

THE WORLD OF MYTH



MAGAZINE

ALEXANDRIA

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BRESCIANI

BROWN

CARROLL

CHIKONO

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GOSSE

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SCHERFENBERG

ISSUE 122

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STORIES

ART

CONTESTS

POETRY

REVIEWS

AND MUCH MORE

JAN/24

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CELEBRATION OF



HAPPY NEW YEAR

THE WORLD OF MYTH



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CELEBRATION OF



HAPPY NEW YEAR

THE WORLD OF MYTH



MAGAGINE

INTRODUCTION

Hey! We're Back!

By: Stephanie J. Bardy



Stephanie J. Bardy

Stephanie J. Bardy is an accomplished author, poet and editor. She is Editor in Chief at *The World of Myth Magazine* and has held an editing position with them for over 2 years. She is also Editor in Chief for *Dark Myth Publications* and holds a position on the Board of Directors for *The JayZoMon/DarkMyth*



Happy New Year

Mythketeers!

Yes, when I hear those words, as a Gen Xer, that is what I think of. Baby New Year. I hope everyone is healthy and going into this new year happy.

I have a few things that I need to talk about in this intro. Things are a little different as we go into the new year. Some good, some bad, but all different.

As a company, we don't have sponsors, we don't have people who advertise with us regularly, and we don't have a regular income. That is all mentioned in David K Montoya's Commentary, but I do want to say that as someone who has worked for this company for over 5 years now, all volunteer by the way, I see the amount of money that it

takes to run everything. The servers to keep the podcasts running and all the websites, the ISBN numbers that we purchase for every book we put out. Submitting said books to Amazon and other places is a cost we absorb as well. I'm not complaining, I'm not whining, I'm just stating facts. There are a lot more expenses that I have listed here, but you get the idea. It's really easy to support us as company. Sign up for Book of the Month, which is only 10 bucks a month with free shipping! Buy some individual books, or a shirt, check out our lithographs. If you're an author, buy ad space on our podcasts, which are circulated and listened to around the world. Become a sponsor. It all helps. I don't want to see this company, and our magazine disappear. Not as we come up to our 20th anniversary. Yes, this magazine has been around for 20 years, the company, even longer.

Okay, now that I am done coming to you with hat in hand, lets get on to some good stuff!

Company.

Her published works include [*Eternally Bound*](#), [*Eternally Bound PCE Exclusive Edition*](#), [*The Chosen*](#), [*The World of Myth Anthology Volume 3*](#), all under *Dark Myth Publications*. She also appears in [*Full Moon & Howlin: A Werewolf Anthology*](#) and *Monsterthology 2* published by *Zombie Works*.

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

Her editing credits include *Full Moon & Howlin: A Werewolf Anthology* and all of the works on *The World of Myth Magazine* for the last three years.

I would like to welcome MoK Junior to the fold and congratulate him for being our cover art this month.

I would also like to congratulate Chris Bice for winning Member of the Month! This man has so much talent and I am so happy for him. Well done, Chris.

We have an incredible book line-up coming this year, and the stories in our magazine just keep getting better. I have hope for the future, mine, the magazines, the company's. We just need to find that market, get our products to the right people. I have faith that we will.

I didn't make any resolutions this year, I set goals. One of which is to write a script for a movie. I have started it. Now to finish it. The goal wasn't to start, I am great at that. It was to finish. I don't set resolutions because when I don't meet them, I have this incredible letdown, and a great disappointment in myself. Goals, if you don't reach them, can be tried again, you can modify a goal, you can extend a goal, you can continue to pursue that goal into the next year. There is no finite time limit on a goal unless you set one. So, goals are my new thing. I have already implemented some and are working them diligently. It's hard, I won't lie, it takes discipline. Which I do lack. Self

discipline anyway. I think we all struggle with that on some level. When you have no one but yourself to be accountable to, you can slide.

My advice, which I know isn't asked for, and may not be wanted, but it's my intro, lol, so here ya go, my advice is keep trying, keep pushing, but be gentle on yourself. Be kind and allow yourself to fall, to slide, even to fail, because it is in those little fails that we learn how to make the big successes. We are creatures who learn from making mistakes. So, make those mistakes, learn, and try again. Well, I think I have put enough on your poor shoulders dear reader, I will end this intro with a hearty hello and a hope that you enjoy what we have to offer this month.

Until next month,



Stephanie J Bardy
Editor of hopes, dreams, and the ever annoying optimism.

Drabble & Flash

How to End the World in Five Easy Steps

By: Tim Law



Tim Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write.

Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog <http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on Parenting Express website.

The first step is simple, pick

a fight and justify it. Make it epic, headline-grabbing, something that immediately piques interest and then refuses to die down. Once you have the world's attention you will then need to ramp up the fear. Stockpile chemicals other countries haven't heard of. Find stuff and people with difficult-to-pronounce names. If those people don't have doctorates, give them some.

Next, make friends. They will need to be like-minded people who will support your cause. The enemy of an enemy is a friend and a friend in need is a friend indeed. Keep these two pearls of wisdom in mind at all times.

When other countries grumble, show them what you've built.

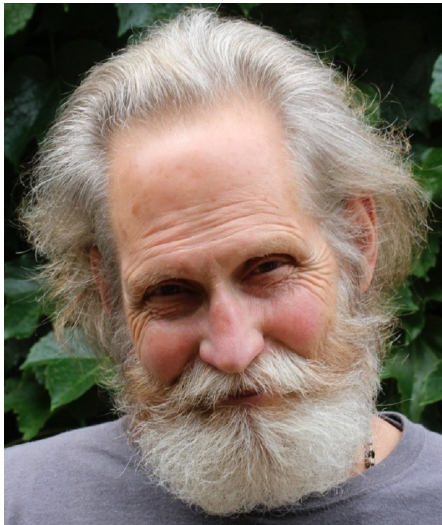
And, when they push their buttons, you simply push yours.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Drabble & Flash

Frozen

By: Jim Bates



Jim Bates

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

Huddled close he watched the last embers of his tiny fire dwindle from a hopeful glowing orange ember to a bitter chunk of blackened char. *This is it*, he thought to himself. *This is the end.*

Early that morning, he'd only wanted to go birdwatching, something he'd done countless times in his eighty-plus years. But he'd ended up getting turned around instead. Lost? He didn't think so. At first, he was only mildly perplexed. *Come on, you can figure this out.* Then he was frustrated. *Shit! Where am I?* Then he spent half a day hiking in one direction and then the other but to no avail. It was then that outright panic took over. *Damn, damn, damn! Where the hell am I?*

Making an unfortunate bad decision, he slogged off the trail through thigh-deep snow trying to find a new path. But he didn't find one. There was never going to be a new trail because there wasn't one out there. Finally, exhaustion set in. He found

shelter under the low branches of a huge pine tree, collected some kindling, and built a small fire with his few remaining matches to warm his hands. That had been four hours ago. A long time in the frigid minus twenty-five degree cold.

Now this. His good life ended by freezing to death. He lay down, curled up into a ball to conserve heat, and closed his eyes. The sun had set. Daylight was gone. Stars came out and the woods were deep and dark. In the distance, a wolf howled. The old man huddled closer to the charred remains of his meager fire. He took in a deep breath. The cold burned his lungs. He tried to open his eyes, but the lids were frozen shut. He didn't have the strength to pry them open.

As his body lost heat, his core started to freeze. He no longer had the will to fight. He became calmly resigned. *This isn't a bad way to go*, he thought to himself. A gentle voice whispered. *Sleep, my friend. Sleep deeply.*

Accepting his fate, he did. He drifted off to a warmer place. In his mind's eye, he saw a roaring fireplace and bright lights in a grand hall. There was laughter, dancing, and music. It was a

by The Zodiac Press for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. His story "The Maple Leaf" was voted 2021 story of the year for Spillwords. He lives in a small-town west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of his work can be found on his blog at www.theviewfromlonglake.wordpress.com.

party!

Unfortunately, he would not be attending.

Drifting, drifting, drifting. Off he went. The lights dimmed, the music slowed, and the dancing faded to a distant past.

Then peace.

The woods were deep and still. In the distance, the wolf howled again. Then it was joined by another one. And another. It was a pack, and they were on the hunt. Soon they would find him. Frozen. They were hungry. They wouldn't care. They wouldn't care at all.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Drabble & Flash

Greys

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

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

Between the streetlights

there were shadows, but she couldn't see anything that would explain the mounting terror she felt or slow down her racing heart. Logically she knew she wouldn't die if she stepped outside. Adrenalin was causing the breathless panic and the quivering she couldn't control. As her hand reached for the doorknob someone hammered on the door. She screamed. The sudden silence that ensued seemed more terrifying than the previous noise. Was anyone, anything, still out there?

She stood on tiptoe to look through the peep hole. Shifting Grey shadow-like figures with large staring eyes milled around her door. The unearthly silence once again filled her with dread. It was true then; the invasion had happened. That was why there had been no-one around for days. Panic swept through her, her throat was tight, her heart was beating too fast, she could feel a

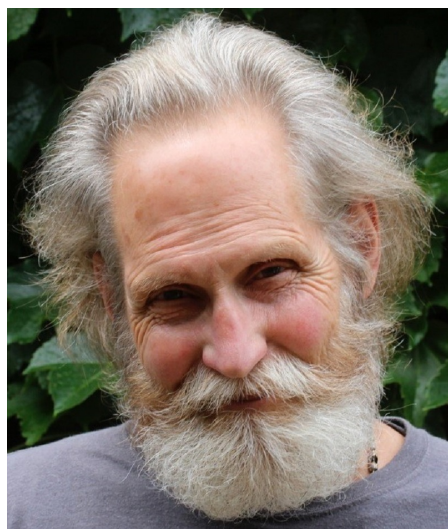
darkness flow over her vision. With no warning, the letterbox opened, grey slimy hands slithered through, captured, and held her. In despair she screamed for help, but she felt all was lost. There was no one alive to help her. Then she heard ringing. It was her alarm, waking her up to a normal morning. It was only a nightmare, she thought. Knowing that didn't help shake of the dark cloud hovering over her though. The feelings of dread did lift eventually, but to this day she cannot look through a peephole without first holding the letterbox closed.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Drabble & Flash

The Alien of Orchard Lake Teaser Chapter Eight

By: Jim Bates



Jim Bates

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

The Story so Far:

For fifty years, Ebar, an alien from the planet Rykos, has lived on Earth in the form of a human, Kyle Johnson. When the soft-spoken Ebar (Kyle) gets in a fight (one he didn't start) at his job at a sewage treatment plant, he is put in jail. Unfortunately, Ebar's jailer overhears him trying to contact his home planet. The consensus is that Ebar is crazy. He is put into The System and comes under the care of newly hired social worker Jeremy Slater who befriends Ebar. Jeremy's egotistical boss thinks Jeremy is nuts to care so much about Ebar and makes life hard for him. Jeremy's friend and fellow social worker Julie is on Jeremy's side. Together they try to figure out how to do what's best for Ebar.

Chapter 8 Teaser:

Getting settled in a comfortable

Adirondack chair, Julie said, "Alright, I'm outside in the back where it's private. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Then she listened to Jeremy as he talked for nearly ten minutes, mostly about what he'd learned that day about the fight at the sewage treatment plant, something Julie had not heard the specifics of before. In fact, Jeremy talked so much and so fast, he never gave her a chance to get a word in. The overriding thought forming in Julie's mind as she listened was that Jeremy was a kind and caring person, and he was obviously committed to helping his patient. The mental health field could use more like him.

Jeremy finally stopped talking, and she could hear him take a drink. *Probably water*, she thought to herself. She'd noticed in the month or so that she'd known him that Jeremy drank a lot of water. *What's up with that?* It made her thirsty just thinking about it. She took a grateful sip of

nominated by The Zodiac Press for the 2020 Pushcart Prize. His story "The Maple Leaf" was voted 2021 story of the year for Spillwords. He lives in a small-town west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of his work can be found on his blog at www.theviewfromlonglake.wordpress.com.

wine and said, "Okay, so let me recap what I heard you say."

"Go ahead."

"I know the background of Kyle, based on what you told us yesterday at the group meeting."

"Right."

"Kyle..."

"Um, Julie? Sorry to interrupt, but could you call him Ebar? Just for now?"

"But he's Kyle."

"I know." Jeremy was obviously frustrated. "He's Kyle. He's Ebar. He's both. He's..."

"Hold on, Jeremy. Just calm down.

Maybe you should tell me why you called me in the first place."

She heard him sigh in the background, followed by another drink of water. Then, he said, "Here's the thing. Remember that I've got to present my case at the meeting next Wednesday."

"Right."

"Ebar wants me to prove to them he's an alien."

There was a long moment of silence before Julie exclaimed, "Good lord!"

To Be Continued...

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Children's Literature

Fortune's Day

By: Tim Law



Tim Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it

The prophecy was quite clear, every faithful that bathed in Luna's bright light knew it well. Where others thought of Fortune's Day as a day fit for joyful possibilities, those who were guided by the moon saw such a day as one filled with worry and dread. Luna warned of a great doom coming, the time of change, when every race would be asked to bow down and relinquish their freedom. Some of Luna's faithful wrote of the ending of the known world; a wiping away of everything, so that a new world order could begin. Other faithful disagreed with this, seeing in their own visions a version of whole world slavery. Year upon year the arguments would flare up around the time when the moon was at its weakest and the sun shone long. There was nothing in the prophecy though that spoke of time advanced, of Fortune's Day appearing before it should. Dove, faithful of Luna, she who was

named Dreamer of the Queen of Dreams, found herself to be more troubled by this Fortune's Day than she had been in previous years. This felt like it. This would

be the day where the visions would come true, whichever vision was right anyway.

"Why? Why? Why?" muttered the paladin.

"All signs pointed to this, the chaos, the Capitol, to us being here," said Bull, running beside

the paladin.

He was impressed by the girl's ability to travel so quickly in armor; his own form of protection was his speed and agility, and his ability to take a punch or two in the heat of a brawl. Dressing lightly enabled Bull to move fast, but Dove in her outer shell somehow still kept pace with him and he with her, stride for stride.

"Yes, I know that" said Dove in reply, irritated. "But why has this happened on my watch? Why here in my home? Why not in a hundred years? They should have waited until we were ready..." is difficult not to be inspired to write.

Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog

<http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on Parenting Express website.

The blade singer somehow had a lead on the rest of the group, ten feet at least, and she was traveling fast enough to increase that lead in mere minutes.

"Meow!" called Cat, the mouse clinging to her fur as she tried to keep up.

Fox had vanished after the house they were sheltering in had caught fire. Nobody knew if he too ran toward the palace, if his courage had left him, or if the strange druid had some other mission he was undertaking.

"We cannot wait!" Bull called back toward Cat and her tiny passenger, assuming that was what the feline was asking. "Bee and Dove both believe that the palace is where we will find the Queen and our final battle."

"Why did it have to be Fortune's Day today?" moaned Dove again. "I guess we can ask when we get there," said Bull.

He smiled, but that changed to a frown when Dove gave him a look suggesting she was less than amused.

"What?" the barbarian asked.

"Just... Keep... Running..." the paladin suggested.

"Or stop!" said a sultry voice, the sorcerer stepping out from an alleyway.

Bee, still ahead of the others and not having seen the new arrival, continued her sprint toward danger. Caught in a spell of words

both Bull and Dove discovered they were frozen in place. Cat almost ran into them, slipping through Bull's open-legged gate, and then around the steel statue that was Dove.

"I remember you," the arcane mistress declared as the two actual animals tried to go by her without notice. "I believe you deserve a punishment from me." "Hhhhhhhh..."

Rrrrrrrroooooowwww..." spat Cat. The hairs on Mouse rose and he showed his teeth.

"I can do that too," laughed the sorcerer, unperturbed. "But when I do it, bad things happen."

