

ESTRONOMICON

FANTASY ♦ SCIENCE FICTION ♦ HORROR

Short Fiction Special September 2007

The Man Who Ate Moths

by Michael Kelly

Marc breeds moths in his bedroom's walk-in closet. They live in a large glass box with screened holes for ventilation. A cage. Like his apartment ...

Stories by

Peter Tennant

Amy Grech

Garon Whited

A.R. Yngve

Hugh MacDonald

Brick Marlin

Mark Howard Jones

Barbara Pratt

Carmelo Rafala

Chris Morris

Darran Martin



ESTRONOMICON
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Steve Upham

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'Sampling Passersby'
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Too Much Of A Good Thing

by Steve Upham

Submissions for the eZine have kept coming in over the past few months, which on one hand is a good thing. But now I find myself with so many short stories that I have enough to fill the main issues for the next two years or more!

So I decided that it would be a good idea to collect a dozen of the shorter tales and publish them here in a short fiction special. I will probably do a similar thing in future with more *fiction-only* issues, in order to make best use of all the material I have available.

Many thanks to Alan M. Clark for providing the stunning cover artwork for this issue. You can see his showcase feature in Issue #5 and be sure to have a browse around his comprehensive website at : www.alanmclark.com

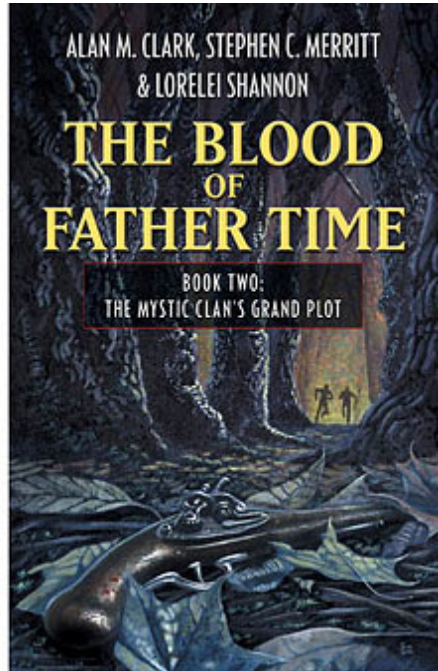
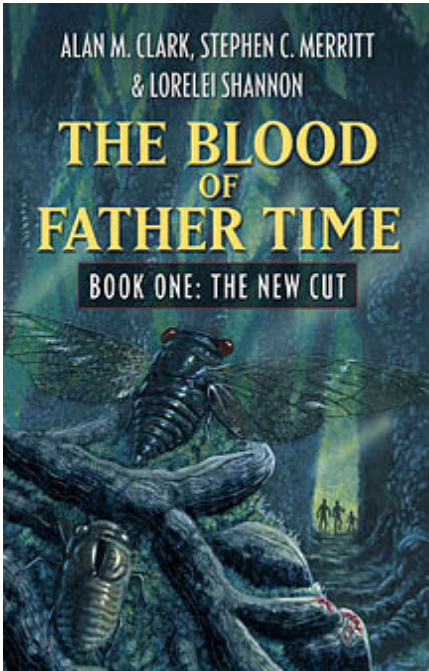
Also check out Alan's collaborative novels, *The Blood of Father Time*, written with Stephen Merritt and Lorelei Shannon, plus artwork by Steven C. Gilberts.

The Blood of Father Time series is a time-travel fantasy inspired by actual historical events and the outlaw clans of early eighteen-hundreds Tennessee. It's a coming-of-age story, an epic adventure, and a rich historical drama.

The Blood of Father Time , Book 1 : The New Cut is the story of Joel Biggs, the intelligent, brutalized, bullying son of an alcoholic father. At twelve years old, Joel and two friends wander down a sunlit creek in rural Tennessee, and into the early eighteen-hundreds. There they run afoul of the infamous Wesley Pike and his band of vicious river pirates. With every bit of cunning, strength, and skill Joel can muster, he survives the adventure and makes it back to the present and is transformed from an angry bully into a compassionate leader.

The Blood of Father Time , Book 2 : The Mystic Clan's Grand Plot is a time-travel adventure involving the land pirates of early 1800's Tennessee and an alcoholic history professor, Joel Biggs, who is tormented by memories of a traumatic childhood adventure through time. The only person who could confirm the reality of this fantastic event has recently died and Joel has begun to doubt everything, even his own sanity. The only way he can find peace, the only way he can live with himself, is to travel back in time once more. If Joel can find his friend Mark, left behind in the 1800's, perhaps he can redeem himself. But that

means returning to a time and place of incredible danger, brutal violence, and sudden death. Joel will have to face overwhelming hardship—and he will have to face himself.



Both books are published by Five Star, an imprint of Thomson Gale. Priced at \$25.95 each, they can be purchased from Alan's website at : www.alanmclark.com

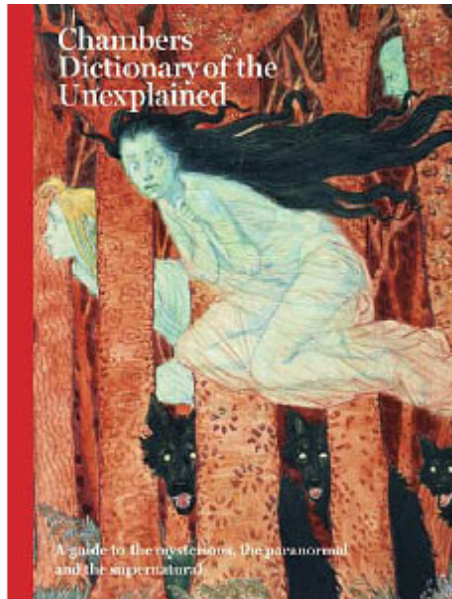
* * *

While we are in promotional mode here, let me also mention another new book that may be of interest to some of you : *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*.

Popular subjects such as UFOs, ghosts, psychic powers, astrology, luck, fairies, Atlantis and life after death are all areas of interest which might be described as the paranormal, supernatural or simply 'the strange'. This book is a comprehensive and reliable general reference work designed as a first port of call for anyone with an interest in 'the unexplained'.

Employing the dictionary format, with over 1,250 alphabetical entries, it covers a wide range of subjects, concepts, individual cases, occurrences and specialist terms. Written in consultation with leading experts in the relevant areas of study, this book also includes 24 essay-style panels, which give a thorough overview of significant subject areas such as cryptozoology, fortune-telling, ghosts, magic, the occult, spiritualism and Ufology. A further 30 panels give entertaining and informative accounts of some of the more intriguing cases such as the Belgian wave, the Jersey Devil, the Loch Ness monster, the Mary Celeste, the 1835 Moon Hoax, the Salem witches and the Titanic.

With its carefully researched, in-depth and balanced entries on topics ranging from alien abductions to the zodiac, this title is a major new addition to the Chambers reference list and is sure to serve as a trustworthy and useful guide for both the general reader and the more serious student. Includes full-colour photographs and illustrations throughout.



Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained is published in hardback by [Chambers](#) and priced at £35. Available to buy from all good bookshops.

Click!

by Peter Tennant

The butler showed Walsh into the book lined study where Sir Francis was waiting for him and left the two men alone.

‘Walsh. Good of you to come.’

The American had fought for his country in Vietnam and been awarded the Purple Heart. He was a brave man, and if the sight of a gun and box of cartridges on Sir Francis Buckingham’s desk disturbed him in any way Walsh did not allow the emotion to show. Without waiting to be asked he sat in the chair facing the Englishman.

‘You wished to see me, Sir Francis.’

‘I thought that it was time you and I settled our differences.’

Walsh glanced at the gun and smiled. ‘I do hope that you’re not planning to shoot me.’

Sir Francis looked genuinely shocked. ‘Good Lord, no! I intend for you to shoot yourself, dear chap.’

Walsh laughed. ‘That’s preposterous.’

‘Mr Walsh, you want what I have...’

‘I want,’ said Walsh, ‘what is best for the company. As the major shareholder I have every right to challenge your management of G. I. S. especially when your private hobbyhorse has received so much adverse publicity.’

Francis Buckingham was a brilliant scientist. His genius had turned G.I. S. into one of the world’s leading companies in the field of genetic research and development, along the way gathering Buckingham a knighthood and a considerable personal fortune.

Walsh had been attracted to the company because of its pioneering work in the field of longevity, an area where there would be rich pickings in the future. He had invested heavily in G.I.S. stock only to discover that the quest for immortality

itself had become a dangerous obsession with Buckingham, leading the scientist into areas that were best described as questionable. Most of the company's reputable researchers had been dismissed and replaced with a motley collection of occultists and mystics, voodoo hungans and cod-medieval alchemists, astrologers and professed devil-worshippers. Since rumours of this sorry state of affairs had begun to circulate the company's stock had fallen to an all time low. Walsh wanted to live forever as much as the next man, but first and foremost he was a hard headed businessman who had no intention of losing any more money through indulging this old man's harebrained notions.

'I'll admit,' said Sir Francis, 'that my approach has been misunderstood in certain quarters, but this is not an area where the usual methods of research can be relied upon. You've read my latest report to the board. You know how close we are. To abandon the quest now, when the prize is nearly in our grasp, and simply because of bad press, would be the height of foolishness.'

'Bad press!' expostulated Walsh. 'The Financial Times reports that G.I.S. scientists are sacrificing chickens to Baron Samedi and you dismiss it as bad press. Your quest for this chimera, this alchemist's pipe dream, has made G.I.S. a laughing stock. You've squandered the company's money and undermined its credibility, a state of affairs I fully intend to rectify at the board meeting on Monday.'

'Perhaps,' said Sir Francis. 'But that won't get you Susan.'

'What's Sue got to do with any of this?'

Sir Francis smiled, seeing Walsh's look of discomfort. 'Come now, dear boy. Surely you won't deny that you and my wife are having an affair and have been for several months now. I have a private detective's report and photographs that are quite conclusive.'

'Sue and I have spent a great deal of time together, that much is true. We are good friends, but that is all. Any other interpretation...'

'Nonsense! You're in love with her and she's in love with you. It's as plain as the nose on your face.'

'I think I should leave.' Walsh started to rise.

'Sit down.' Sir Francis' voice crackled with authority.

Walsh hesitated a moment and then sat. 'She doesn't love you.'

‘Of course she doesn’t, but I love her and she’ll never leave me.’ Sir Francis pushed his wheelchair away from the desk and touched his useless legs. ‘I was paralysed in a car accident. Susan was driving. She blames herself for what happened. She feels that she was responsible and must stand by me.’

He laughed. ‘Her whole family have this absurd sense of duty.’

Susan Buckingham was a beautiful and intelligent woman. Walsh had loved her from the moment he’d first set eyes on her, and recently he’d begun to hope that the feeling might one day be reciprocated. He knew that she was troubled and deeply unhappy, but until now he’d been unable to understand why she persisted in her loveless marriage.

‘You monster! You keep her tied to you with guilt.’

Sir Francis shrugged, unmoved by the accusation. ‘You can take the company from me but not Susan. I can hold Susan but not the company. Neither of us can have all that he wants, unless we find some way to resolve this stalemate.’

Walsh glanced at the gun and the box of cartridges on the desk, a nasty suspicion forming in his mind. ‘And what do you suggest?’

‘I understand that you are an honourable man, Mr Walsh, in spite of your predilection for other men’s wives. I propose an honourable solution, a game of chance in which winner takes all.’

Walsh understood. ‘Russian roulette?’

Sir Francis nodded.

‘And if I agree to play this game how does the winner explain what has taken place to the police?’

‘I have written a suicide note which my butler will deliver to the proper authorities in the event of my demise.’

‘And if you should win?’ asked Walsh, certain that he would not write any such note.

Sir Francis shrugged. ‘There are ways to dispose of dead bodies.’

‘You’re crazy.’

'Crazy enough to do anything to hold on to the woman I love and the business I built up from nothing. But what of you, Mr Walsh? Do you love Susan enough to risk your life for her? Believe me there is no other way.'

'Damn you!'

'I am already damned.' Sir Francis picked up the gun and spun the cylinder. 'Eight possibilities. One bullet.'

In one smooth motion he raised the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

Click!

The sound made Walsh jump in his seat.

Expressionless, Sir Francis put the gun down on the desk, its handle turned towards the American in silent invitation.

'I could kill you.'

'But you won't.'

