

ESTRONOMICON

FANTASY ✦ SCIENCE FICTION ✦ HORROR

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FREEWHEELING

by Robin Hutton

As time tortured Jake Spencer with its malevolence, he was slowly transforming into an anxious, fearful wreck. His feelings were numbed by a ubiquitous evil – it tinged the atmosphere, hanging in great invisible plumes, showing no respect for the souls washed up in its wake. The town was choking ...

FEATURING

Lee Moan
J.W. Bennett
Sean Parker
Ian Cordingley
Charles Black
Neil Burlington
Gregory Hall
David Gatward
Hugh MacDonald

SPECIAL ISSUE

10 short stories plus
progress report feature

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Screaming Dreams

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

Once again I must begin the eZine introduction with an apology! I am sorry that it has taken so long to get *Estronomicon* back on track this year, but I have been insanely busy with other projects over the past few months.

The book publishing in particular has taken up a considerable amount of time, with the backlog of titles from 2007 clashing with new deadlines for the 2008 list. So there has been a lot of re-organizing lately as you can imagine.

There has also been a lot of work involved in preparing for the Welsh SF Conference, as I have three new paperbacks scheduled to launch there. They are all currently in the final stages of editing and should be at the printers soon, if all continues to go to plan.

On top of all this I've had some health issues to deal with too, which has been slowing me down as I'm under orders to take things easy for a while.

But don't worry as the eZine is in no danger of disappearing. My aim has always been to make this a long-running publication. Yes, I know the releases have always been erratic due to other work commitments, but I will always do my very best to publish new issues as often as I possibly can. I just wish I had more spare time to dedicate to it.

I would like to say a huge 'thank you' to all the contributors who have sent in their stories and other material this year. Your support and continued patience is very much appreciated I assure you.

To kick off this first issue of 2008 I have selected 10 short stories for your reading pleasure. I hope you enjoy them and if possible please send the authors some feedback about their work as I'm sure they'd like to hear from you.

You may notice that I've changed the eZine layout this year and have gone for a very clean and simple format. Let me know what you think of the new design anyway. All comments welcome, as always.

In the next issue I aim to bring back the regular non-fiction columns. Some of which will carry on from previous articles, but there will be a few new ones appearing too. The artist showcases will also make a welcome return, along with interviews and other features. So keep watching.

There has been considerable interest from authors for expanding the free eBook section on the SD website. I have received some great submissions and will be working through them over the coming months.

Thanks for taking the time to download this eZine. Remember to tell your friends about it and help spread the word further!

THE EXPOSE

HUGH MACDONALD

Sitting on a stretcher in a small cubicle, Peter looked at the overhead lights which were too bright. He supposed the brightness was to add to the illusion of a sterile atmosphere. Glancing at the garbage bin in the corner, he noticed a large blood-soaked bandage laying face up in the overflowing container. He squinted to get a better look at the bandage and felt sure he saw a large scab attached to it.

“God that’s gross,” he said, then looked to see if anyone noticed him talk to himself. He hated hospitals. His mother had told him it was the quickest way to get sick: “Only sick people go to the hospital.” He remembered she had made that statement as if letting him in on some deep secret and not just stating the obvious. Often, she would make other pronouncements on the world and wait to see his response. Even when he came to the realization that both his mother and father were simpletons, he would act as if she had just imparted some important piece of wisdom essential to his learning the ways of the world.

Peter was thankful he was an only child. The last thing he would have wanted was for his parents to help propagate the hillside community where he’d been born. His ancestors had moved to Kentucky from the hills of Ireland to begin anew in America. The promises had been made that everyone was welcome in America, and the oppressed of Ireland wanted a change. When they’d first arrived, they were watched with a wary eye. After a short time, the people of town noticed they had some peculiar ways about them. They spoke of seeing forerunners before people died, and told stories of leprechauns and banshees. It wasn’t long before the townspeople, out of fear and superstition, kept apart from them.

The new settlers were refused land within the town limits and had no choice but to take to the hills of Kentucky. The settlers were ostracized by the townspeople and the segregation was complete. Hillies were not encouraged to take part in any social or religious function. They were allowed to purchase necessary food items, most at exorbitant prices. Life was hard for the Hill people and was destined to get worse. They tried at first to marry distant cousins; overtime, the degree of separation became less and less, and first cousins marrying was a frequent occurrence. In keeping with the tradition of the Hill people, Peter had been named after a celebrity. For the first eighteen years of his life he had been known as Gomer Goolihey. Peter remembered his high school years as the worst time of his life. “Shazam, shazam, it’s Gomer the

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man.” The Townies greeted him the same way every morning. It made no difference that he was the star player on the football team which brought in scouts from all the major colleges. Several of the supporting players, who wouldn’t have received a second look, were awarded scholarships.

Despite their good fortune as a result of his outstanding playing ability, they continued to ridicule him daily. Doug Murphy was the worst of the lot. Although the Goolihey and Murphy clans lived within a stone’s throw of each other back in Ireland, the Murphy’s had come into money while the Goolihey’s remained dirt poor and were treated according to their station in life. Doug’s father was the town’s doctor and probably the richest man in the county, so Doug believed he was superior in every way. With his arrogance came the belief that it was his right to poke fun at the less fortunate.

Peter recalled the times between classes when the halls were filled to capacity and Doug would call out from thirty feet away, “Hey Gomer, is it true that if your mother and father get divorced they’d still be brother and sister? What do you call your father, uncle daddy?” The Townies would break into laughter and someone would begin humming duelling banjos. Peter knew he was an anomaly. As Gomer, he was seen by the Hill people as their star quarterback hero, having won the state championship for the high school. In truth, he had the same disdain for the Hill people as the Townies did, and couldn’t wait to leave Goolihey Gulch.

Peter learned early to look out for number one, and as a result found that he cared for no one other than himself. He maintained a 4.0 grade point average throughout school, leaving nothing to chance. He wasn’t going to let an injury keep him from leaving Goolihey Gulch. By being at the top of his game in football and academics, he was assured of a scholarship. The summer he graduated from high school he changed his name to Peter O’Shea and accepted an offer from Notre Dame to become one of the Fighting Irish.

College hadn’t been the solution to all his problems, but at least he had found a sort of anonymity. When members of the football squad discovered he was from down south they had asked if he could squeal like a pig. His response had ended that line of joking. He’d informed them, he was confident he could make them do a little squealing, and that it looked like some of the boys were already broken in.

Peter shook his head trying to drive away the memories that had come

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unexpectedly. He ran his hand over the five o'clock shadow. The stubble felt rough and made him aware that he'd been on the go since seven that morning. He didn't mind twelve hour days if he was able to accomplish his goals.

He noticed a mirror above the small sink just outside his cubicle and decided to comb his hair. At thirty three, his hair was still full with only a small amount of grey around the temples. He had plenty of lines around his thick-lipped mouth, as well as around his eyes, which were mistakenly referred to as 'laugh lines'. Peter rarely laughed unless it served his needs. His eyes, a pale grey, sparkled with intelligence but were too far apart, and his ears stood out prominently from his head.

He knew the reason for his less than flattering features was his bloodline. Countless years of inbreeding had reduced the random gene selection. What once had been second cousins marrying was now first and double first cousins doing it with impunity. The only thing closer was a brother and sister and he'd heard some stories.

He ran the comb through his hair and thought that he really did look ill after all. Perhaps his mother *was right*, "Only sick people go to the hospital." He wondered if he'd caught something from the people in the waiting room. Peter returned to the stretcher.

He was angry at the time he'd had to wait. It had taken thirty minutes to register, after which he was directed to a public waiting room which was filled to capacity with men, women, and children in varying degrees of suffering. He'd smiled knowingly at the Emergency Room nurse as she told him it would be an approximate twenty to thirty minute wait. He fully expected at least a forty-five minute wait, resigning himself to it. However, when the forty-five minutes turned into an hour and a half, he had become quite testy.

Hoping he could intimidate her into speeding up the process, Peter had looked at his watch and sighed loudly before asking the Emergency Room nurse how much longer he'd have to wait. She'd shrugged her shoulders, turned her palms up and then disappeared behind a door that said, "Staff Only."

Finally the nurse had called his name, but dammit, that was half an hour ago, and he was still sitting on the stretcher. He was starting to document the inefficiency of the nurses rather than his real task, which was to write an expose of the unsterile conditions in the Emergency Room of the Bayside Mercy Medical Centre.

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He obtained a degree in journalism, paid for by his time on the football field, then headed to the biggest city of all. He received offers to play pro ball and the money was substantial, but finally admitted to himself that he hated football. He'd had enough of handling the pig skin and the pig squealing jokes—he left both behind. His career plans now included a pen and computer keyboard. The eight years he'd put into honing his craft as a journalist with some of the largest newspapers in New York, had made him a shoe in when he'd applied as editor of The Bayside Daily News. The suburb of Stamford, Connecticut allowed him to have the anonymity he craved but gave him a new start in a small town where people got to know you by name.

Peter enjoyed the idea of being the one who makes every thing run. He accepted the responsibility for failure grudgingly, but basked in his successes. He loved the fact that he had complete autonomy when it came to the content of his editorial. His contract was signed for an unheard of fifteen years at a six figure salary. He had been flabbergasted when the owners of the newspaper even agreed to him owning a ten percent share with the option to purchase more over time. He wondered if they would have been so generous if they'd known he was there to expose the shortcomings of the hospital.

He would let his anger fuel the piece he had to write, as he carefully took in his surroundings. The used syringes had carelessly been tossed at, rather than in, the garbage bin. Some still had the needles attached. There was a yellow plastic container marked bio-hazard hanging on the wall. It was solely designed for the disposal of potentially life threatening needles.

Peter took his small notepad and quickly wrote, "Although the disposal container was less than quarter full, the garbage bin was an easier target."

He saw five used syringes on top of the bin, near the scab filled bandage, and he counted another seven lying on the floor in the general vicinity of the plastic waste bin. Peter jotted a note to make a point of how the garbage in the bin would be deposited at the local dump with no special precautions taken, whereas the container marked bio-hazard would be properly disposed of—at least in theory.

Peter knew that some of the young boys in Bayside spent hours shooting pellet and BB guns at the rats and squirrels that called the local dump home. He had gotten to know several of the youths during a piece he'd written on landfill options. Although he wasn't personally concerned with the welfare of

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the children in the area, he knew it made great copy. Once the parents became aware of the shoddy safety practises of the ER, he would be applauded as a protector of the youth.

With all the diseases on the go, he knew the kids shouldn't be exposed to those dirty needles. He thought the entire room was in desperate need of a thorough scrubbing. The counter tops were filled with shiny spots where sugary medicines had been spilled while being dispensed, and no apparent effort had been made to clean up the mess. This story was going to write itself, and unlike some other articles, no embellishments were needed.

He looked at the stretcher he was sitting on, and quickly let himself slide to the floor. The sheet had heel marks from a previous patient, and the pillow case had grease stains on it from where a head with dirty hair had been laying. He noticed the curtain separating his cubicle from the other cubicles was full of copper coloured specks and larger blotches. The bloodstains had long since dried and the curtains should have been laundered.

Although he had an ulterior motive for doing the expose, he really was becoming concerned with the condition of the ER. It was a breeding ground for a catastrophe. With new viruses coming on the scene on a regular basis, he felt that Bayside could easily spread these viruses to the rest of America in a relatively short time. Many of the patients who frequented Bayside were from larger metropolitan areas. They came seeking what they believed would be quality health care, with half the waiting time. Some of the larger hospitals in the city had line ups where people waited ten or more hours before being assessed. Bayside Mercy Medical Centre was equipped with the most up to date diagnostic machines. An MRI or CT Scan could be scheduled within a couple of days.

Moving closer to the curtain, he heard the rasping, laboured breathing of someone in severe respiratory distress. He heard the person moaning and speaking in a weak voice, perhaps praying, he reasoned. Unable to resist peaking round the corner, Peter pulled the curtain apart and was shocked to see an aged woman whose appearance first frightened him--then moved him to pity. Her skin looked as if it had been stretched over her bones, drawn as taut as was possible without tearing. Her hair, what was left of it, was standing up in matted sprigs; open sores were present on both her face and arms. Her weight couldn't have exceeded seventy pounds.

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“My God, how could she get in this state?” Peter said to himself. As he continued to stare at her, he thought she looked like death warmed over.

Peter was so taken by the frail woman’s horrendous condition that he unconsciously moved closer to her. Hearing him move, the woman (who appeared to be in her eighties) turned her head. He watched her raise her hand and he stopped moving forward. He suddenly felt very afraid.

Peter quickly stepped back to his side of the curtain, his face flushed. He hoped no one had seen him. They would think he was some kind of pervert. When he saw her hand rise, he had felt some primitive desire to comfort the woman, but had quickly dismissed the feeling, as his usual disdain for humanity returned. Besides, he reasoned, God only knows what types of diseases she may be carrying. Let her family care for her.

He had been shocked at how fast she had turned her head, but what he had found truly unnerving was the shape of her eyes. Her pupils looked like diamonds with the edges slightly rounded. They also looked like they belonged to someone much healthier and definitely younger. A feeling of *deja vu* swept over him. He pondered that he might have seen this woman before. Something about her eyes sparked a recognition in him.

Peter decided he was going to get back on the stretcher. Taking a few paper towels from the bedside table, he placed them strategically so he could sit without touching the previously used sheet.

He glanced at his notepad and was happy with the data he had collected so far. He would have left then, except he knew Dr. Doug Murphy was on call. Murphy was the reason for his interest in the condition of the ER, and was going to be the main focus of his story. Murphy had followed in his father’s footsteps, but had decided to leave the small town behind and try it in the big times. Peter was sure Murphy wouldn’t remember him, but he was on Peter’s mind every day. It was pay back time, and Murphy was going to pay with his reputation. Peter smiled as he thought how it would look when the doctor’s face was plastered over the front page of his paper and other newspapers across the country.

His anger grew as he thought of Dr. Doug Murphy and he hissed a curse through pursed lips. “That pompous prick. I wonder how he’ll like being the centre of attention, when all eyes are looking at him and the laughter is at his expense.”

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Ridiculed because he'd come from a family of simpletons. Peter liked the word simpletons, as it enabled him to reflect on his parents, but he hated remembering the inbreeding of the Hill people.

It wasn't my fault, dammit, Peter thought, as he rubbed his eyes. He had made a complete break with his parents and others from home.

He had gone back once, to show off, but he found he didn't care if he impressed them. Taking them a few gifts, he had stayed one night. The hurt in his mother's eyes did not subside with the offer of money. She'd clung to him, pleading for him to stay a few more days. He'd lied, saying he would be back soon, knowing it would be the last time he'd visit the Hill. What passed as a conscience was eased when he'd left behind a few thousand dollars on the kitchen table.

His mother had asked him when he was going to marry and give her a grandchild to spoil, prompting him, on his return to the city, to make an appointment with his urologist.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Peter?" his doctor had asked. "I don't recommend it at your age. You may want to take a few days to reconsider the permanence of your decision."

"If you saw the gene pool I'd sprung from, you'd recommend it all right," Peter said. "Snip away."

Peter had laid back and felt the sharp prick of the needle but did not feel the subsequent cutting. The vasectomy complete, he'd picked up an ice pack and returned to his office.

He pushed the memory aside, as he pulled a small camera from his jacket pocket and took a few shots of the garbage bin. He was told Murphy subscribed to unsanitary practices, but he knew that a picture of the ER would be more damning than anything he could write.