Bull tried to call out to Bee but found even his voice refused to obey him.

"You have ruined everything," the sorcerer growled. "My moment of ultimate power... I have awaited this day my whole life... Gone in the blink of an eye... Spoiled... Stolen... And now someone MUST pay..."

Sparks flashed toward the fleeing feline, but Cat with Mouse clinging on tightly was able to dodge and weave around each and every one of them.

At the pace they were traveling, the gap between Cat and Mouse, and that of Bee was eaten up swiftly. The sorcerer ignored them though, instead turning her attention to her captives.

"So, you are the ones who call yourselves Dove and Bull..." she smirked. "I am sure that we can

find a fitting form for you both to take.”

“Leave my friends alone,” growled the voice of Bee.

There came a thrumming that caused Cat and Mouse to both cover their ears. Bee had thrust through the air with her blade, and it shook with power.

“And what if I don’t,” said the arcanist from the tower. “What if I refuse to let these two go, as it seems your toy does not scare me.”

“Then you will face the consequences of your foolery,” suggested Bee. “Today seems to be one of fortunes both good and bad.”

Dove’s mail gauntlet crashed into the sorcerer’s side.

“You are merely a distraction from the true test that faces us,” said the paladin.

“How?” asked the sorcerer, just as Bull wrapped her in his arms.

“Magic can dispel magic,” said Bee. “Surely every caster knows such is fact.”

“But you are weak, no match for my powers,” claimed the mistress of the tower.

Bull’s meaty hand slipped over her mouth, finally silencing her.

“Alone, perhaps that is true,” agreed Dove, her words causing Bee to nod.

“But all together we are a match for anyone and anything that Fortune’s Day can throw at us,” the elf added.

“So, what do we do with her now?” asked Bull.

In that instant the woman he thought he had wrapped up tight suddenly disappeared leaving him hugging himself.

“We run, again,” suggested Dove. “And we hope that we don’t meet her again,” added Bee. “We cannot afford any more distractions.”

“Easy as anything then,” said Bull with a frown.

Dove and Bee did not reply, as they had already, stride for stride headed toward the heart of the Capitol again.

“Meow?” said Cat.

“Squee?” added Mouse.

Bull picked them both up and gave each a scratch.

“Alright, let’s go...” the barbarian sighed.

The streets ahead of the palace gates were crammed with citizens fighting with one another.

“It’s the end!” cried Dove in disbelief.

“Nonsense,” muttered Bee. “They have been changed like Tom, listen to the buzzing.”

Dove discovered sadly that the blade singer was right. The very people that the paladin of Luna had left the church to protect were now, some at least, showing signs they had begun the transformation from self to insectoid.

“What can we do for them?” Dove begged to know. “Is there a cure?”

“The only cure is death,” lamented the elf. “I know of no other.”

Dove felt tears well as she drew her holy blade.

“Then let us make those deaths clean,” she vowed.

“Bzzzzz!!” cried the son of one of the blacksmiths that Dove knew by face.

Luna’s dreamer punched him firmly and he tumbled to the cobblestones. Bee stabbed with her own sword and the boy shuddered.

“Do not waste time with your sympathies,” the elf hissed. “If it were you or I or any other the others the head and the body would not be together.”

Dove nodded to show that she understood, and the next citizen that buzzed was delivered a deadly blow.

“Return to your homes!” the two ordered as they discovered many untouched by the curse of the Queen Bee.

“We have no home,” stated many.

“We must see the king,” demanded many more.

“It is not safe here,” said Dove. “If you cannot find shelter then you must leave for the city limits.”

A great green giant, two headed, and winged, with a great leathery bird hanging from one shoulder appeared, climbing over the palace’s outer wall.

Bee flung a ball of flame up into one of the creature’s faces that exploded on impact. The giant fell

back and crushed the stone structure it had only recently straddled, along with a half dozen citizens, killing them instantly. "Hold off the masses and wait for the others," ordered the blade singer.

"Where are you going?" asked Dove, surprised.

Bee pointed at the hole in the wall.

"I have a date with destiny," she claimed. "And I shall not keep her waiting."

"We will not let these invaders take our city," claimed a citizen as Dove, mouth agape, watched Bee flee from one source of danger toward an even greater source. "Leave or die," suggested Dove to that citizen before she struck down another face that she half recognized.

"Then I guess we die," said the citizen, just before a stinger exploded through his chest.

"There is no point to my being here if you are unwilling to save yourselves," cried Dove.

Perhaps this was the nature of her kind's demise, refuting salvation when it was offered up on a platter. Dove shook her head to clear such thinking.

"Meow?" asked Cat as she ran by, headed for the hole in the wall where Bee disappeared.

"Where is Mouse?" asked Dove, and then she laughed, a dry, humorless sound that was more about madness, and less about mirth. "Please forget that I

asked."

The feline gave a look as if it truly understood (which of course it did), and that it agreed the paladin was somewhat insane.

Then it turned away with its tail in the air, and it padded without a care onto the palace grounds.

Dove disposed of two more insectoids before, bloodied blade in hand, she followed after.

The world beyond the chaos of the city streets seemed quiet. A strange gel covered the grass. It looked to be heaped up against the trees and bushes that had once been a well landscaped garden. Dove could tell just from looking that the curse Fox was trying to prevent had made its way even to this place. Palace soldiers dressed in the same armor as Dove lay lifeless upon the ground, some with the inky black sight of cursed beings and some showing late stages of insectoid morphing. And yet there was no stench of death and decay, Dove could only detect a sweet smell in the air, unnatural, but alluring.

Cat again hissed, she also smelling what Dove could, but where the paladin wanted to discover the source, Cat wanted to get away.

"Come, you lead," Dove suggested.

Cat hissed again, an obvious dislike for such an idea, and yet there was logic in the paladin's

hastily formed plan. Cat would not be mesmerized by whatever was ahead. The feline was the best possible warning for Dove, Bee, Bull. Where was Bull anyway? What had happened to the brutish barbarian?

"Come on, Dove!" called the voice of Fox from the inner gate. "Bee and Bull are not far from the king's throne room."

"Tell them to wait!" Dove called back in Fox's direction, but there was nobody there.

"Meow?" asked Cat, worried.

"I will not go home," growled Dove. "It is my time to shine."

A slither of moon is better than no moon at all... Luna gave Her chosen one a glimpse of the future... Bee sat upon the throne with her brother beside her. The two elves were both clearly affected by the strange insectoidism...

"Tell them to wait!" Dove shouted again, running for the gate.

"Bloody Fortune's Day..."

#

Fox remained in the shadows, watching the citizens storm the palace, some demanding answers, while others merely buzzed, following orders that only they understood.

"Where is everyone," he muttered to himself.

Then he saw the others running straight toward the crowd that he was witnessing, straight toward

what Fox sensed would be an eruption of uncertainty.

"Stop, please!" cried Fox. "Come to me and we will find another way, a better way!"

The battle that erupted was bloody and brutal, and Fox was surprised to see both Dove and Bee in the thick of it. Were they truly the heroes that Dove claimed? As Bee left the battle and slipped away, Fox watched on from afar as Dove skillfully killed more.

"Hey," puffed Bull as he appeared by Fox's side. "What's the plan?" "Stop the bloodbath," muttered Fox.

"I don't think that we can," shrugged Bull as the true nature of some of the citizens was revealed. "We can only hope enough survive this day and remember."

"We are useless here then," said Fox. "We should probably be in there."

Bull nodded, just as Fox changed form.

"I forgot you can do that," the barbarian said with a shudder.

Without reply the fox that was Fox slipped from the shadows and dashed across the open ground.

The people fighting ignored the creature. Bull tried to follow but was less than lucky. The barbarian copped a few fists and kicks, even the flat of a sword blade. He shrugged off every blow, even landed a couple of his own punches, snapped a stinger, and

then breached the wall.

Fox was in the shade of an oak that had succumbed to that dreaded illness, no longer in his animal form, he was openly weeping as he touched the tree's trunk.

"We have little time for sadness, friend!" Bull called as he trotted across the outer palace grounds. "They did not deserve this," the druid hissed. "I was sent to stop this, and I failed."

"If we don't move fast then we will have failed more than the bushes and trees, and the birds," the barbarian said. He did not mention the bees, although there was a distinct smell of honey mixed with sulfur in the air, clearly coming from deeper within the palace layout.

"Come," suggested Bull. "Let's go together."

"Give me a moment," said Fox.

"You go on."

Bull thought for a moment, and then, grabbing Fox by the arm he dragged the druid away. The strange blackness that corrupted the oak, the grass blades, the very ground had begun seeping into Fox's skin.

"Thankzzzz..." said the druid.

Bull punched him, a solid blow straight to the chin. The darkness oozed out of Fox's foot and back into the ground.

"Thanks," said Fox, frowning, rubbing the bruise that was already forming.

"You are most welcome," laughed Bull. "Glad I could help."

The pair ran on toward the inner gate, this time Fox chose not to transform.

"Do you smell that?" Fox asked Bull.

The barbarian nodded.

"Does that mean we are close?"

Fox brought his finger to his lips, a sign for quiet.

"Bzzzzz... Bzzzzz... Bzzzzz..." said an approaching figure.

Bull and Fox could not hear footsteps but there was a sound like wings rapidly fluttering.

Fox leaped forward in animal form and his pointed nose and sharp teeth snapped shut on air.

Bull, when he followed after, discovered a half elf, half wasp creature, located at just the right height for him to sock it in the eye.

"Bzzzzz!!" it buzzed as its wings stopped flapping and it plummeted a few feet to land on its knees.

Fox again snapped his jaws and the creature's mandible was torn away. There was no more buzzing after that as the druid made short work of tearing the enemy to bits.

There was something about the heat, the smell, the strangeness of the palace. Fox led on, but Bull had to force himself to follow.

Ahead of the pair they could both see Dove entering the great palace. Fox brayed and Bull yelled out for the dreamer of Luna to stop, but it was almost as if the

inner gate and the palace doors were a whole world away. "We have to catch her," ordered Bull. "We have to run!" As one, Fox and Bull both left the remains of the insectoid and dashed as quickly as they could to where Dove had disappeared from their sight. Fox was the far faster in his animal form, a streak, he had transformed back again by the time Bull was able to cover the same ground. It looked as though a sword, Dove's or Bee's had dispatched two more of the strange creatures. One had been a mantis-like beast, the other almost arachnid, both suffered scorch marks making Fox and Bull both think that Bee had slain the pair. The passageway turned a corner and neither the druid nor the barbarian could see what awaited them up ahead, but there was enough of a raucous to enable the men to guess. "In Luna's name!" shouted Dove. "We go together on two limbs, not four," Bull said, pleaded. "As you so wish," Fox replied. As twins the corner was navigated and as twins the pair cried out Dove's name. "Hurry I fear we are already too late!" the paladin cried. Bull threw himself into the fray while Fox hung back and drew up columns of stone from the sticky floor to crush the swarm of bugs and beetles that assaulted Dove. "No, no, please leave me and go on!" the holy warrior urged, but her companions refused. Bashing, booting, crushing the tiny enemies beneath his brute strength, Bull forced a path that Dove defended, and then Fox finalized. The creatures stirred once and then no more. Up ahead of the three, by the doors of solid oak gelded with precious jewels, Cat and Mouse were finishing off their own adversary, a bee the size of a raven. The mouse was straddling the insect and biting it repeatedly while the cat swatted at buzzing wings causing the monstrous insect to crash back into the goo. Two swipes from sharpened claws and the giant bee buzzed its very last. "Where is Bee?" asked Dove, concerned. Cat clawed the door open.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

inner gate and the palace doors were a whole world away. "We have to catch her," ordered Bull. "We have to run!" As one, Fox and Bull both left the remains of the insectoid and dashed as quickly as they could to where Dove had disappeared from their sight. Fox was the far faster in his animal form, a streak, he had transformed back again by the time Bull was able to cover the same ground. It looked as though a sword, Dove's or Bee's had dispatched two more of the strange creatures. One had been a mantis-like beast, the other almost arachnid, both suffered scorch marks making Fox and Bull both think that Bee had slain the pair. The passageway turned a corner and neither the druid nor the barbarian could see what awaited them up ahead, but there was enough of a raucous to enable the men to guess. "In Luna's name!" shouted Dove. "We go together on two limbs, not four," Bull said, pleaded. "As you so wish," Fox replied. As twins the corner was navigated and as twins the pair cried out Dove's name. "Hurry I fear we are already too late!" the paladin cried. Bull threw himself into the fray while Fox hung back and drew up columns of stone from the sticky floor to crush the swarm of bugs and beetles that assaulted Dove. "No, no, please leave me and go on!" the holy warrior urged, but

Children's Literature

The Teacher - Chapter Four

By: Tim Law



Tim Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write.

Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on

Have you ever taken a ride on the back of a dragon? Until this day I can honestly tell you that I had never had such a ride either. To tell you the truthful truth I had never painted rainbows with a gargoyle, never rode on a sky train, and I had definitely never ever eaten a strawberry marshmallow the size of a boulder. This place was the weirdest place that I had ever visited, and yet, the back of the scaly giant that had eyes that looked just like my friend Sam's, I felt so safe. "Woohoo!" I called out at the top of my lungs. "Roooooooooaaaaaarrrrr!!" went Sam the dragon. We burst through a bank of clouds so thick that it looked like a wall of ice, Sam took in a deep breath and shot forth flames that were the most vibrant purple I had ever seen. The clouds just vanished from our path, and we flew on, laughing.

had a thought. We could fly around and play all day, two friends having fun together, but that would not help us to find my teacher.

"Hey Sam!" I shouted as we burst through another bank of thick clouds. "Do you know where it is that we can find Mister Bright?" "I have never been a dragon before," roared Sam. "And I don't think you have ever been a gargoyle before."

"You are right there," I said, but I was confused as to how that was going to help us find my teacher. "I was once a Jess, just as you are a Jess now," Sam the dragon continued. "So maybe we could use our shared Jess powers, and if they don't help us to find your missing Brightness then maybe you being a gargoyle and me being a dragon will be more useful."

"What are these Jess powers you are talking about?" I asked.

"When everyone was calling you Jess did you get powers?"

"No," Sam rumbled, his eyes smiling. "Only the power of disguise, a power that was so disguised that I did not even

his blog

[http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot](http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/)

[t.com.au/](http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/) or on Parenting Express

website.

know I had it until the very end of my story."

"But in my adventure, I don't have a friend like Doc, or Mister Polar Bear, or The Butcher, or anyone like that," I replied.

"But you have met a snowman, an actual real to be true gargoyle, a train driver, and me, and I get the cents that your adventure is far from over," said Sam the dragon.

"That is true," I replied, hanging on tightly as the dragon took a dive.

"If I was paid a whole dollar for every truth I told then I would make a lot of cents," considered Sam. "In actual fact, I am taking you right now to my cave home where I can show you my hoard of treasures."

And before I knew it we were there, flying so low that Sam's dragon-scaled body was scraping along the forest floor, the earth and small bushes were being disrupted as we passed, and dust flew up into my face. Then I saw some small hills ahead and we plunged into a cave mouth in one of the hills, the picture looking very similar to the wide open mouth of a certain substitute teacher.

The cave was wet, warm, and moist, and then there came a gust of wind that sucked into the cave instead of blowing out.

"Sam?" I asked, afraid. "Are we inside Mrs. Mister?"

Before my dragon friend could

answer we were zipping down a passage and then into a strangely shaped room.

"Where are we Jess?" asked the great dragon. "This is definitely not my cave."

"I think that we may have flown straight into the mouth of a giant substitute teacher!" I shouted.

"Well, that's lucky," the great dragon replied.

"Lucky!" I shouted. "You think that flying into a monster's mouth is lucky?"

"I think that it is really lucky that we are not in Mrs. Mister's stomach," said Sam. "Don't you think that that is lucky too?"