Walsh looked deep into Sir Francis' eyes and saw the madness buried there. The man had lost his grip on sanity. The sensible thing to do would be to walk out of this house and never come back, but Walsh had never run from a fight in his life. He could take Sir Francis' business from him, might even win his beautiful wife, but in his own eyes he would always be a loser if he walked away from this challenge - not deserving of Susan's love compared to this man who was prepared to gamble his life for that same prize. He would have to go through life knowing that Sir Francis despised him as a coward and in his own heart acknowledge that the verdict was just.

The gun squatted on the desk in front of him like a toad, an ugly snub-nosed revolver with an obscenely bloated barrel. Walsh picked the gun up and cracked it open. Inside there was just one bullet, and seven empty chambers. It was a .38; the bullet would punch a hole in a man's head bigger than his fist. One chance in eight. The odds were good. Better than he'd faced in 'Nam.

Walsh snapped the gun shut and spun the cylinder. Sir Frances watched him, a tight smile on his face.

The American held the gun to the side of his face, fighting not to betray the

inner turmoil he felt by the shaking of his hand. He shut his eyes tightly so that Buckingham's face wouldn't be the last thing that he saw and pulled the trigger.

Click!

The hammer fell on an empty chamber. Walsh released a tightly held breath. He was trembling and his forehead was covered with sweat. The gun was an almost unbearable weight in his hand. He put it down on the desk, handle turned towards Sir Francis.

'Let's make this more interesting.'

Sir Francis opened the gun, took another bullet from the box and slotted it into a chamber. He spun the cylinder, put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

Click!

Impassive, Sir Francis pushed the gun across the desk to Walsh. Walsh's hand felt clammy as he picked it up. The odds, which had seemed to be stacked in his favour, were no longer appealing. This was no longer a game, a ritual of machismo. Suddenly it had all become horribly real. One of them was going to die. For the first time Walsh realised that; believed it could be him. Mechanically he spun the cylinder, no longer trying to control the shaking of his limbs. It took all his strength to raise the terrible weight of the pistol to his forehead.

Sir Francis watched to see what he would do. There was curiosity in his eyes but no trace of anxiety or concern. He was the perfect trained observer; for him this was just another experiment.

Walsh's mouth had gone dry and his heart was beating wildly. The point of the gun barrel felt red hot against his flesh. He wondered how long it would take for the bullet to traverse the length of the metal tube and burrow its way into his brain, turning that organ into pulp. Fully expecting to die, he pulled the trigger.

Click!

The sound was almost deafening. Walsh flinched and then laughed with relief. He was alive. He had looked death in the face and stared it down. Nothing could touch him now. Inside he felt perfectly calm and serene, drained of all emotion.

Briefly a look of disappointment flickered on Sir Francis' face and then was gone. For the first time Walsh suspected that, beneath his surface composure, the

Englishman was more fearful than he was. The knowledge made him feel elated.

Walsh cracked open the gun and pushed in two more bullets before sliding it across to Sir Francis.

‘One chance in two.’

Sir Francis stared disdainfully at the cold lump of metal and then his hand was a blur of motion as he picked up the gun and fired.

The noise of the explosion was like a thunderclap going off in the enclosed space. The bullet struck at an angle and removed half the Englishman’s face, spraying the wall behind him with blood, flesh and slivers of bone.

Walsh opened his mouth to scream but only a hollow sob came out. His stomach hurt and hot tears scalded his eyes. He leaned over, wanting to vomit but unable to do so. It felt as if something cold and metallic was stuck in his throat.

Sir Francis’ body had slumped forward over the desk. As Walsh looked on in horror the corpse jerked itself back upright, limbs twitching convulsively like a man in the grip of an epileptic seizure. The silk shirt Sir Francis wore ripped open, exposing the occult symbols burned into the flesh of his chest.

What was left of his face was a bloody mess, with chunks of raw meat hanging loose and white sticks of bone protruding out at insane angles. It was impossible that he could still be alive, but the thing moved, driven by some unholy force.

It tried to speak but only a hollow rattling sound emerged from its throat. A single eye, suspended from a thread of nerve tissue, glared defiance at Walsh. It pointed at him, the still smoking gun gripped in its bony fingers.

Click!

* * *

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Click! was first published in *Dark Eyes #1*

Stillborn

by Hugh MacDonald

The ball rolled under the sun porch. Uncle Chuck had told him not to play with it in the first place, because it was autographed. Jack had been careful, just throwing it in the air and catching it in the glove, but the sun was bright and he lost sight of the ball's descent. It was in too far to reach it with a stick-he had to crawl under to get it. Jack squinted. He was sure he could see the outline of the ball in the darkness.

He wished he hadn't asked to be allowed to hear the ghost stories last night. Janet always told the scary stories-the true ones.

"Never go under grandma's sun porch," Janet said, "because that's where she buried one of her babies. She thought it was dead, stillborn, but it could be heard crying for two days and nights. People say it's waiting to get someone young and fresh to steal their body and soul."

Jack felt sure Janet had been looking directly at him when she'd said those words: steal their body and soul. Jack didn't know how fresh he was, but he knew he was young. But he had no choice, he had to get Uncle Chuck's ball.

Talking aloud as he bent near the front steps, he told himself it had just been silly talk designed to scare him and the other kids. *Yeah, but she had looked right at me*, he thought. The lattice covering on the sun porch cast varying sized diamonds on the dark earth where the ball had come to rest. *At least there's a little light in there*, Jack thought.

The nails made a screeching sound as he pulled the wood aside. Nails reached for him, as he squeezed through the small opening, and found their mark. He cried out in pain as the nails pierced his back and drew blood. His mind on the pain, he scrambled forward. A few more feet and he would be able to reach it.

He breathed a sigh of relief as his hand closed over the ball. Jack squinted to see if the ball had been damaged and for the first time smelled the sour earth, as he inhaled it deeply into his lungs. Panic overwhelmed him as the previous night's warning came to mind, "never go under grandma's sun porch." He pumped his

legs in a backward motion, trying desperately to extricate himself from the dungeon, cursing himself for his stupidity in not heeding the warning. His foot dropped into a small hole and halted his retreat. Jack's heart was beating liked a trapped bird's.

Afraid to look behind, and nowhere to go ahead, Jack froze. The pause allowed him time to calm down. "Don't be silly Jack, you're almost ten years old," Jack said loudly, his voice resonating with a reassurance he didn't quite feel. Pulling his foot free, Jack began to back up again, this time more slowly. As he reached the small hole his foot had fallen into, Jack saw a sudden movement. *Probably just a mouse or a mole*, he reasoned, but looked into the hole and saw something move-it was too big for a mouse or mole, or even a rat.

A disembodied voice whispered, "Hi Jackie. I'm Uncle No Name. Want to play ball with me?"

Jack saw tiny fingers reach from the opening and felt them pull the ball from his hand. Milky eyes following his, as he tried to look away. His scream seemed to amuse the stillborn as a grin came on its face, displaying a perfect set of tiny teeth. *Babies don't have teeth*, Jack thought, as the light went out of his eyes. His felt his uncle Chuck's strong arms pulling on his legs and opened his eyes to see tiny fingers reaching to grab his wrist. "Stay with me Jackie. Don't you want to stay with me?"

* * *

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Hugh MacDonald has a passion for writing horror fiction, but also writes and performs music. He and his brother, Michael, are currently in pre-production with one of Hugh's screenplays and plan to turn it into an independent film in 2008. He lives with his wife Joanne and son Keith on scenic Cape Breton Island on Canada's east coast. Hugh believes that when you look into dark places, something looks back.

The Man Who Ate Moths

by Michael Kelly

Every guilty person is his own hangman.
– *Seneca*

His closets hold secrets: a noose, and a cage of moths.

Marc breeds moths in his bedroom's walk-in closet. They live in a large glass box with screened holes for ventilation. A cage. Like his apartment.

Marc oversees each stage of the moth's development, from egg, to larvae, to pupa, to moth. At night, before bed, he visits the moths. He considers himself a lazy *Lepidopterist*. Marc steps into the closet, flicks on the overhead light, opens the door of the glass cage. Like the moths, Marc is naked except for the fine silky hair covering his body. The moths stir, lift from branches or the side of the glass cage, and fly up to circle the wan light of the bare bulb. Their drone is music to his ears. Marc smiles, reaches up, snatches a couple moths from the swirling vortex, holds them loosely in his shaking hands. One moth is large gray-brown, the other smaller, cream and brown, and dappled with spots of pale yellow. Marc lifts his hands to his mouth and sucks the moths in. He swallows without chewing. The moths join the chorus of moths he has previously swallowed, filling his stomach even as they eat away at him.

Sometimes he wishes he could fly away, like a moth, to the sun. Marc grins, watches the silky hair grow, emerge. Perhaps, one day, he'll get his chance.

* * *

Cyndy loved moths.

Each night, at dusk, Marc and Cyndy sat on the front steps of the apartment building and watched the moths; large and small; fuzzy brown, silky white and smooth cream. The color of fresh-turned earth and rain-soaked clouds. The moths swooped down on the wrought-iron lamps bordering the building's staircase, and flitted madly around the yellow light, crashing their furry bodies into the glass lamp pane and falling to the ground. They'd get inside the lamp, dance around the light and then bzzt!-fall.

Cyndy would study the swirling ball of moths, listen for the tell-tale *thumps* and bzzts.

“Why?” she once asked, turning to Marc. “Why?”

Marc had shrugged. “Beats me. I guess they don’t like the darkness.”

Later, when Marc found Cyndy’s body, he asked the same question: “Why?”

* * *

The noose waits.

At 5 a.m. Marc eats breakfast: bacon and eggs, toast and coffee. It tastes like nothing at all. Bland. Empty. Like him. Like a lot of things.

At 5:20 a.m., Marc cleans away the breakfast dishes. His thoughts turn to Cyndy, and the noose that hangs, waiting, in his closet. It is a real noose, made of thick, heavy rope; twisted and braided. He walks to the hallway closet—his fine and private place—opens the door. The closet is bare but for a stool, and the noose hanging from the reinforced coat rack. The noose sways slightly in the sudden current caused by the opening of the door. It’s as if the rope is waving a greeting. And, in a way, it is. Marc steps up on the stool and places his head in the noose. He adjusts the slipknot, and carefully—so the knot doesn’t snap his neck—steps down from the stool. His feet dangle inches from the floor. His eyes stare straight ahead, into the gloom of the small room. The rope bites and scratches his skin, tightens around his neck, slowly chokes off his air. His body twitches, feet kick. A low buzzing drone reaches his ears. The sound of tiny wings beating and flapping. And then he can feel the wings; some silky smooth; some furry, brushing his face, inviting him to their dance. His head feels like it is expanding, like a crazy clown carnival balloon, to the point of bursting. When darkness creeps into his vision, closes all around him like a blanket of brown moths, he gathers his remaining strength and, shaking, clambers back onto the stool. He loosens the noose, slips from its grip, and collapses to the floor, winded, barely conscious.

Marc wonders, as he always does, lying there with his breath hitching and his head pounding, how it felt for Cyndy, in those terror-stricken moments, when those hands squeezed, squeezed, squeezed....

But Cyndy died.

Marc doesn’t want to die.

Dying is too good for Marc.

Marc pads to the bathroom, stares into the mirror, stares into his dark, hooded eyes, looking for someone who isn't there anymore. And his eyes trail to his throat, take in the livid, raw circle that rings his neck. A mark, a sign, a scarlet necklace of his own design. His fingertips dance, Braille-like, along the purple rut, and, briefly, ever briefly, Marc smiles. His eyes wander down his pale body. His torso and legs are completely covered in fine blonde-white hair, in silk. Marc turns, goes to his bedroom and gets dressed, choosing, as he always does, a turtleneck.

It is raining today, so Marc puts on a raincoat, leaves the apartment, goes outside.

Often, he sees Cyndy in the rain.

Marc wakes early so he can see the ghosts. At dusk they roam the city streets. They are like the grey mist and moist steam rising from subway grates; amorphous, elusive, inconsequential.

That is when he sees Cyndy, at dawn, the birth of a new day, wandering the streets she never got to wander while alive.

Cyndy died the day he tasted love. He was thirteen. Cyndy was eight.

Marc was in Marla Clarke's bedroom, his body electric, his lips tasting her lips, his hands under her shirt, rubbing, rubbing.

Cyndy, his sister, was lying in the stairwell of their building, as if asleep. Moths capered in the air above her. She'd been strangled. Livid handprints ringed her tiny, broken neck. A red necklace.

Marc wanted to crawl away and hide in a dark place, find a cocoon.

* * *

Marc likes ghosts. They are like him. Existent but inconsequential.

He likes seeing Cyndy.

