needle.

The belly of the fish was huge, swollen like a cantaloupe melon. But soft,

FISH FARM

DAVID GATWARD

squishy, an awful fleshy thing, like a fat octopus head.

Most times, when you jabbed the needle in, flicked on the air, the eggs would shoot out like bullets, rat-a-tat-tatting in to the bucket on the floor. Other times – this being one of those times – the fish would be all bunged up.

It would swell. A fish balloon. Ready to go...

Well, it never went pop, thought Matt. No fish ever went pop, no matter how much air you pushed in to them, how big they got before they finally gave up, gave way.

He remembered when one of the blokes (Carl? Chris? Hell, how many faces had come and gone this past six months?) had got bored, put the hose in to his dry suit. Instant Michelin man. Matt (and everyone else) had laughed their tits off. Even more so when he'd jumped in to one of the tanks, nearly drowned because he couldn't move, swim, anything. Piss funny that.

'Fuck, Matt, you gonna tie a basket to that thing and go sight-seeing?'

Everyone laughed.

But the fish was now huge, and seemed pretty uninterested in giving up its clutch of eggs, even in death.

Matt squeezed the belly, tried to get the eggs interested in moving.

Nothing.

Slammed in a load more air.

Squeezed again.

Then the fish gave up. Let rip.

Matt had tried describing what he did to mates back home. Nothing he'd said had made it sound good. Everything he'd said had made it sound horrific.

'What, you kill the fish?'

'So, let me get this straight: you drug them, then you do *that* to them, and then you just stove their heads in with a steel bar?'

'You do what with the air hose?'

The most fun was had with comments about what they did to the males: 'You wank fish, Matt. Shit. That's just wrong.'

It's hard to go anywhere with a conversation after someone's just shouted that out in a crowded bar.

It's like getting a sudden case of the plague, breaking out in weeping boils while all around you people gawp horrified, hide their drinks, turn away.

Shittiest job? Fucking A.

And the eggs blasted out of the dying fish like a wet fart out from an Elephant's arse.

Matt still found it funny. Because it was. Farts are, particularly things that sounded like farts. Death farts. Fish death farts. Comic genius.

The eggs turned from a torrent to a dribble to nothing.

Dead eyes stared up.

'Kosh it,' said Ed and looked at Baz.

Ed ran the show. A small bloke, attitude problem, drank like a –

Baz picked up the bar, the fish's skull gave up with a wet thud.

Dead eyes.

The next fish slipped on to his lap.

It's the benzocaine, baby... yeah...

The day was over. Number 183. He'd no idea how many more he was going to stay for, if he'd make it to 184 even.

The job had benefits. Average pay, but with accommodation and a pub just a mile away. A pub that served the best Guinness outside of Ireland. A pub with a landlady who'd kick you out and book you a taxi at the same time.

The accommodation was a 70s bungalow, open plan kitchen, diner, lounge, three bed. The other two were occupied. And one of the occupants was Baz.

Baz didn't have a car. Had no interest in sharing the cost of food. Didn't seem too keen on daily washing. Had teeth as brown as a cat paw. Reeked of skunk.

Baz was, like so many of the others, hiding. Matt knew it, had known it from day zero. This was a place you came to escape from whatever it is you'd done before, had been before. Was why he was there himself.

'Out t'night?'

Matt looked at Baz. He was sprawled on the sofa, channel surfing, eating a family sized bag of crisps. Hands scooping the things up like an earth mover, dropping them in, bits going everywhere.

'Staying in,' said Matt.

'Yeah, me too. Ma last night, an' all.'

Matt checked his pizza – just a few more minutes. Cracked open a tinny.

'Fuck all on,' said Baz, flicked channels again. Again.

'Mmm... ' said Matt, pulled out the pizza. 'Where you heading then? After

this place I mean? What's next?'

Baz shrugged. 'Probably just head up the coast, man. No plans.'

Matt held up his hand. 'Want one?'

Baz cocked his head over the sofa, looked at the can in Matt's hand.

'Aye, fuck, aye!'

Matt turned, pulled out the can, glass-poured it, handed it over.

'Nice one, pal,' said Baz. 'Nice fuckin' one!'

Downed it. Drowned it.

Didn't taste it, thought Matt and smiled. The nugget didn't taste it at all.

Woke up.

Barely groggy. Matt could see that in his eyes. They wouldn't open properly, couldn't. Glassy eyes.

Fish eyes.

'Hey... fuck...'

'Hello, Baz,' said Matt. 'Do you always swear? I mean, do you know any other way of communicating other than to say fuck with every damned awful thing that spits out of your tramp's mouth?'

Baz looked up. Well, tried.

'Benzocaine,' said Matt. 'It was in the beer. Jeez, you lot are thick, aren't you? Free beer's all it takes, and here you are. Just like Carl, Chris, Hazel, Mal, Jenny...'

'What?'

Matt reached over, mopped up the drool.

It was dark, but then candles were always there. Candles added to the atmosphere. Matt liked the Vincent Price feel.

'How long you been hiding here, Baz?'

Baz tried to turn again.

Matt slapped him hard.

'How long?'

'What... I... fuck...'

'No more swearing, Baz, OK?'

Matt saw the eyes. Oh, how they bulged.

Fish eyes.

'I know you, you see,' said Matt. 'A rat's chuff like you thinks he can stuff

his stink away in a dark place like this, disappear, not face up to what he's done, what he did.'

He slapped him again.

'Hey! Fu-'

Another slap.

Tears. Whimpering.

'Better,' said Matt. 'Much better.'

For a while, Matt let Baz just wait it out. He wondered if he felt like the fish, if he knew what was happening, what was going to happen. Doubted it. That made him grin. Always did.

It was almost peaceful then when the needle went in to Baz's eye, blew it in an instant to the size of an eight-ball, burst the thing right out of its socket.

'You hate fish?' asked Matt.

Baz was screaming.

'I mean, do you really hate them? Like every day they're staring at you, daring you to have a go, take 'em on, saying, hey – you should see my dad, he's a fuckin' shark, mate! A shark!'

The other eye swelled even bigger, popped right out before it burst.

Matt leaned in.

'I'm hiding too, Baz. Did you know that?'

What was left of Baz's eyes wept across his face and the screams broke his voice to nothing but breathless terror.

'Yeah, hiding, Baz. Funny, eh?'

Baz wasn't laughing.

Then came the fish knife.

And when Matt had finished filleting both legs below the knee, he carefully, oh so very carefully, placed the meat in a grinder, switched it on.

'You see, Baz, I've been watching you, watching everyone, listening to when people are going to leave.'

Slap.

'Stay awake, Baz – you don't want to fall asleep on the journey, you'll miss all the fun, the sights.'

Even now it still amazed Matt just how much the human gut contained and just how far it would spray out of an anus, no matter how tight. And Baz's was tight, had never even bought him a pint. Not once.

The air hissed.

Needle in.

Squeeze the trigger...

Baz ballooned. More than any of the others, though Hazel had gone to a pretty size from what Matt could remember.

Nothing Baz could do but scream.

Bigger still.

'Hey, you're doing well, Baz – you should see it...'