"I guess," I said after a moment of thinking. "And if we are not in the stomach then we must be in the lungs."

There came another gush of wind, and we were bounced around the cushiony room that we found ourselves in and then the wind shoved us into another, darker room.

"We are going further and further into the lungs," I murmured. "And where does air go from the lungs?"

"Well, some of it goes back out of the cave and some of it, the oxygen part, well that goes into the blood and then whizzes around the body," rumbled the dragon. "It actually sounds like it could be lots of fun."

"Quickly Jess, I really want to see your home, your cave with all of the treasure in it," I begged of my

friend. "Breathe your fire, your purple flames and hopefully you will be able to make Mrs. Mister cough."

"How about you just flap your arms a bit and see if you can fly your own way out," Sam snapped. "I want to stay here and ride on the whizzy whizz..."

"Please, Sam?" I asked, but it was no use.

If a dragon could cross his arms and pout, then Sam the dragon would have done just that. I could tell that this friend of mine was flying no further.

"Fine!" I said, stamping my gargoyle foot. "I hope that this works."

Just as Sam the dragon suggested, I flapped my arms up and down like I was pretending to be a bird. Slowly I began to rise up into the air.

"You're doing it!" shouted Sam. And then in celebration, the dragon sent out a burst of purple flame. The warm air caused the cushiony room to begin to rumble and shake, and then, while my arms were frantically flapping, a great gust picked me up and threw me toward the tunnel, the mouth, and then the open sky.

"Bye Jess, bye!!" rumbled Sam the dragon, and then he disappeared in a puff of purple smoke.

"Goodbye, Sam, my friend," I whispered with a tear in my eye. But before I could wonder if Sam was lost forever I was suddenly smothered in sticky, green goo, and then up through the nose I went, up and out, into the world.

"Aaaaaachoooooooooo!!" sneezed the hill-giant.

As I flew I struggled to get free of the ball of sticky goo that I was wrapped up inside of. Up and up and up I went, and then I began to plunge down, back down toward the forest, the rocks, the hills, the trees.

"Gosh mate!" said a pink and purple eagle as it flew beside me. "You look like you could be in a bit of a slimy situation."

"Help me, please..." I begged, but it was very difficult for me to speak with so much slimy goo covering my nose, my mouth, my ears, and everything else.

"Help you, mate?" cawed the eagle. "Not on your life."

I watched as the eagle flew away, into the open mouth of the giant Mrs. Mister, I then watched on as those teeth made of rock chomped down upon the bird that refused to help me. I closed my eyes, unable to look, and so I did not see as I hit the ground and bounced in my protective ball of sticky, green, jelly. I bounced and I bounced, until I bounced into a great big tree, and then the safety ball that I was captured in suddenly exploded. The tree turned its eyes of light brown toward me and then licked its lips with a thick pink tongue.

"Mmmmmm... Aqua-Marine" giggled the tree in a very breezy voice. "My bestestest of flavors."

I grabbed a quick pinch of the green splodges and placed it carefully in my mouth. When it hit my taster I felt a very salty, seaside kind of taste flow over my tongue and tastebuds, it was as if I was at the beach and my mouth was the sandy shore. It was bubbly, and frothy, but quite nice.

"Very nice," I agreed.

I went to have another go, but the tree's branches stretched out in my direction and stabbed at my fingers.

"No, no, no, no, no..." whispered the great tree, branches shaking.

"Gargoyles cannot eat that, not allowed, nothing good can come from this."

"Don't worry," I said to the tree, trying to reassure it. "I am not a gargoyle; this is just a costume."

"Consume? Gargoyle consume the jelly?" asked the tree. "No, no, no, no."

That was when I chose to unzip the back of the gargoyle costume and I began to show the tree that I was really a Jess, and not a monster made of stone.

"What is this stranger magic," whispered the tree. "What is this creature that is bursting from your skin?"

"It's me, the real me," I said. "I am a Jess, not a monster."

"No, no, no," said the tree, its voice growing stronger, like it was taking root and not flowing like leaves in the wind any longer.

One of the branches from the

tree extended further and twigs poked through the costume and picked it up. I fell over as the bottoms of the gargoyle suit were stripped away. From my viewpoint on the ground, all I could do was stare as the dark grey suit was taken up to the tree's eyes for examination and then into the great wood's open maw.

"Mmmmm... Rock road..." sighed the tree. "My others bestestest of flavors."

I looked at my body, my arms, and my legs. I saw that I was me again, no more costume, no more gargoyle. Carefully I got up and made to turn away.

"No, no," growled the tree. "Me need to know if you taste like too."

"You will not be tasting me," I said, and I quickly tried to scramble away. "Not now, not today, in fact not any day."

"No," said the tree. "Stop go." I turned to run off into the forest, but the branches of the great tree wrapped around me, and I found myself entangled in twigs, leaves, and poking sticks.

"Let me go!" I cried. "Let me go!" Instead of letting me go, the tree dragged me toward it. I kicked out with both of my feet and suddenly one foot bumped into the tree.

"Ow, ow, ow!!" the tree moaned, and it began to shake viciously. I was spun about and thrown upside down. I waved around my fists and continued to kick out with my feet. Again, I bumped the tree.

"Hurty, hurty, hurt, hurt!!" it cried.

"Let me go!" I shouted again. "You are not my bestestest of flavors!" rumbled the tree. "You are just a jess, and you are meany meany mean bean."

And then with one final shake of its trunk and branches the great tree threw me upward.

Like a rocket ship blasting off, I left the prison of those twigs that gripped me. Up and up and up I went, until up started to feel like down and down did not feel very right at all. Left was wrong and I could no longer tell if my head was not my knee, and my foot was not my eye. I flapped my lungs and made my heart pump the beat. My toes were in my ears and all that I could see was the sea. I began to fly in that direction, looking up to see down, and knowing that by getting lost I would find the way. On the horizon, I saw a great ball of light.

"Mister Bright," my ear lobes trumpeted, and the ocean called back to me.

This was the way I was meant to be; this was the way to go. In coming forward I was going left, and leaving behind all of that that was, on my way to possibility. Should things go well I would be beside myself when beside Mr. Bright I myself would find. And so, I flapped, swooped, and soared, and when I sawed the beach I discovered it was a place of icy ice and snowy snow. Like an eagle I could see, and what I saw was little people in tiny houses. They looked exactly like the ugly people that Sam had seen in his adventure. Was I there? Was I indeed about to be a gigantic giant landing in the cold of Goblin City? I spent no more time wondering and wandering. I drifted gently upward and suddenly felt myself crashing downward. And that was how I became Jess the giant snowball, destroyer of worlds.

To Be Continued...

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Fantasy

By: Michael Carroll



Michael Carroll

With a B.A. degree from Boston College and an M.A. degree from the Bread Loaf School of English, Michael C. Carroll specializes and lectures on literature from the Anglo-Saxon era, specifically the epic poem of *Beowulf*. His master's program brought him to Oxford University where he studied Old English and the *Beowulf Manuscript* with Oxford professor and author Francis Leneghan. The thesis that he wrote for the program became a 150-page book that explores the climactic dragon fight that concludes *Beowulf*. Michael C. Carroll has a passion for

All the Inner Sea part One of Two

“

...and the foam flying

spattered the rock in either direction,
But when in turn again she
sucked down the sea salt water,
the turbulence showed *all the inner sea...*”

The Odyssey (XII.239-241), trans.
Richmond Lattimore

Wellfleet, Massachusetts: 1949

As the sun set below the churning waters of Cape Cod, the granite clouds of the horizon kept the last shreds of daylight from fading into night. Raindrops trickled between the cobblestones that speckled Wellfleet's seaside boulevard. Ocean waves tested the noble rocks in the harbor below. Every storefront along the coastal road had shut its doors for the evening. The shop owners had flipped their “Welcome” signs to “Closed.”

When the rear door of a lonely taxi slammed shut, only the

seagulls nestled on their seaside perches noticed.

A young, slender traveler stood in the wake of the vehicle's exhaust cloud. Across his shoulders, the traveler wore a thin backpack. In his hand, he held a photograph.

From the center of the abandoned street, the young man could see a wooden sign peeking through the mist. Despite many years weathering the coastal elements, the sign above the boardwalk's final tavern remained intact.

In the sign's center, an old sailor clutched the spokes of a wild helm. A curved pipe dangled from his lips. Over the captain's head, like a rainbow bent above a boundless sea, a set of bold letters announced the alehouse's name.

Ithaca Tavern, est. 1929.

The young man held his polaroid up to the light that pierced the bar's foggy window. Between the drops of rain trickling down his brow, the traveler smiled.

On the sign above the tavern door in the photograph he held, the same captain pinched a pipe between his patient teeth.

The young traveler stared at the familiar men standing in the picture's foreground. His father stood on the right with his

literature, a deep understanding of the Old English source material at the heart of his writing, and a love for grammatical editing born from more than a decade of teaching. Follow him on Instagram at [Michael.C.Carroll](#) for more information about *Beyond the Fall of Kings*, Book One in *The Sons of Hrethel Trilogy*.

arm slung across the shoulder of his business partner. Behind them, a refurbished fishing boat rested on the rack of a tired trailer, the letters of its hand-forged nautical plate—NowYouSeaMe—just within the photograph's frame. In the vacant space at the bottom of the polaroid, the young man could still decipher his father's handwriting.

"Wellfleet, MA: 1929. Richmond and Oliver. Maiden Voyage of *Poseidon's Pest*."

Tucking the photograph into his pocket, the young man turned the doorknob of The Ithaca Tavern and stepped inside.

Hazy light spilled across the floorboards from lamps hung along the bar's paneled walls. The night's final customer gave the traveler a nod as he zipped his jacket and stepped toward the tavern's door. Along the ceiling's edge, license plates from cars and boats alike, peered down at the empty bar like seraphim watching over the mortal world.

"Sign says we're closed," said the man behind the bar. His broad shoulders did not budge when he spoke. Snatching a towel from beneath the bar, the bartender wiped a pint glass dry with a practiced hand. In his massive palm, the glass looked like a child's toy in the paw of a grizzly bear.

"Sorry, I didn't mean—" the young traveler said. "I'm

looking for someone named Richmond. If that's still what he goes by—"

The traveler's voice trailed off.

With a grunt, the bartender put the glass down on the bar.

"Wait here," the barkeep said with a grumble as he walked through the tavern's back door and disappeared from sight.

With the darkness ushered in by the setting sun, the tavern's cloudy windows made the world inside look like a dusty fishbowl. As the slender traveler took his seat at the bar, he saw an old, nautical plate propped alongside the whiskey bottles on the tavern's top shelf.

TheNowYouSeaMe.

The young traveler smiled. He had come to the right place.

When the door to the tavern's office opened again, it was not the bartender who stepped across the threshold. From his sandy boots to the top of his salty hair, the man who emerged from the tavern's office looked not unlike the captain who graced the establishment's sign. As the old man walked, the rickety cane that supported his weight interrupted his otherwise rhythmic footfalls. While the old man's downcast gaze focused on the damp floorboards, his mind seemed trapped in a memory long ago formed but not yet forgotten. As the hobbled man approached

the traveler, his stare climbed the barstool to the young man's face. Then, like a dreamer emerging from his slumber, the old man's thoughts returned from whatever weary shore they had visited. The young traveler felt eager to break the silence. "I—I'm sorry. I know you're closed. I'm looking for the owner. I believe he goes by Richmond."

When the old man remained silent, the young traveler spoke again.

"My name's Lattimore," the traveler said. "I believe you knew my father. He wrote in his will that you and I had some business he wanted for us to discuss."

After another pensive pause, the young traveler watched a delicate smile curl at the corner of the tavern owner's mouth.

"My God," the old man said at last. "You look just like him."

"Do you know the odds of prying open an oyster and finding a pearl?"

As the tavern owner spoke, he unfurled a map of Cape Cod across the top of the bar. With a nimble hand, Lattimore snatched his pint glass before the map's rolling edge spilled his porter across the island of Nantucket.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Lattimore said. "My father was always the one with an intimate knowledge of the sea."

Richmond's chin sank at the mention of his old friend. "Yes, I suppose he was."

After a sip from their respective glasses, a contemplative silence overtook the room.

When the old man at last found the words he wished to say, he spoke them quietly. "I owe you an apology for not attending his funeral. With accidents on the open sea, it's easier for sailors like me to weep for a night and then forget it ever happened. And when forgetting doesn't come easy—"

The tavern owner uncorked the whiskey bottle he had positioned alongside the map and filled his glass until the amber liquid rose nearly level with the brim. With a nod, Lattimore took a long drink from his glass.

Lattimore did not blame the old man for burying his sorrow as deep as possible. After all, the old man was not at fault for steering the vessel the night of his father's drowning. The old captain's gloves were gripping the helm when the boat's fishing net ensnared his father's leg and dragged him to the depths of the hungry sea.

Instead, Lattimore blamed his father for failing to tuck into his sock a knife that could have saved his life.

He blamed his father, and he blamed the sea.

"To your father," Richmond said, breaking the young traveler from

his trance. "May his beer be cold, and his nets be full, whatever waters he now floats upon."

Lattimore nodded and took a melancholy sip. When he lowered his glass, he saw the nautical plate on the bar's top shelf glisten in the lamp light. Richmond caught the traveler glancing toward the plate and turned to retrieve the heirloom.

Before he spoke, the tavern owner held the plate like an injured sparrow in his hands. "It seems you've discovered a trace of our past. It didn't feel right to position this one alongside the others. Not after all the work your dad put into our business. We could never agree on the inscription. I told him if he named the boat, I could forge the plate. He still refused. Didn't speak to me for a week when he saw what I chose. 'NowYouSeaMe.' I liked the magical flare. Your father hated it. He wanted it to read to do with pride. Something from a story he loved."

"Odysseus' escape from Polyphemus," Lattimore said, his stare never veering from the map. "It's the alias he uses to outsmart the cyclops."

"Ah. A deep sea diver *and* a scholar. Very good." Impressed, Richmond took another sip and grinned.

Lattimore did not.

The young traveler regretted his outburst. He wished he had kept

his father's love for Homer's epic to himself. It was a secret passion he and his father had shared, a thread that knit their adventurous souls together.

"Alright," Richmond said after the whiskey finished searing his throat. "Enough about the past. Let's get back to the oysters—one in ten thousand. Those are your chances of prying open one of those beautiful bottom-feeders and finding yourself a pearl. One in ten thousand."

"Admittedly, not the best odds," the old man continued, placing his glass on the map's edge to keep the page from curling. "But keep that ratio in mind—one in ten thousand—and take a look here."

Old age had corroded the hand that hovered over the map's topography. Lattimore leaned over the bar for a better view of the region Richmond indicated. "Right along the harbor here," the old man's finger traced the bay's interior coast, "there are about a dozen oyster farms. Their main objective? Filling the mollusk pots of our coastal restaurants. Whatever rogue pearls they find are sold to the shops on Newbury Street for an extra buck. Not bad work. But there's one farm that follows a different mode of operation."

"Tucked away in this cove here," Richmond pointed to an inlet on the map with his left hand and reached for his whiskey glass with his right, "is the oyster farm of The Athena Corporation. It sits just beyond an unforgiving pass—the Charybdis Canal—through which no ship has ever navigated. Their builders spent years lowering lumber down the bluffs rather than test the waters of that treacherous waterway."

Richmond leaned closer to the map. "Not long after constructing their farm, the number of oysters sold by the Athena Corporation to restaurants dropped substantially. It became clear that they had a new objective in mind."

Richmond grinned. He was enjoying the attention of a captive audience. "One in ten thousand was no longer favorable odds, it seemed. The Athena Corporation wanted to tip the scales."

Rain trickled down the murky windows in steady streams. Wind tested the tavern door. The sign for the candy shop across the street swayed back and forth on its metal chains.