Early morning is the best time to see ghosts. There is a certain quality to the light, a clear view to another world, where, for several moments, nothing is

transparent, nothing hidden. He stands on the sidewalk, or sits on the front steps, smoking the day's first cigarette, clutching a cup of black coffee, waiting for the world to come alive.

And he sees the ghosts.

Marc can't tell if they are coming or going. The ghosts shift silently through the shadows, moving easily along the rain-slicked streets, through fog-enshrouded parks. They look like everyone, anyone—young, old, fat, thin, hairy, bald—except muted, faded, like an old photo left too long in the sun. The ghosts walk past, ignoring him, their faces stoic, sad, indifferent. Sometimes, when it rains, Cyndy strolls past. And Marc's heart breaks. Tiny Cyndy. Eight years old. Forever eight. She doesn't see him. Doesn't look his way. She walks past, looking straight ahead, her pale face blank, looking lost; wearing the same blue jeans, the same striped top, the same bright white sneakers she'd worn all those years ago. A lost little girl.

She still has the scarlet bruises on her neck.

He never follows Cyndy, never tries to talk to her. What would he say? What *could* he say? I love you. I miss you. I'm sorry.

And the truest statement of all: I'm a failure.

Besides, he doesn't want to chase after her, doesn't want to communicate with her. It might break the spell, the enchantment. He might lose her forever. It's enough that he can see her, his Cyndy, in the rain.

Marc likes it out here, in the grey of the early morning twilight.

Just him and the ghosts.

He is still here, in the same apartment building. The one Cyndy lived—and died—in. His parents lived and died here, as well. But they were old, and had lived their lives as fully as they could. Simple lives that played out like so many others. Not like Cyndy's life. She never got to grow up. Never got to taste love. Of course, after that day at Marla Clarke's—trudging up the stairs, giddy, whistling, and finding pale, pretty Cyndy, thinking she was asleep, knowing she couldn't be, seeing the marks on her neck—he never again tasted love. What was the point? The people you loved died on you. It was a given.

It was raining the day he found Cyndy. A soft warm wind gusted. He walked

home, reveling in the soft spatter of the drops, lifting his face to feel the cool rain. Puddles gathered on sidewalks, wet secrets waiting to be explored. The sun poked through the grey clouds in tiny golden shafts, and it seemed as if the rain was falling in slow motion, seemed as if the sun caught it, like a prism, and the rain refracted into hundreds of tiny diamonds, sparkling, shining just for him.

Magic!

Like Cyndy in the rain.

When he found her in the dark stairwell, when he realized she was gone, he didn't know what to do. There was a hollow black pit in his stomach, as if his innards were slipping away. So he sat with her, and held her hand, and stroked her hair. Stared at the bright red ring circling her neck. Stared at the swirling, mad moth dance.

And he wept.

Marc watched the frolicking moths, watched their melancholic dance. He snatched one from the air, a delicate white thing, and held it in cupped hands. He opened his hands slightly, peeked at the moth. Its wings shuddered, antennae bristled. Pale blond hair, like silk, trailed from the moth's body. Marc leaned close, brought the moth up to his face, and popped it in his mouth. It fluttered for a long time in his mouth, bouncing from top to bottom, side to side, and then quieted.

And Marc swallowed the moth. It tasted like nothing.

He felt the moth in his belly, he was sure of it, flying, fluttering; a strange butterfly ballet. The moth settled.

And began to feed.

* * *

They thought he did it, of course. Thought he strangled Cyndy. Thought he killed his sweet little sister, a girl with eyes the color of smoke and mystery, with hair the color of straw and fire.

But the ligature marks didn't match his hand size.

Of course they didn't. He didn't kill her. At least not in the real sense. But he

wasn't home, watching Cyndy, keeping an eye on his little sister. Instead, he was at Marla's house, trying to get in her pants. Trying to taste her love.

* * *

Outside, on the cold grey steps, Marc lights a cigarette. He blows a stream of blue smoke into the wet air, watches it curl and twist, waver and dissipate, fall apart like so many other things.

He waits. And he hopes. His stomach aches. The moths use their proboscises, to tear chunks from his flesh, to suck nutrients from his stomach lining. To feed. To live. Slowly they eat away at him. He is becoming—if he already isn't— a hollow man.

And there she is, Cyndy, rounding a corner and walking steadfastly up the street, through the grey drizzle, her pig-tails swaying. She stares straight ahead—blank, unblinking China doll eyes. Cyndy glides past the steps, and Marc stares at her, at the raw, red ring circling her neck. He shudders, suppresses a moan, and tries a smile. All he can manage is a crooked grin. And Cyndy is gone, past the apartment, up the street, disappearing into the pearly mist, a great grey hand closing around her, squeezing.

Shaking, Marc drags on his cigarette and flicks it to the wet curb. He watches the blue smoke curl and die, watches the tiny orange ember wink out.

Sometimes, Marc imagines Cyndy turning to him, her face pale blue-white, slack, her eyes like faded chunks of coal, her mouth opening, closing, opening, closing, speaking, her voice alternately a whisper and a scream. "*Don't do it. Don't do it, Marc.*"

What? Marc thinks. Don't do what?

Don't leave me, Marc.

Too late.

Just his imagination, though. There is no voice on the wind. No whisper. No scream. Of course, Marc imagines a lot of things. Sometimes, when he opens the door to his closet he imagines Cyndy is in there, waiting, hanging limply from the corded rope, her neck twisted, her face a milky blue. Moths flutter madly around her head; brown feathery wings brushing her face. She winks at Marc. Her lips slowly curl, smiling the smile of a dead eight-year-old child.

The emptiness eats away at his insides.

* * *

In his hand is a large black moth, each wing spotted with a big white dot like some great seeing eye. Marc strokes the moth's wings. He strokes the fine blonde silk covering his body. The glass cage rattles and shakes as the moths fly. The air buzzes, thrums like an electrical field. The flap of many frenzied wings adds another note to the strange discordant din.

Marc's stomach flutters, roils. They are inside him, churning, seeking release. He lifts the large moth, sucks it into his mouth. He swallows. Then he grabs another moth, a furry gray one, and pops it into his mouth. Swallows. Both hands reaching now, left and right, he pulls moths from the air—pearly white, dishwater brown, lemon yellow and dappled gold—shoves them in his mouth and gulps them down, filling the void even as they eat and eat.

Marc stumbles to bed, his head buzzing, his stomach rumbling. He lies down on his side, stretches his legs straight out. As night wears on, the delicate silk grows longer, wraps around him, protectively, encasing him. Some of the threads wrap around his neck, like a noose. His vision fades, winks out.

He lies in darkness, wondering what will emerge.

* * *

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Michael Kelly's fiction has appeared in several magazines, journals, and anthologies, including *Alone on the Darkside* (Roc), *Dark Arts* (Cemetery Dance), *Flesh & Blood*, and *Space & Time*.

His first collection, *Scratching the Surface*, is now out, and a novel, *Ouroboros* (co-written with Carol Weekes) is due out in 2008.

Feed My Lambs

by Barbara Pratt

"You're an Angel, aren't you?"

The Vampire started at the soft, childish voice and its question.

She wasn't supposed to see him in the dark. Even against the white of the hospital room and the faint glow from the hallway lights, she should not have seen him. The entire purpose of the black cape and the re-focused glamour was invisibility---and stark silence.

"I know you're there," the voice went on, "and I know why."

Lucian pulled into himself, weaving the threads of the silence and the darkness more closely into his cellular structure. The child could not be allowed to see him. Not here, not now; not with the hunger on him.

"It's ok if you don't want to come out," the voice sighed wistfully. "I don't like the way I look either!"

The words drew Lucian's attention to the small, bedraggled figure sitting in the center of the huge hospital bed. The figure was female; her scent told him that. And it was pathetically young. There was no hair on the child, and precious few pounds. Scabs covered her arms and head, some of them oozing, most of them inflamed.

"Are you going to take me tonight?"

The words jarred into Lucian's appraisal, forcing him to listen when he did not want to hear. Human business had nothing to do with him.

The pigs (drunks and whores), the chickens (cowards and gossips), the cows (the really big ones)---what did he have to do with them except to feed on them? What did they have to do with him except to produce blood?

Lamb wasn't even worth his bother. Especially not scrawny, diseased lambs like

this one.

The soft voice intruded into his thoughts again before he could stop them.

"Angel, if you're gonna take me, can you do it now? I mean, before I hafta take another treatment? Please?"

Lucian remembered, against his will, the last treatment. He thought the needle they used was remarkably like his own beautiful teeth, and watched it with interest until the child began to scream.

Lucian was used to screaming. At times it even added spice to the feed---a little adrenaline in the system had a tang to it quite unlike anything else, and on occasion the Vampire liked that tang, even craved it.

But that screaming was never like this; never like the piteous, elongated wail of pain that went on and on and on.

"Please?" the question was a forlorn wisp of a whisper that once again pulled his thoughts back to the object on the bed.

The Vampire noted, because it was part of him to note everything, that the whisper was almost as small and as bleak as the lamb bleating it.

Lucian closed down his auditory senses and looked away. He did not want to care about this lamb; about any of the meat and blood vessels inhabiting his food source. He was dead, or as good as. There was nothing about him alive enough to care about anything except the excruciating hunger and the sensuous filling of the feed---

"Or, if you can't take me now, can you make it not hurt so much?"

The voice quivered with that question, and Lucian could sense the lamb holding back the tears; the tears and the fear of the awful, awful pain.

Something inside of Lucian moved, but he held his silence.

What did a few more minutes matter? From the scent coming from the lamb there was no need for her to worry about another treatment. She would be gone

long before the fluid on the pole dripping into her veins.

Suddenly the lamb began to cough, and Lucian recognized the death rattle within it. She was going. If not now, very, very soon.

And she knew it. The spike of fear in her scent told him clearly she knew she was going and she was going alone.

"Angel?" the words were searching the dark, exposing the depth of her fear even as they probed for hope. "Angel, is the devil going to take me instead? Is that why----"

The question faded off, and Lucian could watch no longer. Quietly he dropped his cloak, slipped off the darkness, and allowed his glamour to shine.

The lamb looked up, startled, and Lucian smiled, careful, careful to hide his teeth behind his lips.

"Angel!" the lamb breathed; and the glow emanating from her was so pure it nearly blinded him.

He moved to her bedside, sliding easily and gracefully into the chair next to it. She reached for him and he took her hand, smiling, smiling as the life ebbed away from her.

Once---just before she was gone---he saw her eyes widen with joy and her tiny lips smile. Then there was only a husk; a small, pathetic husk with the vision of glory still in her eyes.

A rustle of feathers behind him announced what was supposed to be a silent, new arrival.

"You're late." Lucian said coldly.

"I know," the Angel gave him.

"Too late, damn you!" Lucian grated, fighting to keep the tear he could not shed from forming.

The tear formed and fell in spite of him. The Vampire ducked his head away from it, hating it and the weakness that formed it.

The Angel reached over his shoulder and gathered the tear up from the child's face. She breathed across it with hope, and formed it into a small, shining jewel.

Lucian ignored her.

What good were tears or jewels in a land of darkness and blood?!

With a snap and a leathery flip of his own wings Lucian assumed his hunting form and left the hospital room to find food.

Everyone knew Vampires did not have souls.

Perhaps only the Angel knew they did have hearts.

* * *

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Hot Live Nude Women!

by A.R.Yngve

Gimme another vodka with a chaser. Last night I saw the truth. You gotta believe me. We're just cattle, man, just cattle. "Hot live nude women!" I saw the sign and I went there like a fly into a garbage can.

That's right, man... insects, that's what we are to them. Has it ever occurred to you that women are really running things, and we men are just putty in their hands? We strut and brag and fight each other and think we're the dominant sex. What a joke on us, man. No, don't go! You gotta listen! It could save your life, man!

Last night... I saw that stupid, stupid sign above the entrance. All in blinking pink neon lights: "Hot Live Nude Women!" No posters or pictures outside, just the sign. Yeah, okay, I'd had a few beers and I had the proverbial monkey on my back and an itch to scratch.

So I went right in... door stood wide open, not even a bouncer there.

Kinda dark and dingy in the lobby. Old furniture, cobwebs, a ticket booth with a "CLOSED" sign in front. And a bit warm in there. I was about to leave, but then this strange lady appears from out of nowhere - I mean, from a doorway - and she puts her hand around my back, and smiles, and says: "Hey stranger, don't go now, the show's just about to start."