Then, at last, he gave way.

Everything came at once; the whole lot ripping to race out of him through that tiny black hole, spraying out like an attack of giant worms, flapping and splashing out, a wave of inside now outside.

It took a further 13 minutes and 24 seconds for Baz to die.

Matt counted every single one.

The food sank in to the tank. The fish gobbled it up, drove it down in to their fat selves, kept on swimming, oblivious to the fact it was Baz they were gulping down.

'Hey Matt.'

Matt looked up. It was Kirsty. Prettiest girl he'd seen in years. A real heartbreaker. Even in a dry suit.

'You really leaving us?'

Kirsty nodded. 'Yeah, two weeks to go, that's all. Should have enough to head off again, then.'

'Where you going?'

Kirsty shrugged. 'Thailand probably. Love it there, you know? Perfect place to just disappear.'

Matt nodded.

'I hear the fish is pretty good out there.'

'I guess,' said Kirsty. 'Don't eat the stuff myself.'

Then she turned, walked off.

Matt smiled.

He liked the fish.

He liked Kirsty.

He was sure they'd get on just swimmingly.



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David has taken redundancy from the (un)civil service and is now a full-time writer. He is working with Random House, Puffin and has a horror series for teens out in June 2010 with Hodder. He used to work on a fish farm and the above story is based on almost actual events.

Follow Dave on Twitter here : <http://twitter.com/davidgatward>

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Rie and I met at a social event organised by our company and we knew of each other's desire immediately.

In our haste to discover each other, we fled to the nearest place available to make love in this overcrowded city. Hastily and, we thought at the time, unwisely, we found ourselves in a nearby capsule hotel.

The 5,000 Yen cost of the room, and a sizeable bribe for the man behind the desk to forget he'd seen Rie, proved to be a very small price to pay for entry to paradise.

Both wonderfully supple and eager, Rie proved to be the perfect companion for lovemaking in such a small space.

Our room - barely three feet by three feet by six - seemed dauntingly cramped at first; particularly as, unlike most hotels of this type, there was a small door rather than just a curtain at the entrance of the room.

But Rie's flexibility proved to be a revelation. The positions that we attained that first night were both surprising and various. Our mutual joy arrived quickly but our desire was not easily sated; we got very little sleep that night.

We were married within a few months but found our sexual congress in the marital bed lacked flavour. We returned to our capsule hotel and rediscovered the heights to which our passion could climb. After that, we returned to the hotel regularly, often twice in a week.

Our limbs twisted into unorthodox positions that would daunt the fittest gymnast, but our desire for each other seemed to put the impossible well within our reach.

Ecstasy was easily attainable within our love box and, every time I released myself into Rie, it seemed to eradicate our lives outside that confined space. The restraints of married life, of my position as a salaryman, and of the capsule itself, dissolved into an ocean of love. Anything was possible for us.

It would have been a particular delight to have detailed our daring positions, recording them in our own capsule hotel Kama Sutra to share our joy with all, but discretion dictates that the manual should remain unwritten.

We have been keeping our appointment with love for over 15 years now. It is something that has perhaps gone on for too long.

Rie suffered terrible back pain following the loss of our baby six years ago. The problems following the dislocation of my hip during a road accident last

year have not faded. Our bodies are no longer as young and as supple as they once were.

For over an hour now, Rie has not spoken. Condensation and sweat have made the narrow mattress sodden and my beloved has begun to grow cold beneath me. Try as I might, I cannot untangle my limbs from hers.

We last made love at 2.30 AM - just after the last of the drunken salarymen retired to his room. It is now 3.50 AM: I have grown soft and am no longer inside Rie.

I have only enough mobility to tap feebly on the door with my left elbow. My other limbs are locked tightly in Rie's love embrace. I cannot draw sufficient breath, doubled over as I am, to be able to call for assistance.

Checking out time is not until 9 am. It is possible that we will remain undiscovered until then. I cannot see how they will be able to extricate us even then; I imagine that several of our limbs will have to be broken.

I do not know which is worse; to be discovered like this, knowing the great dishonour it will bring upon us and our families, or to know that our wonderful love box will become our coffin.

Through the tiny window I can see the lights of a tower crane at a nearby building site. They waver as I struggle for breath, fighting back the urge to vomit, and my tears splash onto a patch of semen that has dried on the beautifully smooth skin of Rie's back.

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Mark Howard Jones lives in Cardiff and has had stories published on both sides of the Atlantic. His eBook *Against the Wall* is available to download free from the Screaming Dreams website. He is currently working on several book projects.

NEXT ISSUE - FANTASYCON REPORT

Were you at FantasyCon this year? If not then see what you were missing! Comments and photos, plus a few short stories.

FIVE PIECES OF SAMMY

JOHN MILLER

“If you don’t do something about my damned room,” Sammy yelled into the receiver, “I’ll call the health department to tell them you’ve got roaches!”

“I understand how you feel, Mr. Thomas.” The desk clerk’s voice was jolly, intended to smooth over Sammy’s aggression. “I know just the thing to make you feel better.”

“It better be the penthouse,” he warned her.

“I’ve already told you that the penthouse suite is taken, Mr. Thomas. But in cases like this I know exactly what to do. I have been given *special permission* to send you a complimentary gift.”

“And what, pray tell, is that?”

“The busboy will bring it up to your room shortly.” Her words were dripping saccharine-sweet, exactly what he wanted to hear. “It’s a *surprise*.”

“Thanks. I may or may not call your manager and bitch about this.”

He slammed the receiver down too hard, the phone’s plastic cracked, and it fell to the floor. He ripped the cord from the wall, wire cutting into his pinkie fingers as he yanked, and he cursed with his bleeding balled-fists raised toward the ceiling.

Don’t they know who the hell I am?

He grabbed tissue from the box dispenser on the dresser, blotted his small cuts, and felt his face flush red. His head pounded and his heart ground like a jackhammer on hard pavement.

“I was on MTV.” He shouted at the walls. “I was *somebody*! So why can’t I get the goddamned penthouse?”

The walls didn’t answer. He glanced at the phone and realized no one would be calling him anytime soon. He didn’t have his cell phone, either. It has been shut off. His national tour had been canceled by his manager. The record label had just dropped him. His fiancé ran off with his drummer last week. And now he couldn’t get the goddamned penthouse?

“Shit.” He threw the bloodied tissue into the waste basket. “They act like they don’t know me.”

They knew him alright. The entire world knew who he was. At eighteen he was on MTV playing guitar and singing his hit song, *Firehouse Blues*, at a beach concert during Spring Break. His song crept into the Top Forty, and *Rolling Stone* depicted him—along with six others—as having the potential to dominate the world of rock. The article had been entitled *Will the Next Kurt*

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Kobain Please Stand Up!

The movement ended before it cemented into a musical genre, and it looks as if the "grunge movement" has died. Unless these six upstarts have anything to say about it. Meet Sammy Thomas. At sixteen he was teaching guitar at the local music store. Now he's signing a record contract with MGM Records thanks, in part, to his stunning performance on MTV.