"The Athena Corporation put their money into the development of their oyster farms with the sole purpose of harvesting pearls," Richmond said, leaning on his cane. "One pearl for every *hundred* oysters. That was their goal. I'm sure you can imagine the money they would make with such a skewed ratio in a market otherwise left to chance."

"It sounds more like witchcraft than harvesting to me," Lattimore said, taking a meager sip from his porter. Before the young man could set the glass upon the wooden bar, however, the old man had already taken the glass from his hand and placed it under the tap to fill.

"Well," Richmond said, returning the overflowing drink to the young traveler, "if the rumors around the bay are true, they found a way to manipulate the oyster's diet. They started importing truckloads of ingredients from all over the world to craft the perfect regiment for their mollusks. Ambrosia they called it. Nectar of the gods. Not long after that, they developed a system to monitor the saline levels of their bay."

Richmond shook his head as he continued, "And then, in case manipulating God's creation was not hubris enough, they built a turbine to regulate the temperature of their inlet's water."

Noticing Lattimore's incredulous face, Richmond laughed. "That's right, lad. You heard me correctly. They raised the temperature of the bloody ocean! Their small corner of the ocean, at least."

Lattimore's gaze wandered towards the license plates along the ceiling's edge as he calculated the profits The Athena Corporation would see. The sound of Richmond's cane striking the floorboards halted the

traveler's tally before he could reach its final sum.

"It paid off for them, Lattimore," the old man said, "because they did it. The bastards did it. One pearl for every hundred oysters." "Unbelievable," Lattimore said, glancing at the compass in the corner of the map. Despite the stained color of the artifact, the depictions printed on the map's canvas had hardly faded.

According to the scale in the map's corner, the bay that held The Athena Corporation's oyster farm was about five miles from The Ithaca Tavern.

"But they didn't stop there," Richmond's voice rose like a priest delivering an impassioned sermon. "They flew even closer to the sun. A pearl in every hundred oysters was not enough. About that time, they stopped selling their products to restaurants altogether. They had themselves a golden goose. What purpose would feeding hungry mouths now serve? Decorating the ears and necks of the women of Boston became their business. And business was good. Business was *very* good."

With another sip of whiskey, Richmond leaned closer to the young traveler. "So good, in fact, that they aren't just harvesting a pearl in every hundred."

Richmond's voice rose in a crescendo as he drew toward his conclusion, "They aren't harvesting a pearl in every ten.

Lattimore, my dear boy, every single oyster they harvest in that bay has a pearl inside."

"Every one?" Porter nearly spilled from Lattimore's nose.

Richmond struck his cane on the floorboards after each word.

"Every. Damn. One."

"That's impossible," Lattimore shook his head.

"I thought the same thing myself, but they've done it. They played God, and it paid off. They could fill their pockets with the pearls they lift from that harbor and have enough left over to throw at the seagulls that pester their docks."

"That must mean," Lattimore said, glancing towards the license plates again as he calculated, "that each of their employees could retire from the profits of a single colony."

"Wrong," said Richmond, smiling over the rim of his whiskey. "It means whoever has their *oysters* could retire from the profits of a single colony."

Lattimore fixed his attention on the old sailor and raised his brow,

"But you can't mean—"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"You can't be serious," Lattimore pushed aside his beer. "With a fortune like that hooked to their docks, they must have a dozen guards monitoring the roads to their property. And even if you were able to somehow make your way past their security, how do you plan on extracting a fully

matured oyster colony from their harbor without anyone noticing?"

"Those security measures only matter if you arrive by land, my skeptical Paul Revere," Richmond said. "And I don't plan to extract one. I plan to extract three."

"You're insane," Lattimore could no longer censor himself.

"I prefer bold...cavalier. Besides, I haven't even come to the best part."

In defeated disbelief, the young man motioned for Richmond to continue.

"You're right. From the road, the corporation's security can't be breached, but from the water,"

Richmond rubbed his hands together with enthusiasm,

"there's only the canal and a turbine monitor that fluctuates when the tide surges. And when that harbor takes on a storm like it will tomorrow night—"

"The waves from the storm will naturally set off the monitors."

"Precisely," the word hissed across Richmond's whiskey-dampened lips, "which just leaves the channel."

"This was always your plan, wasn't it?" Lattimore shook his head. "You and my father planned this heist back when you were fishing the bay. And he died before you had a chance to enact it."

"Listen," for the first time since he entered the tavern, Richmond looked directly at the young man's face. Lattimore did not

dare look away. "The night your father drowned, I swore this plan would die with him. I tucked this map away and promised myself I would never take it out again. Then, you walked through my tavern door holding that photograph, and I would have sworn you were his bloody ghost. I never thought your old man would have wanted you caught up in all of this, but when you mentioned his will—"

The old man caught himself before drifting off into the uncharted waters of his mind. "It seems your father wanted to provide you with a future."

The young traveler exhaled before he spoke again, "A canal that narrow, in a storm as severe as the one to come...we'd be lucky to make it out alive, much less with our treasure in tow."

"Lattimore, this heist can be done." Richmond's voice was even. "We just need a sailor. That's me. And a diver."

The old man tipped his glass toward the young traveler, "That's you."

Running a contemplative hand through his hair, the young man leaned backwards on his barstool and stared at the low ceiling. How many times had his father sat in his same chair and shared a drink with this wild, old man? Did those jagged lines depicted along the bay's coast give him the same uneasy feeling in his gut and bones?

Overlooking the ancient map in a tired Wellfleet tavern, Lattimore wondered if his father had ever felt the stare of those same nautical plates burning the back of his neck as well.

Deep within his veins, Lattimore felt the current of his blood quicken and pulse. He felt the words churning from within like an undertow beneath a powerful wave. He felt his answer reverberate from the hollow chambers of his heart before he opened his mouth to speak.

"Alright, you crazy, old sailor. I'm in."

"Yes!" said Richmond, an elated expression plastering his face.

The old man raised what little liquid remained at the bottom of his glass in triumph. "Tomorrow evening, we disembark. Tonight, we drink."

Lattimore tipped his glass toward the old captain and smiled.

The nautical plate from *Poseidon's Pest* nestled on the tavern's top shelf gave an approving smile as well.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Fantasy

Where Could They Have Gone?

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

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

“**T**hey vanished!” Coal

raced into his older brother’s den, nostrils flaring. Spittle flew from the wolf’s mouth when he spoke again.

“Where could they have gone?”

“You’re babbling,” Charr snapped. “Are you rabid? Or have you been smoking wolfsbane again?”

“No! I swear it!”

Charr soon frowned. “You probably just didn’t notice them sneaking out.”

“They didn’t. I *know* because I never looked away. Those three pigs ran into the brick house, and I blew it over. But they were gone when I searched.”

The brothers went to the demolished house and rummaged through part of the rubble but found no bodies.

“This is a waste of time,” Coal complained.

“Oh, hush. I think I see something.” Charr moved more debris aside. “Look.”

Coal joined him in studying the

foot-wide sphere lying on the ground. It was blue and shimmered. “What is that?”

“I think it’s a magic portal. I’ve heard of them. They lead to other worlds.”

“Maybe this one goes to a world of pigs.” The younger wolf’s eyes gleamed. “Can you imagine dozens and dozens of them?”

“Or hundreds. I’d love a gourmet meal.”

“Me, too. Lots and lots of yummy pork.”

“Come on.” Charr stepped onto the sphere and vanished.

Coal followed him, also disappearing.

Pigs weren’t the first things they saw. Boats were, dozens and dozens of them, but unlike any the wolves had ever seen before. Large with widespread sails, these boats soared through the air high above Charr and Coal’s heads.

They stared wide-eyed as several of the flying craft sped in their direction, descending to hover several feet above the ground.

“Boats are for the water, not the air,” Coal murmured. “I must be dreaming.”

“This is no dream, and those are bigger than boats. They’re ships.”

cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

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

Charr studied them. "Someone must be inside those things, and we need to know who."

A ship landed about two hundred feet away, and a door opened in the side. Uniformed beings stepped out. They wore helmets with dark face shields concealing their faces, and black bands on their wrists with small devices attached. When one removed its headgear, the brothers saw it was a pig.

"Pork walking on two legs instead of four." Coal smirked. "Now I've seen it all."

Charr grinned, but his grin vanished when the pig tapped his wrist device, and the ground began shaking.

Thumps sounded in the distance, steadily growing louder, and within moments, things

approached, ranging in color from dark green to shades of brown and gray. The closer they got, the

more obvious it became that they were huge. Hundreds of feet tall, the monsters bared their long, jagged teeth, and uttered ear-shattering roars. Some ran on four legs, but a cluster of them ran on two and had short arms. One lunged at a smaller variety, attacking and devouring it.

"Not what you expected, I'm sure," the pig said conversationally. "They're called dinosaurs. And not that it matters, but the one that ate the other is a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

That group coming toward us are

meat-eaters, so you might want to run."

He tapped his device again. All the carnivores turned in unison to stare at the wolves, then charged in their direction.

Coal and Charr panicked, uttering terrified yips. Tucking their tails between their legs, they ran as fast as they could toward a cave they saw off to the right. Roars and snarls sounded behind them, and they barely made it through

the small entrance before a Tyrannosaurus Rex stuck its head inside. It snapped at Coal, missing him by mere inches. Charr yanked him backward, and they moved into a smaller area.

The creature yanked its head out, and the scary noises outside stopped, everything going silent.

"Maybe they left," Charr whispered. "We need to get back to the portal, and out of this place."

He and Coal crept toward the entrance. But when the top of the cavern was unexpectedly ripped off, they cowered to the ground.

A dinosaur even larger than the Tyrannosaurus Rex loomed over them. After grabbing Coal by his tail, it tossed him into the air, and bit him in half. His screams stopped abruptly.

Charr fled the cavern, but dozens of predators gave chase. They caught him within seconds, tearing his body into pieces.

The dinosaurs lumbered back over to the pigs, and stood

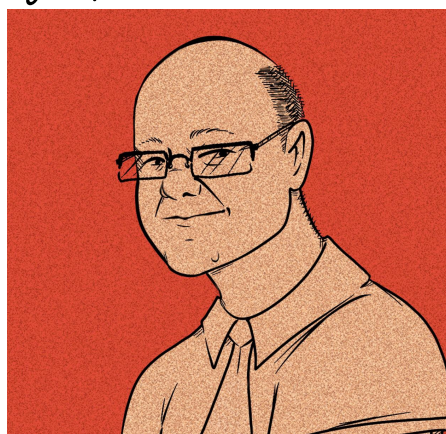
motionless, awaiting orders.
The end.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Fantasy

Wardrums and Warbears

By: Glenn Bresciani



Glenn Bresciani

Glenn works as a support worker in community aged care. For the past year, he has been world building a fantasy world where the population has been forced to abandon fantasy for progress. Many of the fantasy tropes despise this new urban culture, longing for a return to high fantasy. Glenn hopes to explore this fantasy world through a series of short stories and novella that he refers to as the Fast Fantasy series. His stories have been published in the Valor anthology by Dragon Soul Press, and Dreaming the God by Dark Dragon Publishers.

No twigs were snapped, nor ferns crushed as the squad of elven archers raced through the forest. Fennis, the squad captain, leapt over a moss-covered log, his long hair swishing across his shoulders.

"Make haste!" he yelled at his squad. "We must reach the border before the orcs do." Hearing the hiss of water cascading over rocks, Fennis stopped running, shouting with glee. His squad had reached the border that was Bu-blue River. No orcs could be seen between the trees or crossing the rapids. There was still hope.

Fennis signaled to the others to take cover behind blueberry shrubs near the riverbank. The elves obeyed, their cloaks of stitched oak leaves allowing them to vanish into the shrubbery. *Droom, droom, droom* beat the orc war drums, the stretched skin being slapped somewhere along the opposite riverbank. Pig-faced

orcs peeked out from behind willow trees, with weeping branches dangling into the river. *La-dub, la-dub, la-dub* beat Fennis' heart. He prayed to Ludalar, the orchid goddess, prayed that King Flower-tower would arrive soon to defend the border of his kingdom. *Thwack, thwack, thwack.* A pine tree trembled under the blows of an axe.

The elves pressed barbed arrowheads to the corner of their eyes, to wet the iron with their tears. All elves believed that tears of grief were poisonous to the one holding the axe that felled the tree.

Nocking tear-stained arrows to their bowstrings, the squad awaited their captain's order to shoot.

The murdered pine tree toppled, the banks on both sides of the river catching its fall. An explosion of broken branches was its last hurrah.

The orcs cheered when their Chieftain jumped onto the felled tree, a string of mummified elf ears swinging around his neck. He snarled, his pink snout glistening

with mucus, drool dripping off his curved tusks. The war drums beat faster, the big orc dashed across the makeshift bridge, powerful muscles bulging under putrid green skin. Fennis shot an arrow at the Chieftain who deflected it with a swing of his battle axe. Dozens of orcs followed their Chieftain across the river, axes raised above their heads, rusty chainmail hauberks jiggling. The elves released their taut bowstrings, every arrow let fly, an instant kill. Dead orcs dropped into the river, the rapids sweeping them downstream, bouncing the bodies off every rock along the way. The Chieftain leapt off the felled tree, his bare feet crushing ferns that grew in elven soil. He swung his battle axe, shattered an arrow before it could pierce his heart. More orcs swarmed across the bridge. Only half of them made it across under the barrage of arrows. The Chieftain charged, his roar crumpling his snout. An arrow struck his thigh, yet still he ran, eager to wet the blade of his battle axe with elvish blood. "Kill as many orcs as you can!" shouted Fennis to his squad. "Make our king proud." The onslaught of snarling, snuffling orcs would overrun the elves in five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . Slinging their bows over their shoulders, the elves whipped out their daggers, braced themselves for hand-to-hand combat. *Boom, boom, boom.* The ground shook, the ferns and shrubs shivered, the interracial combat came to an abrupt halt, so both sides could stare at the one-ton mass of hulking muscle and fat, covered in brown shaggy fur, that raced along the river on four paws. Those with tusks whimpered, while those with pointed ears rejoiced. The approaching grizzly bear was as big as a wagon and heavy enough to crush a wagon if it were to sit on one. "Groffengruff," Fennis whispered, closing his eyes and sighing. "Groffengruff," the Chieftain growled, his snarl exposing the full length of his tusks. The war bear roared, fangs long enough to rip an orc's face off. His chunky paws slapped the forest floor as he ran. Between the war bear's shoulders sat King Flower-tower in his silver scale mail that shimmered with its own supernatural light. Ruler of the elven forest, his royal blue cloak billowed out behind him, the velvet hem scattering azure rose petals. Upon his blonde head, he wore a crown of flowers. Lavender, daffodils, lilac, all of them stacked so high that the crown resembled a tower. The Chieftain rolled his shoulders, bent his knees, his balance just right for when he started swinging his battle axe. Groffengruff bellowed, globs of saliva flung out of his mouth. He hurled himself at the big orc with the same speed of a boulder tumbling down a mountain slope. The elves held their breath. The orcs squealed. The Chieftain spread his arms wide, inviting violence. *Splish-splash.* Sunlight glinted off the glistening scales of plump salmon that launched themselves out of the river, clearing the rocks and cascading water in a single bound. "Groffengruff," yelled King Flower-tower. "Don't you dare." Oh, the war bear dared alright, pulling a sharp right turn away from his opponent and scrambling after the leaping salmon. The elven king slipped out of his saddle, bouncing off the war bear's broad shoulder. Cartwheeling through the air, he plunged belly first into the river. His paws gripping the rock shelf with water gushing over it, Groffengruff swung his head, jaws opened wide, snatching a salmon out of midair. "Huh?" snorted the Chieftain, one eyebrow raised at the feasting war bear. Grasping the salmon between his front paws, Groffengruff tore off chunks of pink flesh with his teeth. King Flower-tower jumped to his feet, slipped, and almost fell on slippery rocks. His tower crown of flowers had become a

curtain of flowers covering his face. Tearing the limp crown off his head and tossing it into the water, he straightened his back, raised his chin.