Peter had been thorough in his data gathering and had befriended one of the nurses who worked the ER. Poor Charlotte, he thought, what a pitiful little person. He had wined and dined her for two weeks and had been successful in gaining her trust. He had been able to gather an enormous amount of information about the staff at Bayside Mercy. She had informed him of Dr. Murphy's less than sanitary practises. He had pumped Charlotte for more than just the dirt on the medical staff and then dumped her unceremoniously when he had all the information he needed. He was glad that part of his research was

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over, although she'd been pretty good between the sheets. He smiled and winced as he remembered the love bites.

He'd told her that she wasn't his type and then thanked her for the past two weeks stating, it had been fun. Had Peter taken the time for one last look, he would have seen something other than hurt in her eyes. He would have seen hatred and a little something more. He hoped when he quoted her as a 'reliable source' from the ER, she would be able to hide her guilt.

Peter heard the rustling of bedclothes from the old woman's cubicle, then a light thud as if a pillow had dropped to the floor. He wondered if he should check on her, but dismissed the idea as he still felt a little shaken by the appearance of her eyes. They had not appeared frightened. It seemed she had recognized him. Her dark eyes held him in her gaze and appeared wise and cunning. As much as he didn't like to think it, her eyes seemed to hold a quality of evil.

Peter let out a small gasp, startled to see the old woman scurry across the floor towards the garbage bin. He watched in horror as she pulled the plungers from the syringes that had been used to collect blood samples. She inserted her long, thin tongue inside, licking clean the last drops of blood. He felt his stomach turn as she quickly cleaned the five syringes, oblivious to the needles as they pierced her hands. He heard his stomach contents hit the floor. Peter watched the vomit splash against the old woman's curtain, as she picked up the bandage. Licking the blood from it, she then placed the large scab on her tongue like some weird parody of a Christian partaking in Communion.

She glanced at Peter as she chewed the scab. He wanted to look away but felt helpless to do so. He continued to vomit, as he watched her make her way back to her bed.

"Dammit," he heard one of the nurses say in a low voice as she entered the room. "Look at the mess in here!" Putting on the best professional face she could muster, the nurse asked Peter if he was all right. She gently pushed him back, making him lie down on the greasy pillow. After a few moments had passed, Peter heard the nurse returning with the infamous Dr. Murphy. He listened as the doctor read his chart, "Upset stomach with a slight headache." Peter had stated those very symptoms to the nurse who had registered him. Looking down at the floor he thought, well there's the upset stomach, and touching his forehead he could feel the throbbing pounding headache with

each heartbeat.

Peter watched as Dr. Murphy bent down and picked up the dirty bandage, squashing it in his hand before throwing it in the garbage bin. The bandage only looked slightly soiled now--the old woman had been diligent in her task of cleaning it.

Peter retched as Dr. Murphy approached him, both from the memory of what had been on the bandage and from the fact that Murphy hadn't washed his hands after handling it. Peter quickly sat up and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. He grimaced at the stain the vomit left. Before the Doctor could begin to examine him, he managed to blurt out, "I insist you look at the old woman in the next room first."

"Are you sure you're all right?" Murphy asked.

Peter assured him that he was and decided to stay in the sitting position. He watched as Murphy pulled aside the curtain then entered where the old woman lay. Peter heard him ask the usual questions. "What seems to be the problem? Where does it hurt?" He strained to hear the old woman's mumbled reply; he was not able to distinguish what was said over the sounds of her whimpering. Still, he thought, her voice sounded stronger than it had earlier.

Letting his curiosity get the best of him, Peter side-stepped the vomit to peek around the corner and thought that the old woman must have left. The person laying on the stretcher looked no older than sixty-five, seventy at most.

He stood transfixed as the Doctor pulled her hospital gown aside. Murphy started probing the woman who looked to weigh more than a hundred pounds, and whose hair was quite full. He touched under her right breast as she lay facing him. Peter watched as the woman pointed to a spot on her hip which made the doctor lean over, straining to see what ailed her. Peter saw the old woman's right hand and noticed that the first and second fingers had nails in excess of three inches.

Suddenly, with the doctor trying to locate the source of her discomfort, the old woman thrust the nails into the doctor's neck. She held his head for a moment, then released him. Dr. Murphy stumbled out of the cubicle yelling for a nurse, his hand firmly clamped over his bleeding neck. Peter continued observing the old woman. He watched, mesmerized, as she held her right wrist with her left hand, then slowly tipped her right hand toward her mouth, emptying the contents. The nails were tube-like and held a huge quantity of

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blood.

Catching Peter's eye, she held up one of her breasts and squawked, "You like looking at an old woman's titties. Want to touch?" she laughed, her diamond shaped eyes dancing.

Peter felt as if he was in an old horror movie as he started putting the facts together. He was witnessing the transformation of a shape shifter. A metamorphosis was taking place. When he had first seen her, she had looked slightly better than a mummy, but after acquiring a minimum amount of blood she became somewhat rejuvenated. He sat back down, wanting to peek behind the curtain but terrified at the prospect of what he might see next.

He heard the sound of a zipper being opened and a variety of noises from behind the curtain, when at last he saw a woman emerge from the cubicle. He couldn't see her face, but judging by her hair, clothes, and walk she looked to be in her thirties. He jumped down from the stretcher wanting to get a closer look at her. He glanced in the cubicle where she had been, and noticed a small suitcase that must have held her new attire. Her old filthy clothes were strewn over the small cot and floor.

Peter watched as someone nodded to her in recognition, then she was out the door and down the steps. He had to jog to keep up with her. He wanted to get a closer look at her, anxious to see what age she would appear to be now. Something about the way she moved struck a chord in his memory. He wondered where he had seen her before. *What a story this would make*, he thought, as he shuddered inwardly.

Racing through the streets, trying to keep pace with her, he saw her grab a child and hurry up an alleyway. Fearing for the child's life, Peter ran headlong into the darkened pathway. He thought he could hear the child crying, in what had to be the darkest corner. He stopped running and wondered what he was doing here. Was he out of his mind following some shape shifter into what could very well be its den?

He decided he had better get out of there and to hell with the story; too bad about the kid. He started backing down the alleyway, too frightened to turn and run. Something or someone struck him forcefully in the lower back, and he was propelled forward, directly toward the whimpering sound. He saw what had struck him and became aware that it wasn't a child, but a gnome-like creature with the face of a gargoyle, apparently working in concert with the

woman. With his arms flailing, Peter hit the wall with a massive force, his shoulders dislocating upon impact.

His head was twisted to one side; he felt a sharp burning sensation in his neck. Peter felt his blood leaving his body, and he tried frantically to move. His arms felt heavy and numb and did not respond to his brain's command.

"Hold still Peter," he heard a voice say as his eyes tried to focus on the woman.

"Who are you?" Peter asked in a pain-filled voice.

As she stroked his head, continuing to feed, he heard her say quietly, "Probably don't remember me, you said I wasn't your type." He looked into her diamond shaped eyes, realizing where he'd seen them before. Peter felt a coldness replace the blood that was being drained from his body. He heard, as well as felt, his heart rate slow.

"Charlotte, why?" he asked, as his vision blurred. He felt the pressure lessen and blood run down his neck as she removed her nails from his throat.

Holding her right hand skyward, she bent her fingers toward her mouth. "I may not have been your type, but as it turns out you are mine," she said, as she poured his life blood into her waiting mouth. "I recognized the disregard you had for your fellow humans. How you thought they were here just to serve your needs. You see, you really are my type, feeding off those whom you can master. As your reward I'm going to grant you eternal life."

Peter watched through terror-filled eyes as Charlotte pulled one of her sabre-like nails across her left wrist severing an artery--the blood flowing freely. She pulled open his mouth and Peter tasted the salty, icy liquid as it coursed down his throat.

"You will go to sleep when the sun rises and awaken with the moon. After you tire -- and you will tire -- of the hunt for blood to stay alive, you will wish you were dead. But you cannot die. You witnessed the pathetic creature I was reduced to tonight. I hadn't fed for several nights, as I wanted to die, but then survival instincts took over, and I was forced to eat the decaying flesh from a garbage bin."

Peter's head bumped lightly on the pavement as Charlotte got to her feet. He listened to her footsteps as she walked from the alleyway toward the street.

They were in the night sky, behind the clouds. I have often wandered and wondered late at night. I have some trouble; sleeping. In my disproportionate waking time, I wander out and wonder at- what inhabits the dark spaces of the night sky. Things, we cannot normally see. And on one black and cold dark night, I could see this- a dull-lit glowing, high in the sky. I saw a creeping of a tendril up beyond the obscuring and drifting clouds, caught between them and the large pale moon. It was a chilling sight. It was a seeming green and gray centipede in motion; like a river flowing sideways in perfectly eerie quietude. It was transported by many rippling and shiny yellow pointed legs. As I watched it, a single something- long and wispy and translucent slid down from behind that cloud. A long strand, and then more strands following as if a few loose parts cut from a giant web, cast down from the clouds and the creature. I then saw an insect-like head, seeming to dribble a dark digesting juice tinged red at its sharp egg-cup 'lip'. Several more such creatures, obscured in glowing mist were behind it.

'I was afraid. I will not lie. This creature was strange by any imagining and its fine strands, perplexedly distressing. I can't in honesty say that I ventured forth that night to see what the strands did where they landed, nor how they appeared- close-up. I watched in chilled silence for minutes more as it spread its works down into the forest surrounding our little village of Anders. I watched it. I beheld the glow of green and yellow behind it; not from the moon but from some other source. I felt my feet and my tongue grow leaden. When it disappeared, I stood there still in expectation of a reappearance that did not occur. Some time later, now quite cold- I turned back. I returned to Anders, my coat wrapped tightly about me, held by my arms and clutched to my sides.'

'I slipped into bed. There was no noise in my home. I am not married. I am in fact a widower, and have never considered the notion of another marriage beyond my one, true love. That love, now lost to sickly Tuberculosis. In the total silence of my little home, the wood and the tamping are all that separate me from the outside where there are, many dangers. I am ill at ease as I contemplate sleep; sleep that will not come. I roll over in my blankets; blankets that itch, and close my eyes. I hum softly in the hopes of driving off potential interlopers, or other things looking for an empty and warm space to inhabit.'

'Days pass. I turn shavings and bind twine in my shop, behind my home. I am a broom-maker. I am a maker of 'fish-brooms' for sale to the nearest

sea-port market. They are sturdy brooms that are used to wipe ship-decks clear of the bodies of fish that have slipped from the net, and other detritus. I make several trips to the nearest sea-port each year, to sell them. It is an honorable profession and it coincides nicely with the logging efforts being made to expand the thick foresting about the village. The logging, being done to expose the land for further residences and businesses. My work, is solitary work. It suits me well. There is only one road leading into and out of the town, at this point. We are a fair distance from other villages and towns. Anders is a small village of less than sixty people, but we have plans to grow substantially in the coming decades. This growth begins with the export of excess logging products; material not needed for housing. The villagers also send their trappings from the forest. The forest is the life of the community, and we are never far from it. We are in and out of it, all the day. Most, don't venture there at night, largely from fatigue. It is wearying work expanding a village in the bush- but some don't stray into the woods at night, from sensible fear. I have learned that their fears are justified. Yet I work on in silence. What I have seen- the grim oddity, I say nothing of.'

'My nights' sleep continues to evade me no matter how hard I strain during the waking day. I work my fingers to the bone and yet can build up in me no exhaustion; only more nervous strain. At times I lull into a few tossing hours of rest, but it is not really sleep. I have never reached that blissful state, since I've lost her. I fear I never will. Could my visions in the clouds be some kind of delirium? Hallucination? If it were so, I could dismiss them without taking on the burden of associating my voice with the perilous occult. I could also, relieve myself of guilt. I consult the doctor. He gives me palliatives and calming mixes. They do... no good. I am as bad, perhaps worse than before- having now eliminated any cure to my predicament. I am alone with sleeplessness, and monsters in the sky.'

'The first of the men, die. They are logging in the forest, swinging sharp bright axes at the hoary trunks of heavy old trees- cutting moss. They hazard the strands, pushing through one or two of the silvery gleaming crosses, and they feel it fast. By account of the two men that made it back, the victims turned and twisted in the strands- and holding out chemically-burned hands they fell to the ground, writhing in pain. They died rapidly. That is the only grace. The rest is horror. The survivors attempted to grip them and bring them back. This

burns their hands severely. The dead men are poison to the touch. The dead men are left where they fall. The survivors have never seen anything like this before. No one has. Almost, no one.'

'I am racked with guilt. I should have said something. I should have come forth. Now, it is too late. If I come forward, they will know I did not tell them when the deaths could have been prevented. Now, it is too late. The dead men's places are marked with wooden crosses, beside their quickly decomposing bodies. It is decided graves will be dug there in the woods, and the bodies pushed into them with logs. For the number dead- ten, this takes more than a day to dig deep enough, and four of the bodies are left overnight on the grass, exposed to the elements.'

'Again I walk alone at night. I walk near the woods, though I have been cautioned against this by others with greater care for me than I have shown for them. I am ashamed, yet I remain silent.'

'I see them, once more- by the light of the moon. The centipedes, crawling on the clouds' soft edge, under the moonlight. They must be giant and terrible, and yet at this distance they appear small and seem safe to observe. And, like a forewarning of grave danger by dread- one slips the ending curl of a wide white and gray-centered cloud, and begins a decent on a single silvery strand.'

My heart races. It pounds. The creature; it is coming down. I turn to run and to put as much distance between myself and the morbid creature as I may. Yet something stops me, there in my tracks. And I turn my eyes, back.'

'The crawling thing cuts into the tree-line from above. It slowly and gracefully drops from the thread. Watching this, I make a fateful decision. I step forward, toward it. I walk, I believe not brazen, not foolish- toward the creature. I move stealthily and shade myself in the trees, in the bush. I am in looking distance on the ground in little time. I see the horrid creature. It is the length of five log cabins and the height of a man, and it is wending through the darkened trees. There is almost no light and my lanterns' faint flame aides me but slightly to see. A hissing noise; a slithering and an awfulness of speed and slippery movement- those are the things about the creature that is dripping juices from its jaws, with its eyes glowing a dark and muddy orange- that send shivers up my spine. And raise the hackles on my neck.'

'I lose my nerve. I am writing this all down. I have been, from the start. I watch as the creature finds the poisoned dead and ravel them around in a

spinning motion, and crawls all over them with its sharp and pointy legs. It does this to bind em' in silvery strands, that it knits to them everywhere.'

'I have made a decision to watch this creature on its terms and in the dark wood. I realize now, I am in grievous error. The creature is a hunting thing. It is keen in its every aspect. It is visiting us, from another place. Some place I now imagine to be so much more foul and disastrously dangerous than our own threatening world. It threatens me, by its mere existence. And I have put myself, at its mercy.'

'It can hear me.'

'I am certain of it. Its attention is now turning from the dead- its food. Food it will no doubt return with to its home beyond the clouds in that, other place. I hold me, responsible. I have broken trust in cowardice and in silence. I have ventured into the space of this deadly creature in some, rashness. I now admit it. And now it's turning. Now it's searching. Now, it is drawing near me. My dear friends, I have betrayed you. And now the monster of my night-time, is so very near.'

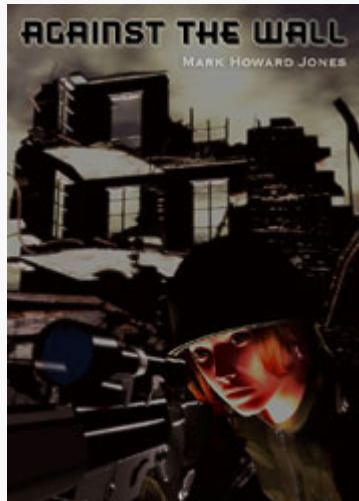
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FREE EBOOKS

FROM SCREAMING DREAMS

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As time tortured Jake Spencer with its malevolence, he was slowly transforming into an anxious, fearful wreck. His feelings were numbed by a ubiquitous evil – it tinged the atmosphere, hanging in great invisible plumes, showing no respect for the souls washed up in its wake. The town was choking.