Sammy remembered vaingloriously who he *used* to be as he traipsed to the bar, reminiscing about another world he'd almost owned. It was the world belonging to rock stars. It was a world where attitude was everything, and he had plenty of that, even now.

What he hadn't understood back then was *image*.

"Image is *everything*," he said. Ice clinked inside his glass as he poured bourbon. "I was *somebody* until the Press ruined me, the bastards."

The Media destroyed him. After his gig on MTV, his image was ripped apart by a vicious and temperamental Media who loved him one day and hated him the next.

He had found himself touring with *Matchbox Twenty*. He didn't open—he supplied the music between the opening act and the main act, a kind of musical hours de vours.

I wasn't that big yet... but I was on my way, damn it!

The party. Someone busted through a wall between hotel rooms. Drugs and women. He was eighteen living like a rock star before even becoming a rock star. It was his destiny and he knew this.

Eighteen years old and I was making more money in a month than my old man had ever made in one freaking year.

It seemed like such a good idea at the time. "Every rock star does it," someone said. So he orchestrated his new groupies to help him haul the fifty-two inch television outside his room, through the sliding glass doors. Outside they scooted it on the balcony, hoisted it up and lopped it over the railing. He remembered how it teetered on the edge, almost tipping back on top of him. Then it lunged forward all at once, the electrical cord whipping behind it like a serpent as it grew smaller and smaller.

Ten stories below little Tommy Sanders left the swimming pool. It was after hours. The pool was closed.

He wasn't supposed to be there. Broke the rules.

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The giant TV struck Tommy, squashed him like a bug. The Media showed images of a bloody pool although the ten year old hadn't actually been in the pool when destiny called. The force of impact split the youth open like a sack of Kool-Aid, the kind that comes with straws attached, and the pool turned red.

"It wasn't my fault." Sammy raved before the news crew outside his hotel room the next morning. "The kid broke the rules. Shouldn't have been there."

The Media attacked him for his lack of empathy. Tommy and his family had been vacationing. Sammy had been vacationing too, inside a rock star's dream. His vacation ended when the Sanders' vacation ended... when Tommy's life ended.

Reality struck hard. Ten months of community service hard. Dropping record sales, booing crowds, and embarrassed friends in the industry.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Room service." The voice was baritone, rough. "Open up. This is heavy."

"I didn't order any room service." Sammy was suspicious—he was always suspicious now. "What is it?"

"You complained about something. The desk clerk asked me to send up your complimentary gift. This is how we deal with customer complaints."

He opened the door and saw a giant holding a hanging garment bag. It draped over his left shoulder. The man was Italian with a Brooklyn accent.

"What is it?"

The busboy seemed more like a bouncer or member of the Mafia than a busboy. He ignored Sammy and hefted the garment bag from his shoulder. Judging from the way the big man strained, the garment bag was heavy. He hung it on the hook inside the door.

"Complements of the hotel." The busboy was a full head taller than Sammy, glowering down at him. "Hope you enjoy it. Now I gotta' go."

A beefy hand grabbed the doorknob and the door slammed shut.

What the hell did Bruno bring me? Elvis Presley's white suit?

Whatever was inside the bag, it was heavy. He'd seen the busboy straining with it.

The hanging garment bag was six feet long and two feet thick. It was used to hang suits or dresses, specifically made for travelers to keep their clothes nice and unwrinkled. The color itself was strange, a pinkish pig colored hue.

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And the leather had images in it he couldn't quite decipher, more than a pattern or design but less than a drawing. A zipper ran all along the bag's outside.

He smelled the scent of leather and reached for the zipper when the phone rang.

He answered it.

"Hello? Mr. Thomas?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"This is the desk clerk checking in on you. Did you receive your complimentary gift?"

"Yeah, just got it. Thanks. Haven't opened it yet."

He noticed the telephone wire he'd yanked from the wall. The phone was still unattached—it shouldn't have worked.

"Just let us know if there are any other problems," she said. Her voice was jolly, almost creepy. "Good-bye."

"Wait!"

Too late. She hung up.

He listened and didn't hear anything. No dial tone. Nothing. He placed the receiver back on its cradle and shook his head.

What the hell is going on here?

His cuts burned as if enflamed. If he could get the phone to work again he'd call his manager and demand bandages for his fingers that still bled. Then he realized he could probably call the desk clerk back, put up with her giddy demeanor, and request a first-aid kit.

"Hello?" he said into the receiver.

Nothing.

He hung up again and felt foolish. The phone obviously didn't work.

Then how did that bitch call you, Sammy-boy?

Icy fingers slid down his spine and he shuddered. His eyes swept across the room to the hanging garment bag. Liquid dripped from the bottom edges, darkening the beige carpeting.

Is that water?

He felt his intestines slithering like snakes in his gut, a bad feeling creeping along his skin, but he walked to the garment bag and bent to look at the liquid.

It was water, but it was dirty as if from the ocean. Sand and debris collected on the carpeting. He saw a small opening at the bottom corner of the bag. The

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zipper wasn't fully closed.

He backed up as the stench of something foul nauseated him. It reminded him of rotting meat and algae-packed ponds, oceans of death. He backed away until he was beside the bar. He glanced around the room looking for hidden cameras.

Am I being Punked?

He knew he wasn't a big enough star for that—never was really.

Candid Camera? Do they still have that show anymore?

It might have been a gag, but if so it wasn't funny. Heads would roll for this. The stench coming from the strange leather garment bag, along with the dirty water dripping from its open corner, was too much.

He needed to get away from the smell.

A full length mirror ran the entire length of the room from the door to the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony. The beige bedspread, slightly darker than the thick carpeting, had starfish patterns on it. White walls ran into the kitchenette where a chandelier hung over a dining table for two. As he turned his head toward the balcony and ocean outside, he got a whiff of a salty breeze.

Gotta' get fresh air. Air this joint out.

He went outside to the balcony. He saw a couple on the balcony next door. They smiled and waved. He nodded.

"Hey, aren't you...?" she said.

She obviously couldn't remember his name.

"Yep. That's me."

"Sammy Thomas." The man was older than he was, but at least *he* knew his name. "I've still got your album in my van."

"Which one?"

"Uh... I didn't know..." the man stammered.

"The one with the seashell and merman on the front of it," the woman said. "Hey, like Carl said it's *still* in the van. Maybe we could bring it over to you sometime and have you autograph it for us."

"Yeah, maybe you could if I actually felt like signing autographs today."

He went back inside his room, slamming the sliding door shut. Back to the stench. Anything was better than dealing with fools like them.

He saw the maggots and gulped. There were three of them and they made him remember his drummer, Kyle.

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"Look!" Kyle said along the beach after the MTV concert. "Another dead fish."

"From the oil spill?" Sammy asked.

"Don't think so." Kyle held a stick and poked at the fish. "I don't see any oil."

The Pacific Coast had been bombarded by oil from the oil tanker. The captain of the tanker had driven around drunk not knowing his ship had a leak.

"Gross!"

"Let me see, Kyle."

"Look at the maggots."

They crawled over each other. White puffy things, alien. How could such horrible things be from this planet?