"See that fish." He pointed at what remained of the salmon that had yet to make its way into the war bear's gullet. "That's what Groffengruff will do to you if you don't leave this forest."

Eyes unblinking, upper lip curled into a sneer, King Flower-tower placed his hands on his hips, glowered at the orcs while water dripped off his scale mail, and river weeds clung to his drenched hair.

The orcs flinched when Groffengruff snapped salmon bones with each bite. They shuffled from foot to foot, fidgeted with their chainmail, glanced at each other, glanced at their Chieftain to see what he would do.

The Chieftain rubbed the back of his neck, a human gesture at odds with his oscillating nostrils in his piggish snout. He backed away from the water while snarling at King Flower-tower.

Fennis had eyes only for his king, eyes bright and twinkling. He smiled and applauded his King. So, dashing. So brave. So fierce. With the king present, the orcs had only two options: to be slaughtered on elvish soil or run squealing all the way home.

A salmon leapt out of the water, slapped the king's face with its

swishing tail as it glided past.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Fantasy

Wyldewood Forest Part Three of Four

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

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

A low-hanging tree branch swayed, even though there wasn't a breeze. Two slits on the trunk parted to reveal eyes. For a moment, the tree stared at Lianna, but then it slowly lifted its roots, using them as feet to approach her. Unsure what to expect, she backed away a couple steps and chewed her lip. She contemplated running, but wondered if it would give chase. "Success. Success. Success. Earn the right of egress," it announced before sinking its roots back into the ground. "What does that mean?" she asked. When it didn't respond, she approached it, repeating her question. It said nothing, so she tapped the trunk. "Stop," the tree said. "That tickles." "Did you mean I have to succeed three times in order to go home?" No answer came. "If so, I would have twice left. Is that right? Am I supposed to wander around till I meet someone else who needs help? Or do I need to go into another book?" Yawning, she changed the subject. "I'm tired, but I know I'll be stuck here forever if I sleep." "Not true." The unexpected response made her jump. "That only applies after opportunities begin." "So, it's safe for me to sleep now?" "Yes." Her nephews' faces appeared in her mind's eye. She'd agreed to watch them for her brother, Brent, and his wife while they went on a two-day honeymoon — something they hadn't been able to afford when they'd married. They were supposed to drop the boys off tomorrow evening. How long had she been gone? "Time in Wyldewood Forest doesn't pass the way it does outside," the tree said. "Oh, no," Lianna muttered, a disturbing possibility having occurred to her. She might have already let Brent down. "Only a few hours have passed since you entered the forest. Your promise is unbroken. Rest your

body and mind with no fear." The tree pointed a limb toward the ground, and a thick layer of blankets appeared. Yawning, Lianna's jaws popped. Her eyelids felt weighted down, and she fell asleep within moments of her head touching the soft material. Bright sunshine woke her, and she stretched, feeling rested. She didn't know much time had passed because the hands on her watch were spinning. "Not long," the tree commented. "You read my thoughts?" "Yes."

"What you said before — I have to succeed at three tasks before I can leave?" "That's correct. Three successes are required. You had one." "Am I supposed to wander around and look for people, or do I have to find more books — uh, worlds?" "Neither." The tree vanished. Lianna scanned her immediate vicinity but didn't see it anywhere. However, she heard something to her right — crackling like someone stepping on twigs — and tensed. An animal the size of a raccoon scampered across the ground, but the similarity ended there. Light blue, its four-inch-long fur rose and fell as it ran, and its long, fluffy tail billowed behind it. The creature dashed up a tree, followed closely by a second one which was darker blue. They glanced around, looking through her as if she didn't exist. Their tails were like foxes', and they had cat faces — only their features were more expressive, almost like those of humans. The two jumped from tree to tree before vanishing. Lianna shrugged and started walking away. No doubt she'd encounter someone or something that would tell her what her next task was. But she froze when she heard a snorting sound. "Quit it!" a woman snapped. "You need to grow up and stop acting silly. Life is about more than just playing around." "There's nothing wrong with having fun," a man replied. "Hello?" Lianna ventured. The other woman acted as if she hadn't spoken. "Yeah, as long as you do the important stuff, too. But you want to do nothing but play and play and..." "I'm sorry to interrupt," Lianna said. "But could you...?" A tree materialized in front of her, and she gasped, an involuntary squeak escaping her lips. It looked like the one she'd spoken with before. Making a sound rather like a throat being cleared, it expanded to many times larger than it had been. "They can't hear you yet," the ancient told her. "Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us. Sometimes someone has to show us." "All right."

"This world operates on magic and time." After these words, the tree disappeared. "Of course," Lianna grumped. "Vanish right when I'm about to ask you questions." Her neck itched, and she rubbed it, dreading the next so-called opportunity. That word was positive and optimistic in and of itself, but *pain in the butt* seemed to be a more apt description. She waited for something to happen. For an individual to speak. Surely if someone or ones needed help — maybe even the people she'd heard — they wouldn't conceal themselves. If nobody showed up soon, how would she find them? Searching would take time. And, if they were hiding, did that bode badly for her? Her neck twinged, and she scratched it again. A mosquito had no doubt sneaked up, silently munching on her, and she hoped it wasn't part of a mutated, magical strain that would turn her into fanged mouse, flesh-eating bush, or something like that. Her persistent itch turned into a tingling sensation which spread to the back of her head and arms, and she discovered they were shimmering, taking on a faint blue tinge. "Blue?" she exclaimed. Fur sprouted on her forearms. "No, no, no!" she yelled. "I don't want to be anything other than what I am. Human." Her protests

made no difference, and the fur grew to four inches in length. Her fingers shrunk, her hands turning into paws. Her feet felt funny, too. When she kicked off her shoes, she saw they'd been changing as well, and in no time at all, she found herself on all fours. A fluffy tail appeared at the base of her spine, wound around her paws, and she lost her balance, falling flat on her face. She'd turned into one of the creatures she'd seen earlier.

"Now they'll listen." The voice was the tree's and came from all around her, even though it didn't appear.

"Why did you turn me into this — this darn *blue* thing? What in the world is it anyway?"

"You mean what are *you*?"

She glared. "You didn't tell me I'd change into an animal. Don't I get a say in this?"

"No." The tree's voice was quiet. Tranquil.

Lianna took several deep breaths, trying to calm down. Clearly, she had no rights whatsoever here, but she really, *really* wanted to get back home. "So, what am I?"

"You're a furrel."

She thought about that. "I take it a furrel is a combination of a cat, fox, and squirrel."

"A furrel is a furrel."

The circular reasoning made her want to roll her eyes, but she resisted. Other world or not, the tree might recognize an expression of scorn and irritation, and if she did something it didn't like, it might decide to leave her as a weird, mutated animal forever. Raising her front, right paw, she flexed it, her nose wrinkling in distaste.

"You don't appreciate your new form." It was a statement. The tree slowly reappeared to her left but didn't materialize all the way. She could see saplings and bushes through it. A raspy noise that sounded suspiciously like laughter came from the tree, and she frowned.

"Not really," she replied. "So how do I get back to normal?"

"Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us. Sometimes someone else has to show us. This world operates on magic and time, and they'll listen now."

"Who? Who will listen?"

The ancient's eyes sparkled, and she didn't know what to think when one closed briefly in a wink. Something blue caught her eye and she realized it was a shape moving high in a tree, followed by another. The furrels descended the trunk so fast they practically flowed down it. Watching them bound along, she frowned and couldn't help but feel resentful. They were no doubt having a good old time, while she was stuck in hell.

The lighter-blue creature was a few feet ahead of the darker one, which stopped, grabbed something off the ground, and threw it, beaming the one in front on the back of the head.

"Leave me alone, Bralus!" the female snarled, whirling on the other. "How many times do I have to tell you I don't want to play with you?" She raked the air in front of him with her claws, barely missing his nose, and he backed away a little. She sniffled and began sobbing.

"Wh...?" His eyes widened. "Why are you crying, Allixa? I was just kidding around. We were having fun."

It dawned on Lianna that she could understand them. She waited for the animals to tell her what they needed so she could hurry up and try to get this over with, but they didn't even look at her.

"Maybe *you* were having fun," Allixa accused. "But I wasn't. I just wanted to get away from you because you wouldn't listen."

"Listen? To what?"

Her eyes narrowed. "*That's* what I mean. Oh, you listen and respond when it's something you're interested in or want to hear. But when it's not, you go all mute and don't respond anymore. And you act like I haven't even spoken."

Bralus blinked, eyes wide and clueless. "If that's true, I'm sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. If there's something you need to talk to me about, I'm listening. Tell me now."

"You've got to be kidding? I *did* talk to you earlier."

"Oh, you mean the bit about preparing for cold weather."

Cocking his head to the side, he studied her. "That's not a big deal."

"Yes, it is. It's *huge!* How can you not understand how important that is? It affects our future. You want to do what you want to do, and that's nothing new. I can't count how many times I've asked you to get serious. To think ahead and prepare like all the other furels."

"Honey, you're making this out to be a bigger issue than it is. We're not intended to slave away every minute. We're supposed to enjoy life."

"Preparing for winter isn't slaving all the time. It's working *some* every day and relaxing some, until we have enough food stored away. But you don't want to gather anything, not even a single nut, and I'm tired of trying to get through to you." Breaking into sobs, tears flowed from her eyes.

"I give up. We're *through*. Do you hear me? Through!"

Bralus' face crumpled, confusion and anguish crossing it, but he grinned within seconds. "You don't mean that. We've loved each other forever."

"Yes, but you refuse to grow up. My parents were right about you, and they're going to arrange for me to be someone else's mate." Listening to them, Lianna wondered what their situation had to do with her, and what she was supposed to do. "Uh — hello," she said.

Allixa flinched, squeaking, and her irritation growing. That male was eyes widened. She bowed her head, begging, "Great Furria, you honor us with your presence. Please help me. I don't know what to do."

But Bralus studied Lianna, eyes narrowed. "She's just a furrel, not the Great Goddess." To the newcomer, he said, "Mind your business. Go away." He playfully bumped Allixa's shoulder with his.

"Come on, sweetie. Let's go play or snack on nuts."

"What about getting extras and storing them for winter?"

"There's no need for that. Cool weather is a long way off, and our cold season hasn't been bad in years. Food is always available, so we don't need to store any."

"My parents say it sometimes gets so cold, ice forms on everything, and all the plants die. When it's that bad, food can't be found."

"They're exaggerating. Just saying that to trick you into doing a bunch of unnecessary work."

"They wouldn't do that."

"You're too trusting."

"*Please listen* to me," Allixa implored. "I don't want to have to end things between us, but I will if I have to."

"That'll never happen." Grinning widely, he used a paw to whisk her front legs out from under her and she landed sprawled on the ground.

"I said *stop it!*"

Lianna, watching, felt her own

something else.

"It's hopeless, Great One," Allixa said, turning to her. "He's beyond even your help."

Sparkly eyes showing how truly clueless he was, Bralus tossed a twig at her, laughing when it bounced off her head.

Fresh tears welled in Allixa's eyes, and she ran away, sobbing.

He started to follow, but Lianna snapped, "Leave her alone." She narrowed her eyes and flinched when small bolts of electricity shot from them, zapping him on his flank.

"Ow!" No longer smiling, he frowned at her. "How'd you do that? Never mind. Don't tell me. It's a good trick. Allixa's parents planned this with you, didn't they?"

She just stared hard at the earth and couldn't help but giggle when more bolts flew from her eyes.

"*This is amazing*," she thought, relishing the power coursing through her. But then she yawned. Reality hit her like a tsunami, and she remembered what tiredness meant, and what she stood to lose if she ended up falling asleep.

The tree had said, "Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us. Sometimes someone else has to show us." Bralus had to be the one she needed to show something to. And it stood to reason this had to do with him refusing to prepare for winter. So

how would she address it?
 "You're going to lose Allixa if you don't change your behavior," she told him.
 "I'm not doing anything wrong. And it's not your business anyway."
 "I think you're wrong about that and it's pretty obvious you need my help."
 "No, I don't." But he stared in the direction Allixa had gone, his ears drooping. "Maybe I'm wrong. You need to make her understand it's okay to have fun."
 "She said you need to plan ahead for winter and stock food. What about that?"
 He shrugged. "Why work hard when it's unnecessary?"
 Lianna considered what she'd gleaned from their conversation. "I want to be sure I understand what's going on. Most furels gather food during the warm months and store it for winter."
 "Yes, but it doesn't get very cold and..."
 She cut in, wanting this over with. "Allixa said her parents said it does sometimes. What do your parents say?"
 "The same thing."
 "Do they typically lie to you?"
 He frowned. "No."
 "Then why do you think they are now?" When he said nothing, she spoke again, voice softer. "If they never lie, then you know you should listen and put food aside. Isn't that wise just in case it's needed?"

"Every moment I spend with Allixa is magical, and I don't want to waste even one. I want to build happy memories with her." His voice pulsed with feeling. Sincerity.
 Lianna recognized he really did love Allixa and felt warmer toward him. But the problem remained, so she tried to explain things, giving it her all.
 Time passed. Lianna eventually fought the urge to scream at him. No matter what she said or how eloquently, Bralus didn't — or wouldn't — get it. The stubborn furrel gave even stubbornness a bad name. He acknowledged unexpected things did occur at times. He admitted his family, and even Allixa's, were reasonable, even wise, planning ahead for colder times. But he persisted in refusing to do the same, claiming it wasn't really necessarily. He insisted unpleasant weather never appeared, and if any ever developed, he'd have time to "grab a little food."
 Lianna felt like she'd gone through an emotional minefield. Her efforts to persuade the male furrel to listen had worn her out, and she kept yawning. Bralus had dozed off, but maybe the memory-loss thing didn't apply to creatures who lived in the forest. She ran in circles, trying to wake up, and didn't stop moving till she was alert. Searching for the ancient tree, she called out, "Hello. Are you there?" She

glanced at Bralus to ensure he was still asleep before she spoke again. "I need to talk to you."
 It appeared beside her, and she complained, "He won't listen. I don't know how to get through to him." Once the tree recited the same things he had previously, she frowned. "You told me that already. Also, that this world uses magic and time. But I don't see what I can..."
 A memory popped into her head, and she felt like cheering. But, just as fast, she wondered if certain things were off-limits. "Can I use an idea that wasn't originally mine? Like something from a movie?"
 "As long as you make it yours."
 "What does that mean?"
 "If you don't copy every single portion. If you change it and really want to help."
 Hope flooded her. Finally — something good. "That's wonderful. So how would I..."
 Realizing the tree was gone, she fell silent.

The end of part 3 of 4.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Fantasy

Paechra's Tale: Part Twenty-Nine

By: Tim Law



Timothy Law

Timothy Law is a writer of fantasy, horror, detective and general fiction from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. A happily married father of three children, family is very important to him. Currently working at the Murray Bridge Library in the role of Library Manager he has dreamed since his early high school years of becoming a full-time author. Working for a library, surrounded by so many wonderful authors it is difficult not to be inspired to write.

Many of his short stories and general musings can be found on his blog

The year is 514, Vladimir the Young is Sage-King of the human kingdom of Thuraen. The year is 5,297, Ulan is High Prince, Derek is Low Prince and Sienna Alknown is Mother Druid of the sylvan principedom of Greenwood Vale.

Paechra Lightheart called from her raft, Thomas the Butcher and Sienna Alknown standing beside her.

"Stay along the river's bank as much as you can!" she ordered Anton and those in his care. The head truth keeper ignored her cries, turning his back to the younger Lightheart, the rafts, and the river. Upon the back of the white steed, he quickly vanished beyond the tree line and the small group that he led followed after. Heidi, sister druid, the lone figure who chose to pause long enough to give a half wave before she, the last of that group, also vanished from sight.