“See you next week, Jake.”

He gave no answer; his cleaner did not expect one. She was aware of his torment if not fully appreciative of its extent. The door clicked shut.

Since the disappearance of his wife, Catherine, the will to live had been drained from Jake and yet he clung to hope like a baby to its blanket. Newspaper cuttings littered his lounge; a picture of Catherine – snapped for a passport photograph several years earlier – dominated his coffee table. When the press requested a picture to assist in the search, Jake selected a photograph that was devoid of expression: her joy and her warmth were his alone to view – a painful connection to their blissful past.

Theories were numerous and the police remained ‘hopeful’ of solving the mystery. They had, however, been ‘hopeful’ of tracing Julie Cummings after her shock disappearance three years ago. The same optimism was publicly shared following the bizarre departure of Mary Smith a year later. She was on a railway station platform in the centre of town with her husband, Martin, waiting to catch a train. The train arrived; Martin boarded, presuming his young wife to be close behind him – she was never seen again.

Catherine’s abduction – nobody challenged the string of disappearances as anything but – had been just as shocking; she’d simply gone to work one July morning, and not returned.

In the weeks and months that followed, Jake struggled to retain his sanity. Despite a heavy course of medication, he existed inside a maelstrom of misery.

Jake was unusually dressed and groomed this particular morning – a visit from his doctor shoving him into the real world – albeit temporarily. To satisfy Dr Sullivan meant being left alone for another week. He had acres of crimson rage to vent; interruptions were not welcome.

“Good morning, Jake.”

Dr Sullivan let himself into the house. He learned that Jake seldom answered the door, which struck the doctor as strange, having gone to the effort to get cleaned and dressed, Jake seemed to care little for visitors.

"Morning," said Jake.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little better, thank you."

Dr Sullivan knew his patient well enough to take nothing for granted.

"You look exhausted. Sleeping okay?"

Jake hesitated. "I still have...bad dreams."

The elderly doctor began to run his regular tests: blood pressure, heart rate, eyes and throat.

"Do you want to talk about them?"

"Nothing much to tell: falling sensations, things jumping out of the shadows...Catherine."

"Take these." Dr Sullivan reached into his bag and produced a large brown bottle. "Two tablets, an hour before bed. Should help you sleep a little better."

Jake took the bottle, examined it and shifted his gaze to the doctor's reassuring face. This man was the closest thing he had to a friend. His family was gone – Catherine had been it. If he was going to confide in anybody about his night-time horrors, it was going to be his doctor. Not today, though.

Jake liked Dr Sullivan; under different circumstances he might have enjoyed his company. He was intelligent, worldly, intriguing. Jake feared for him: he had two daughters and they were pretty and popular. All of the missing women seemed to fit the same mould.

"Are you happy in this town, doctor?"

Sullivan looked Jake deep in the eyes. He didn't seem to enjoy the question.

"It has its good and bad points, like anywhere else."

"You think it has good points?"

"The town is full of good people, Jake"

Doctor and patient sat in silence for several moments. Jake's consideration of the doctor's statement was intense, and Sullivan was happy to let his point of view ring for several moments.

"You should leave town, doctor." Jake quivered slightly as he spoke and the *clack, clack, clack* of the bicycle that haunted his dreams suddenly filled him with terror.

"I won't be going anywhere."

"It's...evil this town, doc. I swear."

Sullivan felt a surge of pity for his patient, but the other sensation that ran up his spine was much more real and disturbing.

“You’re living in a nightmare, Jake,” he said. “But someday you’ll wake up...and maybe start to accept that...”

“Accept that Catherine is dead?” Jake’s abruptness startled the doctor.

“I’m afraid so. You’ll work through the pain or...”

“I’ll curl up and die?”

“I know that sounds attractive to you right now. But the life you have is worth living.”

“Sure. I appreciate the sentiment, doc. But look out into the street; the place is the *living* dead. Remember the way this town used to be on a summer evening?”

Sullivan said nothing, but there was an air of sudden melancholy about him.

“Fucking hell, doc! FUCK!” Jake’s hand slammed down onto the coffee table as he shouted. Sullivan jumped and the newspaper cut-out of Catherine slid across the table and onto the carpet.

“Fucking town’s gone to shit, doc.” Jake was crying.

Sullivan was disconcerted, but covered his unease. “You’re going to get through this, Jake. Time, it’s all about time.”

“It’s not doc. It’s this dirty fucking town, it’s not right – there’s something feeding here, something...”

Sullivan’s ears pricked up: this was sounding dangerously off the straight and narrow. His concern grew.

“Same time next week, doc?” said Jake through his tears.

Sullivan hesitated. Physically, Jake was doing fine. Mentally, he was beginning to have grave doubts. But he couldn’t section a man for talking in metaphors.

“Take care, Jake.” He touched him on the shoulder – a simple, supportive gesture – then made his way out into the street.

Jake slumped into a chair and began to drink: the only kind of relief from his grief that had ever presented itself – and it presented itself more and more frequently as the days swept by. He soon slept.

Clack, clack, clack – the bicycle sounded through Jake’s sleep. It echoed through his head, deafening, terrifying.

FREEWHEELING

ROBIN HUTTON

His dreams transported him back to his first sighting of the apparition. The haunting figure – featureless, its head turned up to Jake’s window as Jake crouched above the sill and fought the tsunami sized nausea that swept through his system. *Clack, clack, clack* – each mechanical shot sent electrical charges of fear through his body. His stomach contracted, his brain fired; all the while his heartbeat felt like it was driving a dynamo, until he was sure he would turn into a ball of electrons and simply cease to be.

“I’ve found you, you bastard!” yelled Jake, the terrors of his slumber slapping him back to reality.

It passed every night, just before dawn. He’d followed it over the course of a week – hiding in alleys and behind walls, while his living nightmare cycled on with that incessant tempo: *clack, clack, clack*.

Out of town he crept, stage by stage, out of his safety zone – if there was such a thing – to a field, a bridleway, where the featureless cyclist disappeared into a patch of woodland. The *clack, clack, clack* stopped and Jake fled.

And now, lying on his back in a chair, Jake could sense the arrival of the end. There had been no clues, no reason to follow, or even suspect – it was purely instinct. He knew the answers lay in the woods, and it wasn’t just Catherine that pulled him into a state of readiness, it was something deep inside him that was now alive.

Clack, clack, clack: it was coming. Gut-jerking electricity – *clack, clack, clack*; his breath came in heaves and splutters, a whirl of dread spinning inside his stomach – *clack, clack, clack*...

Jake was out of his chair no sooner than the horrific metallic rhythm had subsided. A pistol had taken up permanent residence in his jacket; he struggled into the sleeves, heading for the darkness.

“Coming to get you, I’m coming to get you.” Jake murmured to himself in time with his footsteps, as the road began to disappear behind him.

Going insane, Jake you’re going insane.

“Shut up! Coming to get you, I’m coming to get you.” He grappled with his brain.

Crazy as shit, Jake, you’re crazy as shit. Going insane – crazy as shit!

Jake suddenly stopped dead on the road and considered going back. His hesitation lasted all of four seconds, then he was back on the trail.

"I'm crazy as shit. I'm crazy as shit?" he murmured.

Clack, clack, clack, clack – all in your head, all in your head, it's all in you head and Catherine is dead.

"No!" Jake said. "No!" But his feet still carried him forward, one foot then the other, steadily.

Clack, clack, clack, clack – silly song, Catherine is gone, Catherine is gone – silly song...

The head chatter was not beating him. He reached the field and bridleway – his destination nearing; merely a half mile from his house, no distance at all.

And what are you going to find Jake? Crazy man, crazy man, Catherine is gone, crazy man.

Jake was upon the woodland and he entered with no thoughts of stealth. He felt he was being led there – why conceal himself?

Then the darkness gave way to a glow that propelled its way through the pine branches, reaching out to Jake with what felt like warmth – almost maternal. But there was a definite redolence to the hue; was it...blood?

Crazy man, blood in the woods, crazy man, blood in the woods...

Jake crashed on through the spiked pine branches towards the glow, his childhood monsters coming at him from all angles and a sense of bewilderment that this could be undetected so close to his home. "The police...why?"

He hit a clearing; the glow was brilliant at this point, rendering him almost blind. It suddenly faded.

As his eyes adjusted, Jake braced himself for some kind of onslaught. His eyes began to take in chunks of the scene, and the more he saw, the greater the scream that grew inside him tugged at his vocal chords.

"My God...my God...my God" Jake began to tremble violently and he vomited as he sank to his knees in a helpless bundle, his eyes never leaving the emaciated forms caged at close intervals around the clearing. The forms were women, but they could not be alive in their advanced states of physical ruin – surely not. Foul though the stench around him was, however, it was not the stench of death...

Jake stumbled towards the nearest cage and pulled a torch from his pocket. He shone it inside and vomited again at the site that greeted him. Barely human

eyes starred back, the skin was drawn tightly around the cheek bones and the woman was naked, except for a filthy pair of panties. Her breasts were none existent, just stretch marks where they once sat. The eyeballs bulged, purple veins intertwining with bloodshot whites. The pitiful creature struggled to inhale, a ghastly whistling sound emanating from inside its throat at every breath. Jake began to panic.

“My God...what are...why don't...?” He realised that the women made no sounds. Dried blood caked their mouths and saliva gushed down their chins forming streaks of clean skin through the grime – their tongues had been removed.

“Where are you, you bastard?” Jake was screaming now, rage winning its battle. He darted between four cages, illuminating the gruesome forms each time, before...

...He froze. The olive eyes of his wife starred back at him. She was unmistakable, despite the sickening signs of physical abuse and starvation. But if recognition was there behind the emptiness of her gaze, it was invisible.

“Catherine!” he screamed. He lunged at the cage in a frenzy, madness gripping his mind and transforming him into an explosion of hate and desperation.

His misery and sheer hysteria were such, that he neither saw nor heard the axe being swung towards his spine.

He hit the ground in a shocked, breathless bundle – agonizing pain beginning its macabre dance to the far reaches of his body.

The eyes of his wife met his, but there was no emotion. There was nothing.

Jake tried to turn his head to face his assailant – it would not move. The implanted weapon had rendered him unable to view any scene but the one inside the cage.

He felt blood streaming from his wound and gathering around the waist of his trousers. Helplessness and anger swamped him, but his brain ticked on sufficiently to present a solution – provided he could move his arms.

He gasped and his arm moved – slowly, but with enough steadiness. The fear and rage had gone and he felt peaceful.

“I'm here...baby, I'm here.”

His hand clasped firmly around the pistol's handle, and in a measured

FREEWHEELING

ROBIN HUTTON

movement – his mouth breaking into a victorious smile – Jake shot his wife through the head, seconds before the last breath left his body.

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Robin Hutton lives in Leeds with his fiance and writes to avoid soap operas. His work has appeared online at Gorlan Publications and he describes his writing as ‘A head on collision with that mischievous part of your brain that would happily leave you trembling in the corner.’

Another of Robin’s stories will be featured in the *Dark Reign* eBook anthology. Due to be published soon by Screaming Dreams.



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Rain fell dark.

Gip wheeled in to the car park, casting midnight diamonds high as the battered 4x4 trucked its way through puddle after puddle after puddle. A screech, a crunch, and the thing came to a juddered halt, sinking slightly in to the mud beneath.

Gip yawned a tiredness of miles of tarmac and no Red Bull. All that had got him through was a pocket-crushed case of rough-throat cigars, a six-pack of warm coke, a bag of double-cheese burgers, and a best-of CD collection that belonged in a juke box some side of hell. There was only so much Don Williams he could listen to, and with *Amanda... light of my life...* still rattling round his skull, he grabbed his bag, ripped the cab door open and spewed himself to the ground below.

The Inn growled down at him, eyes of windows burning through the steam of the rain like flickers of badly tuned TVs.

'The Fox Inn,' Gip muttered, and with collar gripped up, he cast a quick-step across the puddle-cum-car park, to the 'Vacancies' sign above a shadowed door sheathed in rain. The door yelled a rusted metal cry as he pushed through, shoulder in to wood, a heave, then from wet dark to damp glow of hall.

Glancing round, Gip wiped water from his eyes. It was an empty place filled with frills. The lights, the curtains, the walls, everywhere was dressed up to look like a cake serving-dish or an old woman's Sunday-best blouse that only the vicar ever got to see. Walking over to the New Arrivals desk, Gip glanced at the notice board to the right. It was a sad little window on Old Newton, a tableau of life in that small town. Advertises for a Hair Salon rubbed aside a sign for a book store that looked like it had been pinned up years ago; the pin was rusty, the writing faded, and asked only for 'Books of second hand nature, please, thank you.' Gip wondered at a book shop owned by someone who couldn't spell, never mind type, or indeed write a notice that made any sense. A large area of the board was given over to the 'Monthly Farmers' Market - Please Come!' sign. Below a motif of body-less bull and ancient tractor, listed numerous reasons to attend, from fresh meat to live chickens, honey, bread and cheese, as well as the occasional strange hand-written addition, such as 'Mary's back to read yur t-leaves!' and 'Come on and get some of Harry's ginger beer!' Gip reached out, his finger barely touching the paper notice, when a cough chipped in.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

DAVID GATWARD

'Yes, Hun?'

Gip turned to face an old woman under new make up. She smiled, revealing teeth laced with lip stick and a studded tongue. The stud rattled as the woman played it against her teeth.

'I've a reservation.'

'Name?'

'Stoar. My name's Gip.'

'Ah, yes, Mr Stoar...' stuttered the woman, looking up, her face crushed to a smile of furrowed fields. 'Yes, we have your reservation. Staying long?'

'Two nights.'

The woman jotted something down in an enormous, aging book that covered the entirety of the desk in front of her, the stud in her mouth rattling again.

'Work or pleasure?'

'Work,' said Gip. 'I'm researching the increase in popularity of farmers' markets, so I'm here for-'

The woman cut in.

'And the pleasure?'

She glanced up, playing her studded tongue over her partly open mouth.

'I'm not sure, really,' said Gip, unsure as to how to respond. The woman... was she coming on to him?

'Well, two days is a long time for some and not long for others,' said the woman.

Gip found his hand instinctively playing with his keys.

'Don't want your stay to be tiresome now, do we?'

Gip shook his head, words refusing to enter his mouth.

The woman handed him a room key.

'You're in room 16, first floor, straight down, on your right. My name's Joan... just dial six then nine and I'll be there, OK Hun?'

'Oh, er... yes, right,' stammered Gip.

Walking away, towards the stairs down the hall, Gip glanced back. Joan was staring at him, her eyes wider now, light dancing in them. And that clatter-clatter of the stud... it followed him, too.

The room was already prepared with patchwork quilt pulled back on the bed,

complimentary coffee and biscuits, a mini-bar stocked with 7-11 booze, and a TV that promised feedback, some interference and a broken remote control. Gip unzipped his bag, pulled off his jacket, and went to run a bath. The water spewing, he guided his feet to the window, split it open with a heave, and took in a breath of air. The rain scored direct hits, but Gip didn't mind – his closed eyes hid the world and the tiredness in his bones ached for the bath singing splashes to him from behind. One cigar sat alone in the packet in his pocket, but he decided on ignoring it, instead pushing the window to a crack, closing the curtains and turning to the mini-bar to twist open a double JD. He threw this to the bottom of a not-so-clean tumbler, and then topped it up with a beer, downed in one.

A knock at the door.

Gip hushed the bath, yawned, rattled a floor board.