The light was dim, so I couldn't see all of her at once, and she kept sorta moving around me so I never saw her entire face, but she had hot hands, I mean *hot to the touch*. Her hand felt like a cup of really hot coffee. Whatever she was wearing, it clung to her curves like it was painted on, and she had a top hat. Long flowing white hair, too. And a voice like Dusty Springfield.

"What kinda show?" I asked her.

"Just what the sign announced, lover. Hot live nude women."

There was a scent about her, pretty nice actually, like dry wood. The old floor creaked under her high heels.

"What's the cost?"

"Only... one dollar."

"Okay," I said, and gave her a buck, thinking that this must be one of the last old-style burlesque houses in town, running on its last legs... I pictured they had horrible-looking old women on stage, doing pathetic reruns of their glory days. And I was a little bit drunk."

So I let that lady with the hot hands lead me into theater and I took a seat... saw a few scattered men in raincoats sitting there, quiet, waiting for whatever the show on stage was going to be. The stage lit up, and we could hear a raspy pre-recorded brass band fanfare. When the lights were on, I saw just how run-down theater really was... rats on the floor, man!

And us, the hungry flies, in the seats...

The lady in the top hat from the lobby walked in on the stage, her heels going click-clack, click-clack, and I could see her face. Something was very strange about her clothes... they were black and looked like they were made of chain-mail. And her skin was kind of orange.

Then she shouted, without a microphone, and every perv and lonely guy in the audience listened.

"Welcome, gentlemen, to the venerable old Hot Pants Theater. You are the few lucky ones to witness its final great night, before it will be torn down to make place for a parking lot." She leaned down by the footlights and grinned at us. "We're going out with a bang! Expect the unexpected. We'll show you women, hot live nude women, as you've never seen them before!"

The music played again, a drum roll.

"And now," she said... I could swear her eyes were totally black, but maybe the lighting fooled me... "without further ado, I give you the first act, starring our cat-alicious female dancer... *Foxyyyy!*"

The top hat lady clapped her hands and darted off as the curtains went up, and some phony-Oriental bellydancer music played. On the stage stood a nude woman... no, not like that. She was a ballet dancer, had that kinda pose, and a ballet-dancer's body. All wiry muscles and springy feet. The top hat lady talked, while the dancer did her act. Dancing. Like ballet. I remember her eyes were totally black. Some guy who sat in the row before me stood up to leave the place. But he stopped and couldn't take his eyes of the dancer. Yeah, she was nude, but

that wasn't the thing. She wasn't even really pretty. And she had no hair. I mean, not even eyebrows.

I can't recall everything the top hat lady said to us, and the music was a bit loud in places so I didn't catch some words... but she told us a story. In rhyme, too. I didn't know what to think. She told us about a race of people who went underground to live in caves, more than a hundred thousand years ago. The reason was, they were escaping an ice age.

And they went deeper and deeper, until they came to these huge caverns, miles beneath the ground, where the air was foul with toxic fumes and heat from volcanoes.

Many of these prehistoric people died there, suffocated by the fumes. But some of them survived, and had children, and after twenty thousand years they had adapted to life underground. They grew resistant to immense heat, and could even store heat inside them, and didn't have to drink water anymore - they ate rock, and fungus, and drank oil! Oil that seeped down from vast natural deposits. Then followed thousands of years of harmony, no wars, and great migrations underground, and eventually they dug long tunnels and built cities.

The dancer bowed to us, and the other guys clapped their hands, like I did, but you could hear we were more than a little bit confused. I felt this heat radiating from the stage, my clothes were soaked with sweat. Just thinking about it makes me thirsty. Buy me another drink, and I'll tell you the rest...

* * *

The top hat lady returned, and said to us: "Now we move on to the second act, in which hot live nude women illustrate the story of The Oil Crisis. Give a great applause to the tantalizing, titillating, lubricated... *Lillyyyy!*"

The second dancer came on stage. This one was sexy, I'll give her that. Great body, great dancing. She was all covered in this oily stuff, made her look like living bronze. The top hat lady kept telling her story. I was in a trance, man. I just took it all in. She told us that many years ago, the underground people discovered the first oil drills that came down from the surface world.

Around that time, she explained, the underground people had forgotten what the surface looked like, and they didn't like the air up here, so they never made contact with the "aliens" on the surface. The undergrounders were pretty surprised when the drills began to suck in their oil and pump it away from their wells and

deposits.

But there was lots of oil in the ground, so they didn't worry... until the wells ran dry. Turned out the drills from above multiplied and went deeper. The undergrounders tried to break the drills, but it didn't help - the surface-people just built new ones. Now the underworlders were facing starvation, they had to work harder and harder to find oil to drink, and they organized an expedition to the surface, to try and stop the oil drills.

The first underworlders who reached the surface went blind. Their eyes couldn't take the ultraviolet sunlight, and those who didn't go blind had trouble breathing. But they quickly found out that one could steal or buy gasoline and all sorts of oil and flammables, so they could live and breathe if they drank the right toxic stuff... toxic to us, I mean, not to them.

The dancer on the stage took a can of black oil, right there and then, and drank it. I felt sick. Then she lit a match and spouted fire into the air, for a long time, made circles of fire while she was dancing.... looked amazing. And she bowed, and it was the end of the second act.

By this time I was excited, scared, confused. But I couldn't up and leave, not just yet. I felt there was an ending to the story we've been told, and... and I was scared of not hearing it. Scared *of* hearing it, too.

* * *

The fire-breathing dancer stayed on stage, and the first dancer joined her, and the top hat lady with the long hair. She took off her hat, and her hair - it was just a wig. And the second dancer, she took off her wig too.

They all looked at us, three bald women with orange skin and completely black eyes.

"We hope our little mating dance has impressed you," she said. With those eyes and no eyebrows, I couldn't read her expression. But her voice sounded... shrill. Too cheerful. I wondered how long they'd been on the surface. Maybe they had lived a long time. None of the women seemed older than forty. "We'll need a few members from the audience for our third and final act. Three manly men! Do we have three real men in the audience, who are not afraid of three women?"

Then I understood. They wanted to mate. For real. Maybe their males didn't last long on the surface. Or maybe they wanted to create a new cross-breed that could

live on the surface. But why the stage show? Was it their idea of a real mating dance? Must've been a cultural misunderstanding. Look, I'm as fond of the ladies as the next guy, but this was too weird. I ran for the exit. They shouted at me to come back. The front doors were locked, and I heard them coming for me. I ripped out an old brass bar from the wall and started to bash the door in. That's when I accidentally knocked loose a few old wires from the wall. Sparks flew, and some draperies and old carpets caught fire.

The whole damn place went up in flames. It must've been dry as cinder. Flames all around me, screaming men in the distance... and laughing women, running through the flames like fire couldn't hurt them. I think they laughed because they enjoyed the heat. I ran into a room and found a boarded-up window, bent them up with the brass bar and jumped. Fire brigade was coming, but it was too late for the old theater. I stood and watched the place collapse. No one else came out but me.

* * *

I couldn't have made this up, man. It was too crazy to be made up. Hot live nude women! If you see that sign anywhere in a town, it could be them - the underground people. Don't look at me like that. I've had a few drinks, so what?

What the hell, I'm not forcing you to sit and listen to an old barfly like me. But before you go, here's a tip: go check out the old Lantern Theater downtown. I'm going there tonight. Wanna come along? You'll recognize it by the new billboard above the entrance - it says: TONIGHT ONLY - THE AMAZING FIRE-BREATHING LAVA LADIES! LAST LIVE SHOW ON EARTH BEFORE THE GREAT CLEANSING. FREE ENTRY - ADULTS ONLY.

Hey, it's free... I gotta have one more look at those ladies. It's their last show... gonna be a real killer! I mean, damn! *Hot live nude women!*

* * *

Replay

by Carmelo Rafala

Scene: scroll image 333-453321-33a. Camera quickly pans to a wide shot of a far wall. Image shifts back and forth, tilts fifteen degrees, shoots up toward the high ceiling. Halo fuzz around the distant white light, then down to look at a pair of hands, palms open. Enhance.

He sits on the hard floor of this prison cell because he's been denied a chair, a table, a bed, anything of any comfort at all. A dim light burns in the centre of the room, suspended from a high ceiling. Morning has long since broken, and they've denied him a meal for the third time. He picks at pieces of leftover food, trying to make it last.

He knows he should be frightened as he sits in their prison, terrified, for in a few hours they are going to execute him—again. But oddly enough he feels a strange calm, like cool waters upon a placid lake. He sits, expectantly, as shuffling sounds crawl behind that steel door....

* * *

Scene: scroll image 333-443320-12a. Replay. Camera pans back and focuses on a riverside, water at low tide. Audio picks up voices. Camera moves in to get a shot. A woman moves into the frame. Enhance.

Karyn's yellow, sun-bleached hair wraps around her neck in the wind like a scarf. A baggy uniform does little to mask the curves and softness he knows are under there, had felt the night before, wants to feel again.

"Parliament has broken up," she says, forcing a small smile.

He nods gravely and looks at the deep well of sky, at the stars coming out now against the fading blue. They point at him, as if accusing him of some dark tragedy. He winces.

"I see," he says flatly, not so much to her as to the sky.

Off in the distance, by the now sleepy shore, the remnants of London stretch, charred, broken, in ruin, yet still used. He can just make out the thin smoke columns of fires, burning steady against the rising evening wind.

He sucks it in, the wind, lets it caress his face this one last time before he must give it all up to the Dhijad, the wind, water, the asphalt jungle he calls home. He curses his artificial eyes for the clarity of memories.

"I suppose the order comes effective immediately," he says, going through the motions, knowing the answer.

"Yes," Karyn replies. "Navy transports are gearing up for the evacuation." She walks over and places her hands on his shoulders. "There is no other choice, Jon. Can't rebuild properly in a city full of refugees. The authorities need space."

A bird cries overhead. He considers it for a moment.

"There are always choices..."

Karyn continues, unhearing, his words falling off her like leaves. She brushes a hand over his face and meets his eyes with a look of quiet longing. "Thanks to the new Skylight defences, those Dhijad clans are having a hard time of it," she says. "Anyway, I'll be leading the first group away from London at midday tomorrow." She pushes her softness into him. "But now your favourite dinner is waiting, and more," she whispers. "Let's make it last."

* * *

*Scene: scroll image 333-443320-12b. Shadows and silhouettes of ruins scatter the view of the shore. Moonlight casts doubtful shadows, blankets rustle. **Enhance.***

The memory of London is haunted for him, and there is something, something he can't explain that laments the city's broken back, voices echoing into the night where only the spirits of the dead now wander. He can feel it in his heart and in his bones, a swirling band of sadness and peace, as elusive as the evening mist, yet as perceptible as a fever.

Fires twinkle in the city, while the stars shine hard and silent like sentinels in the sky. From inside a burnt out block of flats he can hear the water licking at the shore, the thrum of a vehicle down a dark and narrow street. The air seems pensive. How long now? How long would it be before they come? This time he tries not to remember...

Karyn shovels a fork full of food into her mouth from a plate near their makeshift bed. The candles are still burning and wiggling in the moving air, casting an eerie glow and producing quick shapes his eyes can hardly record

properly.

He can hear them, his eyes, the tiny machinery whining and clicking in his sockets.

Karyn lies flat on her stomach, her legs entwined in his, the plate on the floor. "The last time I will see these stars with you," she says, eyes fixed up, her back to him. "And then we'll meet down in Kent..."

He smiles inwardly. "Why don't we take the boat out tonight onto the Thames? You and me under these stars?" He'd always secretly wanted to, that night, to let it all slip away, fall behind him as if he'd never been a part of it. The Great Burning.

She carries on as if he hadn't said a word. She sits up, and he sees the smooth skin of her back, reaches out and touches it.

"Karyn..." he breaks off.

She turns to him, soft eyes betraying concern. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

"I don't know," he says, wanting to pull the eyes out of his head; the eyes *they* had given him. But his brain remembers as well as his eyes. "I guess I expect to rewrite it all. Or to push delete and wipe it all away."

"Everything must play itself out," she says. "Just as it should."

"Should it?"

She smiles somewhat wickedly. "Just for you, Jon."

Her face resumes the composure it had before the shift in conversation, the way it had been that night. She gets up, the blankets rustle down, exposing her flesh to the moonlight, cold and pale and ghostly. She walks to the window. She glances back over her shoulder, eyes hard, accusing.

"Karyn, I wanted to tell you...I wanted to say..."

He closes his eyes and keeps them shut. But he can never keep them shut for long.