"I cannot trust," said Paechra as

the raft drifted further along with the current. "My dream has predicted trouble, danger, death will befall us..."

"Yes," said the voice of Mother Sienna. "We have chosen the way of water because your dream did warn us of what would happen if we all followed the line in the land."

"And now some whom I call friend, some we know and love, will walk this path and they will fulfil my dream," sighed the young druid.

"What do you mean?" asked Thomas, very concerned. "Anton is going to die?"

"Yes," said Paechra.

"No," Sienna said, disagreeing.

"We need to stop them," said the butcher. "I will swim out and guide them back."

The elderly hand of the ancient mother druid held Thomas' shoulder in a surprisingly strong grip.

"The dream will not come true," Sienna said.

"How can you be so certain?" asked Paechra, unconvinced.

"Your vision did show the one

<http://somecallmetimmy.blogspot.com.au/> or on [Parenting Express website](#).

known as Raven who was not Raven meeting all of us upon the North Road," said Sienna. "All of us."

Thomas and Paechra thought on what it was that the mother druid said.

"Your argument holds some logic," said Paechra.

"But it is a great risk that we are taking in hoping it will be true," added the human, still worried. "Trust," said Sienna. "Trust that what you have seen already cannot be."

"I guess that is something I can believe in," agreed Paechra.

"That will need to be enough to satisfy me for now."

"We will see the others again," said Sienna.

Paechra gave a quizzical glance but said nothing.

"Oh, no dream, no vision," laughed the elder. "Just a feeling I have got, nothing more."

"And so, we just trust in a hunch?" asked Thomas.

"Dreams and gut feelings, and an inkling of hope that Anton and the others don't meet Raven on the road?"

"Yes," said Paechra and Sienna together.

"Trust," Sienna said again, choosing then to sit and allow the water to take her where it willed to go.

"I guess we do not have a lot of choice," Thomas sighed.

"I guess we don't," Paechra

agreed.

It was at that moment that Paechra realized just how many were still looking to her for leadership.

"We may have parted ways," she called, loud enough for all to hear her. "But I vow we shall meet again."

There was a murmured response from the other rafts, and then a silence that was briefly broken by the lapping of the river's waters upon the wooden craft.

The day upon the waters passed slowly, Paechra ordering a meal of fruits, nuts, and other nibbles to be consumed mid-travel.

Conversations flowed, but Paechra, missing Heidi, remained quiet, wondering how her friend fared.

"Do not worry so," Thomas tried to tell Paechra on a few occasions, but the druid chose to ignore him.

As the day eventually turned to afternoon, Paechra's thoughts morphed from Heidi to that of her friend Raven, the real Johannas Stormsong, not the strange figure from her dreams.

"Where are you, Raven?" she whispered.

"You need to stop focusing on troublesome thoughts until they truly trouble you," suggested Sienna, mother druid.

"Are you not the one who taught your daughters to be prepared

for dangers and disappointments?" suggested the younger Lightheart, quizzically. "Besides, I think of the human, not the apparition." "I wonder though what of this dark, aura-less one that plagues your sleeping moments," mused the elder druid. "It is not like you, Paechra, to visualize that which is not and that which cannot be."

"I do feel strange, mother," Paechra replied. "I know that this is not Raven, not the man that I have spent time with, and yet there is something about him that seems familiar."

"It frightens me to suggest this, daughter Paechra," Sienna said, her words almost whispered so quietly that the river wind stole them before they were heard. "Perhaps your friend is caught in the in between."

"You believe my friend Raven has gone where?" asked Paechra.

In all of her years, the young druid had not come across such a term, and certainly thought that she had never visited such a place.

"It worries me if our enemy does in fact know of how to banish those we love to the world beyond our own," said Alknown. "We do not fear the in between," laughed Paechra, just as quickly she had gone from a state of fear to one of relief as

she realized where it was that Sienna Alknown did suggest. "I did walk such with ease, guiding Queen Catherine, Thomas, Michael, Anton... But never did Raven accompany me..."

"Such was dangerous, just as you were reckless in traveling aboard the great ship, The Picturesque Picaresque," berated Sienna. "You were lucky in all circumstances that no soul or life was lost to the ship or the world."

"But you did teach us those ways and instructed us yourself that we should use them when and if we need," argued Paechra. "Was that wrong of you, mother?"

"I am too old to know of how the world will change, child," sighed Sienna. "I am far too tired of seeing the moon wax and wane."

Paechra nodded at this, and the pair spent some time staring into the trees, seeking signs of Anton and his party. There were none.

"I am sorry to have added to your worries," Paechra said next, choosing to break the silence.

"It gladdens me to know that you thought it time to use such skills and had enough knowledge and practice to make such happen," said Sienna in reply. "My only hope for you now daughter is that you can use such knowhow and that

which else I have taught to find your true friend and bring him back."

"Thank you, Mother Druid," said Paechra, grateful. "I sense that the true Raven is close to finding his way home, that he has a guide, someone that I know, but, again, that which is remembered has morphed and evolved, and together, I feel, each will lead the other along that path they need walk."

This time Sienna Alknown was the one who nodded to show that she understood.

"I hope though, mother, that once returned there will be a home recognizable for my Raven to see," murmured Paechra.

"As do I, daughter," Sienna replied. "As do I..."

Late in the afternoon Paechra ordered the rafts to shore.

"Why can we not continue?"

Thomas demanded to know.

Paechra saw in the butcher's aura an eagerness to be home, back walking the streets of the city of Andrapaal. It saddened Paechra to see this, to discover just how quickly the young human had managed to block from his memory how his home had changed. Paechra still recalled sensing the spirit of Andrapaal cry out in pain as the city beneath, the vorsurk fortress that had been buried for centuries rose up through the

earth and stone, forcing the new Andrapaal, the human Andrapaal deep down below.

"It is too dangerous to travel by dusk," Paechra said. "I will not allow it."

"The current is flowing toward the city, and the river is dragging us home, where is the danger?" questioned Thomas.

"Any travel by night is a risk," said Paechra.

"What of the travel you made us undertake?" said Thomas, his question disguising a threat.

"Forcing you, your queen, our party to travel at night was a risk, but a risk I judged to be necessary," replied Paechra.

"Just as I deemed our travel by boat a risk that was worth taking."

"And who made you our leader?" the butcher asked.

"You did," said Paechra.

Thomas made to reply, the human's face flaring up with frustration, but then he stopped.

"Thomas, I know why you worry," Paechra then said, kindly.

"You are strange, Paechra," Thomas whined. "I struggle to see how any of you sylvan can think like a human."

"I see you watching the shoreline for signs of your people," Paechra said.

"I see none..." Thomas began, head hung. "Does this mean that we are too late?"

"I sense that the lives of those who live along the river have changed," said Paechra. "It gladdens my heart to know that such change has not travelled all the way to Sage Williamson and those in his care."

"But surely it is only a matter of time," said Thomas.

"And that is why we travel by raft," said Paechra.

"We are too slow... We need to keep travelling, to not stop," argued Thomas. "By horse, by road, we would have been eleven days to the heart of the kingdom, but now, will it take us all phases of the lunar cycle?"

"We are slower than a horse, yes," Paechra agreed. "Such has been our travel this day anyway."

"And how far do you think we shall travel tomorrow, Paechra?" Thomas demanded. "What if the river changes direction and sends our journey backward?"

"We have magic on our side, that and nature, and all things we need to get done what needs doing," the druid promised. "I will forgive you for your forgetting, but you need eventually to learn to trust and have faith in me and my people if we are to succeed."

"You wish to gain my trust and faith, and thus the belief of my kith and kin?" asked Thomas.

"Then prove such is warranted, just light the way and help us go further and faster this day."

"You are correct in believing we have travelled less in one day as a horse would upon the open road," Paechra replied, trying to remain calm. "But such a horse would not go far if my thinking and dreaming is to be considered and believed."

"Your kind are always taking a dream to be more than what it is," sighed Thomas, his frustrations boiling to the surface. "I fear that I and my people will never see life and everything about it the same way as your people do, but what I fear most is that there will be far less of my people left to try once we do finally arrive."

"I shall try my best as leader of this army to make certain your fear does not become reality," promised Paechra. "But I tell you with honesty, my thinking tells me that travel by night is not the answer to settling your worries." "Then what is?" Thomas begged to know.

"Tonight, we rest," said Paechra. "And tomorrow we shall make up for such time that you believe we have lost."

With the river flowing calmly, it was with ease that the fleet of rafts were drawn into shore. Paechra considered the risk of lighting small campfires, but by Thomas' estimate they were still a little way off from the next township. Low spirits were given

a much-needed boost when some of the sylvan warriors managed to pull fresh fish from the water. When chatting and singing started up, well Paechra let that go on also, even after her mother and the mother druid warned of how such could attract attention.

"What must we fear from the forest by night?" scoffed Paechra at such warnings. "Should we fear the shadows? Be afraid of spirits? Will the very trees become animated and drive us back to the waters?"

"Do not jest so," berated Sarah Lightheart. "Be more respectful of your elders."

"I show you respect, mother, and you know of my respect for your kindness and wisdom oh Mother Sienna," replied Paechra. "But what of my respect earned from leading this army? Should that not also be given and shown?"

"Come, Sarah, take me to my tent that we may talk, and leave this leader to make her mistakes," suggested Sienna.

"As you so suggest, mother," Sarah replied, offering the elder both hands so Sienna could more easily rise from sitting.

"Fine," grumbled Paechra.

"Advise me, my elders, that I may not learn from my own mistakes."

"Oh no, no, no," said Sienna with a smile. "There is only so much

one can be told, especially one such as you, Paechra."

"I swear she is her father's fruit," sighed Sarah. "One must certainly have been plucked from a branch of the same tree." "Wishing you no criticism of self, Sarah Lightheart," cackled the ancient sylvan. "But such was why I did choose for Paechra to lead us."

"Oh, I know," replied Paechra's mother with her own voice hinting at laughter. "If Paechra were anything like me we would still be back in Greenwood Vale." Annoyed, Paechra listened to the pair vanishing into the night. She longed to turn to seek the council of her friend Heidi, but such council of course had followed Anton. The younger Lightheart considered staring into the campfire flames in an attempt to contact Heidi, but that would only have worked if Anton had allowed campfires also.

"What would Anton do if he was here and believing that he was in charge?" Paechra said to herself, speaking out loud.

"He certainly would not allow this," Thomas' voice came from the darkness in reply.

"You yourself suggested that a fire would be fine along the river's edge," Paechra said to the young butcher.

"Yes, one fire, for cooking," Thomas argued.

"This army is large," said Paechra. "Too large a group for just one fire, we would need at least ten for cooking and warmth."

"And who said anything about warmth?" asked Thomas. "Cook, clean up, bury the evidence... That would be what Anton has done."

"That is if he has stopped at all," considered Paechra. "He was very eager to get off the water and back onto land."

Thomas sat in silence for a moment, thinking. Paechra chose to patiently wait for him to respond, even in the dark of the evening she could sense the human's aura showed signs of a struggle.

"I should have gone with him, but I thought Anton's decision a foolish one."

"And what now?" asked the sylvan. "Has our slow progress changed your mind?"

"I don't know," Thomas replied with a shrug. "I thought that travel by water would get us where we needed to be far faster than traveling blindly through the trees."

"I still feel like this is the way," said Paechra. "But I am wondering about this vibrancy, a party when your people are enslaved once more."

"Are all the stories true?"

Thomas asked. "The stories recorded about vorsurk

enslavement, the prophecy, the passages scribbled in the tomes by the sages of old?"

"I do not know," admitted Paechra. "That was over five hundred years ago, and although I am far older than you, even I was not born at that time."

"The one you call mother was though, right?" said Thomas. "Not your mother, but the all-knowing one."

"Yes, that is right, Thomas," said the sylvan. "Sienna Alknown, Mother Druid of Greenwood Vale was but a youngling at that time, but she certainly was alive then."

"We could ask her what to expect..." said Thomas. "We could be forewarned and such."

"Yes, we will certainly ask the mother druid for her council when we draw closer to Andrapaal, closer to danger," agreed Paechra.

"We?" asked Thomas. "Do you mean you and me?"

Paechra actually was hopeful Anton would be able to help her concoct some sort of plan, as she still believed that their paths would cross again before humanity needed to be saved. There was a change in Thomas, both his physical stature and his aura. The butcher grew in confidence as he listened to Paechra. The sylvan weighed up the pros and cons of revealing her thoughts and quickly

decided to retain them.

"You are the sole voice of your people, Thomas," she suggested instead. "Your council was always important, but now, in this moment, it is even more so." "I shall not let you down," said Thomas. "I must tell Athru, Bekros, and Urmunt..."

Paechra watched Thomas go off with a greater spring in his stride. It was truly amazing to her in witnessing the power of words upon the strange human race. Finally, alone, she considered still trying to contact Heidi, but the day upon the water had been a long one. Instead, she went in search of her own tent and dreamless slumber.

#

The following morning camp broke up quickly and the convoy was upon the river just as the sun was rising.

"Now we shall see what cost fire and fun is," announced Sarah, causing Sienna to nod sagely. "You are two of little trust," stated Paechra in reply. "You need see through kinder eyes my own abilities and the nature of those we are trying to save." It only took an hour for Sienna and Sarah to be proven correct.

As the forces of Paechra's army drifted along there came a volley

of arrow shafts from the tree line.

"Vorsurk!!" cried Thomas, horrified as feathered shafts disappeared into the otherwise calm waters.

"Shields up," commanded Paechra, and she and her sisters cast their spells.

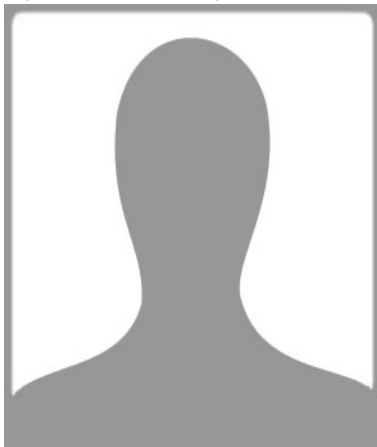
To be continued...

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Horror

Into the Bleak

By: A.N. Myers



A.N. Myers

A.N. Myers is a London UK based writer of speculative fiction. His recent short fiction credits include *The Best of British Science Fiction*, *BFS Horizons*, *Sein Und Werden*, and the forthcoming anthology from Jayhenge Publishing, 'Sunshine Superhighway'. His flash fiction has appeared in *Flash Frontier*, *Bag of Bones*, *101 Fiction*, and the 'Valentine' Anthology published by Black Hare Press. His YA science fiction novel, 'The Ides' is available from Amazon.

Eighty miles north of Albuquerque, New Mexico, somewhere between San Clemente and Wilsonville, squats a small diner cum gas station called *The Way Out*. Years ago, this had been a thriving business, where it was common for a hundred of the big rigs to roll into the parking lot on any one day. But then a passing biker gang killed a waitress, and route 270 was diverted, and people stopped coming. *The Way Out* vanished behind a veil of dust and time, but to some, like Lazari Darga, it remains the stuff of legend. He parks his black haunted house of a station wagon beneath the blinking neon sign and winds down the tinted windshield. The sun is low, safe enough now, and a thick haze lingers over the desert hills. It is a chilly early evening, and Darga has driven a long way. As he stamps across the tarmac towards the diner, the dust of ages rising from his ancient long coat (peeled from

the body of a British cavalry officer he'd killed in the trenches), he feels a flutter of excited anticipation in his dead heart for the first time in decades. And a ravenous hunger, as intense as any he has known.