Joan was at the door clutching a steaming pie and a quick-on-the-run hairdo styled by desperation and distant longing.

'I've bought you this, Hun.'

'It's a pie,' observed Gip, not quite knowing why.

'Apple pie,' corrected Joan, 'my very own. Hot and sweet, darling, like I'm sure you like it.'

Gip found it hard to ignore the terrifying innuendo of Joan's conversation.

'Thank you,' said Gip, 'but I'

He wasn't given time to refuse as Joan pushed past, in to his room, setting the pie on the table over by the bed.

'There's cream, too,' she said, and with a flick of her hand reached out, dipped a finger in it, and sucked it dry, eyes turning to Gip.

Gip shuddered, but smiled, politeness in him forcing the words, 'Thanks, that's very kind.'

'Not at all,' said Joan, drifting back to the door, glancing a leg-to-leg touch as she went past. 'You'll love my pie, I'm sure.'

Joan pulled the door behind and Gip knew he wouldn't make it to two nights.

The pie, Gip conceded, was delicious. The apple flavour was intense, perfumed, and filled the room with a scent of late summer. The cream was thick, cool and unctuous, cloaking the pie in silk. Though the pie had been large enough to feed a healthy family of five, between getting undressed and sinking in to the

bath, Gip and consumed half; by the end of the night, it was gone. From the bath, Gip took his tiredness to a heavy bed of down and blankets. It welcomed him, sucking him in, the weight of the covers pushing him down in to sleep hard earned by a road well travelled he wanted to forget.

Dreams haunted him that night. In darkness his world was filled with the perfume of the apples, of blossom and clover and grass, of dew in the morning and acorns. Everything felt so real and in it he wallowed and scrunched and snuffled. It was a dream of rolling around and growing full and lying in the sun. And it played him all night that scented phantom, dancing him a tale of senses sated.

Morning broke warm.

Gip, a stretch leeching the sleep from him, rose to see it. Light played across the floor through opened curtains and on the table by the bed no empty pie dish but a note saying, 'Breakfast – just 'phone thru, Joan.' The thought that Joan had been in that night while he was asleep both disturbed and amused Gip, as he rose from the bed to the bathroom. A woman her age should know better, or perhaps she did and just chose to ignore it.

Washed, dressed, breakfast call made, Gip sat waiting, reading his notes about the market. It was centuries old, apparently stretching back to what had originally been a yearly celebration of harvest, when the townsfolk would gather together for a feast. Gip had discovered a few scant references to not-so-healthy practices entwined with the festival, but as with all such ancient traditions, myth and legend played as much a part as hearsay and truth. He laughed; one story he'd found mentioned something about the pig run: a prize pig was selected then chased through the town, until finally it was caught and spit-roasted. The blood of the poor creature was apparently drained and drunk by the women, supposedly making them more fertile for the year to follow, in the hopes of new births in the year to come.

Knock at the door.

'Come in,' called Gip, still reading.

Joan entered behind a glittering trolley that only barely squeaked.

'You slept well, Hun.'

It was more an observation than a question; she *knew*.

Gip nodded, closing his notes.

‘What time does the market start?’

‘Why, whenever you arrive,’ said Joan, the studded-tongue licking her lips, eyes live.

Gip looked to her, his eyes questioning. It was an odd statement, but then Joan was blatantly odd. Mad even. It was probably her trying to chat him up. How horrific.

‘This is my breakfast?’ asked Gip, nodding at the trolley. ‘Looks... big.’

Joan, with a flourish, whisked away a bright white cloth that had covered the trolley to reveal enough food to keep Gip going for weeks.

‘I hope you like it, Hun,’ said Joan, backing away to the door. ‘Have to have you filled up today, don’t we? Can’t have you fading.’

The door closed behind her and Gip sat on the edge of his bed, dragging the trolley to him. It was a three-course breakfast. For starters there was a bowl of fresh, sliced apple and brie. For the main a plate of mushrooms, eggs, tomatoes, fried bread and beans with toast, and for pudding, a bowl of yogurt topped with nuts. A particularly large jug of fragrant apple juice sat by to chase it down.

It was a big breakfast. It lasted exactly 23 minutes and 14 seconds.

Chill air hastened.

Gip was outside, a bright sun slinking from horizon to high, clouds dusting speckles of white on the blue above. The rain of the night before had faded to grey in someone else’s day far off, and Gip stood happy now with the day ahead.

A finger tapped his shoulder.

‘It’s a cold day,’ said Joan, and before Gip could do anything about it, she’d wrapped a warm, snug scarf of red wool round his neck. ‘Don’t want you catching you’re chill now, do we?’

‘Really, I’m fine,’ said Gip, motioning to pull the scarf and hand it back.

‘You keep it, Hun,’ said Joan, smiling, ‘I’ll collect it later, I’m sure.’

‘But,’ said Gip, knowing he’d already decided to not stay the extra night, but Joan had turned and was gone.

With a shrug, Gip pulled the scarf tight, welcoming its warmth. It was indeed a cold day and he wasn’t about to worry about whether Joan would, at the end of the day, miss the scarf if he didn’t get round to handing it back. So hands stuffed deep in heavy pockets, he turned from the inn and walked

straight over to the Farmer's Market, where already life was in full-blood flow.

Animal breath everywhere.

Gip entered the Farmer's Market on a cloud of hooves-on-cobbles, chuckling bystanders, busy stall keepers and ripe smells. It was one huge organism, each part playing its own in keeping it alive.

Wandering stall-to-stall, Gip made his way from this to that, from liquid to solid, fermenting to fowl; it was a place where if it couldn't be eaten, it didn't belong. It was policed by people obsessed with food. They grew it, bred it, lived it. Their lives were their food, their produce. It was in the air, in their faces and, when Gip looked at them, it was in their eyes; a strange, vivid hunger gnawing at the day.

'What can I do you for?'

The voice was from a man short but wide, a face ruddy and worn.

Gip smiled, nodded, took in the man's wares; pats of cheese filling shelves.

'Try this,' said the man, handing Gip a not insubstantial milky orange chunk.

Gip took a bite. His mouth stung with taste; again that blossom, reminding him of the pie, the dreams he'd had, the juice from breakfast.

'Apple-smoked that is,' said the man. 'My own recipe, my own apples. Like it? My pigs do, though they only get the waste.'

'It's... delicious,' said Gip, and gobbled the rest.

'Thought you might like it,' said the man, smiling. 'I saw you come in yonder and I thought, "now there's someone what'll like the apples in this". I knows these things you see.'

Gip nodded, not really listening.

'I see you've yon Joan's scarf on there,' the man noted. 'She'll be taking that from you later.'

'She leant me it for the day,' said Gip. 'I'll give it back before I leave.'

'She's likes to put her mark on, does Joan,' said the man. 'Are you're marked now, you know.'

'I guess,' said Gip, trying to smile, not knowing what the man was getting it. 'How much is the cheese?'

The man told him and Gip parted with some cash for some of it, and continued to munch and crunch and snaffle his way through it as he continued on his way.

For the rest of the day Gip sniffed his way round the market, taking notes, talking with stall holders. It was an amazing place, ripe with taste, and the sun graced it with a faint warmth as it rose high then eventually started to sink. And all he spoke to noted the scarf round his neck so that, as it came for the time for him to eventually leave, Gip decided the best thing to do was hand it back to Joan, make his apologies and leave. And so he went back through the market, scrabbling his way through the hungry-eyed crowds, to the entrance across from the inn, evening now only a nod away.

The pig squealed.

Gip jumped as the animal darted in front of him chased by a small boy across the entrance to the market.

'Where you a heading?'

The voice came from behind Gip and he turned. The man was tall, dressed dark, a leather apron across his chest and legs. His hair was slick black and eyes mud brown.

Gip forced a smile.

'I'm heading home, it's been a lovely day and...' he fingered the scarf, '... I need to give this back to Joan.'

The man edged forward as did, Gip noticed, a few others.

'She'll be taking that from you herself soon enough,' said the man.

'Well I'd rather hand it back,' said Gip, and turned to head towards the inn.

The hand that clamped his shoulder stopped him dead.

Gip turned.

A crowd had now gathered and Gip felt suddenly alone. The faces he recognised; the stall holders from the market, the buyers and sellers, all were there, edging down through the market towards him, hunger in their eyes.

'I'm going now,' Gip said firmly and went to pull himself from the hand of the man in the leather apron.

'Then it's a chase,' the man said.

'Pardon?'

The man edged forward, unclipping a large butcher's knife from his belt. On hot breath he delivered one word: 'Run...'

A stumble took Gip backwards as edging towards him the crowd grew to a throng.

'What's wrong? What do you want?'

No one answered, everyone called: 'Run piggy run!'

'I don't understand! I don't...'

Panic took over then and, without a thought, Gip turned and fled.

Turning right up the main street he pelted, lungs crying, bones and muscles tearing to keep him in front of whatever came behind. Eyes streamed tears racing terror through his mind. What was going on? Why were they chasing him? Why had they called him a little piggy? What was happening? And so he continued to run, not looking back, but then no where; the street was blocked by more people, streaming from the sports complex ahead. From hair salons they came with hair in curlers and from the antiques shop clutching old clocks and bits of pottery, price tags still attached. Gip turned to face more and more and more as faces swam at him, the call of 'Run piggy run!' screaming and crying and slicing and splitting the air. Running one way to nowhere to another to another the crowd soon surrounded him, his every escape now no more than another arm or leg or body. And they closed in.

'Hello, Hun.'

Gip turned and Joan was there, smiling, her breath sweet in the air. She leaned in, kissed him, her mouth clamping down, the rattling of the stud in her tongue chasing his back down his throat, her hands gripping the scarf round his neck. When she pulled away, so too came the scarf, now hanging from her hands.

'Do you squeal, Hun?'

'What?'

'Do you squeal?'

The smile cut across Joan's face as hands pushed him to the ground. Then all was naked and pain and Gip did all he could to fight them off, to push them away, to stop it, to end it, but he couldn't.

And Joan rode the pig.

Rain fell dark.

It had been a long celebration. The crowds had milled and swollen and finally sunk to a few hangers on. In the centre of the market a fire now but embers sat smouldering, above it spinning the remains of the day, drifting down on a thin cast of rain. It had taken some time to catch the pig, but it had

finally been cornered. As with tradition, the throat had only been cut after the steel rod of the spit had been pushed through from tail end up through the mouth. The squealing had delighted the crowd, as had the gush of blood when the throat-cut was finally made. The drained blood had filled a good-sized urn and the women had come forward to drink their fill. None had been surprised by the fight the pig had put in at the end, though many had been impressed by the chase. The roasting had taken some time – this was no small pig – but the meat had pleased all, the crackling juicy, the meat sweet. Now the day had died and, like the feast, all was ended.

A man approached the spit and cut himself some of the meat; he knew his trade, being a butcher, and went for what was left of the rump. It steamed in his hand, and the fat crunched a scrunch between his teeth.

‘Not bad,’ he said, turning to the woman who’d sidled up beside him. ‘Not bad at all. Feed ‘em on apple and the meat’s as sweet, that’s why I always say.’

The woman leant over and tugged a morsel, slipping it down with a nodding smile of moonlight and fire, chasing it with a glass of the drained blood that laced her teeth with rivulets of crimson, some of it spotting her chin.

‘You can’t beat a good pig roast,’ she said. Then she wandered away from the fire, the red scarf round her neck tight against the cold evening, the stud in her tongue clicking against her teeth, and the memory of Gip a fresh warm taste in her mouth.

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Dave Gatward: son of a preacher man, collector of pipes and smoking paraphernalia, Dave's first book was published when he was 18. Among other things, he's working on a children's sort-of-horror series for Puffin due out in 2009.

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I don't believe in ghosts. Not in the way that most people think of them, anyway.

All those tales of nameless shadows at the top of the stairs, the sudden rush of air through an empty room, ashen faces at bedroom windows – all that stuff. It's all the same to me.

I don't believe in ghosts and I'll tell you why. The one I've met is a liar.

When Granny comes over, she likes to talk about her 'strange' experiences, trying to scare me witless.

"Listen," Granny would say, "there are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

She had quoted from *Hamlet* on several occasions, not realising her thirteen-year-old grandson easily caught the reference. We read Shakespeare in school, for Pete's sake. Went over it a hundred times.

She would tell me things then, about the *other place*, or the *world beyond*, or the *shadow realm* – spectral locations with the same corny sounding names, as though when you died, your soul fluttered off to some horror novel convention. Some of the stories were chilling, like the one about the phantom caravan or the thing in the pond. Others were vaguely humorous, like the one about the ghost who came home from the one-hour photo shop to find unexplained *living people* in the background of its snapshots.

For my part, I'd kneel on the rug, wishing I could turn on the TV but knowing that, if I listened, pretended to care, then maybe, just maybe, there'd be a tenner in it for me.

Yeah, I know, it doesn't make me look good, but there you are. I've heard so many of Granny's fibs I think it's best to be honest with you. You're not going to believe me anyway. How could you? I don't even believe it myself.

Oh, and before you ask, I'm not a ghost, because that would be stupid, wouldn't it?

Do ghosts type stories in Microsoft Word?

Exactly.

What I *am* is Benjamin Monks, thirteen, healthy, and most of all, *living*.

On this particular night, mum was off with the latest boyfriend and that meant only one thing. Granny had come over, taking up her knitting in the rocking chair, switching off the TV (I was missing 24 but what the hell – the things we do for pocket money, hey?) and after a sip of her sherry, launching

into another ghost story.

"When I was a girl," she began, as she always did, supernatural experiences being limited to the young, obviously, "me and my friends took a fancy to trying out a Ouija board. Do you know what a Ouija board is, Ben?"

"Is it like an ironing board?" I asked. Jesus. Like I didn't watch *Buffy*.

"No. It's a special wooden disc with letters on, whereby the dead may communicate with the living," Granny wheezed, impervious to sarcasm. "You summon a spirit, and by moving a glass over the letters, it spells out its name and you ask it questions."

It. Always *It*. The dead don't have gender, apparently. No fun in the shadow realms, oh no.

"Sounds...complicated..." I said.

"Not always," she went on. "Anyway, I remember the time we had a go on the board in my mother's old house, down by the canal. Summoned up something, and no mistake. The glass nearly danced off the table! It moved round and around, spelling out the same message, over and over – *Que Sera Sera, Que Sera Sera*. Are you familiar with the phrase?"

"It's a song, isn't it?" I said, remembering it from TV with dad, last year. "They used it before the penalty shoot out in the FIFA World Cup. Germany."

"It means 'whatever will be, will be'. And pish to football – it's Doris Day. One of my late husband's favourites," and Granny gave me a rendition, her voice decimating the melody:

*When I was just a little girl
I asked my mother, what will I be?
Will I be pretty, will I be rich?
Here's what she said to me.*

*Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours, to see
Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be.*

Then she sat back, misty eyed, looking rather pleased with herself. She

started clicking the knitting needles together again, humming; labouring over a garish jumper that looked frayed at the elbows, and stained, and similar to one I used to own.

I prayed to God that it wasn't my Christmas present.

"And?" I enquired, a touch irritably. It was bad enough having to listen to the story, I knew where it was heading – same place it always did – but now Granny was making me work for it.

"Oh, sorry dear," she muttered, "forgot you were there." Her eyes narrowed behind her spectacles, adopting the '*here comes the killer*' expression of storytellers everywhere. "Well, this was back before the War, you know. Your granddad had just starting courting me, bless his soul, and one night, he came over to my mother's house for dinner. Our parents were different than yours are today, none of this...*gallivanting*..." she waved a liver-spotted hand toward the front door, making it plain what she thought of her daughter's recent carryings on. "They liked to keep an eye on things, make sure your man was up to standards, manners and the like. Luckily, Henry was, so -"

"So he came over for dinner," I prompted, hoping to head off a tangent about Granny's love life, which she always described in soft focus, complete with orchestra in the background. Old people. They'll make you believe the War was a good thing.