*Scene interrupt. Scroll image 333-443320-12c. **Replay.***

He hears the boats rocking in the docks, the soft groaning of the hulls in his ears. He opens his eyes. The water glows silver in the pale light of the moon in a remarkably crystal sky. He sees her form on the quay, silhouetted and haloed in a ghostly moonlit aura.

And he can feel them out there, hidden behind the velvet of dark, ready to come bursting forth from the quantum bubble and set fire to the night. He shivers.

He had been there, in Birmingham, when they had come, set fire to it, let it burn. And he had seen Manchester reduced to ash and steam from a distance as those clan ships hurtled away from the bloody massacre.

He squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head. (*Scene interrupt...*) He opens them, wet, glossy, tired. So very tired. (*Scene continue...*)

He suddenly grows cold, shivering. "Karyn," he says. "I want to hear you say it."

"I've got us a place on a navy frigate. They say the Canaries are nice this time of year. War didn't reach them, they say." She winks. "Playas las Americas."

"Karyn." His heart pounds. The moment is fading.

"It would be nice," she says, her smile distant in the moonlight. "To finally stay somewhere together for longer than a few weeks. You. Me."

"I need you to say it."

"I've got a little secret," she said, smiling. "Want to hear it?"

"Oh God, please say it!"

"Before the internet went down, I spied out a little place by the shore for us," she says. There is a crashing in his brain. "Just for us. You like the sea, the boats." She reaches out for him to join her for a walk on the quayside, like she had done that night before they had come, unannounced.

But he was supposed to help stop it all. Wasn't he? That's what they used him for, right? And these islands were to be spared by capitulation. Spared. Left untouched.

The knowledge of his actions came to him the day the Dhijad knocked out those new defences, defences known to them through *his* eyes...

"Say you forgive me," he whispers to the air.

"A little place for us," she continues.

"Yeah," he relents, chest caved in. "Sounds real nice."

"My gift to you, Jon."

He quivers slightly and remains where he is, takes a long, deep breath and awaits the inevitable, the lightning crashing to earth. Again.

"Goodbye, Karyn," he says.

She doesn't hear. She watches the stars.

But he swears, swears that this time as she looks back, hand still outstretched, before the night becomes day and the water in the Thames boils and the little shanty towns built upon the ruins blows away in the fire wind, that she is smiling at him. Smiling.

And he waits for the scene to fade, for the vision to smudge and swirl into base colours and finally turn black.

Through the replay he can hear shuffling sounds behind that steel door...

And he waits, longingly, in the dim light for that promised peace that seems to never come, that final resting peace where at long last he can relinquish countless hours of replay.

Peace.

The peace of the dead.

* * *

Driving Hard

by Mark Howard Jones

Carrie loved her car. Big, black, sleek and hard, it was the only thing in her life that had never blown a tyre and veered off the road.

The tree-huggers who whined about how much gas it guzzled could kiss hers. 'This is my world. What do they want me to do - walk?'; it was a mantra she repeated every time she passed the rare pedestrian on the filthy city streets.

No, this baby was a beauty and she was going to drive it hard; just like she'd always drive Jack hard, before he bailed on her, the useless shit. She'd even been tempted to say it wasn't him when she went down to the morgue to identify him: 'I deny you, I negate your lack of identity, you leech - you never made your own way in this world.'

Stuck in cement-solid traffic, Carrie tried to massage away her headache. If her sister and the waste-of-space she'd married thought they were going to get the lion's share of their mother's estate they were very fucking much mistaken. They'd always used those two brats as an emotional bargaining chip with the old woman. Well, she was gone now and they'd find the world a harsher place, with more adult rules and shrunken bank balances. Cars are more reliable than kids, anyway, and she wanted to trade up.

Carrie reached over to the Buick's big back seat and fished inside her bag for her cigarettes. She noticed that there was still a slight semen stain there from a few weeks back. She couldn't help but chuckle as she remembered that arrogant bastard's face - just because he hadn't come didn't mean she was going to ride him for ever! He'd had to finish himself off. The piece of shit had left his mess behind him; still, it'd been worth it to see the look of humiliation on his face as he slunk away. If he had problems, he needed a doctor, not her.

She lit up, sucked in the smoke then exhaled loudly, slumping back in her seat. Flicking buttons impatiently, Carrie chose the best driving music she could find and then dreamed about driving while staring at the red rear light of the Japanese model in front of her.

The city left behind her, a few shabby buildings showing up here and there as its only reminder, Carrie put her foot down. She savoured the feeling: silky vibrations quickly smoothing out into a full body purr as the car eased into its new mode.

She had a three-hour drive ahead and intended to enjoy it.

Scrubby fields flashed by. As a series of bends forced her to slow slightly Carrie noticed three huge shapes off to her left. Slightly startled at first, she slowed to see what they were. Visible only as silhouettes in the fading light, they appeared to be giant figures. Unmoving, she thought they had to be some sort of art project; probably made out of recycled toilet paper.

Despite her suspicions over their 'worthy' origin, they still made a powerful impression on her. Anything that big could destroy her easily within seconds, if they decided to move in her direction, seeking out the metal carapace of the intruder into their peaceful, natural landscape while stamping out of existence the black ribbon bifurcating their fields.

As she sped on the figures finally dropped out of sight in her rear view mirror. Shortly afterwards the fields came to an end, replaced by a curious flat moorland that dropped away from the road in a gradual gradient. It made her feel as though she was driving along the top of a globe.

The road stretched like a razor cut in front of her, flat and straight for miles and miles. She reached over to turn the music up, then pressed the accelerator pedal, ready to do some hard driving.

* * *

After an hour-and-a-half's driving Carrie felt she needed a break. But she hadn't seen anywhere to stop. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen anywhere at all: just a long strip of black highway.

Needing some air, she pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. She'd driven this way once before and felt sure she should have passed through a town by now. She fished in the glove box for a map, flipping it open on the seat next to her.

'The map is not the territory, the map is not the territory.' She kept repeating it

to herself as she pored over the open sheet. Yes, there it was; she should definitely have passed through a small town called Fordham by now. Where the hell had she gone wrong? The road was straight - just straight, straight, straight - no turn-offs or diversions for about another 20-odd miles.

She stepped out of the car and looked around; there was nothing to see in the darkness. There wasn't even the light of another car to be seen, in either direction. "Great, I've found the lost highway," she muttered to herself. This was all the fault of that stupid bitch of a sister of hers!

She flipped open her cell phone, looking for help, though she didn't have a clear idea of who she would phone. No signal. Damn. This really was the middle of nowhere. No connection to civilisation.

There was nothing for it but to drive. She was bound to reach somewhere eventually, then she could get her bearings before continuing her journey.

* * *

At one stage she saw a fire, a long way off across the flat fields to her right, but she didn't slow down or stop to try and work out what it might be. God knows, she thought, and I'll let him care about it.

She pushed the pedal down even harder, eager to get somewhere, anywhere. As the dial touched 100 the car complained loudly and seemed to rock backwards. Carrie gripped the wheel tightly, eyes flicking across the dashboard dials for signs of trouble. A scorching white light flooded into the car, seeming to surround the vehicle like an illuminated river, flowing over and around.

It was over in seconds, Carrie's eyes stinging as she struggled to readjust them to normal. She hit the brakes as soon as she thought the car had slowed enough for it to be safe. She killed the engine. "What the fuck ..?!"

She sat behind the wheel, forcing herself to take a couple of deep breaths. Had she been caught in a searchlight? She stared at her feet. Listening to the tick of the engine cooling in the night air, Carrie resolved that as soon as she saw her sister she was going to throttle her.

Turning the key, she started the big car up again. Her eyes had just about returned to normal. She was about to drive off when she noticed that someone was

standing right in front of the car, blocking her way. It was a man; probably a drifter, she thought.

She honked her horn twice; no response. Sliding the window down a notch, she yelled "Hey, get out of the way!" She honked again. Still nothing. She exhaled hard; she'd had just about enough for the one night - if he didn't move she'd go over him. "OK! Have it your way."

She pumped her foot hard against the accelerator and the roar of the beast below the metal suddenly died. She turned the key, hearing it cough pathetically a few times before giving up.

The man reached forward and, strong and swift, yanked the badge from the front of the car. He lifted it to chest level and slid it inside his clothes. He stood still for a few seconds and then began to shake slightly.

Carrie's anger now overcame any fear she might feel. "Hey! Hey, you bastard!! Stop wrecking my fucking car!" She was out of the car, slamming the door, walking towards him. Then she halted, stepped back a pace, unsure, as the man began to walk towards her, one step at a time, stopping for a moment between each one as if to prove he was in charge, completely unafraid.

Carrie backed away, wishing she'd been smart enough to stay safely inside the car instead of flying off the handle like she had.

She ran around to the back of the car, her mind racing. As he followed her, she continued to keep the car between them. Now she had drawn level with the rear door on the far side of the big vehicle. She glanced through the window. 'Of course,' she thought. Now she was back on familiar territory. She quickly opened the door and climbed into the back seat.

If he was thinking with his balls he wouldn't be using his brain and that would give her time to outmanoeuvre him. She sprawled back across the seat, elbowing her bag onto the floor, and hitching up her skirt. She tore open her pantyhose to save him the trouble.

The man was outside the door. She could see his ragged trousers and, for the first time, she could smell him. She covered her mouth. He stank like a cross between a junkyard and a butcher's shop, the mingled stench of metal and flesh corroding.

He bent lower, putting a scarred and pitted hand onto the seat to steady himself. At first, seeing the pieces of metal embedded in his skin, she thought he had been in an accident. But then the stink hit her once more. He eased himself forward. Now she could see that his clothes were mere rags.

The Buick badge he had ripped from the front grille was embedded in the center of his chest, the distinctive three shields becoming a bloody emblem of triumph. Everywhere his body was studded with parts of cars, flesh melding with metal before returning to ruined human meat again.

Carrie held her breath. Finally the man's head dipped below the door arch and into the pool cast by the interior light. She shook her head in disbelief. She couldn't scream but she wanted to, so very badly.

His mouth was the ragged-edged bullet hole in a vulnerable diplomat's windscreen; the rest of the face bore the craquelure pattern of broken glass, the fissures eating deep into the flesh, held together only by a flimsy inner membrane.

Carrie whimpered, then screamed, then twisted to try and open the door behind her. The creature was too quick for her and she felt the heaviness of his metal-enlaced thighs bearing down on her own flesh, cutting into it. She yelped in pain.

He had her pinned on the back seat, unable to pull free. Then he leaned back and Carrie saw something fall out of the torn garments around his crotch. It was a grotesque mechanical parody of a penis, dripping a rare cocktail of engine lubricant, blood and semen. She tensed, realising this was no longer something she could control. Her plan to outwit him had gone badly wrong and she sobbed as she anticipated the pain to come.

Now he was on top of her. She gagged on the stench as she felt him move inside her. The big Buick bucked as the backseat ballet began.

* * *

Sitting in the driver's seat, awake at last from her long slumber of pointlessness, Carrie glanced over at her new lover.

He didn't move. He sat staring ahead through his shattered bulb eyes at the dark

road ahead. He flexed his hands, the bolts embedded in his knuckles making a gentle noise as they knocked against each other.

The landscape ahead looked the same in the dark yet she knew that it was a different place. A place that ran alongside the place she had just left. She recognised some of the scenery but the next sunrise would show it to be transformed.

Carrie saw again the giant figures that she had seen earlier in the day, standing far off in the distance. But now they towered over the roadside.

The three striding figures came closer, revealing themselves as a family group sculpted from twisted metal and charred flesh, compacted bones making up their smiles, still-sparking electrics lighting up their eyes, striding forever together towards the horizon that they would never reach.

She understood that the figures marked the signpost to a very different future. The sky had something of the rainbow hues seen in a pool of engine oil, while the stink of petroleum filling the car felt like the relief of breathing fresh air after being stuck in a fetid room for hours.

Her blood-bloated skin was as finely stitched as the most sumptuous automotive upholstery. She stared out at the road ahead from behind the smashed dials covering her broken eyes; her radiator mouth purred with joy, the sound like the bug-filled wind sighing through the front grille at 90 mph.

The white line down the centre of the road now became a thread drawing her to infinity. She pressed down on the accelerator pedal harder, eager to reach the destination that she knew would never appear. This was it, now she knew. Incendiary synapses flickered to life through her oil-flooded brain as the thought filled her with joy - 'I'm home'.

* * *

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Mark Howard Jones lives in Cardiff, the capital of Wales. He has had dozens of short stories published on both sides of the Atlantic and his novella '*The Garden Of Doubt On The Island Of Shadows*' is currently available from [ISMs Press](#).