"It's funny about maggots," Kyle said.

"What?"

"No matter what they're on, they're the first thing you see no matter what."

Now, inside his room, he realized Kyle was right. The three maggots slid down the object hanging from the garment bag, oozing along almost like snails along the fingers.

Fingers?

That was when he realized the maggots were on a hand. A gray hand. Protruding from the open corner of the garment bag. Patches of purple rotted skin was along the back of the hand. One maggot dangled as if it would drop at any second.

Bruno left me a dead body in that fucking bag!

He ran to the phone and picked the receiver up: nothing.

Shit, shit, shit!

He glanced at the sliding glass doors, remembered his *neighbors*. Sammy ran back to the doors and couldn't open them.

I thought I left this open.

In his panic he couldn't operate the locking mechanism, and after pinching his finger and cursing, he finally unlocked the sliding glass door.

Outside a rush of fresh salty sea air swallowed him, filled his lungs with life, but when he looked at the adjacent balcony he frowned. It was empty. His *neighbors* were gone. Maybe if he hadn't been such an asshole...

Naw.

He looked to his right and saw that balcony was empty, too. He looked down and realized he was too high—no one at the pool below could hear if he

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shouted. He thought of dropping a fifty-two inch television to get the attention of the ants below.

Stupid kid.

He didn't want to go back inside. Inside waited the dead body, hanging like meat from the hook on the door. It stunk inside.

I have been given special permission to send you a complementary gift.

The overly-friendly desk clerk's words rang in his head. She was in on it. So was the busboy. They were in on it together.

They're both sicko-freaks!

They had to have been working together didn't they? He replayed the events in his mind as they'd unfolded. He remembered complaining. The offer of the complementary gift. *Bruno* showed up shortly after with the hanging garment bag.

This is so very wrong on so many levels. Are they framing me for murder?

He reached into his pants pocket for his cell phone but remembered it was gone. Another unpaid bill. His service shut off.

The thought of *Bruno* flashed in his mind. The behemoth of a man was out there *somewhere*, hulking in the shadows and waiting for him to come out of his room. *Bruno* was big enough to cause serious damage.

Or stuff a corpse inside a garment bag.

He glanced at the phone through the open door and wondered if he could fix it. He went inside to check it out. Part of the cord was still in the wall secured correctly, but the wire was in two pieces. Obviously it had been frayed for some time before *Sammy* had lost his temper and—

A maggot squirmed on the receiver of the phone. Its white body wiggled, camouflaged against the white surface of plastic. He hadn't seen it before, but now that he was kneeling and examining the wall, his face closer to the phone on the nightstand beside the bed, he could easily see it. He also saw the wet handprint on the phone as if someone had just come from a refreshing dip in the ocean and used the phone without drying off.

His eyes slowly drew themselves to the hanging garment bag. The hand still hung from the opening.

I've got to get out of here.

But the thought of walking toward the hand and the dead body still tucked inside the leather bag freaked him out. He couldn't imagine reaching for the

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doorknob, turning it, and *something* wet and dead reaching out of the bag for his face, or seeing Bruno outside his door waiting with a smile.

There'd been a mistake, mister. I left you the wrong bag.

He thought of the giant Italian trying to get his garment bag back, stepping inside and seeing the hand hanging from the bag. He envisioned Bruno's eyes narrowing, his beefy fists clenching, perhaps his lips pressing together with the determination of what he must do.

Sammy ran outside to the balcony and began calling for help. The couple next door were out on their balcony again. When they saw him they got up and headed back inside their room.

"Wait. There's a dead body inside my room. And maggots. The busboy left the body hanging from my door."

"What are you on?" the man said. "Is that why you killed that kid by dropping a TV on his head? Drugs?"

"We should get rid of his album as soon as possible," the woman said. "He's a prick."

"Wait. Don't go!"

They went into their room and slid their door shut.

Please don't go. Don't leave me alone.

How could they do that? How could they simply walk off while he was telling them about a dead body and maggots and—okay. He realized he sounded crazy. Yeah, he would have a hard time believing it, too.

Maybe if I beat on their wall they'll get pissed and call the desk clerk.

Wait! That wasn't such a good idea. She'd send *Bruno* to investigate. Bruno whom had delivered his *complementary gift*.

He heard wet squishing sounds from inside his room. He knew immediately what the noise was from: *his complementary gift*.

Dear God, please no! Make it stop!

If he turned now—he told himself with tears in his eyes—his band mates would be laughing and telling him he was on *Candid Camera* or that he was being *Punked*. But as he turned he saw the room was empty save for the wet footprints in the carpeting. The footprints went from the front door—or *from the hanging garment bag*—to the sliding glass door and circled back. The footprints were probably a man's. A maggot wiggled in one print and seemed to be saying, *Hello up there*.

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Of course. I hate maggots.

The tracks led back toward the garment bag, but when he looked closer he saw they turned toward the bathroom door... went inside. The garment bag was unzipped on one side, the zipper jutting out from the bottom of the bag, and water poured slowly like dark tea on the carpeting.

That's when it hit him. He realized what the markings on the garment bag were, the etchings in the leather he hadn't been able to make out. They weren't manmade. He could tell what they were because he stood far enough away, and from a distance they came easily into view if he simply looked long enough.

Two human faces held silent screams on either side of the bag. The faces *were* a part of the bag which was crafted—he realized with a gasp—from human flesh. The faces were different, one female and one male.

How could I not have seen that?

But he hadn't seen it. Even now it wasn't crystal clear, but he realized leather stretched and contorted when made into clothes or garment bags. It was a bag of death carrying death. Or it *had* been carrying a dead body, but that dead body had gone for a walk—*just a stroll, really*—and it was now inside the bathroom taking a piss (or whatever it was doing).

I'm losing it for killing that kid. I've really gone over the deep end this time.

Wet smacking sounds—the wet slap of human feet on tiles—came from the bathroom. Water pooled from beneath the door.

It's just on the other side.

He ran to the railing of the balcony and hugged it, intending to leap over the edge to escape certain death and insanity back inside his room. It was too far down to jump into the pool.

Or is it?

Wet smacking sounds turned into squishing sounds.

It's on the carpeting now. Coming after me.

Something deep within him stirred. From his gut this *force* pushed outward, pushing his stomach and heart and lungs up and into his screaming throat. The pressure pushed against his eyes until they bulged, moved upward until his head swam with pain and his ears filled with the sound of pulsing oceans which was louder than his high-pitched squeal somehow. His testicles shrunk and pulled themselves close to his body, as if trying to bury themselves inside the meat of his flesh.

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"Dear God, somebody please help me! Call 911 somebody PLEASE!"

His words ran over each other, but anyone hearing the sound of his voice wouldn't need to understand. They'd be able to recognize the sheer terror in the sound of his voice.

A shadow loomed against the wall of the balcony one floor up. Bruno stuck his head over the side and Sammy turned quiet instantly.

"Is there a problem?" Bruno asked leaning over the railing above. His voice was a demand. "If so I can come down now and fix it, Mr. Thomas."

Water dripped over the side of the balcony and from Bruno's clothes as if he'd just climbed from the swimming pool below.