"Yes, don't rush me, dear," she said. "Well, the point is, my mother was there at dinner too. I don't know why I said it, maybe just to scare them, maybe even to impress Henry, but I told them about the message on the Ouija board."

She paused for effect. Clearly disappointed by my steady gaze, she continued excitedly.

"My mother spat a mouthful of peas all over the table! Went pale as a ghost she did."

While Granny chuckled, I wondered why she always spoke of ghosts as 'pale'. No fun, no sun, in the shadow realms, apparently.

"I nearly jumped out of my skin," she confided. "'Mother, mother, what's wrong?' I asked. 'You look like you've seen the devil himself!' Well, mother said nothing, not for a while, not until we pressed her, and pressed her hard."

Another dramatic pause.

"What did she say?" I enquired, out of sheer politeness.

Granny leaned forward, clutching the knitting to her voluminous breast.

Her voice was hushed when she spoke, barely the scratch of a whisper.

"She told us about a little boy called Owen, and her hands were shaking like leaves in a gale. The little boy lived in my mother's house before she owned it, years ago. One of the Collington family. According to my mother, Owen died when he was five, drowned in the canal. The Collington's sold the house, moved away – took the old name of the place with them too. It was called –"

"*Que Sera Sera*," I breathed. Despite myself, I felt goosebumps pepper my skin.

Granny nodded, and sat back again, shaking her head at the unexplained world.

"So, Ben," she said, tapping the needles together, "you see, sometimes they come home, trying to tell you something."

"Like what? That they're not very good at swimming?"

Granny clicked her tongue. "No, silly. Maybe just to tell you they were *there*."

I snorted, flicked a glance at the silent TV, wondering what dangers Jack Bauer might be facing. But I knew what was coming next.

"There's another story," Granny said, in a quieter tone, with much less relish. "Another tale, if you're ready to hear it."

I bunched my shoulders, feeling uncomfortable.

"Gran, I'm not so sure. It's getting late, and I've got school tomorrow..."

"This one's about another boy," she whispered regardless, "who used to live in a different house. This very one, in fact. A few months back, the boy won the school poetry competition, and his mum and dad were delighted. The prize was only a tenner, but all the same, they were very proud. They had the banknote framed and everything. The afternoon of the presentation, the mum was at work, so the dad drove the boy to the school. They never made it. There was a car crash, you see, father and son both –"

Now I had definitely heard enough. I stood up, stretched, and made my excuses. I didn't care for pocket money anymore. With an apologetic smile, I kissed Granny goodnight and traipsed upstairs to my bedroom.

Well, one ghost story is enough for an evening.

Looking down from the top of the stairs, I'd like to tell you that Granny just faded away, or rose to her feet and drifted over the carpet, vanished through the mantelpiece or something. But that would be as much a lie as the one she'd been about to tell me.

No. Granny just sat there, shaking her head over the framed object sat on the table beside her. Sighing, she continued her work on the jumper, the stained one frayed at the elbows, similar to one I used to own.

It didn't matter that I'd attended Granny's funeral last summer. When mum went out on one of her jaunts, Granny always came over, with her tall stories about the *other place*, the *shadow realm*, sucking her gums while croaking her spooky vignettes.

I went to my bedroom and shut the door. There was an easy way to discover the truth of her tale. I'd type the town and the house name into my computer, the one dad had bought me last Christmas. It sat on the desk, draped in a sheet.

Failing that, I'd ask mum, and if she didn't know, I'd visit the library. I'd look for a boy called Owen, and a death by drowning. There had to be records somewhere, didn't there? Some proof of Granny's yarn? Even then, it could still turn out to be one of her fibs.

I sat down on the bed. The perfectly made bed, that these days, always seemed covered in dust. I stared at my hands. They did not look remotely pale.

I'll never let Granny tell me that tale, no matter how hard she tries. I don't care how many times she comes over. Even if mum ignores me forever and dad never comes home, I'll still refuse to hear it.

Granny's a ghost and she loves to tell stories, but I don't believe a word of them.

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J.W.Bennett is a British author of dark fantasy and the occasional contemporary fable. His debut novel *Unrequited* (written under the name James Bennett) is presently available on Amazon and has recently been nominated for a Best Debut Fiction award by the Lambda Literary Foundation (US). This present story comes from an old family tale and has its roots firmly in truth.

Further info is available via the [author's website](#)

Eric Kramer paced anxiously around the room which he used as his office. He carried a large book which he read from, only interrupting his perusal of the text to look nervously out of the window or to glance at his watch.

"Past midnight already," he muttered to himself.

Kramer was a writer; and in the course of his research for his current project, he had travelled far and wide. Yet he was not a tourist interested in seeing the sights of the world, but a man seeking knowledge, knowledge of the strange, knowledge of the occult.

His travels had lead him to places where obscure religions were worshipped, and magic and witchcraft practised, and now he was writing a book about what he had learnt concerning these extraordinary matters.

Of course there had been other books published on the subject, but they were old and rare, and written in a style difficult to follow. His book was to be a mass market paperback, accessible to the general public. It had been one of these old books that had got him started on the subject, *Nameless Cults* by Von Junzt. Kramer had found a copy, an English translation of a text originally written in German, in a dusty antiquarian book shop.

This had lead to him searching for further books on the topic, and tracking down some of the cults mentioned in them. But his delving had not been appreciated. He had meddled in things that he was not meant to know; and now forces were at work that meant to end his prying once and for all.

Kramer a man of average height, in his mid thirties, paused by his desk and added the volume he had been studying to the pile of similar old books that stood next to his word processor. From the shelf behind the desk he picked up a carved statuette. The grotesque idol, was both repulsive and hostile, and was some kind of alien hybrid of a winged and clawed man, with an octopus for a head, a representation of the god Cthulhu.

The writer poured himself another glass of whisky, and stared at the monstrous image. "He should have been here by now, if he was coming. Perhaps they have got him," he shuddered at that thought.

Kramer pulled another volume from the stack of books on his desk, this was the book that had got him into this business in the first place, the work of Freidrich Wilhelm Von Junzt. He opened it at the marked page, and read: "*Among those sects who worship Great Cthulhu are those known as the Disciples of*

Cthulhu. These brethren bare the mark of there lord, that takes the form of a hideous deformity, bellow the arms there are two extra limbs in the form of tentacles." Unfortunately this edition published by Bridewall in 1845, suffered from numerous spelling mistakes. Despite his agitation Kramer allowed himself a brief smile of amusement, it was a wonder that tentacles hadn't been misspelled as testicles. A woodcut depicting one of these multi-limbed men illustrated the opposite page.

When the bell rang, Kramer rushed to the front door.

"Who is it?" Kramer asked, as he tried to scrutinise the man on the doorstep, through the portal's spy hole.

"Mr Kramer, it's Johannes Heidendorff," the caller announced.

The visitor matched the description of the man he had been expecting, six feet in height, but surprisingly corpulent, in his sixties, white hair and pointed beard. Heidendorff was an occult scholar, and the great grandson of the Victorian occultist of the same name.

Eagerly Kramer opened the door, and ushered his guest in. "Come in, do please come in, I was beginning to fear that you would not arrive." Kramer led Heidendorff into his office, but was so on edge that he forgot the social niceties of taking his guest's coat, or offering him a drink, "It was good of you to come. I must admit; I was not very optimistic of receiving any aid."

"When I received your letter, I was extremely pleased to hear from you. I had to come." Heidendorff spoke with a slight Eastern European accent.

The two men stood looking out of the window; the moon was full. "At first I did not believe in any of it, I thought it was a load of mumbo jumbo. I originally intended mixing in all sorts of nonsense about UFOs and the Loch Ness monster and such like. Then I had a go at casting a spell, and I knew then, why these cultists take it seriously," Kramer told Heidendorff.

"Yes, of course, who takes magic seriously these days, originally you intended your book for cranks and weirdoes, but now you know better and wish to warn the world. You are familiar no doubt with Professor Geoffrey Slayden?"

Kramer swallowed nervously, "Yes, yes of course, poor fellow, he met a grisly end."

"As did Alhazred, Von Junzt, and so many others, but that is the risk one takes when attempting to expose the world to the activities of occult groups."

Heidendorff smiled.

Kramer turned to face Heidendorff, "I do not intend to meet the same fate," he replied.

"Your wards and protections have proved most effective so far."

"Yes, Prinn's book was extremely useful, but I am concerned for how much longer they will be of sufficient protection. That is why I decided that I must perform the ritual that I need your assistance with." Kramer crossed over to his desk, and picked up the book he had been studying earlier.

"I'm glad you did, because you see your defences were extremely comprehensive, and it was unlikely that we would have been able to breach them."

"What? What did you say?" cried Kramer as he span round to face Heidendorff.

"Yes the only way for one of the disciples of Cthulhu to get past the safeguards that protected you and your home, would be for you to invite them in." Heidendorff had removed his coat, underneath he wore no shirt.

Eric Kramer dropped the book and screamed in horror at the sight of the true form of Johannes Heidendorff, disciple of Cthulhu. The woodcut and Von Junzt's description had not been completely accurate. The tentacles were present, but Heidendorff's torso also had an eye upon his chest, and a mouth in his abdomen.

As he met his grisly fate, the writer's cries turned to screams of agony, until a tentacle wrapped around his throat silencing him forever.

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Visit the [Mortbury Press](http://www.mortburypress.com) website for more information about the *Black Books*.

MINTAS AND FRANKIE

GREGORY HALL

Dennis made eleven. Eleven guys who wound up dead. Teena couldn't complain. The twins killed those that deserved it and Teena did the cleanup. It was only fair. After all, they were doing it for her. Teena wiped away the tears and took in the night air. She wasn't afraid anymore. It was good to be loved.

She had thought Dennis might be the one. Mintas and Frankie warned her. They didn't trust him much from the start. Sure, he was polite and courted Teena for quite a while before they entered the physical phase of their relationship. He even took her to his church last Sunday. But the Girls knew it was just a matter of time before he showed his hand. They always did. It was only a question of when they would reveal their true intention. Some dumbasses thought any time from first date on was good to spring their dirty little demands on a woman. Smart guys like Dennis knew to wait until after their prey was completely seduced and trusting.

The only flaw to the plan was Mintas and Frankie were smarter. And where Teena went, they followed.

Dennis arranged a quiet weekend away at his secluded cabin. Because Dennis liked to make videos. Demanded Teena get in front of the camera. It made her feel very uncomfortable. He spun his single-minded request every which way. Come on, everyone does it. It would be fun. You're so beautiful. Stop being such a nun! Take your clothes off and just do as I direct you!

When it didn't work, Dennis got angry. Shoved Teena. Ripped her sweater. Yelled out 'Do It!' and threw her to the bed he had preset with various sex toys. She started to panic and did as she was told. She took off her top and began to cry. Dennis slapped her. Told her to behave. He screamed with his face inches from hers. It was his last mistake.

He saw Frankie from the corner of his eye. He jumped back but Mintas smashed in Dennis' temple. Blood sprayed out of the pervert's nose. Frankie finished the job.

A smile fluttered across Teena's lips as she scrubbed the last of the blood stains from the bedroom floor. Usually the twins simply snapped a neck or strangled their prey but tonight things got a bit out of hand. Dennis figured out too soon that something was wrong and put up a hell of a fight. Things got nasty. So there was extra blood and some vomit this time around. Teena didn't mind. She knew for the first time in her lonely world that she had two beautiful

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friends who truly loved her. And she was very attached to them.

Mintas and Frankie came into her life almost a year ago. My God how the time had flown. And how much Teena had changed. She had always been conservative by nature. The prototypical wallflower. And things didn't get any better after Jimmy broke up with her. Staying home on too many Saturday nights or winding up the girl that kept the 'ugly friend' occupied while her best buddies wound up with the dream men. Teena had been pushed to her limit and beyond. On the wrong side of thirty, something had to change.

Then she met the Girls. There was nobody like them.

Mintas and Frankie introduced her to everybody who was anybody. She had the instant VIP pass. Any friend of Mintas and Frankie's could be a friend of hers.

They immediately taught her self improvement was the key. You are what you make yourself. If you don't like something about yourself, in today's world why would you keep your flaws? Sure, it took some time and money but they gave Teena more confidence than she ever knew she could have.

Laser surgery took away the librarian glasses forever. Teeth whitening. Regular tanning bed sessions. And of course she would be nothing without the noticeably large breast implants. By the time she got her new hot and aggressive hairstyle, Teena was Hollywood Sexy. Jimmy would have killed for her now.

Almost immediately she saw the change. At work, heads turned whereas before she was completely invisible. Teena loved all the attention she was receiving. No more turtlenecks or pants suits. Nope. Discretely low cut blouses and shorter skirts. If you got it, flaunt it, she learned quickly. Some of the guys were more verbal about what they liked while most tried to sneak a peek when she walked by. Of course, stopping to pick up a pencil or leaning over their desks helped capture their admiration.

She even got her first big raise since she changed her outlook on life. Coincidence? Hardly. But she was only playing the game the way the rest of her competition did. That's how Lisa Gretch climbed up the company ladder so fast. She was the frequent addition to many a crucial out-of-state meeting. Rumor had it she had slept with at least nine people in upper management. Teena wasn't that desperate, at least not yet. For now, the leering and uncomfortable shifting in chairs was enough to feed her ego.

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Still, the proposals came in. Dates. Parties. Weekends away. Teena had her pick. And the sex...In the past, it was a chore for Teena, something a girlfriend was supposed to do. She could count the times she had sex on two hands. Not the different men. Actual times. The majority with Jimmy. Seven times in two years. No wonder he left.

But something about this new body, this new look and this new attitude made that difficult portion of her adult life disappear. Now she not only enjoyed sex, she craved it.

Of course, she wouldn't be having sex at all if it wasn't for Mintas and Frankie. They made it all happen. Broke the ice and did all the talking. They only had one rule. Some times they liked to watch. Other times they liked to join in.

Teena didn't mind that at all.

What a fool Dennis was, she thought to herself. He had no idea the fun I could have introduced him to sexually. The fun the Girls could have introduced him to sexually. He only wanted his dirty little videos.

Teena pushed him down the coal shoot and called it a night.

The trip home took far longer than Teena wanted but she had to be careful. Mintas and Frankie always preached covering their tracks. By the time they got back to Teena's apartment, everyone was exhausted. Still, it had been a good weekend.

Teena fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillows. And as it happened more often than she cared to admit, her dreams drifted off to Jimmy. Two years together. It wasn't that the time was filled with magical memories but when it's the only long term relationship you've had in your adult life, there's nothing else to compare it against. So she was left with unfulfilled dreams of her one and only one boyfriend long gone.

Jimmy was a big man, built like a football player. He actually played in college, not that Teena was ever a fan. In fact, they didn't have much in common except desperation. Jimmy was fresh out of Detox and broke. Searching for some kind of stability to help him get back on his feet. Teena was stable and looking for anyone to pay attention to her.

They made a strange couple. He wore nothing but flannel and jeans. Had a long pony tail like he was a card carrying member of Lynard Skynard. She dressed like a greeter at a Republican Convention and enjoyed romance novels.

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Jimmy said why read about it when you can do it. And Teena, well, she was as Jimmy painted her when they broke up. Frigid.

But Jimmy liked it dangerous and that just wasn't Teena's style. If they had spent more time in her bedroom and less time in parking lots outside of strip clubs or nightclub bathrooms, maybe Teena wouldn't have said no so often. By the time he had started using again, Teena was done with men. She didn't have sex again until after she decided to change her life...four years later.