Clockwerks

by Garon Whited

Even the heat of the forge could not dispel the chill of an English winter; the cavernous space greedily drank the heat. Worktables, row upon row of them, stood in orderly ranks. Each held a gleaming array of pieces, a careful design of mysterious parts. Gears and cogs, springs and coils, levers and wheels, all lay in neat patterns, as though an infinitely complex engine had been dissected and laid out for examination.

Outside, candles drifted over the snow; each candle illuminated a face in the dusky light of the fading day. They drifted, pale and ghostly, past the narrow windows of the building. The faces were silent as they passed but for the faint crunch of snow beneath booted feet, a slow procession of false phantoms. Eyes glanced at the structure almost furtively before turning quickly away.

The light inside the house swelled brightly as the furnace door opened. Daniel, glowing in the yellow-white light, licked his lips and narrowed his eyes. Tongs reached into the yellow-white blaze of heat and drew forth the vessel of molten metal. It poured like glowing water into the mold, ran rivulets of bright fire in the narrow channels of the form it was meant to take. He reached into the forge's heart and replaced the container.

"Robert!" he shouted, over the rush of air and fire, "close the door!"

A manlike figure in the shadows of the heavy door moved, swung the thick ceramic-and-steel portal closed with one hand, turned the wheel to lock it. With the door closed, the gas mantles still made the figure gleam. Manlike it was, but not a man. It had arms and legs like a man. It had a face like a man. It had eyes to see with and a tongue to speak. And yet, its entire form was drawn from metal and glass, bronze and brass, polished copper and shining steel. It was a man all of metal with emerald lenses for his eyes.

"Robert," Daniel said, without taking his eyes from the delicate mold of molten metal.

"Yes, Father?" When it spoke, it was a pleasant sound. A voice modulated and pitched so perfectly as to be indistinguishable from that made by a human throat. It was lilting, gentle, soothing. Yet for all of that, it was not a human voice. It was too mild, too gentle and soft and dry. It varied neither in pitch nor stress, but

spoke only as sounds made in the air, without a soul to give them true meaning.

“Pump the bellows, Robert. I’ll have the fire up high for when I temper the mainspring.” Daniel wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. His once-white shirtsleeves were grimed with labor, sweat, and soot. The heavy apron he wore over the trousers and waistcoat had shielded his body from the occasional sparks, but his sleeves were burned through in places.

While Robert moved to turn the cranks that would force air into the forge, Daniel moved to a low sink and drank deeply from the carafe within. Cold water spilled down his chin, but he paid it no mind. He was close. *Close!* In a matter of hours, he would be finished with his greatest project, his finest triumph. *She* would be whole.

Outside, distantly, almost drowned within the rumbling hiss and roar of the forge, he heard the sounds of singing. He paused, carafe still in hand, and cocked his head to listen. Distant carolers again, singing joys into the world with the spirit of Christmas.

“Carolers,” he whispered. “Perhaps we’ll go caroling.”

Robert made no reply, cranking the air into the forge.

Daniel shook himself and moved to take up tools. Unlike the forge’s hammers, these were finer, smaller, fit for a jeweler or watchmaker. Indeed, the device he labored upon was fit for the finest of fine watches. Smaller than a woman’s fist, it was filled with gearing of such dizzying complexity that even its designer worked upon it with trepidation befitting a surgeon operating on his firstborn. He donned thick glasses for his task, lenses that magnified many times; then he seemed to grow still as the tools touched the mechanism, like a man removed from the bitterest cold of the Pole to thaw in the warmth and light. But his hands did move, imperceptibly, as smoothly as a man of ice might melt, drawing finer and finer the thin wires within. He scored and cut, affixed and turned, screwed and bolted and twisted, all with movements so fine that the human eye could not mark them unaided. And the miniscule parts with which he worked were often of a thickness not even equal to that of the finest human hair.

When he sat back and rested, the first grey light of dawn was teasing the eastern sky. He stretched and crackled, wincing at the lancing pains in his neck and shoulders. But he took no real rest; he moved almost immediately to the forge and began several delicate and complex operations upon the metal he drew forth.

The white heat of the forge had marked this metal, but even that infernal heat had failed to melt it. Where steel had run like water in the dead of night, the greatest fury of the forge had but softened this alloy. Daniel placed it on the anvil and began to hammer upon it, shaping it blow by blow, slowly. It was almost done, that much was obvious; with every hammer-stroke the metal altered subtly, the changes wrought within it and upon it all but invisible.

How many blows had he struck upon its adamantine surface? How many hours had he spent in the heating of it? How many nights had he persisted, human will and blind determination pitted against obdurate metal? He had lost track, nor did he care; all that mattered was the final, finished product. Whatever time it took, he would give.

Into the fire, back to the anvil, the hammer rises and falls again and again, then back into the fire....

If the master is truly so, there comes a time when the work of his mind and heart and hands is perfect. There comes a moment of supernal clarity when the creating has ended and the creation *is*.

The strange, hard alloy was a thin, flat strip in a tight, tiny spiral.

Daniel quenched it. Drawn from the earth, bathed in fire, baptized in water, christened by blood and tears and sweat, the small spiral was then laid upon the surface of the anvil to rest.

Robert ceased turning the bellows-cranks and stepped close to look, the India rubber layer on his feet silent against the stone floor.

"Have you completed the Mainspring, Father?"

Daniel nodded, his eyes never leaving the coiled bit of metal.

"Does this mean that I will have a sister?" Robert asked.

Daniel flinched and then turned to Robert with a look of black fury.

"You will not have a sister," Daniel hissed, his fists clenching. "You are a prototype, an experiment, a rough draft! *She* will be my daughter! *You* are a mechanism!" He pointed a trembling finger at the mechanical man. "Never forget that!"

"Am I not your son?" asked the uninflected, monotone voice.

"I created you. I built you. But that does not make you my son!"

"I do not understand," Robert observed, still quiet, still mild.

"You do not have to," Daniel replied briskly, turning away. "Just do as you are told."

"Yes, Father."

Daniel took the tiny spring in a pair of fine tongs and moved to the device upon which he had so recently labored. There he donned his magnifying glasses again and delved into the secret places of the innermost workings. His once-brawny frame, now gaunt, hunched over the intricate clockwork as though he might coax even greater skill from his gifted hands. For long minutes he stayed focused, rapt in concentration. Then, with the faintest *snick* of a closing aperture, he sat back again.

"At last," he breathed.

Immediately, he divested himself of goggles and apron. He took the egg-shaped device in his hands with exacting care, as though he handled something so fragile and so precious that the world might be brought to its end if he were to tremble. With careful steps, he moved across the workshop to a lone table draped over with a sheet.

"Uncover her," he whispered. Robert moved to obey, lifting the sheet with delicate, precise grace and withdrawing it from the form beneath.

It was a young woman. Her appearance was that of one just at that age when her girlhood was past, but her womanhood not yet full-flowered; a maiden with hair the color of molten gold and skin like alabaster or porcelain. She wore a dress as any respectable young lady might wear, a sky-blue color with a white apron, and black leather shoes, complete with polished buckles. Her fine-fingered hands were folded on the center of her body, between and just below where her just-grown breasts disturbed the flat line of her blouse.

"Open the throat," Daniel ordered. Sweat stood in beads upon his brow and his skin was grey; but for all that his hands were steadier than the Earth in all her quiet patience.

Robert drew the neckline of the dress down with one finger, precisely. The other hand touched her throat *just* so, exactly at the place between her collarbones, and a portion of it folded outward to reveal the hollow cavity within. Metal gleamed and revealed the maiden—the perfect, lovely doll—for the construct that she was.

Daniel stepped closer, ignoring the tightness in his chest, and gently, as a mother lays her babe in the cradle, laid one mechanical marvel inside another. It slipped sweetly, perfectly, into the hollow of her throat.

“Father, your appearance indicates an issue of health—” began the mechanical man, but Daniel waved it imperiously to silence.

Daniel’s eyes were fixed upon the face of the girl as he closed the small, pale place in the hollow of her throat. The door closed, merging seamlessly with what appeared to be flesh, hiding once more her true nature.

“Wake up, daughter,” Daniel said, voice husky and rasping. He struggled to take a deeper breath. “Wake up!”

The faux maiden lay silent, unmoving.

Daniel leaned on the table, eyes brimming with tears. His chest was tight and painful; his left arm was growing numb. He couldn’t think... everything was right, everything! He had worked miracles in metallurgy, chemistry, metaphysics... she should be alive. She should be alive!

She lay there, silent testament to genius, love, and to failure.

Daniel leaned over her and whispered, “Please?” A pair of tears streaked his stubbled cheeks before falling on the smooth curves of her face.

“Please, daughter?” he pleaded, softly, supporting himself on his right arm. He felt weak, shaky, tired. “Please wake up for Papa?”

She remained still.

Daniel felt the bolt of pain in his chest like a hot dart, flung from his heart to the fingertips of his left hand. It left him gasping in agony, but his thoughts were clear again. He would never see her rise. He would never feel her holding his hand. He would never get to sing her to sleep. He would die a failure.

He leaned close to her, struggling to remain upright for a few seconds longer.

“Sleep if you must, baby girl,” he whispered, and kissed her gently. “Daddy loves you.” Then his knees folded and he slid gently to the workshop floor. “Daddy,” he whispered, “will... always....”

Robert stood mute and unmoving while Daniel crumpled. He stood there as Daniel breathed out in a soft, almost noiseless sigh. And he remained unmoving even after Daniel grew utterly still.

The maiden licked her lips. It was a perfect simulacrum of a living girl, even to the moisture of the tongue. She blinked, her lashes fluttering slightly, and opened eyes that seemed almost *too* real. She sat up, a perfect replica of life. She turned her head, hair falling about her shoulders, and looked around the workshop. When she spoke, her voice was that of a young, somewhat frightened woman.

“Where am I?”

* * *

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Perishables

by Amy Grech

Placido Sanchez sat hunched over the rickety card table in a narrow, windowless room in the basement of his modest house. He had been there for a while. He couldn't say how long; days meant nothing to him now. Placido didn't dare set foot outside, not since the Cubans dropped the bomb and the high fallout levels forced him inside.

Panic-stricken, Placido ate perishable food – milk, ice cream, cold cuts, cheese, fruit, and vegetables at first—stored in the walk-in freezer before switching to canned and freeze-dried food, his last resort after the bombing that obliterated his family and everything else. He'd been reduced to eating metallic, tasteless canned food that had been sitting for months. He couldn't bear another can of bland, baked beans; his stomach growled loudly in protest. He yearned to taste fresh, succulent meat that would provide genuine sustenance for days to come. He licked his lips and sighed. Placido kicked the last unopened can of baked beans across the floor. It landed with a loud clang against the massive pile of empty cans, bottles, and boxes strewn in a corner.

Julia's remains were perfect—a bountiful feast to engage his senses. Placido had been consumed by her passion long ago. Now his beloved Julia would be consumed by his hunger. She would have wanted it that way – it would bring them together again, body and soul...

With a heavy heart, he sliced pale, pink meat into thin, translucent strips with a brand new knife he got at the mall. A kerosene lantern, also from the mall, provided a soft, warm glow that created a soothing ambiance.

His tears ran down his wife's cheeks as he set them down on a dish made of delicate bone china surrounded by pale, pink roses. Placido chewed each morsel slowly, relishing the poignant flavor of his last meal, fresh off the bone. His wife's thighs contained the sweetest meat he ever tasted.

He pushed the empty dish Julia never got to see aside and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Placido already devoured the succulent meat on her ass, arms, breasts, lower legs, toes, and fingers. He removed the diamond ring from the ring finger on her left hand, kept as a memento out of respect and slipped it on his

pinkie. The precious gem sparkled in the dim light. They shared a decade of bliss...

The phone was out, but it hardly mattered now, there was no one left to call. He couldn't remember the last time he saw the sun, but he had the lantern, a poor substitute. No running water either. Luckily, Placido had several gallon bottles to sustain him for the time being.

None of the comforts of home.

The morning of the bombing, he drove to a nearby mall to pick out birthday presents for Julia: a set of Chicago Cutlery, and the bone china she always wanted. He picked up the lantern on a whim.

Foresight....

* * *

Cubans dropped the bomb at six o'clock, Sunday night, a direct result of mounting tension between Cuba and the United States regarding their right to occupy our airspace. In retaliation, they unleashed a nuclear arsenal capable of mass destruction.