"There is no problem," he tried to say, but his words came out a choking whisper.

"What?" Bruno demanded.

Bruno's giant hands clenched the railing above, and Sammy imagined those hands on his throat, fingers digging deep. After death, he envisioned Bruno carrying his dead body out to sea.

Is that what happened to the guy in my room? Bruno killed him? Drowned him before stuffing him inside the leather bag?

"What?"

Bruno's voice was vicious. His eyes flashed and he glowered down. He disappeared. Water poured from the balcony as if it rained, but it wasn't raining.

"Wait!" Sammy cried. "I was practicing... a scene from a new movie I'm in."

Nothing happened for a breathless eternity. Then Bruno's head appeared.

"You're an actor? I thought you were a singer."

"Yeah... I'm both, actually," he lied. "I'm just now getting into acting."

Bruno nodded and smiled.

"Well keep it down, will ya'? You could wake the dead with all that screaming."

Bruno disappeared. Sammy almost cried with relief.

Sammy looked inside his room. It was dark. The sun was going down. It was still over the ocean, burning the tips of pointed waves and foaming the sea in reds and oranges and pinks, but it was low enough down to create long shadows. Darkness deepened within those shadows

His room grew darker. He imagined it growing into an abyss of crawling maggots and dead bodies.

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But it isn't my imagination, is it?

No! The dead body was real. Bruno was real. The footprints were real.

Before it became too dark to see he went inside holding his breath. The bathroom door was open now. He saw footprints inside on the tiled floor after turning on the lights. Wet footprints in the thick carpeting of the living room.

I have to escape this hell-hole!

Bruno could come back at any time. In fact, he could be on his way now, intending to investigate why Sammy had been screaming for someone on the balcony. Bruno hadn't actually said he'd believed his lie about acting.

He rushed toward the front door, intending to open it and go outside, get away from this cursed room forever when—

The phone rang.

He whimpered and stopped dead in his tracks. A small amount of urine leaked out before he caught himself, painfully forcing it to stop.

I can do this, he thought as he walked to the phone. If it's working again I can call my manager.

But how could it be working again? It had been torn from the wall, its frayed cord snapped in two.

It can't be working again. It can't.

He picked the receiver up with severe trepidation and said hello.

"Mr. Thomas. This is the desk clerk checking in on you. Have you managed to unzip your surprise yet?"

His hand shook so bad he almost dropped the phone. He pressed it hard against his face to keep from dropping it. He became dizzy. His legs wobbled. He sat on the bed with a short cry. His breathing came in gasps.

"Are you alright, Mr. Thomas? I'll have the busboy come help you with your surprise if you don't understand it."

"I understand it," he shouted. "I don't need help. I understand it completely."

"You do?" Her voice beamed with sweetness. "I'm so glad to hear that. Then I take it you'll be *joining* us?"

"What?"

Silence.

Joining the hotel employee roster... or joining the dead body inside the bag?

"Obviously you haven't opened up the bag yet have you, Mr. Thomas?" It was a direct statement, her voice an undeniable angry undertone. "I'll send

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Bruno right away."

Wait-a-minute! Did she just call the busboy "Bruno?"

"Isn't that what you like to call him?"

He knew then that if he didn't escape the room's insanity he was a dead man. The full realization struck him hard and he wondered why he hadn't left the room earlier. He looked at the garment bag and felt his hackles raise, a layer of gooseflesh claim every inch of skin, because he knew his greatest moment in life wasn't his gig on MTV, but was getting past the bag of death and out the door.

He felt his heart race, his breathing came in great gulps, and his body trembled. Part of him screamed to go through the damned door and escape, but another part—the primordial part of his brain where frozen terror cradled screaming insanity—begged him to hide beneath the bed, behind the curtains, anywhere—but *whatever you do don't go near that damned bag!*

He could hide but eventually he'd be found. They'd kill him. He knew that now. Bruno would stuff him in the hanging garment bag while the desk clerk spoke in her cheerful voice saying, "Complements of the house."

Suddenly he hated the ocean and the salty air. He hated music videos and television. Fame and fortune didn't matter much now. Only one thing mattered. Survival.

He walked away from the nightstand dragging the phone behind him. He rushed to the door, reached for the doorknob, turned it.

Locked.

"Hello? Hello?" The voice of the desk clerk was loud enough to be heard in the room although he didn't hold the receiver to his face. "We want to serve you, Mr. Thomas. We are *going* to serve you."

He dropped the phone and reached for the lock on the door. Before he could unlock it a gray water-soaked hand reached from the bag and snatched his wrist. He whimpered in pain as bone crunched and blood seeped around the tight pressed fingers. Sammy fell to his knees, the hand still holding on.

He heard heavy tread from the hall outside. A shadow loomed beneath the door. Someone knocked.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Thomas?" Bruno sounded severely pissed off. "If you don't open this door right this instant, I'm going to have to come inside, sir."

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Another hand lunged out of the leather bag. It grabbed his other wrist. Another hand reached out, and another still, until ten hands reached and clawed and grabbed. The hands pulled his hair, pinched folds of his skin together, fingers piercing deep like blunt pegs. The stench of rotten meat was all over him now. The hands were gray and some had tiny holes where something had nibbled away at them. One arm had a large chunk missing as if from a shark bite.

They're coming out of the bag! Dear God, make it stop, please make it stop!

Arms and feet and heads rolled and reached for him. They flowed like a wave of living flesh from the leather bag, a flood of death and maggots. He tried to zip the bag up, but the zipper stuck on the wrist of a severed arm. A hand fell out, but another arm reached down and picked up the dismembered hand, pulling it back inside.

The hands pulled him closer to the bag.

That's when he realized he was wrong. The hands and arms and bodies weren't coming out of the leather bag—he was going in.

They pulled and yanked and in a second he was inside. He kicked his legs out of the bag, tried to find a foothold, but hands and teeth held his leg and pulled him back inside. Claustrophobia screamed through his mind as the zipper started closing, light diminishing. The zipper didn't close completely, leaving a small opening allowing enough light illuminating the liquid-flesh he wallowed in.

Cold mushy flesh rubbed against him. Dead fingers curled into his flesh. Something choked him, another rotting hand. The hands, like scavengers of the deep, pecked and nibbled until blood licked from countless wounds like burning fire.

The door opened. He felt himself swing with the door as cold and wet things slobbered against him. They choked and pulled at his fingers and the folds of skin, and even his manhood wasn't off-limits.

"Mr. Thomas?" Bruno demanded. His voice, muffled through the leather bag, sounded distant. "Where are you?"

Hands and teeth choked him, dug into his throat. He couldn't respond with anything louder than a strangled cry.

"Oh, good! You opened our complementary gift, Mr. Thomas." Bruno sounded happy, elated. "But you left the garment bag unzipped at the top.

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Somebody could steal... something. Somebody could get out, Mr. Thomas, and we won't have that."

Sammy heard a loud *zip* and the small window of light disappeared. Everything went dark.

The stench of rotted meat filled him, not just through the putrid odor, but through the dead fingers and toes digging into his body. Little wiggling things wormed their way into his flesh, and he knew what those *little things* were although his mind wouldn't allow him to say it.