Since that time she had sexual relations at least two dozen times. With eleven different men. All dead now.

Sundays were special at Teena's apartment. She liked to sleep late, usually to shake off the naughty bit of hangover she achieved from the previous party night. Of course there was no hangover from last night. Nothing that a solid scrub-down in the shower couldn't cure.

The Girls were wide awake by the time she got out of the steamy bathroom. They all sat down to breakfast.

"Are you okay with what we did to Dennis last night?" Mintas asked full of concern.

"You know the pig had it coming, right?" Frankie cut in with her slight Baltimore accent. "You know the pervert had to go?"

Teena quickly nodded as she chewed her wheat toast. "I know. I'm completely cool with what happened. It was a lot messier than usual..."

"Asshole saw me coming! We had to take him down!"

"Frankie, let her talk." Mintas said as the voice of logic. "She knows what happened. She was there."

"No, everything is good. I just thank God you two were there! Who knows what would have happened if you weren't? He was getting pretty rough with me. I probably would have done his videos to make him leave me alone."

"And wound up all over the internet."

"I know, Frankie. I know." Teena kissed the twins. "I would be totally lost if it wasn't for my two best friends."

"You know, our problem wasn't in the filming of your naked beauty, Teena. You *should* be proud of your body." Mintas comforted as she rubbed Teena's cheek. "But what that sicko wanted was not sexual. It was dominance and disrespect. And you're too much of a lady to be treated like that."

MINTAS AND FRANKIE

GREGORY HALL

"Do you think I'm beautiful?" Teena coyly asked her roommates. "I'm serious. Not trying to be a compliment whore but I'm really trying to improve myself. I want to be done forever with Princess Wallflower. I want Angelina Jolie."

"I think you are as close to Hollywood gorgeous as a woman can be"

"Mintas is right. You are incredible, hon. Why just look at all the men who have fallen head over heels for you!"

"Fallen head over heels over us," Teena smiled as she raised her orange juice glass in a toast.

There was a knock at the door. Teena's eyes quickly shifted to the wall clock. It read 10:23 AM. Who would possibly be at the apartment this early on a Sunday? Not a good sign. Teena nervously got up from the kitchen table.

"Just be calm and cool," Mintas directed. "Nobody knows anything."

Teena made her way to the front door trying to keep her knees from shaking. Had they pushed their luck too far this time? Was somebody looking for Dennis? Did someone make the connection all the way back to Teena and the twins?

She looked through the peephole. Her heart stopped.

It was an all too familiar face.

"Oh my God," Teena gasped. "Girls, allow me to introduce you to Jimmy."

She opened the door and stepped back. There he stood in his full flannel glory.

"Hello, baby. Been a long time," his grin cheated through his trimmed goatee. "Can I come in?"

Teena slid off to one side and gestured him inside. "Um, yeah. A long time, Jimmy. Four years. How did you find me?"

"Ran into Newton down at the Target in Perry Hall. He said he saw you at a Christmas party. You told him you lived out here now."

"Yes. Newton. He's dating one of the girls at my office. Small world." Teena scratched her neck nervously. "I was uh, just finishing up breakfast. Would you like some coffee or something?"

"That would be great." Jimmy was already across the living room before he finished his sentence. He tossed his jacket onto Teena's couch. He didn't even notice the twins or for that matter, the new Teena at all. He disappeared into the kitchen.

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“Charming,” Mintas whispered as they heard the refrigerator door open in the other room. “Teena...?”

“It’s okay.” Teena said with a shaky voice. “It’s just the way he is. It’s okay.”

They walked into the kitchen and Teena cleared her throat. Jimmy had his head in the fridge and was shifting things around on the shelves.

“Damn, baby. Ain’t you got no bacon? Sausage links? I can’t even find fucking eggs in here...”

“Um, I’m a vegan, Jimmy. I’m much healthier now. I don’t eat meat anymore.”

“That’s not what I heard.” He pulled his head out and leered over his shoulder. He added a rude chuckle.

“Um, a lot of things have changed in the past few years, Jimmy. Um, hey, I’d like to introduce you to my two friends. This is Mintas and Frankie.”

Jimmy took an exaggerated step back and rotated his hands in an obscene attempt at humor. “Oh, hello girls. Jimmy like.”

“Scum.” Frankie growled.

Teena nudged her roommate. “Um, what are you doing here, Jimmy? I mean, um, why did you stop by? After all this time?”

The country stud swaggered towards her. “Well, for one thing I missed you. And I know you’ve missed me. For another, I heard you kinda changed since we split. Heard you run around a bit now. I wanted to see that for myself.”

Jimmy planted a hard kiss on Teena’s lips. She could taste the liquor on his breath but she didn’t fight him. In fact, Teena melted. He put a hand on her breast and she knew Frankie was about to pummel the ex-boyfriend. Teena shuffled to one side and shielded Jimmy from harm.

“I don’t mind saying, baby, I do like what I see,” his bloodshot eyes blatantly undressed her, stopping on her impressive cleavage. “You know I’ve always been a tit man. And you definitely didn’t have those when we were a couple.”

“Like I said, Jimmy, I have been through a lot of changes. And I like who I am now. I’m not the same gump you left behind.”

“So you’re not so frigid anymore? You know, I still think you’re one of the best lays I ever had. The few times you let yourself get into it.” He let his gaze scrape over her tan legs and arms. “Like the new hair too. That color suits you. I like redheads. Carpet match the drapes?”

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Now Teena could feel Mintas anger joining Frankie's. She knew everyone needed a chance to calm down quickly. She gave her best inviting smile, exactly the way the Girls taught her. "Well, if I had any carpet I'm sure it would. Jimmy, I'm going to ask you again. Why are you here?"

The rough boy was slightly taken aback by his ex's new brashness and confidence. He stood speechless for a moment and then answered as asked.

"I thought we might give it another shot. I know what we had was very special. We helped each other out a lot when we needed it most. And, uh, I need you again."

Teena and the Girls stared him down. There it was. The truth.

"You wouldn't happen to have your bags in your car, would you, Jimmy?"

"Uh, yeah. I do. I kinda do. I mean that wasn't why I stopped by. I just wanted to see if you still thought about me."

Teena leaned up against the door frame and let her robe fall open slightly. She saw no hesitation in Jimmy's eyes as they locked onto her naked skin underneath.

"Go get your bags, Jimmy."

Jimmy's face jerked to one side as if he was slapped. "You...are you serious? I can move in?"

Teena moved out of the way and gestured towards the door. Her left breast became exposed all the way to the top of her rose colored nipple.

Jimmy swallowed hard and hurried to get his bags.

The Girls waited until he was down the hall before they spoke.

"Are you crazy?" Frankie snapped. "This guy? He's using you, Teena!"

"She knows that, Frankie." Mintas interrupted, calming things down. "Teena, are you doing what I think you're doing? What we've taught you? Please tell us you are not letting this alcoholic scum move in with us."

"He's the ex-love of my life. The only guy who gave a crap about me before I went through my change. Don't you think I owe him something?"

Mintas wanted to believe Teena was grounded but she had her doubts. And Frankie, it was all she could do from busting out and going insane. Still, they had to trust Teena. They had done too much work on her to think some male slime-ball like this Jimmy was going to ruin their perfect world. The Girls had to stick together.

Jimmy came back and found Teena and her new buddies gone. What a pair

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those two were, he thought. His mind ran wild with images of the three of them rolling around together in pure female bliss. There was no doubt Teena made far more changes to her rigid past than she would show publicly. With that new look and new attitude, alone in an apartment like this? Teena definitely swung both ways. And that was absolutely fine with Jimmy. He was going to like living here.

He saw the bedroom door was open and wandered inside. The lights were set low and there on the bed was Teena. The robe was gone. He dropped his bags next to her dresser drawers.

"No, naughty boy. You sleep in the guest room down the hall. You don't get to sleep in here."

"Oh, okay. I guess I'm confused..."

"This is where the Girls and I sleep. You only get to visit. You have to earn your way in here," Teena purred. "You don't mind if they watch, do you? They like to watch me."

Jimmy felt dizzy from all the blood that rushed away from his brain. "Um, I like the Girls very much. Um, don't remember their names. Sorry. But yeah, they can definitely watch. Do I get in bed now?"

Teena crawled up on all fours and leaned towards her man. "Toss the bags into the hallway. Then come here and kiss me. And the Girls."

Jimmy saw Teena's soft pink tongue snake into a wet kiss with Frankie. The bags landed outside.

"I want you to keep those pants on for right now. My house. My rules. You have to please me and my friends first. Without your 'manhood'. Then you get your reward. Think you can do that?"

Jimmy nodded anxiously and climbed into bed. Teena laid flat on her back and pointed. "My toes. You must start kissing at my toes and not miss an inch of this gorgeous body I'm offering to you. Now worship me."

Her ex began doing as told, working his way up Teena's ankle and leg slowly. Teena moaned, not from the physical pleasure but from the power. Just like Mintas and Frankie taught her.

As he reached her most private area, Teena seductively slid her well manicured fingers in the way. "I'll handle this. You show my Girls what an excellent kisser you are."

Jimmy moved up in bed and stared at Mintas and Frankie. They were

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almost identical twins. Every fantasy come true. Jimmy couldn't care less which one he picked first. He was going to be nailing both soon enough anyway. His mouth went to work on Frankie, Teena's kiss with her still fresh in his mind.

"May I?" Mintas whispered to Teena.

"Isn't that why we're here, my love?" Teena gasped erotically. "It's my turn to watch."

Almost on cue, Jimmy buried his face into Teena's huge cleavage. Suddenly, Mintas clamped onto one side of his head, Frankie the other. Jimmy started to struggle as his oxygen cut off. The twins held tight and continued to smother him. Jimmy's arms flailed about wildly.

"There, there, my ex-lover. Don't fight it." Teena soothed him as she ran her fingers through his long hair. "Let my Girls do their work."

Jimmy's fist found her cheek and Teena reeled from the blow. She growled and pulled his hair, shoving his face deeper into her hungry cleavage. "Now you're pissing me off, Jimmy! You free-loading drunken asshole! You think I'm something to be used and thrown away? I am a *woman*, goddammit!"

Jimmy lifted his huge body off the bed and Teena came off with him. But still the twins held strong. His muffled curses filled the room. The bed started to jump, banging hard against the carpeted floor. Teena knew it was only a matter of time before the neighbors below would come upstairs or complain to the landlord.

"Jimmy, please! Can't you even die like a man?"

The giant did another push up and then hurled himself onto his back. Teena and the Girls flipped with him. Mintas and Frankie let go for only a second. Jimmy saw them coming again. He screamed.

Mintas and Frankie grabbed and twisted.

Jimmy's neck sounded like a large tree branch snapping loose during a violent wind storm. He twitched once and then his body collapsed lifeless next to Teena.

The Girls glowed with happiness and pride as Teena casually rolled their latest victim to the side. She raked her fingers over her chest and felt orgasmic shockwaves ripple from head to toe. "Oh, I love you so much, Mintas. I love you, Frankie."

She knew her breasts, her best friends, loved her too.

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"You know we've always said never kill in your own domain."

"Don't spoil the mood, Mintas. I couldn't ask for a more beautiful start to the day." Teena exhaled as she shoved Jimmy off the bed. He landed on the floor with a thud. Teena didn't care. "We should celebrate our new direction."

"What new direction?"

"I think Teena is talking about the fact that dearest Jimmy here is not like the other eleven." Mintas expounded.

"He's not?"

"No, he's not, Frankie." Teena boasted as she slid her underwear back on. "You had to save me from the others. You always acted in my defense."

"And today, Teena planned this one out all by herself."

Frankie jiggled. "Oh, that's beautiful."

"Our little girl has finally arrived, my twin."

Teena stood in front of her wall mirror and cupped her gorgeous breasts. How life had changed since she got Mintas and Frankie. Best suggestion she was ever given. And oh, the glorious future they had together now. So many men out there to punish and remove from this sex obsessed world. Teena was no longer a victim who had to be protected. She was the hunter. And Mintas and Frankie were the ultimate killers.

For what man could resist huge perfect breasts?

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Gregory L Hall has been a professional writer for the theatre for over a decade. He's won a national Telly Award and is the creator/producer of the annual Baltimore Comedy Fest. As a horror writer, he has recently finished his first novel, *At the End of Church Street*. His short stories can be found in *Twisted Tongue*, *Static Movement* and *Blood Moon Rising*.

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As previously conjectured, the creature now in flight across the enclosed area was a form that appears in several surveys, and has been sighted at almost every land mass visited. The form in question (W54) is generally found to be no more than 8 units in length. The thorax is of a varying shade of grey (mainly #000543 and #000537 - see the charts found in the appendix to the study entitled *Light and Colouring* - the updated version of which has recently been released via the usual channels) in contrast the lower part of the abdomen which is yellowish (#664466). Its eyes are of the more usual compound variety, and red (in this case #984657). The entire body has a fine hair covering. As well as six legs (which allow it to operate effectively on any surface, whatever its relation to the ground itself) W54 also has a set of wings, which allow it to travel in the manner it was employing at this point in the time period with which this report is concerned. It has been noted elsewhere that the W54 appears to carry and transmit a wide range of diseases which are on occasion debilitating to many of the other forms found in the same environment. Amongst the symptoms which are believed to be caused by these afflictions (in particular the effects on B7 forms, which are thought to be an area of prime importance for future study) are an easily measurable raise in temperature, an increase in the voiding of waste, the appearance of a lack of energy, loss of mass and in some cases changes in the colour of skin in the form of a reddish rash. Not all these symptoms are apparent in a single individual B7 studied, and there were signs of other symptoms in some which may or may not be related to this matter. Although many theories are at the moment in general circulation, pointing to many diverse paths of future investigation, there is not at yet any consensus of opinion on what may turn out to be an extremely important area.

In the troposphere all forms of life (except for those who dwell in the huge liquid environment available) are able to exist on a mixture of nitrogen (as much as 78%), oxygen (20.95%), argon (0.93%), carbon dioxide (0.038%) as well as tiny amounts of other, as yet unidentified gasses, and around 1% of the vapour of what appears to be the same fluid that was proven to play an essential role in the production of the spectacular electric displays the surface environment was sporadically exposed to. Testing shows that areas containing a greater amount of this vapour are somewhat lighter than 'drier' parts of the troposphere. Separate articles on the troposphere (as well as those concentrating on the stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, ionosphere and

the exosphere) have been recently completed and distributed, so there is no reason to repeat any of the same information here.

The creature's flight was completed by its landing on one of the vertical surfaces of the enclosed area. This particular area was covered with a thin sheet of pulped organic matter, regularly patterned. Our studies have brought to light the fact that there exist seventeen distinctly separate such pattern arrangements to be found in many variations of colour and form found in a large number of similar (in some respects) enclosed areas. No significance can, at this point, be given to the appearance here of the number seventeen.

The adjacent vertical plane to the landing point of the W54 is, by surface area, approximately 40% transparent. The material used is a vitreous solid, a non-crystalline substance which also, somewhat inexplicably, appears to have many properties of a liquid, albeit a relatively slow-flowing one. The transparent area in this particular case is divided into three equal rectangles. Each consists of two sheets of the vitreous solid, sealed in place in such a manner as to contain a layer of the gaseous oxygen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide mixture mentioned previously. The general effect of this appears to be that of a rather inefficient insulation system. Also, a tendency to mute various frequencies of sound wave from without to within, and vice versa, has been noted. Tests have shown that whilst there are indeed important variations between the atmosphere of the interior and exterior environments, these have a generally minimal effect on the majority of the forms so far studied. Two of these rectangular plains appear to feature a mechanism at the side of them which would allow them to be opened outwards, although for what purpose it is not known, as to do so would appear to defeat the purpose of the whole construction

The floorspace of the enclosed area was made up of a material which we have found to be the commonest non-naturally occurring substance in the areas covered by our surveys. Comprising of a combination of oxides derived from aluminium, silicon and calcium, it also contains gypsum, limestone and sand. This is covered by a layer of fibrous material, a densely packed surface made up of tiny loops of a polypropylene based solid in the form of thin strands of less than 0.05 units in thickness, fastened onto a woven base. In this case, the resulting covering appears as a dark blue colour (#440052).