The night of the bombing, Placido grilled hot dogs and hamburgers in their backyard in New Mexico—next door to the air force base, a prime target—while Julia kept Juan and Maria company at the picnic table nearby. They were playing cards, Gin Rummy, and Juan's eyes lit up when he won for the first time. He grinned while his feet dangled in the air. Not used to losing, his little sister pouted and knocked the entire deck of cards to the ground.

Placido and Julia rushed into the house when they remembered to get buns and rolls out of the basement pantry before the hamburgers and hot dogs burned. She ran down the stairs too fast; the heel of her shoe got caught, and she tumbled down—head first—to the concrete floor below. By the time Placido reached Julia, her neck was already broken.

As soon as Placido heard the explosion outside, he screamed and clutched his lifeless wife in his arms, unable to accept the blow fate dealt him.

* * *

He wanted to give Julia a proper burial in the backyard, but radiation prevailed. Instead, he decided to preserve her body in the walk-in freezer, her final resting-place, until he needed her.

Placido closed his eyes and pictured the gigantic mushroom cloud, an immense, fiery burst of lethal nuclear energy, instantly annihilating everything in its path, including his beloved children.

He pictured the hot dogs and hamburgers, along with everything else burnt to a crisp. The baked beans and the macaroni salad Julia made devoured by ants, bit by bit, until there was nothing left.

* * *

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Monsters

by Chris Morris

It was two days after she was taken that Jennifer Grant realised who it was that had taken her.

She had just finished work at the office where she was currently working as a temp. It was quite enjoyable working there and there were several men that seemed glad she was there too. She especially had her eye on Norm Michaels, her immediate superior, he was married but that usually added to her fun.

She had just reached the basement level of the car park and was wondering whether she could get Norm to join her for the weekend when she felt a prick in her neck and everything went suddenly dark.

When she awoke she found herself chained to a bed in a specially constructed cell. The walls were bare brick and the one small window was nowhere near big enough to squeeze through. The door was made from steel and was obviously too strong to be broken through. The design of the door reminded Jennifer of the prison doors she had seen in movies with a square slot at head height that was obviously meant to look through. This was normally kept locked shut but three or four times a day a face would appear at the top slot. He would stand there staring for half an hour at a time just his eyes visible in the balaclava that he wore.

Each time he appeared Jennifer would shout at him. She couldn't believe that this man was so terrified of her that even though she was chained to a bed in a cell with no escape he still could not look on her without wearing a balaclava.

* * *

When the man was a child he had been constantly afraid. He had a sister two years his junior, their mother had left two days before the girl's third birthday; his father had climbed into a bottle and had never crawled out. His only enjoyment seemed to come from beating the two children. He had always blamed them for his wife leaving but could never admit it to himself so it had festered into a loathing which he hated himself even more for.

The two of children found the only time they felt safe was when their father had gone to bed and the boy would sneak into her room and they would snuggle up in bed together. This went on until he reached the age of eleven when he started to

find that snuggling up with his sister started to give him strange feelings that he couldn't understand.

His sister soon found that she was experiencing the same sort of feelings and before very long the siblings were entwined in a very physical relationship with no-one to tell them that they were doing anything wrong. It made them feel good and they saw no reason why it should be wrong. That was until the one time their father awoke after vomiting all over himself in his sleep.

As he was still drunk he could see no reason why he should have to clean up his own vomit so he went into his son's room to get him to do it. Finding he was not there he flew into a rage and searched the house for him. The last place he looked was his daughter's room and when he found them asleep together his rage reached a new peak and he knocked the boy unconscious with two blows. When the boy awoke he found his father sat in a corner of the room crying, his sister was lying in the man's lap but it was obvious even to a young boy that she was not asleep, in his rage he had killed her.

"I didn't mean to!" Was all the man would say as he sat there weeping.

After several hours the man pulled himself together and told the boy that if it ever came out about what he and his sister had been doing and that his sister had now been killed they would both be in a lot of trouble. So he followed his father into their garage and the boy watched as his father dismembered his sister's body with an electric saw and then put the pieces into a single bin bag.

At first light they climbed into the family car and drove to a nearby wood. Once there the father got his son to dig a grave three feet deep and place the body in it. Once the grave was covered over the father said, "Now you're an accessory and you'll go to jail the same as me if you ever tell anyone what went on here."

The boy and his father told everyone that the mother had turned up and took her daughter to be with her, no-one ever really batted an eyelid and life progressed as normal. For the boy it was slightly better as his father always kept more of a check on how hard he beat him.

So the two lessons he learnt from this were that sex was very bad and things got better if someone died.

* * *

The first person he had killed was his father. On his eighteenth birthday he waited

until his father had drunk himself into unconsciousness and then had removed the loose brick from the fire grate and hit his father once with it right in the centre of his forehead. After replacing the brick in the fire and arranging the body so it looked like he had fallen he called the ambulance. There was a cursory police investigation but interviews with the neighbours brought forth plenty of testimonies as to the man's alcoholism and the case was soon ruled closed as an accidental death.

Yet again death had made the boys life better.

It was three years later that 'The Banksville Undertaker' was born.

The young man had had an on-again off-again relationship with a girl. Every time it seemed that the relationship would come close to becoming physical he would back off remembering the lesson he had learnt so early in life. Finally he could take it no more and had invited Susannah out for a meal which he didn't enjoy because of the feelings that seemed to be building in his stomach. Afterwards he walked her to her apartment and when they got there she invited him in.

After finally consummating their relationship he walked into the kitchen, grabbed a carving knife and stabbed her through the heart. The look of surprise on her face made it all seem worth while. He had made so many mistakes that first time. It took him hours to clean up the blood and then he had to wait in her apartment until nightfall so he could leave unobserved, luckily he had thought to take several expensive items from her apartment to point to a rape-burglary.

The police visited him to question him but he had told them that they had broken up again. He seemed sufficiently heart broken to them to throw them off the scent and yet again he was away scot free.

But he realised three things. He had enjoyed the whole experience, he needed to be better prepared next time and Susannah had deserved a decent burial just like his sister had.

It was eighteen months before he was ready for his next experience. He had bought a cabin in an out of the way area where he wouldn't be spied on, and this was where he had built his 'cell'.

He had captured and killed twelve women in the last eight years. Five had been found dismembered in their graves each with their own hand carved wooden cross. This was something that he had always thought his sister had deserved.

Of course the papers had soon pounced on the weird circumstances of the deaths and had come up with the name 'The Banksville Undertaker'. Post mortem evidence showed the women had all been repeatedly raped and then had their limbs cut off while they were still alive. Examination of the stomach contents showed they had not eaten for several days before being killed.

The man would chain the victim up and it would take him several days to forget his lesson of sex being bad. He was even scared of the women at first, he wouldn't even look on them without some form of disguise, because he often had the thought to let them go and he wouldn't want them to go with a description of himself.

After this initial shyness had worn off he would start going into the cell and he would then rape them. He would often keep them alive for several days until his guilt would get the better of him and then it was time for their 'funeral rites'. No matter how much he told them that it was better for them to die they would still cry and scream as he prepared them for burial.

This new victim was different though, she was stronger than the rest. She never cried or whimpered like the others and the things she shouted were different. No 'please let me go' or 'please don't hurt me' from this woman. She always shouted things like 'you'd better let me go' or 'you'll regret this'.

He was quite looking forward to taking on a woman of stronger stuff, a woman with fibre, it would be a challenge. There was no doubt in his mind with this one, she was not getting away, there would definitely be no release for her.

Two days after her capture he walked into the cell, undisguised holding a cordless power saw.

She took all this in and said, "You must be the Undertaker. Nice saw."

He smiled; strong and intelligent. She was going to be lots of fun.

"I suggest you let me go now. I am well trained."

"I know martial arts too. It helps build body strength and resolve. Especially helpful when I take people." He replied.

"I'm not talking martial arts." She said as he walked over to her bed.

As he reached it her right hand snaked out and grabbed his wrist.

“Wow! I’ve never had anyone get free of the chains before, I’ll have to review the chain situation for my next guest.” As he said this he broke her grasp and grabbed her free wrist with his other hand.

“If you don’t let me go you’ll have no more guests here.” She said as her other arm shot out and grabbed the top of his arm.

“You really are good! Now stop struggling and I might kill you quickly.” He tried to keep his voice calm but he was worried. He had never encountered such strength or ingenuity in a victim.

When he broke the grip that she had on his arm he looked down and saw that her legs were now free. This couldn’t be possible. Looking again he saw that the chains that had held her legs were broken!

“How.. How did you do that?” He stammered.

“I told you I’m well trained. I’ve had people trying to catch me for three centuries.” As she spoke he could swear that her teeth became sharper and longer.

“What’s happening to your teeth?” He asked backing away.

“I usually prefer prey that I’ve led away from their usual hum drum lives. The heart seems to beat faster if the person is being naughty. But then you’re pretty naughty anyway aren’t you. Don’t worry, I always bury my victims, just the way you do. It makes it harder for anyone to piece things together. I’ll even burn down your home for you. Now, where’s that lovely neck of yours?” She asked.

Out here no-one could hear his screams as she drained his life blood.

As she left the burning cabin behind she hoped that the company hadn’t filled her spot at the office. She really did want to lure Norm away for the weekend.

* * *

A Dark Disappointment

by Brick Marlin

The man of darkness continues to watch on...

Jonathon Muvarro awaits the end to his existence. He awaits the end to his very soul he was born with; the one that bred inside of him as he grew into manhood. Something that grew into his adulthood that caused terror for the innocent ones that took his wrath.

Jonathon Muvarro sits quietly in the electric chair not having an emotion of fear, sadness, or even grief for his crimes. He sits with leather straps across his arms, legs, thighs, and chest as they're pulled snug to fit. His head sports a cold, metal skull cap that circles from temple to temple. A saline soaked synthetic sponge sits on his shaved scalp to increase the flow of electricity as copper electrodes are attached to his leg and head. And then, finally, a box with a lever hangs on the wall that delivers a current that boils one's blood in the vein.

Behind a large window lay observers for the show. The curtains are withdrawn and the stage is set. Eyes peer out of the seats waiting, watching, anticipating the kill. Butterflies flutter inside their stomach's, giving goose bumps. Some are reporters. Some are the grieving families of the victims. Some are just junkies that get a rush watching someone die.

And the man in the shadows, one that no one can visibly see, waits for his prize.

Muvarro halfway listens to the verdict being read as he reverberates his mind back to the terrible deeds he has done. All of the torture and killing he accomplished reigned terror across the state. Newspapers would portray his crimes and he always made the front page. *Always* made it.

It made him feel good.

It made him excited for more.

The speaker for the execution walked before the audience and said: "Today we are here to witness the execution of one Jonathon Muvarro. Convicted of the murder of twenty women; whereas only fifteen bodies have been recovered."

Muvarro's mind turned back more videos of the violence he did. The horrors

of what he had done.

"Jonathon Muvarro is to be executed in the electric chair on this date of April 20, 1986."

Muvarro emerged a grin.

"Would you like to say anything else, Father?"

Muvarro tuned the priest out totally.

"The Lord is my shepherd. Yea though I walk through the valley of death..."

Muvarro's eye's found the priest, watching his lips move and if looks could kill....

"...may God be with you, my son."

The executioner walked over to the lever.

"Any last words, Jonathon Muvarro?"

Muvarro's mind danced, still thinking about the killings.

The executioner grasped it with one hand.

Muvarro's grin turned into a smile and he said: "Just hit the switch before my blood gets any colder."

The executioner followed his instructions and then things began to get interesting.

One second Muvarro's thoughts were happy and fulfilling, still submerged into his crimes - the next second they developed horror and pain. Electricity forcefully injected itself into his body flourishing its evil through his veins, muscles, and organs. He was engulfed from head to toe while his body convulsed wretchedly beneath the straps.

His head screamed of heat.

His eyes bulged from their sockets.

His vision blacked out.

His nervous system baked, diffusing under the skin...

...And that was only the first wave...

The man in black watched, almost in a drool, now...

A second jolt of electricity was administered to make sure that his heart ceased it's beating.

Muvarro, half in this world, half out, never felt the second wave of the proceedings as his blood boiled profusely in his veins as his body poured blood from any hole it could find. Burnt flesh filled the room giving a bacon-like sweet aroma.

Muvarro's body finally leaves this world for the next as his corpse reaches a temperature of about 128 degrees and his skin swells; stretched to the point of almost breaking. He feels his self drifting out of his body, out of his fleshy shell, up into the air hovering over the burnt carcass. The group of witnesses by his body and behind the glass watching with discontent until the end; until the finale of the execution.

Muvarro drifts...

Drifting higher..

Drifting higher...

And higher flying like a bird....