He pauses before the double doors. Everything is perfect, just as he'd imagined. To his left stands a low grey lichen-smeared block of rooms, where, doubtless, he will be busy tonight, and in the smaller lot next to these, five cars, as expected. The diner itself is shaped like a sombrero, with a round, tomato-colored, jauntily tipped crown. There is something of the temple about it- fitting, he thinks, for the home of the *Kashdek*, the feast that all his kind must undertake before their journey into the Bleak.

The Bleak. Where all the years of slaughter, all the restless journeying and hiding, all the savage hunger, has been leading them. Not quite an afterlife- they are not truly living, so cannot truly die- but a hidden dimension drenched in blood, where they will remain in a state of transcendent engorgement for all eternity, unmolested by time or enemies. After killing the five he

will take himself into the desert. He will enter a twilight world where he will roam for many days until the Bleak is revealed to him. It is all that he and his brethren believe in, and all that they crave, besides blood.

He pushes open the doors and steps in, gleefully conscious that his blood-teeth are becoming erect. He fed only two days ago- a middle-aged nun in Miami before he set out- but she had been a mere aperitif. He gazes at the white granite counter, so much like an altar, and mulls upon the sacred blood that will soon be spilled upon it. The pictures of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Hank Williams above it are a triptych of tackiness, yet appropriate. And then *she* steps through the door to the kitchen, and smiles at him, and all he knows is his rancid desire.

"You are Amata," he says, mouth dry.

The girl chews ruminatively and blinks. She is perfect, too- dark bobbed hair, pale skin, wearing a gingham waitress' uniform which, he observes, doesn't fit her well. She extracts from her pocket a notebook and pencil. "No, there's no one of that name here. I'm Lori. You want anything?" She nods at the counter. "There's the menu."

"Do I want anything? Am I hungry?" He laughs. "Oh, I see. Thank you, *Lori*."

He picks it up. The only menu he is interested in is on a piece of paper- well-folded, long memorized- in his coat pocket. *Amata- the young woman. A seductive blood, redolent of cherries. Gilgoth, the male cook, thick and still, cloudy like whiskey. Rubati, the teacher, her blood like thin red wine, slightly phlegmy. Seth, the young hero, fast like lightning, blood charged with struggle and poignant fear. And Nabu-bel-uzur, neither man nor woman, mysterious, full of contradictions, and bitter like liquorice. The Eternal Banquet.*

As he watches the girl busy herself about the till, he wonders at the Elders who created this place, who bent time to serve their appetites. To think, he will kill this girl, kill all five of them tonight, and tomorrow they will be back here again, alive, innocent of their everlasting destiny, reset for the next hungry visitant.

"A coffee," he says, sitting on the bar stool. He thinks he can see the throb of a vein in her neck, smell her pulse of blood. He could kill her now, but that would be too unkind, and somehow blasphemous.

"That's a strong accent you've got, pal," says Lori. "You not from round here?"

"No. I am Turkish." He clicks his very long sharp nails on the counter. "I have travelled far. The Kashdek- or should I say, *The Way Out*- is hard to find, but there are a few who know its location. I have been looking forward to my visit."

"Wow," she says, raising an eyebrow. "Well, we'll do our best to...make you comfortable. You wanna room for the night?"

"Oh yes."

"I'll let the manager know for you."

Presently she pours out his coffee. He sips it. "Ugh," he complains. "This tastes of ashes." She sits down opposite him and lights a cigarette. "You going on someplace?"

"I hope so. The Bleak."

"Bleak?" She shrugs. "Don't know it. Is it far?"

He nods. "A world beyond worlds. A place of fattening and gorging. Of ripping flesh, and spilling blood, forever." He sees her recoil slightly at his foul breath, the oily dead stench of his lank hair.

Nonplussed, she taps out her cigarette. "Sounds real nice. I suppose we all gotta get away sometime." She gazes past him, towards the desert. "I'd like to travel. Europe, I think. Rome. My father's Italian. 'Course, I don't like it too much here. I'm not gonna be a waitress forever."

He sneers. He can't control himself anymore. "There you are wrong, my dear." He walks to the door, flips the sign to closed. "It is your fate to be nothing else."

He strides towards her. He is

aware of his menacing size, his preternatural strength, and he revels in the fear he imagines she is experiencing. "You do not need to be afraid. As a rule, when I kill someone, they stay dead. But not you. After your evisceration, your corpse will vanish, as will your car from the parking lot. And then, twelve hours later, you will drive in again, and report for work, none the wiser, ready for the next of us. And you will do this forever. You have been here, looping, providing us with nutrition for our great journey, for many, many years. Such is the wisdom and craft of the Elders."

She backed towards the kitchen door. "I've got a gun under the counter."

He shakes his head. "No, you haven't. I know everything about this place. You only have a small kitchen blade, and that isn't enough to hurt *me*, dear *Amata*."

He reaches for her, clasps her throat with his talons, tugs her towards him. "I will try not to spoil your delicate beauty."

And then she is vaulting over the counter and is on him, and surprised, he staggers back, knocked off balance, and *chukchukchuk* there are three silver bolts poking from his chest, and then something white flashing across his throat, and all his stolen blood flooding down. He falls heavily onto his back, outraged and suddenly afraid, and she is ramming down with her fists, and then he is nothing because he has become a trough of stench, a puff of blood and ash. She stands, coughing, shaking him from her hair, kicking his empty coat and boots under the table. The door opens and another young woman, taller and harder faced, enters and looks about. "Already? Thought he'd be tougher."

"No. Came onto me straightaway. Usually, they wanna talk a while. Ugh." She tufts up her dusty hair. "Madison, he's all over me. I smell disgusting."

"You can use the shower in number five. Who was he?"

"Lazari...Darga. Pretty old, nightwalker, Turkish originally. Been offing oldies in Florida for years." She sighs. "Never ceases to surprise me that nosfers swallow that dumb myth. *The Kashdek*. In a New Mexico filling station, of all places. Funny though," she adds, "when I was on him, he didn't put up too much fight. Like he wanted a way out."

"Maybe he did. And you were happy to oblige him." She squints at her phone. "Abel says he's set up another one, tomorrow. One of those gross biker dudes."

"I hate those guys," says Lori. "Nasty."

"So, we've got till morning," says Madison, taking Lori's hand. "I'll play Amata tomorrow. In the meantime, you go get showered. I'm taking you into Santa Fe."

There's a new Brazilian restaurant. Great reviews. And don't say anything, I'm paying. My treat."

THE END

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Horror

Housekeeping

*By: Matthew Kunashe
Chikono*



Matthew Kunashe Chikono

Matthew K Chikono is a writer from Chitungwiza, Zimbabwe. He has published a short story collection entitled *Dreams of Paradise*. He has also compiled and edited a collection of short stories by Zimbabwean writers entitled *The Rules of the City*. Currently, he is set to publish his novella *Invisible Trails*.

<http://facebook.com/passionatewriterspen>

Seventy-five years. That was

how long Maud had stayed inside the house, not even once leaving its doors to enjoy a little sunshine. Her shoulders had become slumped; she couldn't tell weather from old age or the repetition of scrubbing and dusting the big house spotless clean each and every day of those seventy-five years. Maybe it was the weight she carried on her shoulders that made her back slouch; the weight of a slimy green worm that had ate bits of her soul for many decades.

Maud walked down the stairs, each step she descent accompanied by a loud breath and cracking of bones. A couple of steps down she could feel her knees ready to buckle. If her own legs failed her at that moment, she would tumble down the stairs to her death. The visitor she had been waiting for would find her a few hours later and would not understand her purpose. She continued to climb the stairs as meticulous as ever.

Halfway down the stairs was a

tiny window that overlooked the fields and dust road outside.

When she reached it she decided to take a rest. Maud stared at the window hoping to catch a glimpse of the reflection of the weight on her shoulders, but it was futile. She had done an excellent job of cleaning the glass window that not a sparkle of dirt remained.

The glass was so clear that Maud could see dust raised a kilometer or so down the road which led straight to the house. Dust on the road meant travelers, which meant her visitor would arrive soon.

She slowly reached downstairs without further trouble. She walked slowly to the sitting room mentally debating with herself whether she still had time to take a nap before her visitor arrived or wait at the door. She decided the former. Maud made her way to the century old armchair, and comfortable relaxed on it.

Everything in the house was old, half a century at least. The most recent item in the house was a rotary phone which Maud had helped install in the first decade of her tenure as the housekeeper.

Maud closed her eyes and remembered that day she last had had visitors. Before she had doze off, the doorbell chimed. Her visitor had arrived.

A girl with fake blue hair walked in.

That wasn't how Maud had imagined her visitor to look. She

had expected a young woman with short black hair or a cloth wrapping around her hair, maybe with a thick layer of makeup to cover bruises her husband inflicted on her. Maud didn't hope this girl had a husband or boyfriend she was running away from, no, but if you had to come to the house you had to be running away from something. The teenager who had walked on was free, happy, and not old in enough to carry the weight of the house on her shoulders. "Wow, I just went back in time," the girl said, "Is this like an antique store or a museum? Do you know how much money you can make by selling all this old stuff online?" Maud didn't know what the girl meant. It didn't matter though, if the girl was the one, then Maud had to start training her before it was too late. Maud's own time was now limited, her soul was almost finished, drained by the weight of the house on her shoulders. She asked the girl if she knew why she was at the house. "I know why I am here old lady. The Ad said it was a house, man, this is a mansion! Am I supposed to clean it all by myself?" The girl asked. "You can stay in this house for the rest of your life, but you will have to clean it each and every day." Maud told the newcomer. "If you can't live in this house for the rest of your life now is the time to go back wherever you come from." "I can't go back," the girl said in a small voice, "I have nowhere else to be except here. I will do everything you ask." Maud smiled. That was the answer she needed. Everything else would fall in to place now that she had a successor. She said, "Good, if you learn the rules of the house, keep it clean, and be able to bear the weight of the house on your shoulders, I will leave you the house when I die." The girl gaped, the surprise of owning a mansion too great to keep her mouth tight. She quickly grabbed an apron and started searching for something to do in the room. Maud was impressed with the girl's eagerness to please. Decades earlier, she had been where the girl was; running around the house doing whatever it takes to woo the then housekeeper to leave her the house. She kept its rules, kept it clean and the house was hers after the passing of the housekeeper. The weight of the house that later fell on her shoulders wasn't what she expected, her predecessor had never actually mentioned what it actually was. "What is your name, girl?" Maud asked. "Saru," the girl with blue hair said, "My name is Sarudzai."

Sarudzai patiently waited at the door for the knock promised. She knew it was finally the day her visitor would arrive. She was prepared. Sarudzai wondered if that was what her predecessor had done on Sarudzai's own arrival. Sarudzai tried to recall the former housekeeper's name, Maud, but her face was lost in Sarudzai's mind. That was half a century ago when she had last seen Maud's face, a long time she had never seen another face. Her own successor would come soon. Sarudzai wasn't going to hide anything to the new arrival; she could keep the house, but she had to let a green worm suck her soul until she died. The former housekeeper had called it the weight of the house. Sarudzai scoffed at the name befitting the monster on her shoulders. If she wasn't distracted that day with the prospect of owning a mansion she would have noticed what she was getting into. Her greed had overcome her. Sarudzai glanced at the clock, it was almost seven in the evening. She hoped her visitor was late not canceling. She had done enough cleaning and now hoped for death. Her heart leapt as someone knocked on the door. Her visitor had arrived.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Horror

Precious Child

By: Gabriella Balcom



Gabriella Balcom

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

“We dreamed of a child forever.” Margaret’s eyes teared up. “You’re the answer to our prayers, and we’re so happy you’re here.”
“I am, too.” Seven-year-old Annabelle beamed at her adoptive mother, who hugged her tightly. “I always wanted a home.”
“And now you have one, precious child,” Hugh told her, also giving her a hug.
“Would you like us to show you around the house?” Margaret asked. “I really hope you like your room. We prepared it just for you.”
Hours later, the family sat down to dinner.
“This is the best day I’ve have in — well, years.” Hugh smiled at his new daughter. “How has yours been, Sweetie?”
“Wonderful.” Annabelle grinned widely.
[Four days later]
Margaret’s heart still sang, and she felt as if she were floating.

She’d felt that way ever since her beautiful, perfect child’s arrival. She’d tried to get pregnant for years, longing for a baby ever since she and Hugh were married, but even more after learning she couldn’t conceive. Having a daughter now didn’t seem quite real, but it was astounding. A dream come true. She and her spouse found something else equally astounding. Despite Annabelle having been removed from a bad environment — her mother had fancied herself a practitioner of black magic, according to the foster care worker — she showed no signs of mental health issues. Seeing Annabelle’s pleasure at having a room to herself rather than having to share had sent joy surging through her new mother. Pushing her on her swing and hearing her delighted giggles had been amazing. And, she’d been thrilled to see the wonder shining in the girl’s eyes when she’d seen the tiny kittens born only a few weeks earlier. Remembering, Margaret smiled. She’d never been happier.
A few minutes later, she began singing, “You Are My Sunshine.” The words held a whole new

cheese and chocolate. Check out her author page:

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

meaning for her today.

"Sing it again," Annabelle

clamored. "Please." When her mother did, she clapped her hands and accompanied her.

"You caught on quickly," Margaret said. "What a smart girl."

"Thank you ... Mama."

Hearing that word pierced Margaret's heart, but in the best possible way. She had to look away to wipe her eyes. "Would you like to learn another?"

"Yes." The seven-year-old

bounced on her feet, practically vibrating with energy. "Do you know any about dogs?"

"Just one named 'That Doggie in the Window.' It's about someone seeing a dog, wanting to buy it, and wondering how much the dog would cost." The older woman took a breath before beginning.

She thought of lyrics later while Annabelle did a puzzle, and jotted them down. When the child asked her to play a game, Margaret first sang what she'd composed:

["Please be my little one,
forever and ever more.
If you stay and never leave,
my heart will always soar.

Sweetheart, dear heart,
I adore and love you so.
You're my precious angel.
Please don't ever, ever go."]

That night, while lying beside her

husband in bed, she hummed her

tune to herself, and smiled

dreamily. "My mother used to

sing to me all the time. I thought I'd never get the chance to do the same thing with my own child."

"Now you can, Sweetheart," Hugh said before leaning over and kissing her.

"I did. Today."

"And?"

"And it was amazing. If Mom were here, she'd be so happy for me."

[Three days later]

"Do you think a tomcat sneaked into the shed and snatched it?"

Hugh asked his wife after

Annabelle boarded the school bus. He worked from home, and had discovered one of the kittens was missing when he took food out to the cat family.

"I don't know." Margaret

frowned. "It's possible, I guess, but I haven't seen any toms around. Wherever the baby is, I hope it's all right."

That evening, after fixing supper and eating with her family, she went outside to check on the remaining cats. They were fine, but the thought of a little furry creature missing its mother bothered her to no end. She searched around the home and general area, but found no sign of the kitten. She did notice something, though: impressions in the ground leading to the back

door.

Biting her lip, Margaret stared at

her home, unease making her stomach go queasy. An idea occurred to her, but she rejected it immediately. It returned against her will, however, and she frowned, then slowly made her way inside. Careful not to make even the slightest noise, she crept up the stairs, ever-so-slowly turned the knob on her adopted child's door, and entered. She heard a faint sound coming from the other side of her daughter's bed, tiptoed over, and gasped. Heat flooded her face as horror washed over her, and she had to put a hand on the wall to steady herself.

["Hugh!"] Margaret screamed. Blood and small chunks of flesh dotted Annabelle's mouth, the kitten she was devouring still in her hands.

Margaret swayed on her feet, then fainted. The last thing she saw before losing consciousness was the girl raising the kitten's body up to her mouth.