Amidst the loops of this covering can be found a varying number of the

form A631. This is a form which generally measures around 0.004 units in length and approximately 0.003 units in width. The main mass of this creature is roundish and elongated. Movement is achieved by the use of eight separate limbs, similar in some ways to those of other forms in the A grouping, although not to be confused with them, as observation has proved them to be of an entirely separate different species. The A631 is covered by a finely ridged cuticle, presumably for protection purposes. Relatively small changes in temperature or atmospheric humidity can cause termination of life in this form, but this does not prevent them from being found in massive numbers where conditions are adequate for their survival. The A631 thrive on organic debris, especially that which is shed at a steady rate by form B7 beings. As it has only a remarkably basic digestion system, the A631 produces a variety of fungal matter which it deposits upon the material to be 'eaten'. This breaks down the material to the point where the A631 can make use of it. The A631 then consumes it, defecates it, and repeats the process until all possible nourishment has been extracted.

Placed on top of the flat horizontal plane of object T4448 (ref:07, along with all other stationary objects found and studied within the enclosed area which are not directly relevant to the current report) is a rectangular device, the front of which is made from a similar material to that of the transparent areas of the vertical planes of the enclosed area. This device is familiar from many other studies, so is only described briefly here. Suffice to say that the clear front, in this case of 1000 units in height and 1200 units in width, is used to display a varying pattern made up from rapidly renewed pixel arrangement of 600 by 800 (approx). The device also produced a variety of sound waves, which are outside the remit of this report.

At a distance of 7670 units from the display device are to be found a group of three almost identical examples of the object group designated C1. Each of them was of a light brown colour (#735846) and a full description of the materials of which they consist can be found in section 45 of the document C:07.

An example of the form B7, sub-category M/C was currently occupying the central C1-type object. This particular B7 was, at various points on its anatomy, sported what may well be protective coverings of some kind. The materials of each (and some are worn in layers) differ, as do shape, colour and general design. Surveys from all sites show some variation on these items to be found

at every point studied, and much more research is still to be done in this field, especially as to whether there is any specific purpose between the differing designs.

To one side of the B7 form lay a smaller electronic device. It is of a silver colour (#747499), and its shell is formed from one of the many acrylonitrile butadiene styrene products often found in the survey area. The surface of this device that faces upwards contains 32 buttons, each displaying a small symbol printed in black to signify its purpose. These buttons are of a related, but more pliable, material to the rest of the construction.

Inside the casing are two cylinders 40 units long, each containing zinc chloride.

The B7 form had one of his two prehensile body parts, the left one, (there is generally one on either side of the B7 forms trunk, where they serve as the termination point for their upper anterior limbs) upon the small silver device. One of the five digits which make up this particular body part rests on one of the 32 buttons, the fourth one on the second row. The skin-and-cuticle protected distal phalange of this digit was observed to exert some pressure on said button.

On this physically given command, the device performed what is believed to be its proper function. At the end of the device, the front of which was pointed in roughly the same direction as the B7 form was facing, a beam of near infra-red light (which we believe to be beyond the range of the B7's optical equipment) was fired from a form of primitive diode. This beam crossed the enclosed area and struck the solid surface materials of the rectangular display device mentioned earlier. The observable effect of this light emission was to cause the display device to appear to shut down entirely for 0.0056 t/u, before returning to life, showing an entirely new set of patterns, which had no connection whatsoever with what it was displaying previously. Also of interest, although strictly speaking outside the remit of this report, it was observed that the sound waves produced by the display device changed entirely at the same time.

At 2.09 t/u after the above event, the W54 form was seen to disengage from the pulped organic covering of the vertical plane of the enclosed area in question which it had occupied for much of the duration of this section of the observation report. Reverting to the use of the set of wings mentioned above,

the W54 headed in the direction of a transparent, vitreous solid sections of the vertical plane.

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It was too hot and bright and the veterans were hitting on her friends. She kicked a rock out of boredom. Her arms were folded in front of her chest and she had a scowl on her face. Her parents boasted it was beautiful today.

"And that's where we'll be." They were showing their neighbours, who were not fortunate enough to be granted acreage, an unassuming little hill. Covered in tall emerald grass until a few years ago it had been charred black.

"Oh, they're going to love it here!"

She could have laughed. Her parents had anticipated that she would derive pleasure from planting trees in the soil, digging a pond for fish. As a child she had. In many beaming pictures of her as a fat faced toddler, looking up from towering over a puny sapling or a trembling bunny.

"Yes," her parents said. "It's going to be lovely."

"And we're going to have neighbours," her mom added. "A couple of nice families."

The McNaughtons, the...what was their names again? Downbelowers: stupid, thick and weird. On the surface for as long as her family had been above it. Supposed to be here today. She sat on the ground. The wind was abrasive against her skin; she shivered. Above she sat the dots of the redoubts. She tried to pick out which one was hers.

Her family made the pilgrimage to the surface somewhat more frequently than others. On the obligatory two days of Landfall and Hostility's End and on the corresponding anniversaries for the battles important to her family. Today was the anniversary of the day the settlers were forced to do the almost unthinkable.

"Emily, come here please! Grandpa's unit is coming!"

She sighed. She got up. She brushed herself off and walked towards her family.

They were beaming. They were wearing their finest. Which happened to be black and could not be made dirty under extreme penalties. She walked over to her parents, included back in her family and the discussion.

"So, Emily, what do you think of getting an acreage?"

"It's fine," she lied. She tried to look at least somewhat happy. It wasn't like she had a choice in the matter.

"Yes, it'll be fine for a young person," her father droned, "to grow up on the surface. As it was intended."

Emily smiled, nodded and hoped the conversation would end soon.

But they droned on. The same thing, over and over again, about how wonderful it was.

She sighed. The very openness of the landscape seemed to chill her.

And eventually the course of the conversation turned to the war, and how horrible it was. If her grandfather were here there would be no end of it.

“Not much older than Emily, matter of fact...”

“Yes, it must have been so horrible, trying to make a clean start when...”

“Especially since the Xenos...”

“Who were doing nothing until we arrived. And we did exterminate them.”

Enough to maintain a healthy level of tension between she and her parents: biting, but short of a full-scale argument.

Her father gave her a look of disapproval. “Well, we lost control over most of the planet by that point,” he said. “But here’s dad, he can tell it!”

He grandfather approached. He wore his old olive army uniform, laden with ribbons and medals. He was a foot taller than Emily and about her age.

“Hello there,” he said.

Her parents ahhhed and rushed to embrace him.

To be a veteran was to have conferred upon you a sort of admiration previously reserved for the gods of Olympus. Except on the two major days everyone observed and the two in particular her family revered she had seen very few. Hardly any in the redoubts but working the last scattered patches of arable soil, something that was supposed to grant almost unachievable esteem.

“Emily!”

She smiled, walked over. She hugged him. “Hi, grandpa!”

“We were just talking about the wars!” her younger brother chirped. *Oh God, not this, not now.*

“Well now, about what?”

“I think the Xenos,” her brother said. “What were they like?”

There was footage of them. There were pictures. Tangible evidence was scarce, but it existed. Her grandfather struggled to think for a way to trump all of that.

“I remember when I saw my first,” he boasted. “I was just a hair under Emily’s age.”

Emily hated being dragged into this. It was bad enough she was coming

down here---too hot when it wasn't too cold, on a knife-edge between light and dark, *gravity* for goodness' sake. He could leave her out of his recollections, thank you very much.

He gestured to the horizon. "It was like a jellyfish, only larger. And bright: I will never forget the brightness."

His finger was raised above the horizon in a forty-five degree angle. There was little around to serve as a reference point; in the air he tried to invoke the size of the creature.

In the footage they always seemed so passive. Obviously they were intelligent but strangely indifferent to the various human efforts to communicate with them. At first a curiosity, then a nuisance when inevitably they interfered with the colonists' machinations. And of course it was the *colonists* who fired the first shot.

But grandpa was still tracing its shape in the air. Her brother followed enrapt; her parents were indulgent. "I stood and watched it for over four hours. It looked so beautiful."

Grandpa was lucky to miss out on the major battles. He explained: "Well, not long after I was in uniform. But I was so young."

He turned his back to the horizon. He walked over to the monument. A stage had been set up. It was draped in flags and banners. The band was still tuning their instruments in impractical uniforms that must have been murder to wear. People milled about its base.

And grandpa walked, arm outstretched. He named for some of the chiseled names near the top.

"Yes, fine boys and girls all," he said.

Because of the nature of the colonist's final, desperate, ironic act of retaliation they had been afforded some of the more flowery tributes, their names carved somewhat larger than the others commemorated. Her grandfather had been rattling around like a marble in a jar in one of the last shuttles off the planet while they died in agony.

"Yes, good people all."

"We received an acreage," her father said, hoping to change the topic.

"I know. Congratulations!"

"Thank you father. So, what do you think?"

He beamed, said it was wonderful. Emily sighed; the same words repeated

over and over and over.

“Ah, the McNaughtons! Emily, you remember Brian?”

No. Their last meeting, supposedly, was at the Hostility’s End ceremony. All she remembered was standing silently, waiting for the dying notes of the bugles to fade amidst muffled sobbing. It rained that day.

Brian was her age: tall, tanned. Scrawny more than muscled: some of her friends said that Downbelowers were somehow hot. It never seemed that way to Emily. They made eye contact and they exchanged greetings. They stood while their parents babbled.

The McNaughtons came to shake her grandfather’s hand. Brian walked over. He smiled; his handshake was weak. He eased back next to Emily.

The veteran’s parade began. Her grandfather took his place with the others. Their regimental flag was held high, and as soon as the brassy opening notes were sounded they were off. Row after row the veterans marched past, smiling. About as young as the day the colonists made war upon the Xenos. Brian and Emily crowded with their families, and all the other participants. There was cheering. The music was loud, triumphant.

“So how do they...?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said.

She shook her head. So much of their technology and knowledge had been “restricted” until some ill-defined future date. Only the privileged---the important, of course the veterans (how could they be denied?)---were permitted access.

“How do we have to bribe to be like that when we’re old?”

“Be a veteran,” he suggested. “Kill a few Xenos.”

She rolled her eyes. “Its retarded.”

Her heart stopped for a moment: she didn’t mean to inflame or provoke.

He shuffled in place. He looked downcast, disappointed.

“I think it sucks too.”

Well, maybe it would not be too bad.

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KILLING GLORIA

LEE MOAN

The first time I tried to kill Gloria was on our first wedding anniversary. I took her to Gino's for dinner, her favourite place. While I ate the four-course meal, she watched me with her usual doe-eyed look of adoration. Did I feel guilty, knowing what I had in mind that night? Not a bit. I'd had enough. Enough of her and her unconditional love. She had to go.

So I drove her down to the canal, and we walked arm in arm along the towpath for a while, taking in the cool night air. The rain was falling steadily, soaking us both to the skin. I'm surprised she never twigged then. I mean, who goes walking at night in the pouring rain? But I was such a gentleman, she never suspected a thing.

When I was sure we weren't going to be disturbed, I turned to her. She was expecting a kiss, and dutifully pursed her lips. But I couldn't reciprocate. It would only have been a Judas kiss.

"I'm sorry, Gloria," I said.

Before she could form a response, I shoved her backwards with all my strength. She hit the oily black waters with a *splosh* and a spray of foam. She was so heavy she sank beneath the surface like an anvil. I stood there for five minutes, watching the dark waters for signs of life. During that time the ripples she'd made faded away, the driving rain slowed to a light drizzle, and my heartbeat eventually settled to its usual steady rhythm. With no sign of her coming back up, I walked calmly back to the car and drove home. When I hit my pillow, I was asleep in an instant. I hadn't slept that soundly in twelve months . . .

. . . until six o'clock the next morning.

The first thing I knew was the steady creak of the bedroom door as it swung open. My heart burned with fear, but I didn't let it show. I remained still, with my back to the door, listening as bare feet padded carefully over to the side of the bed - *her side* - and then stopped. I heard the drip-drip-drip on the polished pine floor and I knew instantly it was her. A water-heavy garment was removed noisily and dropped on the floor with a loud *shlupp* sound.

"David?"

I said nothing.

"I'm back."

I took my time before answering, choosing my words carefully. "Are you

okay?" I said.

"Yes. I'm fine." The bed creaked as she sat down. "Just a little upset at what you did."

I remained silent, studying the outline of her shadow thrown across the far wall by the landing light.

"Are you angry with me?" she said. "Is there something I've done wrong?"

"No, honey," I said in that mechanical tone I'd come to use a lot. "I'm not angry. You've done nothing wrong. It's me."

"I still love you," she said.

Her words were like razors in my gut. Not from shame, you understand, or even guilt at what I did to her. What really burned me is that, even after all, she still bore me no malice. A real woman would have plunged a knife into my heart. I might have even respected her if she'd done that. Better a knife in the heart than this intolerable forgiveness.

"You still love me, don't you?" she asked.

"Of course," I told her.

She slipped under the duvet then. As she moved over to my side I felt water soaking into the sheets at my back. When she wrapped her arms around me I flinched. She was ice cold. As we lay there in our silent embrace, the sounds of the early morning were drowned out by the noise of tiny motors whirring and clicking from somewhere deep down inside her. After a while, it was all I could hear, getting louder, and louder, and louder . . .

Why did I marry Gloria? You may well ask.

After forty years of feeling alienated by the entire living, breathing female population, I came across this advert in the back of a men's magazine:

UNLUCKY IN LOVE?

TRY THIS REVOLUTIONARY NEW CONCEPT FROM RSA!

(All our spouses are fully-functioning, emotionally intelligent replicants)

CALL TODAY FOR A FREE CONSULTATION

And so, one free consultation later, I decided to tie the knot with a mail-order replicant bride - my dear, devoted Gloria.

Problem is, the Replicant Spouse Authority have very strict stipulations for

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prospective buyers. Marriage is compulsory with any replicant spouse - no 'living together' as far as the RSA is concerned. Replicants need stability. I suppose the RSA just don't want their products being kicked out on the street after a few months.

Also, there are no refunds. You cannot, under any circumstances, take it 'back to the shop'. So when you agree to take on a replicant bride, you're signing a binding, legal declaration of moral responsibility to said replicant wife *for life*. In return, you are promised a lifetime of 'total devotion'.

I was tired of being sad and lonely, and it seemed like a good idea at the time.

But here's the irony:

Twelve months after the marriage, an RSA technician came to my house. A gorgeous raven-haired bachelorette technician named Kathy Bedford. She put Gloria on standby and then hooked her up to her laptop via a bullet-point in the base of Gloria's neck, before ripping through a complex series of diagnostic procedures with breathtaking ease. It soon became clear that nobody knew their way around a micro-circuit board better than Kathy. I was in love.

And, as we talked over Gloria's inner wirings, I began to sense that she was attracted to me. No one was more amazed than I that a woman -- a *real* woman -- could find a middle-aged, balding, chunky-around-the-middle techno-junkie like David Hjortsberg not only good company, but also want to get him into bed! It was just my rotten luck she came along twelve months too late.