He was going to die and he didn't even know why. He had enough serious wounds that he knew he was already dead—all that was needed was for his heart to get the message from his brain. Sammy had too many wounds covering his entire body to survive. His body was agonizingly pulled apart. The index finger on his left hand was pulled out of joint, then it came off with a loud pop. Teeth chewed into his ear eating him alive.

He couldn't stand not knowing why this was happening to him.

"Bruno! Busboy!" He shouted after pulling the hand and teeth from his throat. "Why are you killing me?"

"It's my job, Mr. Thomas." Bruno punched the bag, and Sammy felt his jaw shatter. "I handle complaints for my *new* boss just like I did when I was alive.

"Used to come to this room all the time. Room 222. I was the *complaints department*, you might say... customer service. People who messed with the boss disappeared. Stuffed them in my garment bag that I had specially made out of two of 'em. Took them out to the ocean... fed the gulls and made the sharks smile.

"You're going to like the ocean, Mr. Thomas. And after you've been there a while, I'll let you come back with me to this room and you can help me. I work for the hotel now."

"Help with what?" he asked. His voice was strangled by the hands climbing back to his throat, choking him. "What do... "

"You can help me with customer service. I deal with complaints just like I used to when I was alive. I make the complainers go away."

A hand tore his throat out. He felt himself pouring out, dripping out into the leather bag, then out of the bag onto the carpeting, his blood. Somehow he felt through his blood, through the sound of his voice. He saw through each of his body parts, heard through each one of them as they were tore from his body,

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without the need for eyes and ears. He saw through his index finger; heard through his foot being gnawed off; felt through his eyeball that was plucked out.

Sammy screamed—or tried to—and gurgled instead on blood and stink. He fell amidst body parts, and he realized Bruno hadn't told him *everything*.

He felt heads and hands and arms and torsos. All separated. Bruno cut them all up before tossing them into the ocean. All the *complainers*.

How do all these body parts fit inside this bag?

The bag unzipped itself and Bruno climbed inside. Somehow the giant man fit. He zipped the bag shut behind him.

I've gone insane. I'm in an insane asylum somewhere, surrounded by protective padded walls.

Bruno unzipped the bag. Everything spilled out.

Sammy found himself underwater. Salt water burned his lungs and eyes. Pressure increased, pressed in on his body until it shrunk. Bruno floated nearby, a shark with a meat cleaver and narrow eyes of evil intent.

He reached for Sammy. Sammy swam away.

Doral fins swam close, real sharks.

I shouldn't have pushed that TV from the tenth floor. I shouldn't have complained so much. I shouldn't—

He saw a dorsal fin then a large shadow. The shadow swallowed his face. It was a shark's mouth lined with razor-sharp teeth. He knew he was going crazy—*I've really lost it now*. He literally lost his mind as the shark swam away with his head. Other sharks bit chunks from his body, tearing and twisting pieces off, bone and all.

When it was over Bruno smiled and collected Sammy's remaining body parts: two hands and two feet. He stuffed them into the garment bag then saw something out of the corner of his eye. He smiled at the eyeball rolling along the ocean floor. Sammy saw Bruno's hand coming close, growing giant as it neared, and it swallowed him up. Bruno tossed Sammy's last remaining piece inside the bag, climbed inside himself, and zipped it shut.

Five pieces of Sammy—five pieces he saw and felt and heard through—floated with the pieces of others, body parts all of them, floating in the seawater of the leather garment bag.

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JOHN MILLER

He stared at the darkness while dreaming about giant TVs falling from hotel balconies and crushing children. The bag shook waking him from slumber, and it opened at the bottom. Sea water poured out and a hand hung through the garment bag's small opening—the hand wasn't his. Someone outside the bag zipped it open completely, and the small hole opened into the familiar space of *room 222*.

A beautiful woman with wide eyes stared at his pieces and the pieces of others. They were all complainers, mixed together in a watery soup of body parts and seawater. He perceived her through his two hands, two feet and one eye. Somehow he saw through each remaining piece of his body, heard the sound of the woman crying through each of his remaining body parts that hadn't been consumed by the sharks.

She looked down at him, at the part of him that was an eyeball. All his body parts saw her doing this, five separate blurbs of vision not unlike bug-sight. He looked back at her through his eye and tried to blink—something he couldn't do.

Doesn't she know who the hell I am?

He poured out of the bag with his fellow dismembered family members, floating on the dark seawater. They sloshed to the floor and floundered like fish out of water. His hands crawled toward her on the carpeting. His feet inched closer by curling its toes. His eyeball rolled nearer.

She backed away and fell beside the bed.

In five minutes they swallowed her up in a fist of flesh, pulled and yanked and bit until they pulled her back into the bag.

He heard the familiar tread of the *boss*. They sloshed against the woman's trembling body as the door swung open. The *boss* unzipped the bag and smiled at the bleeding woman.

"Where are you taking me?"

"We're going fishing," the *boss* said.

Then he climbed inside.

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You can find out more about John at : www.xanga.com/Pen_of_Mjoollnir

THE PROMISES

DOMINIC LYNE

Three days ago I died, don't worry it wasn't painful, the dead don't feel physical pain. Whilst my body screamed as the overdose swarmed through its system, trying to force everything out, my soul waited calmly to be freed from its mortal prison. Don't judge me, suicide was only an option, only an exit. Not really the only exit, but still, an exit into what? The nothing, the dark. We are born from nothing and that is exactly where we return. No blinding light, no tunnel, no pearly gates. Just darkness extending for infinity. Death is the escape for the mortal body, but where do the dead escape to? Maybe my salvation just forgot about me, I mean I've spent my whole life being abandoned, so why should it be any different here? As you can tell, there's so many questions yet no one to answer them. Maybe there are no answers. Who knows?

If I focus hard enough I can see the outlines of a room, the room in which I died. I can see the furniture, the bed, my body. My phone keeps ringing, a distant echo from the realm of the living. I guess they haven't found me then, but I guess that's what I wanted. No time to save the lost soul. The more I concentrate, the more I see. Great, I'm trapped living in the shadows, locked in the room I died, these familiar walls my tomb. Shit. Fuck. If only I could answer that phone.

Funny that, no one bothered to call whilst I was there, no one ever checked to see if I was okay in my moments of absence, but now they won't stop fucking calling and there's nothing more lonely than the mournful ring of the phone of a dead person. Click through to voicemail and hear the voice of a ghost. Strange how much we leave, yet how little comfort it brings to those left behind. Recorded moments of life. Memories are our legacies.

Then the light came. A blinding light forcing the darkness to the edges. My eyes adjust and I see it all. The door to my tomb opened wide, the figure running to my lifeless form. The air filled with shouts, screams, panic and upset. Stood on a film set watching the actors go through their lines, unable to do anything. Everything played out according to plan.

Standing alone, disconnected. Hearing the phone calls being made, seeing the tears, the pain caused by my one simple act of freedom. This isn't how it's meant to be, I was meant to be free from all this shit. Isn't that part of the promise? Why is this happening? Another question with no one to answer.