No pain evolved....

The pain of dying had ceased to exist...

Floating, drifting, no gravitational pull...

Drifting above the world in which he once walked on. Above the world where his mother gave birth to him exposing him naked under a grave sky. Above the world where he grew and at one point in his life he was a good person; a good soul.

Not now.

Not ever.

Muvarro saw a lighted tunnel, white in color, funnel-like and rounded, that stretched straight up. Straight up high. Straight up where it came to a point, but went on. *Went on.* Muvarro saw it knowing that it was his heavenly elevation. He would go before the man himself and be forgiven for his sins. Be forgiven for all the acts of crime. All the acts of changing the warm blood-filled bodies into corpses left for the flesh to rot off the bone. The deadly sins acted upon bringing the evil wrath he accomplished on planet earth. Yes, he was to be forgiven.

God forgives.

Muvarro knew it and smiled. His hateful soul still wicked and happy for his kills. He was to escape freely and acquire his wings and be an angel. He was happy. He would fool heaven in believing that he was a good person now. A good soul to have that forgiveness.

Up he went.

Up he soared.

Higher now.

Higher and opening his arms wide for them to take him.

His eyes closed.

Higher, higher he went.

And then, still with his eye lids tightly shut, he felt a hand on his arm. Then on both arms as he was swung around, but not forcefully. He figured that he was at the gates of heaven. At the gates of another life to live and perhaps prosper. At the threshold of salvation. He was home.

But, not quite..

Opening his eyes, and to his horror, he saw two hands with black flesh looking as if it had been dried under the sun too long, burnt and peeling. Dead skin nearly hung off the bone and there were missing finger nails. The grip was cold and icy. No warmth ran through the veins, only a river of darkness; a river of death.

Muvarro saw that these hands reached through the tunnel's walls capturing him in mid-drift. They were holding tight, not letting go. Muvarro was now a prisoner and he knew it. He would not go to heaven. He would not rejoice and be forgiven for his sins. He would not wear any wings.

Muvarro panicked and tried to break free, but the grip held tight. It was like two cold metal clamps and every move he made they tightened, breaking skin.

His body was pulled through into total darkness; still, the grip held fiercely. He was being pulled - savagely jerked - almost feeling as if his arm would pull free from the bone. Down he descended; down he went, moving faster now.

Faster he fell.

Faster, faster, faster...

Wind whipped his face and hair as he felt himself tumble like a doll. His legs just flapped in the air, no control and no escape. He was doomed, he knew it. No wings. No rejoicing. No forgiveness. Everything was history. Gone.

All at once, he hit rock bottom...

Even being dead did not help when the air was knocked out of him and he gasped for oxygen.

After gaining lung control, he realized that he was on a cold, sticky concrete floor. Light showed directly on him like a spotlight. Everywhere else was darkness; a pitch black view of simply nothing.

He tried to get up but just lost his balance and slipped back down. The stickiness was wet and he knew right off what it was: blood. He had shed plenty of it to know how it felt on the skin when touched; when tasted. Red blood was what he was used to, but this was pure black. Not one speck of color protruded and it bore a thick film everywhere seeming almost like being in a shallow pond.

Without a hint of warning hands of different sizes, small and large, reached through the bloody floor and grabbed Muvarro and seized him. They attached themselves onto his arms, legs, waist, and throat. Before he knew what more to expect, before he could even a cry out in terror, the hands started to pull him under the floor as it turned into quicksand.

He tried to gasp for air, for life, but nothing helped him.

Down he sank.

Down he fell into the dark blood.

No rejoicing.

No heavenly wings.

No forgiveness.

Gone for good now, in body and soul.

Now the satisfaction of the man of darkness lingers happily.....

* * *

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Brick Marlin lives in the Ohio valley with his wife, four dogs, and a cat. Since the voices inside of his skull continue to dominate his life, his work has been in *Enigma Magazine*, *Microhorror*, and *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*.

Consequences Of Life

by Darran Martin

It was late and the street was quiet, no traffic and no people. It was raining heavily, so heavy that the rain was bouncing back up in the air as it splashed down onto the ground. What little light there was in the street was coming mainly from the streetlights lining the road. The lights were also shining off the wet ground and from the broken reflections coming from the large puddles on the road and pavement.

A red and blue neon sign, stating "Martens BAR & GRILL", blinks on and off repeatedly in a window next to a side alley. Inside the dimly lit bar are two men. The first, a tall slim man with dark brown hair, sits on a stool at the bar with a half full pint glass and the other, a shorter slightly chubby man with slightly graying black hair, standing behind the bar cleaning and rearranging the display items.

Phil

You know what Marten. *Coughs* For a year I've carried two things everywhere I've gone. No matter where I go they're always with me and I don't think I'll ever be able to get rid of either. The last few days I've done nothing but think about them both because the guilt is getting worse than ever.

Marten

What's things are they then Phil?

Phil

You know that my wife was murdered just over a year ago yesterday.

(He pauses to take a drink from the half full glass).

We had a fight because I'd crashed the car and she had to go out to work at the hospital for the late night shift. I told her to get a taxi and I would pay for it but she was so stubborn. She always used to say that after her best friend was raped by a taxi driver that took her home from her hen night that she would never be able to trust any of them again. She stormed out of the house and slammed the door behind her. I didn't get to tell her that I still loved her. She must have missed the bus and decided to walk all the way across to the hospital, because at that time of

night the busses are few and far between.

(He pauses again to take a drink and swallows long and hard leaving only a small amount in the glass).

It was about 11:30 when the phone rang, it was her boss Shirley asking whether she'd forgotten to come in to work. I told her what had happened and she offered to get her husband, who owned a garage that did body repairs, to pick the car up and do the repairs cheap since Melissa and her were good friends. She also said that she would call me when she did turn up at work.

Marten

That's quite unusual. The insurance company would normally pay for the repairs. Still it's always handy to get cheap car repairs. You want another drink, One for the road?

Phil nodded his head in reply and Marten takes the glass. He begins to refill the pint glass and pushes it in front of his late night customer. Meanwhile Phil starts flicking through his wallet for the money to pay Marten for the drink.

Marten

Hey. No need. It's well after hours. It's on me.

Phil

Thanks Marten.

As Phil puts his money back in his wallet an old creased passport sized photo falls onto the bar. He picks it up and looks at it. The picture shows himself and his wife in a photo booth with his wife laughing. The raven haired and blue eyed young woman looks extremely happy. His mind begins to run through some of the happier times that the two had had together. He sigh's and then he pushes it back into the wallet. Marten catches a quick look at it as he put it back.

Phil

The police called round at 9 o'clock the next morning to say that my wife had been found dead in an alleyway earlier that morning. They said from the way the scene looked she'd been running through the alleyway as a short cut to the hospital and that before she had even gotten halfway she'd been attacked. Somebody had grabbed her, raped her, stabbed her several times and took all of

her money from her purse. She never left the house with more than £10 on her. They said that she must have put up quite a struggle before they'd finally held her down. It's a little over a year later and the police still haven't found them.

I lost the most precious thing in my life all because some guy was drunk and driving his car without paying attention to the road and because some sick and twisted scum had to pick on a woman so they could have their fun.

The fact that we had had the fight over me crashing that damn car and her having to walk to work made me believe it was all my fault... and I've carried that guilt... that burden ever since... for the whole year.

Phil picks up the glass in one hand and wipes a tear from his eye with the other. He takes another drink staying silent for a little while until Marten breaks the silence.

Marten

So what's the other?

Phil

Huh.

Phil snaps out of his little trance and back to Marten who is still cleaning his bits and pieces behind the bar.

Marten

You said that there was two things you carried with you. If one of them is the feeling of guilt then what's the other one your carrying?

Phil

Oh,

Phil fumbles around in his inside jacket pocket and finally pulls out a small, black, loaded revolver. He places it carefully on the bar with the barrel pointing towards the window. Marten looks extremely shocked at the sight of the gun on the bar.

This.

Marten

Wh, why do you have a gun in your pocket? What the hell do you intend on doing with that thing?

Phil

Just in case.

Marten

Just in case of what?

Phil

Just in case I get jumped or if I see anyone mugging or raping anybody else. I have every intention on using that gun on them to make sure they don't get away with it like they did with my Melissa. It's to make myself feel as though I've helped get revenge for Mel so that she can rest in peace. I know I'll never find whoever killed her but at least if I can get rid one rapist like that I'll know there'll be one less of them on the streets.

Marten

You know I've known you for nearly 5 years. You've been in here every night ever since you first told me about Melissa's death. Now you tell me you've been in here for the past year with a loaded gun... every night... and I've been serving you drinks while you've had that thing in your jacket pocket.

You know I respect you right? Everything you've gone through in the last year and now you show me this. You're wrong Phil. Totally wrong. While your carrying that gun around with you you're no better than that scum you want to kill. If you want Melissa to rest in peace you need to get rid of it and forget about killing them and let the police deal with it.

That's their job. Your job is to get on with your life and make Melissa proud of you keeping her memory alive.

Phil stare's at Marten and picks up the gun reaching to put it back into the pocket it came from. Still staring a sudden wave of realization hits him and his head drops.

Phil

You're right Marten. While I've got this gun I'm no better than whoever killed my Mel. I can't believe I didn't realise it before now. Here.

He places the revolver on the bar and pushes it closer to Marten. He picks it up carefully and pushes it into his apron pocket with a slight look of relief.

Take it, get rid of it. I need to clear my head, start over and get my life back on the right tracks. You've always been a real good friend to me.

Marten

You know me. Forever the voice of reason.

He starts overacting and looking smug as he adjusts his shirt collar as if making a speech.

Martin

A simple sympathetic barman looking out for his favorite customers well being.

The two look at each other and begin laughing.

Phil looks at the clock on the bar wall. It reads 11:58pm.

Phil

Look at the time. I've got to get going. I'll speak to you tomorrow night.

Marten

Wait. I'll call a taxi for you. Can't very well have you walking around out there in this kind of weather.

Phil

It's okay. I'll just walk, it's calmed down out there now and it'll only take me 10 minutes to get home besides I need some time to think over my life and how to start it over. I just hope Melissa can forgive me for what I've done for the last year.

Marten

Well if you're sure. Here I'll let you out.

Marten moves round the bar to get to the door. He unlocks it and pulls the door open looking out into the soaked street. The rain had died off to a light drizzle. Phil stands by his side and put's his hand on Marten's shoulder.

Phil

Thanks again. You always seem to make me see things much more clearly. You've got quite a gift you should have been a doctor or a psychologist. I just wish there was some way I could repay you for all of your advice over the years.

Marten

Just look after yourself. That's all the payment I could ask from a friend. See you tomorrow night.

Phil

You bet.

Phil begins walking up the street as Marten locks the front doors again. The neon sign in the bar window stops flashing and the lights around the bar area go out shortly after leaving the lights in the kitchen. Marten moves into the kitchen area and begins cleaning Phil's glass.

The sound of a gunshot jerks Marten's head up in shock followed by two more and then the sound of the metal bins outside being knocked over. He remembers the gun tucked in his apron pocket and fishes it out, looks at it and holds it ready to fire as he walks over to the fire exit he pushes the handle down quietly and opens the door wide and fast. He jumps out and sees a young man struggling to find money in the fallen man's pocket's. Marten pulls the trigger of the revolver and shoots the young man in the chest killing him instantly. Marten drops the gun and rushes to help the injured man lying in the spilt rubbish from the bins. Marten drags the man towards the exit door and looks at him in the light of the kitchen. A sudden wave of realization hits him as he begins to understand what has happened.

Marten

Phil. Oh my god Phil are you okay? Speak to me. Phil please.

He opens Phil's coat to see the injuries to reveal three small bullet wounds each one soaking his light blue shirt as the blood seeps out in an outward circle.

Phil opens his mouth to speak and coughs up blood that dribbles down across his now pale cheeks his voice sounding tired, weak and raspy.

Phil

I'm sorry Marten. I never... meant to pass on... my burden to you. I'd never... wish it.....

Phil's eyes close and his last breath leaves his body with a bubbling gurgle. Marten puts his hand on Phil's face and shakes his head as he kneels in the alley next to Phil both bathed in the light coming from the open kitchen door.

Marten

Phil. Come on Phil don't you die on me. Phil. PHIL.

A tear rolls down his face as he sees Phil's wallet lying open on the ground and the picture of Phil and Melissa laughing floating in a puddle. He picks it up and places it in his inside jacket pocket and adjusts his clothes before picking the revolver up.

* * *

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Darran can be contacted at : darranmartin@hotmail.co.uk