Then, just as she was giving Gloria a final system check, Kathy spotted something. "There seems to be an awful build-up of saltwater in Gloria's . . ." She trailed off, as if the answer to her query had exploded in her mind like a sunburst. She sat back on her haunches. "You tried to drown her, didn't you?" she said calmly. And when she looked at me with those big brown all-knowing eyes, my cool façade just disintegrated.

Over the course of six vodka and tonics, I told her that I knew it was a mistake from the minute I married her. A lifetime of devotion sounds great on paper, but when you're in that situation day after day, no one can describe how maddening that kind of unconditional love can be. Unfortunately, the RSA's 'no divorce/no refunds' policy meant that I was stuck with this . . . *thing*, for the rest of my natural life.

"Well," Kathy said, sliding her technician's fingers over my hands, "that's

not entirely true, David. There are ways . . .”

Once a month, Gloria has to shut herself off for a period of six hours, what the RSA calls ‘the recharge cycle’. After six hours on ‘standby’, they come back on, recharged and good as new. Kathy suggested I do the dastardly deed during those six hours.

One of the worst parts about the recharge period is that they keep their eyes open throughout. It’s spooky. That evening, I approached her cautiously, running my hand in front of her eyes, but she didn’t stir. I picked her up carefully and carried her weighty form out to the car, placing her in the passenger seat.

She was still ‘asleep’ when I parked my Mercedes on the cliff-face car park, but by then the predicted storm was starting to get serious. Charcoal clouds, fat with rain hung above the cliff-face like angry angels. The wind was forcing the trees to breaking point. And down below, the sea roared and crashed against the base of the cliff.

I reached across to Gloria and lifted the tiny flap of skin behind her right ear. Beneath it was the emotion-inhibitor chip. This miniscule piece of technology was there to stop Gloria from -- among other things -- causing herself harm. If my cover story was to be believed, the chip had to come out. Using the micro-screwdriver which Kathy had given me, I removed it and slipped it into my pocket. I took a moment to study Gloria’s expressionless face in the light from the dashboard. Hopefully, I told myself, she wouldn’t know a thing about it . . .

“Goodbye, Gloria,” I said, and released the handbrake. I opened my door to climb out when lightning struck an old tree on our left and a branch the size of a lamppost came crashing down not two feet from the car. There was a loud electronic beep from the passenger seat and Gloria’s inert frame snapped into life.

“What? Where are we?” she said. Her eyes were wild with fear, and she grabbed my arm for reassurance. I turned to Gloria, soaking in the fear in her face, and I smiled inwardly. It was actually nice to see some real emotion for a change.

The car was beginning to pick up speed. I had to get free of her iron grip or I’d be joining her on her express trip. I managed to shrug out of my coat and

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jumped free of the car.

I watched my beautiful Mercedes rumble towards the precipice. Saw Gloria trying her door, only to find it locked. She clambered over into the back seat and pressed her hand against the rear windscreen. Without the inhibitor chip, Gloria's system was racing through a succession of emotions, and I could see her features trying to find the right expression -- that look of spurned agony -- but ultimately, all she could manage was a mask of confusion.

"I love you," she mouthed.

As my Mercedes teetered on the brink for a few moments I felt the pang I always feel at losing something of great value. And then it was gone . . . the car, I mean. All fifty grand of it, spiralling down, down into the wind-lashed night, alloy wheels turning, waxed bodywork reflecting the moonlight with a starburst sheen. A lump came to my throat as the car was dashed to smithereens. The resulting explosion lit up white waves cascading against the jagged rocks below.

I pulled the inhibitor chip from my pocket and looked at it in the moonlight. For a moment I wondered if this tiny piece of technology was in some way to blame for all of this. What if I'd given the marriage a chance without it . . .

But then I remembered Kathy, and all the warmth that she offered, and let the chip fall, down, down, joining Gloria in her watery grave.

After staggering home along two miles of deserted road in the driving wind and rain, I went straight to my bedroom, and jumped in the shower. I'd just finished shampooing my hair (what there was of it, anyway) when I caught the distorted silhouette of a female figure through the smoked glass shower door. A cramp of fear squeezed at my heart.

"David?"

In my panic, I grabbed a loofah for protection and rolled back the shower door. A momentary flash of lightning lit up the figure.

It was Kathy.

"Jesus, what are you doing here, Kat? I thought we agreed to avoid each other until . . ."

She held up my bathrobe. "I know. I just couldn't wait. I had to see you."

When I stepped out, she placed her hands on my wet face and then kissed me passionately. I sat down on the bed, and she knelt behind me, rubbing my

shoulders with her technician's hands. "She's gone, isn't she? Gloria, I mean? She's definitely terminated?"

I closed my eyes, trying to give in to the pleasure Kathy's fingers sent through my body. "Yes," I said. "She's definitely terminated."

"Good," she said. "Now all you have to do is call the RSA in the morning, tell them that Gloria was acting crazy all night and drove off with your car. They'll find her body eventually and see that the inhibitor chip was missing, put the whole thing down as a 'technical malfunction'. Then you're free," Kathy told me. "We're free."

She slipped her arms over my shoulders and pressed her firm, warm body against my back. My heart quickened, and in the silence, I could hear hers beating faster, too. There were no motors whirring here. Just two hearts of flesh and blood beating as one.

That had to be worth a Mercedes-Benz.

"You're right," I said, falling into Kathy's embrace. "We're free."

It was the smell of cooking that brought me from my sleep. It had been a good, sound sleep, the kind of sleep I'd been aching for during the last year of my life.

As I rolled over, I discovered that I was alone in bed. The sounds and smells of cooking which drifted to me from the kitchen downstairs filled me with euphoria. I was free now, and the woman I had found was not only good in bed, she also loved to cook.

Lucky, lucky me.

I looked around for my bathrobe, but the only one I could find was an old one of Gloria's. It was a white frilly thing, but I thought Kathy might get a kick out of seeing me in it, so I put it on. As I descended the stairs, I became lost in an explosion of my favourite smells: fried mushrooms, grilled bacon and scrambled eggs.

"Honey," I sang, "this really is the first day of the rest of our lives!"

I stopped short in the kitchen doorway. The woman hunched over the electric cooker was wearing my bathrobe, but it was not Kathy. When she turned, a shout of shock and revulsion escaped me.

The unholy apparition was barely recognisable as the Gloria I had known. Most of her skin was gone, burnt off like so much wax. Her inner wiring was exposed for all to see. Her left leg was badly mangled, and as she started

towards me she dragged it along behind her like a ball and chain.

God, the irony just doesn't quit.

After much scraping and clanking, Gloria stopped and focused her naked electronic left eye on me. The skin and facial muscles on the right side of her face were melted into a gruesome mask. I found it hard to look her in the face, but I managed it.

"David," she said, her once-human voice now sounding like gears grinding together. "I'm finding it very hard not to be angry with you right now."

I took a hesitant step towards her. "Gloria, I thought you were--"

"Dead?" she hissed. "Well, I suppose I should be after what you did to me." She dragged herself one step closer. "But, I'm prepared to forgive you, David. One last time." She held up a wooden spoon with a mouthful of scrambled eggs heaped on it. "I even made your favourite breakfast, just to show you how much I want us to get over this."

I shook my head vigorously, trying to clear my head of this aberration.

"Jesus, Gloria! What does it take to get the message through? I *don't* love you! I never did! Can't you understand that?"

Gloria cocked her head at a funny angle. "But you promised to look after me, David. I was your responsibility, wasn't I? For life. Not something to be tossed away when you found someone better. That was the agreement. Can't *you* understand *that*?"

An involuntarily laugh escaped from me. "This is absurd! Gloria, you're a replicant."

"So?" she cried. "I still loved you, David."

"No you didn't," I told her. "You were *programmed* to love me. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, you had to love me, Gloria. It was part of the agreement."

She stepped up to me, her squat, metal nose pressed against my own fleshy pink one. "You think my love isn't real?" she whispered. "You think because I am not flesh and blood like you, that I don't have emotions?" She faltered then, and an oddly human misty glaze came over her eyes. "Way down at the bottom of the sea, with my inhibitor chip gone, I had a lot of time to work out how I really felt about you. And, do you know what, David? I realised I do love you. Even after all."

"Gloria, stop this," I said, knocking the wooden spoon out of her hand.

"This has to end. Today. *Now.*"

She shook her head slowly. "No, David, this is the beginning for us. A true beginning. No inhibitor chip. No programming. Just you and me."

I ran my hands through my hair in frustration. "But I love another woman, Gloria! A *real* woman!"

Gloria's ruined face pulled into an ugly snarl. "What, that slut, Kathy Bedford? The whore who came to service me and ended up servicing *you*?" I was so stunned, I fell back against the refrigerator. Gloria poked me in the chest with her metal forefinger. "Don't think I didn't know what was going on. And what's really ironic, *honey-dear*, is that I was prepared to turn a blind eye to your little affair. But not now. Oh no. That little fling of yours is over!"

"Gloria?" I said, the words trembling on my lips. "Where's Kathy? What have you done to her?"

She turned away from me, her eyes settling on something outside. Following the path of her gaze, I stumbled across the kitchen to the open window.

The heated swimming pool!

All I could see was a mass of raven-dark hair spreading out like a fan in the centre of the pool. Ice water flooded into my veins. I rushed out through the door, and without hesitation, I dived into the crystal blue water. When I raised my eyes to the surface, I found my worst fears come true. It was Kathy staring down at me, her pale features frozen in a mask of shock.

I dragged her naked body to the poolside and wrapped it in the ridiculous, frilly bathrobe I'd been wearing. Holding her there, lost in grief and stroking her dead skin, I forgot, momentarily, the monster that had invaded my home.

Moments later, I was reminded, as the sound of shuffle-clank-shuffle-clank came over the tiles and stopped behind me.

"Poor Kathy," she said. "She just couldn't hold her breath as long as me."

I said nothing, containing my rage, silently plotting a more permanent end to this fiendish bitch.

Then she said: "Kathy said an awful lot before she died. She told me some very interesting things about the RSA."

She had my interest, and I hated her for that, too. I half-turned towards her.

"Did you know, for instance, that all replicant spouse units are fitted with a sort of black box flight recorder, like they have on aeroplanes?" She paused,

letting me soak up the information. "Yes, you see they were worried that some of their products would get abused, so they had these little recorders put in which log everything that happens to each unit. You can't erase it, and you can't destroy the box. It's very clever." She looked down at Kathy with a feigned expression of pity. "The only time it doesn't record, she said, is during the recharge period, so Kathy's plan was almost perfect. Sadly, she didn't know that I came to at the last minute. Spoiled everything.

"I think Kathy told me all that to try and stop me drowning her, but I couldn't stop myself by then. So that's all up here." She tapped the exposed metal plate at her temple. "Anyone who downloads my black box will know I've been very naughty."

She giggled like a schoolgirl. The sound sent a shiver up my spine.

"But," she went on, her voice returning to its cold, emotionless state, "it also recorded everything you did to me, David. Every . . . little . . . thing."

I looked back down at Kathy and smoothed a few strands of hair from her face. "So where does that leave us, Gloria?"

"Like I said earlier, David, this is a new beginning for us. No inhibitor chip. No programming. Just you and me." She laughed. "Of course, you'll have to dispose of Kathy's body first. But then, you're getting pretty good at that sort of thing, David. Wouldn't you say?"

She stepped up close to me and ran her cold, metal fingers through my hair, the way lovers do. The sensation was like being touched by the icy hand of death itself.

"I want to make a real go of it this time, David. How about you?"

Well, what could I say?

That's love for you.

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Lee Moan lives on the south coast of England with his wife and three children. His stories have appeared in *Dark Recesses Press*, *Revelation*, *Scifantastic*, *AlienSkin*, *Nocturnal Ooze*, *Whispers of Wickedness* and *From the Asylum*.

The next three SD paperbacks, due to be launched at the Welsh SF Conference, are as follows ...

The Postmodern Mariner by Rhys Hughes

ISBN : 978-0-9555185-2-2

Cover artwork by Steve Upham



A short book of implausible adventures featuring absurdities, anachronisms, exaggerations, outrageous puns, pirates, mythological beings, giant cups of tea and the occasional metafictional trick.

Kangazang! by Terry Cooper

ISBN : 978-0-9555185-6-0

Cover artwork by Terry Cooper

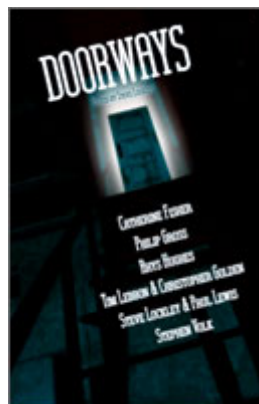


A space adventure novel with plenty of humour! Troubled Earthman and Kebab-lover Jeff Spooner is having a bad time. His fiance found love in the arms of the local vicar, and she dumped him. Plus she wants the £50 he owes her back. And to make matters worse, he seems to be mocked by the sounds of 'I Should Be So Lucky' and 'Don't Worry, Be Happy'.

Doorways edited by Steve Lockley

ISBN : 978-1-906652-06-7

Cover artwork by Steve Upham



A special event publication ...

Sapphique by Catherine Fisher

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Mind the Gap by Tim Lebbon & Christopher Golden

City of Woes by Steve Lockley & Paul Lewis

Notre Dame by Stephen Volk

Space, Time, Machine and Monster

A Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Conference for the Valleys



Saturday 21 June 2008, 10:00am - 4:30pm
 University of Glamorgan, Treforest, South Wales
Tickets £5 / £3 concessions; available on the door only

On Saturday 21 June 2008, Academi will be holding a Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Day Conference as part of the new South Wales Valleys Literature Development Initiative. The event will be held in the University of Glamorgan, Treforest campus. Professor Mark Brake, originator of the 'Science: Fiction and Culture Course' at the University will introduce an exciting day including workshops, discussion panels and presentations from a wealth of talented authors, scriptwriters and creative artists from Wales including Jasper Fforde, Philip Gross, Tim Lebbon, Steve Lockley, Stephen Volk, Catherine Fisher, Terry Cooper and more.

There is a long and lasting fascination with Fantasy and Science Fiction in the Valleys in Wales, dating back to the Mabinogion. This also includes a story about alien contact written by the Bishop of Llandaff in 1638 and continues with others including Lady Gwen written anonymously in 1891, Godwin's writings and more currently Peter George and Terry Nation, with the most current and successful writer to raise the profile of the genre being Russell T Davies with Dr Who.

The Conference aims to attract and celebrate the creative talents of people of all ages and abilities with a variety of stimulating talks and workshops throughout the day. It will be an ideal event to showcase a particular genre of literature which is gaining ever more popularity and interest and will help to promote its enjoyment and relevance today.

Scintillating sessions from:

- * Jasper Fforde - creator of the 'New Weird' genre of writing
- * Stephen Volk - Horror script writer for TV and film
- * Steve Lockley - Horror writer
- * Tim Lebbon - Horror writer
- * Dr Dimitra Fimi - Lecturer in English Literature (specifically Tolkien)
- * Rev Neil Hook - History of Sci Fi and Fantasy in Wales
- * Rhys Hughes - talk on Magic Realism/Readings
- * Louis Savy – Presentation of the London Sci Fi 48 hour film challenge
- * Rhys Hughes – OuLiPo presentation on how to write impossible stories
- * Andrew Cartmel – scriptwriter for Dr Who, Dark Knight and Torchwood

Sessions particularly for young people include:

- * Creative Sci Fi Writing with Philip Gross
- * Graphic Novel Character and storyboard workshop with Terry Cooper
- * Fantasy Fiction for children with Catherine Fisher

For further information please contact Louise Richards
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e-mail : swvldo@gmail.com
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or the Academi on 029 2047 2266

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