There's something different about the room. Ignore the people rushing

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around, ignore all the noise, something isn't right. There's a shadow in the corner, tall and dark, just standing in contrast to the brightness of the room. I can see it out of the corner of my eye. Tendrils of smoke rising up from its feet. I turn to look, the growl hits my ears as, in a blink of an eye, the shape rushes forward, arm stretched to the light. I can sense anger, rage, an eternal loneliness pouring from it as it passes, then everything fades to black.

The scene changes. I know this by the change in the air. Still surrounded by the darkness I feel lost, alone. All the emotions I thought I'd be free from attacking my soul, pure and at the core. I feel naked, no fleshy walls to protect the most sensitive part of us all. My essence, the controller that moved the machine stands naked for the shadows. Nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run.

I try to focus again. Force my phantom eyes to see in the dark without their glassy orbs. The inky darkness swirls and fades slightly. The room is empty, plain, safe for the shrouded table as its centre. At least I'm not in the same place I guess.

Movement, more of a sense than physical, but enough shift in the environment to make me aware of it. I'm not alone. I don't feel alone. I'm drawn to the corners of the room again. I freeze. It's still here with me. The tall shadow, black against the darkness. It moves, as it does so I can see its shape isn't solid, made up of thousands of little particles like a cloud of flies. Thickly condensed and trapped obediently into this form. It continues to approach. The table prevents it from reaching me. We stand and stare at each other. My mouth opens. 'Why?' A simple enough question.

'Why?' The shadow's voice a whisper. 'Why? Such a simple word yet so hard to answer on its own. Why what? Why does it rain? Why does it feel so cold? Why are we here? Why are you still here? So many whys for poor little mankind.'

I swallow, if a spirit can still technically make physical actions I don't know but that's what it feels like. 'Why am I still here? Why does all this pain go on and on inside my head? Why hasn't it all stopped like I'd expected?'

'Poor poor child, did you misunderstand the promise of death? You feel pain because the pain from which you ran wasn't physical. Death can only heal you from the ills of your mortal decay. Your body rots around you but your soul never ages, it just gets beaten and bruised, torn and damaged. Collecting

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all the baggage of life in mortality. The journey of life is to learn from this pain, to grow and acknowledge it., to turn pain into understanding. Both life and death offer you a promise to help you through both existences.'

'What, to live in pain for eternity?' I feel cheated. 'What stupid worthless promise is that?'

The shadow roars. Explodes into its thousands of particles. The flies swarm around the room chaotically before they dissolve into the darkness. I'm alone again. I guess I'll have to wait for my answer. I'm getting used to that anyway.

The overhead lights flicker on. Bright, fluorescent. Clinical. Doors open and figures walk in. If I had a heart, it would of stopped beating. One of them is an unknown, the second is my mother. The woman leads her to the table. The cover is pulled back and there in the crystal light is my mortal form. Cold. Hard. Dead. Mother breaks down, her sobs scream out into the air like knife blades piercing the thin barrier between our two worlds. I scream, the pain too much. I see my own creator standing there, her face lined with anguish. The look in her eyes, oh the look in her eyes. So much for her to take in. The pain she must be feeling. Her hand clutches her chest. No parent should ever have to see the body of their child like this. Dead before their eyes like a delayed abortion.

The noise, the anger, the sadness, the disbelief all rip through me. Cutting fresh scars into my soul. No escape, forced to bear witness to my mother's fate with no way of comforting her over the grief I have caused. My screams continue to erupt from my phantom mouth, the ghostly tears, sobs and upset echoing through my form. 'Let me out,' I scream. 'Let me off this pain.' The dead have no escape.

Mother is led from the room. The lights switch off. It's black again. I feel the air change, I know the scene has done so as well.

Vision clears, refocuses at its own will. I'm sat in a room, a room without walls or doors. A chasm of darkness stretching on for infinity. With each passing moment my eyes are adjusting to the eternal night. The vision of the dead being born into my soul.

The shadow sits opposite me. The clouds of insects that give it shape moving like smoke, noiselessly flying without break. 'Have you learnt? Do you understand? Or is your mind still lost to the corrupting anger you brought with you?'

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'Anger? Of course I feel anger. Why do I keep seeing all I do? Why are you forcing it upon me?'

'That word again. "Why?". I can tell you the answer but you won't like the answer I will give.'

'Try me.'

'You see and feel all this pain and somehow, somewhere in that mind of yours you are convinced others are to blame. Every choice has a consequence we must all face. This pain and anguish you see is all because of you. It is the consequence of *your* act.'

'I escaped that life, its pain. I don't need to see it, or face it. That part is dead.'

'Is it? How selfish you are. How little you understand but that is not all necessarily your fault. The world you left behind will continue. You chose to leave early so you act has altered it, lives need to be readjusted, souls repaired. Do you think that you can shatter so much and be freed from all the blame? Your mortal life may have ended but your unprepared soul now faces an eternity of life, of contemplation, repentance, yearning. From here you will watch the world come and go, your loved ones age and die, and you will feel the pain at not being able to share in it.'

'I said earlier about two promises, the mortal helping the immortal and vice versa. The mortal life helps build your soul for this eternity. Throughout your mortal existence your soul grows, learns to appreciate pain, loss, love and wonder. It has a natural, predetermined time before it is ready to move on. Death's promise is the one of soul freedom, no matter what or when. You chose to use that promise early, before your time was due, so now you must continue to learn unprotected and alone. Each new pain you were still to experience will be done so but you'll have nowhere to run, no one to turn to. You broke fate's plan and this is the price you pay for changing everyone's destiny.'

The tears fall from my eyes, I'm lost. 'So this will never fade?'

'In time it will. You'll reach the point where your soul was destined to move on. In each life we are expected to experience certain qualities, until that point there can be no going forward. Some lives are short, some long, you had many years left ahead of you, planned out and structured. Your time here will be long. You'll see the damage you caused, its repair, destinies rewritten. You'll see yourself forgotten by those who cared for you. Your pain will be tenfold but when salvation comes you'll finally be rewarded. My time with you is over.'

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From now you are alone.'

The figure stops his monologue abruptly. Rises to his feet and glides away slowly. I watch, speechless, alone, dead. I finally understand. For every action there is reaction, for every choice a consequence. I remain seated. Focused would be the word I'd use. I guess this will be my redemption.

Laura Edwardson watched the gathering around her grave, the hollowed ground into which her mortal body was lowered. This was the first step in her journey. Once hidden from sight beneath the earth, the visits would grow less. Fewer and fewer until the days where the grass will grow and the final offerings of flowers will have withered away to dust.

So many people had turned up to the ceremony, so many forgotten aspects of her life in attendance. She'd cried with them. You generally don't realise or appreciate what you have until it's gone. So many lives effected by her one choice, so many fates changed, futures altered.

If only, she thought. If only I'd valued what I had. If only I'd understood more; told the people who meant something what they meant to me; told the people who I loved that I loved them. If only.

Alone she turns and walks away from her past. There is no if only, no maybes or I wonder. There is only the facing up to the paths we have chosen. The only regret you should ever feel is when you knowingly gave up before your time, that you stepped off your path and cheated yourself of your fate. That is pain eternal.

The sun sets on her mortal wounds, her life is only just beginning. She opens her eyes to the pain and welcomes in her redemption.

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Always one to think outside of the box and speak his mind honestly, Dominic Lyne's work takes a no-holds-barred approach. A mental kick in the teeth, a punch in society's guts. Misanthropic, blunt, and opinionated. One person might not be able to change the world, but he'll certainly try and leave a scar upon it.

For more information please visit : www.dom-lyne.co.uk

I sit on a stool and wait. I wish there were windows and the room was wider, but that cannot be. Rodrigo moves in his bed. His naked torso is shaken by his forceful breath. He is about to wake up. I guess his shape, covered by those thin sheets, his athletic body and his bulky, well-sharpened muscles. It is cool in here, and I have always loved the way his hair stands on end.

He half-opens his eyes. He looks at me puzzled. He tries to sit up, but a stab of pain restrains him. Now it is the time for questions. He has been always like that.

"What happened?"

"They tried to kill you"

"Will we have war?"

"We already had war"

"What...?"

"War is over now, honey"

"How...?"

"I shall reveal you all secrets step by step. The doctors said it wouldn't be good for you if I tell you everything straight away. You have to rest."

"And...?"

"We won"

"How long...?"

"Months"

I preen his hair. My fingers immerse in his mahogany waves. He has been always proud of them.

"You've changed"

I do not answer. I just kiss him, barely brushing him, promising rather than giving, caressing his lips in a quick succession and stoking up his desire. My index finger draws a line from his neck to his chest, and then it starts drawing circles in his nipple. He shivers. I drive him crazy in desire. I let him waiting for more and then he pounces on me. When he starts unbuttoning my blouse fiercely, I push him against the bed. I lay my open hand in his chest and then I bend myself to start the kissing again. My hand descends, scratching his skin. I stop on his penis. It is hot. My hand is cold. I do not do anything else. I am promising, not giving. He sighs. He moves his hip to get the touch of my fingers, trying to get my reaction. He insists. My kisses descend traveling around his lips, his chin, his neck, his chest and his belly. I stop in the border of

his pubis, nibbling and enjoying the passionate shudders I provoke. My mouth travels over his erected penis from its bottom, breathing out warmly without even brushing it.

"You don't have to", he says. Always a gentleman. Maybe that is what I like most from him.

In answer, I cherish his glans with my tongue.

He stops me again.

"Really, you don't have to if you don't want..."

"I want", I purr in luscious tapping. I definitely love his false chivalry. His mouth objects, but his body quivers the other way round. He feels dizzy and feels a sharp pain in his temples, I know, but he ignores everything because the urge of sex is stronger. I love it.

I continue my game. My tongue finds his glans again. I moisten it with quick licks. I like its taste. I start masturbating him very slowly, rubbing his penis up and down with three fingers. I let him boil. I play him my tongue and his prepuce. Finally, I start sucking it slowly, two centimeters at first and then advancing more

I feel his dick in my mouth. It excites me.

I get faster, adjusting my moves to the rhythm of his pelvis. He tries to sit up but I will not let him. He gasps. I strangle his penis with my thumb and my index. I will not let him ejaculate so soon. He moans in pain and pleasure. I wait for his excitement to get low, and then I suck slowly, without releasing my trap. Little by little, I increase my cadence as I loosen my prey. I let him spill it in my mouth. His body curves an instant and then collapses with a faltering panting.

"I love you", he says, with this innocent look I have never found in anyone else.

"I love you too, you fool", I answer, pattering the tip of his nose.

He starts caressing my hips but I pull him back.

"You gotta rest"

"I have many questions"

"I know, honey, but they will have to wait. Now sleep"

I get up and leave the room, leaving many matters behind.

I cross the cement-walled bunker's corridors. In the intersections, the faded-coloured numbers of each section reveal our decadence. That would not be allowed in our past. Left behind is the room of that old general who still

revives the battles from decades ago, immersed in a virtual world made of artificial intelligence's and stale data. He explores the several decisions he could have made. He is insane, like everyone of us. There are many people who choose to escape from our crude reality into fictional worlds. I even do it myself in my own way.

Arturo is in the control center. His eyes are lost in the horizon, going through the thick security windows. He looks emaciated he has not eaten for days and wears a shabby beard. A thin spat string comes out of his mouth. His mind takes shelter in his synthetic happy world created by simulation drugs. If your universe comes down, create another one. In his each time fewer lucidity moments he calls it the desolation disease. Some time ago we were lovers. He was the great leader of our generation then, our hope, and now he is another remain. I ignore him. I pass by him and look at the devastated wastelands, its bare hills, its cracked lands, half-lightened by the static energy purple sparkles. A frozen wind raises dust clouds. Nuclear winter. Some day it will go away, or so they say.

I type a sequence and three monitors flicker and switch. The first one shows Rodrigo sleeping in his bedroom, crawled up in cold. His deterioration has already begun - an unstoppable process. It hurts, but he is my perversion and my drug. I will not reveal him my secret not even at the end. I will let him think he is suffering from a virus released in the war. His mind is so cloudy that he will not question it, I know. In the second monitor there are data from the next clone. Its constants are correct and its spring will be in the next three months. It should be enough, but genetics are not an accurate science and much less nowadays. Rodrigo Santa Marina Lasarte. The ideologist, the politician, the genius who was killed in a terrorist attack. The great hope shattered. Later his name was used as a spur for the war, as an excuse. If he would have not died, everything would be different, that is what the general says. I testify there is no match for him, that is why I resurrect him again and again. Maybe I am trying to find an answer, that is my comfort. Actually, I know I try to impregnate myself of the purity from another time, as if that contact would be my redemption.

I see myself reflected on the third screen. It is my grandmother's photograph. She was a pretty, dark-haired, olive-coloured-skinned woman with even features. She never lose her hope - we have so much in common.

When the suicides overcame the births, she took charge of the situation. I remember her lessons. She was my grandfather's greatest love. She took some months in seducing him and many years in getting pregnant. That is what she told me.

The world has changed, but humanity prevails with all their vices. They are our condemnation and our legacy. I cherish my belly. The possibilities were remote, one in ten thousand, but I never gave up. She would not have.

We are so alike.

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Pedro Escudero Zumel is a writer based in Valladolid (Spain) where he now lives after having seen the world.

He won and received mentions in various awards such as the Aullidos Horror Tales Popular Awards (twice), the second award of electronic publishing and selection for the anthology *Fabricantes de sueños 2009* of the Spanish Association of Fantasy, Science Fiction and Horror (AEFCFT).

His stories have appeared in various magazines, anthologies and eZines (all in Spanish): *La biblioteca Fosca*, *Calabazas en el trastero*, *Cuentos de un futuro InCierto*, *NGC3660*, *Historias Asombrosas Online*, *Mundofábrica*, *Monstruos de la razón* ...

Pedro's first anthology, *La escalera de San Gregorio* will be published shortly by the Spanish publisher Novel Mundo.

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