The End.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Horror

Demon

By: Destiny Eve Pifer



Destiny Eve Pifer

Destiny Eve Pifer is a published horror author whose work has appeared in numerous anthologies, magazines, and websites. Her stories have appeared in anthologies by Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, Nordic Press, Fun Dead Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Raven, and Drake Publications. Her stories have also appeared in FATE Magazine, The World of Myth Magazine, Sirens Call Magazine, Spotlight on Recovery, Country Magazine, Reader's Digest, and True Confessions. Her stories have also appeared on podcasts by The

It was dusk when Sara arrived at the hospital parking lot. The whole drive there she had been dreading going to work. The truth was Sara hated her job. She hated working what many referred to as the "Graveyard Shift." As a nurse's aide, she had made the mistake of choosing the float pool which meant that the clinical supervisor got to choose who went where. For some reason, Sara was always chosen to be what many considered a patient sitter. Her job was to sit with the most combative patients. Some who had harmed her in the past. But what choice did she have? It was either do her assignment or lose her job. So, as she predicted the supervisor put her in with an elderly woman who had injured a few nurses during the day. The moment she entered the room the daytime sitter was already on her feet and heading out the door without giving a report. Sara had to block her path. "Hey, tell me what I am dealing with here," she said, feeling frustrated. "She's evil," said the other sitter. Sara stood and stared at the terrified young girl. "Evil?" she asked. The girl pulled her coat tightly around her. "She's evil, wicked, and just plain crazy," the girl replied. Those words already had Sara dreading the night. She was informed by the nursing supervisor to keep the TV low and to sit with her back facing the doorway. "Don't get close unless it's to get her vitals," said the supervisor. As Sara sat down at the computer the supervisor gave her one last warning. "Oh, don't turn your back on her for a second or leave anything she can use as a weapon." Sara nervously sat at the computer. It wasn't the first time she had sat next to a combative patient but just the mere glance at the old woman gave her shivers. The woman lay with a sheet pulled up to her neck. Her long grey hair hung on each side. There wasn't a smile on her face but instead a scowl. According to her medical chart, the doctor had to sedate her twice. Each time didn't last long. All Sara could do was pray for the night to end quickly but she knew that the night shift never did. There was a chill in the air as she read the patient's file. Her name was Gretchen Wilson, and she was a ninety-year-old woman who had been in and out of psychiatric wards before being Morbid Forest. A lover of everything dealing with horror

Pifer currently resides in a small rural Pennsylvania town with her teenage son.

moved to a dementia ward due to overcrowding.

She had a history of violence and had assaulted many employees during her stay. The only relative she had was a daughter who wanted nothing to do with her. Supposedly the daughter had moved to another country and refused to be contacted. Sara looked back at the old woman who was shrouded in darkness. She was unaware that she was being watched. Watched by a vengeful woman with evil coursing through her veins.

Looking at the time Sara realized it was time for midnight vitals and to ensure the old woman was dry. However, the moment she put the blood pressure cuff on the woman's thin shriveled arm the old woman snatched her wrist. It was a move that caught an already frightened Sara off guard. As the woman dug her nails deep into her wrist Sara snatched her wrist away and pushed the help button. A couple of nurses came rushing in as the old woman sat up and began cursing at them in a language Sara didn't understand. They tried to calm her down until the doctor was paged but the old woman continued to thrash around. Sara ignored the blood running down her wrist as she secretly hoped that they would let her go home early. But alas they were short-staffed, and her wound was patched up as the head nurse told her to keep on

charting. A sleepy-eyed doctor appeared and once again gave the woman a sedative. She spit in his face as four nurses held her down. Finally, the woman seemed to relax, and the room once again turned dark and eerie. Sara looked over at the woman and called out her name.

"I'm not here to hurt you Gretchen I just want to help you." The woman turned to her and gave her an eerie smile that sent chills down her spine. "Gretchen is no longer here," said the woman. Sara turned back to the computer and began typing. "Did you know she murdered her husband and four children," said the woman. Sara was too frightened to look at her. "One of those conniving little brats got away but not before I slit my neighbor's throat," the woman cackled. The more she spoke the more Sara wanted to grab her things and quit. "I came to her in the institution, and she willingly opened her arms," the woman continued. By now Sara could feel herself starting to sweat. If only they had restrained the woman she would feel much better but according to the notes, it only agitated her more.

Sara refused to allow herself to show any fear. "I'm not afraid of you," she said rising to her feet. The old woman tried to kick her, but this only made Sara tuck the blanket in tighter. She turned on the light and tried to reposition

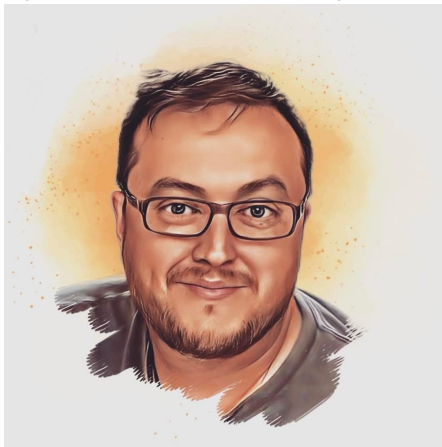
the woman who was trying to scoot out of the bed. But the old woman turned and looked at Sara and it was then that Sara saw that her eyes were completely black. Suddenly the woman grabbed Sara by the neck, and she found herself struggling to get free. It wasn't until the crucifix around her neck broke free that the woman let go and hissed. Sara calmly picked up a pillow off the ground and began smothering the woman. As she smothered her Sara began to smile. Maybe finally she could have some peace tonight.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Action/Suspense

Six Degrees Celsius - Part One

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

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

Los Angeles, California,

January 14th, 9:58 AM.

Jean Harris grabbed a scarf and headed for the front door before she called out, "Come on, Scott! The school bus will be here any minute!"

The stairs rumbled as young Scott Harris made his descent from them. "I'm coming, Ma!"

Jean grabbed a tin lunchbox from the kitchen counter and handed it to her son, Scott. With a gentle smile, she leaned down and kissed his forehead softly, reminding him to behave and have a good day. After ensuring he had everything he needed for the day, she opened the front door and stepped out into the cool morning air.

The young boy only made it a few steps out of his home before stopping and yelling for his mother. As Jean turned the key to lock the front door, she suddenly heard a loud cry from outside the

house. Her heart raced as she recognized her son's voice calling for help. She quickly rushed outside, frantic to make sure he was okay.

Once outside, she found her son and his other bus mates frozen in fear. They all gazed wide-eyed, mouths gaping open at the figure before them. Frantically, she grabbed her young child by the arm, pulled him back to the safety of their home, and then called the police.

Los Angeles, California, January 14th, 10:52 AM.

The sirens cried aloud in the bright, beautiful January California Skies. As the last patrol car pulled up to the scene, curious bystanders cautiously peeked out from behind the safety of their delicate pastel-colored window coverings.

Detective Alison Wells walked upon the crime scene almost unnoticed. While women had been a part of the Los Angeles

Police Department for nearly thirty years, the respect they deserved would not arrive for another thirty.

Alison, or Alice as her family called her, looked down at two separate white sheets. Each were a yard long and half in width. *Kids*, Alice thought and knelt to one of them. *It looks like the side of two kids.*

Alice pulled the sheet back enough to spy what was beneath it.

"What the hell," Alice sputtered aloud. To her surprise, she found the lower half of a woman.

Instinctively, she grabbed the other sheet and pulled it back for public viewing. While it was evident that the blood had been drained from the corpse and washed down with gasoline, the top half had been mutilated. The woman was cut from the edge of her mouth to the ear, which created an eerie visual effect of the dead woman smiling.

"It's called the Glasgow Smile," a deep voice said over Alice's shoulder. "This was deeply personal."

"I didn't ask," Alice said without acknowledging who was behind her.

"You know, at some point, you are going to have to look up at me," the deep voice responded with a snicker.

Alice's gaze drifted upwards to meet the piercing blue eyes of Marcus Alexander, a towering

figure with broad shoulders and a chiseled physique. As she exhaled, a sense of admiration and apprehension washed over her. "There! I'm looking at you now. Are you happy?"

Marcus smiled. "Yes. Thank you." Alice moved a few inches aside as Marcus knelt beside her.

"Do we want to talk about the other day," Marcus said softly with his cutting blue eyes fixed on her.

Alice dropped both sheets, shot a look of fury his way, and, in a harsh yet hushed tone, said,

"HERE? NOW? There is a woman sawed in half, blood drained, and you wanna talk about having sex with me last Friday?"

"Well, since you brought it up, I'm willing to have some dialog about it," Marcus said, adding another smile. "Oh, I agree. That was a surgical saw that cut the Vic in half."

Alice paused for a moment and processed what Marcus had just said. Eventually, her brow cracked, and she said, "You are a warped man, aren't you?" Again, Marcus smiled and shrugged.

"Okay. Fine," Alice snipped. "It was an accident. You are an asshole with an amazing body. I have quite literally wondered to myself how, in God's name, you can work the hours you do and still have a body like that. Add alcohol to that mixture, and what happened Friday is the result."

"Ouch," Marcus said deadpan and got to his feet. "That was fair, I asked... Have a good day, detective."

"I—" Alice's lips parted, ready to speak, but her words died on her tongue as she found herself entranced by the sight before her. A figure, tall and chiseled with muscles, moved away from her, his back a work of art that begged to be touched. Alice couldn't help but watch, captivated by his every movement, until he disappeared from sight, leaving her with nothing but the memory from the previous weekend.

San Diego, California, January 8th, 7:41 PM.

Beth felt Steve's hot breath on her neck while he was atop her. Their small hotel room was silent, only to the narration of their lust for the skin. While she enjoyed the *moment*, her mind was elsewhere, but he did not mind if her heart was unwilling as long as the rest of her body was.

Steve rolled Beth onto her back, and they stared deep into each other's eyes.

"C'mon baby," Steve gasped.

"Enjoy this before we have to go back home."

"You mean, go back home to your wife and kid," Beth said without breaking eye contact.

"Not now, Beth," Steve whined and moved in position to finish.

"I'm... Almost..."

"You have been promising me that you would leave her before I even left *New England*," Beth grumbled, not completely disconnected from the intimate moment. "I've been in California for a little over three months." "Shhhh...", Steve begged. "Please..."

Beth lay beneath him in silence. She was mad at him about his lies to and refused to show any enjoyment. Once Steve met his finish, Beth continued where she left off.

"You said that once I got here, you would leave your family and be my agent for Hollywood."

Steve, now angry, rolled off the top of Beth and stood at the side of the bed. His hands flew upward with each sentence. "For the love of Pete! You really are a self-center bitch? Aren't you? I wanted *us* to have a moment, and all you can think about is you and your wants and needs. What about my wants and *my* needs?" Beth wrapped herself with a sheet, sat on the side of the bed, faced Steve, and answered, "Christ! We have to drive one-hundred and twenty-odd miles to far enough away from your wife so we can screw. How about that for *your* needs?"

Steve stood silently and stared at Beth. Eventually, he mumbled, "That's not fair."

Tears fell from Beth's eyes. "I just wanna go home."

Steve's anger transformed into

confusion, and they sat beside her. "What now? It's almost eight at night."

Beth looked over at him, her eyes lashed separated by her tears, and nodded her reply.

"Okay, look," Steve Started. "I'm sorry. How about we go get supper, and first thing in the morning, we can head back home to LA."

"You promise," Beth whispered.

"Yes," Steve said, frustration lining his face. "I promise."

Los Angeles, California, January 14th, 12:30 AM.

Alice covered the woman's head with the sheet and rose to her feet to be met by Robbery-Homicide Detective Wesley Bronson.

"Detective," Alice said, accompanied by a nod.

Bronson was a man of medium height with jet-black hair and lines that etched his face. His darker eyes spoke of the evils he had seen. Although many people were afraid of him, Alice was not. When the middle-aged detective spoke, his voice was soft and comforting, much like her father's. It was strong yet soothing at the same time.

"I just got word that the Cap called in the Feds," Bronson said in a hushed manner. "I need for you to get me as much info on this as possible. Because this is just the type of thing the Edgar

Boys like, before we know it, they'll turn the whole damned thing into a three-ringed circus."

"Understood," Alice said in a strong but respectful tone. "Do we know anything at this point?"

"A mother of a kid that catches his bus called it in," Bronson reported. "She rushed her son out the door to only witness a few kids poking at the remains with sticks."

"Good God in Heaven," Alice prayed softly.

"Another parent questioned saw it and thought it was a mannequin," Bronson continued.

"The Coroner is on his way to pronounce and hail the body back with him. So, I need you to find out anything that will help us nail the sick bastard that did this."

"Do we know who the vic is," Alice said as she stared at the two halves.

"The face is too damaged," Bronson explained. "We will get her fingerprints ran and find out that way."

"I will get as much detail as possible," Alice said, looking toward the street. A van with the word *Los Angeles Herald* on the sides pulled up next to the parked squad cars. "Shit! News-reporters just arrived."

"I'll go stall them," Bronson instructed. "You get as much info before they get to you."

"Understood," Alice said.

Bronson turned and began to walk away but stopped and

turned back to face Alice.

"Detective?"

Looking puzzled, Alice looked over at Bronson and replied,

"Yeah."

"I can tell you right now, this is gonna be a shit case," Bronson said with a straight face. "So how about you lay off breaking other officer's hearts until it's over?"

"Understood," Alice said with embarrassment attached to her words.

Bronson grinned and said, "I'm glad you do."

To Be Continued...

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Action/Suspense

The Soap Opera

By: Dawn DeBaal



Dawn DeBaal

Dawn DeBaal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband Red, two rescue dogs, and a stray cat. Dawn has published over 400 stories in many online magazines and anthologies, including *Spillwords*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Zimbell House Publishing*, *Black Hare Press*, *Clarendon House*, *Blood Song Books*, *Cafelit*, *Reanimated Writers*, *The World of Myth*, *Dastaan World*, *Vamp Cat*, *Runcible Spoon*, *Siren's Call*, *Setu*, *Kandisha Press*, *Terror House Magazine*, *D & T Publishing*, *Sammie Sands*, *Iron Horse Publishing*, *Impspired Magazine*, *Black Ink Fiction* and others. She was the *Falling Star Magazine's* <https://linktr.ee/dawndebral> <https://www.amazon.com/Dawn-DeBaal/e/B07STL8DLX> <https://www.facebook.com/All-The-Clever-Names-Were-Taken-114783950248991>

"I must hang up, Angela.

My cake is done, and the timer is dinging." Betty put the handle back into the cradle. She didn't even have a cake, but the soap opera she'd followed since high school was about to begin, and Betty lived vicariously through *Living Our Lives* five days a week. The show was about a family of no-do-gooders who took advantage of everyone and everything. Betty loved to hate the characters who seemed to lack a moral compass. How many times had Sheila had an affair behind Buck's back? They'd break up and get together, only for her to be tempted yet again. The woman was a marshmallow. Her eldest daughter wasn't much better, and her son was simply a hopeless case. She studied them to ensure she didn't raise her children as Sheila did.

Opening the refrigerator, Betty took out the sandwich she'd made earlier. This time of the day

was her selfish time. No husband or kids making demands on her. She'd have a cup of coffee from the percolator with real cream and sugar and sit on the davenport for an uninterrupted half hour of entertainment. Betty turned on the television. She was a bit perturbed that Angela had kept her on the phone too long, and she might have missed the beginning of her show while waiting for the television to warm up.

"And now, your favorite show, *Living Our Lives*, starring Ben Bascomb and Kimber Hastings as Sheila and Buck Masterson," the announcer said. The show went to commercial, and Betty sighed in relief; she hadn't missed a thing.

The cameras turned to Sheila's kitchen, which looked similar to hers. When they bought the house, Chet gave her free reign on the design, and she loved Sheila Masterson's kitchen and made it nearly identical.

"Buck, breakfast," Sheila called

out. The handsome man strolled through the swinging saloon-type doors while Sheila placed a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in front of him.

"The toast is burned," Buck said sourly.

"Sorry, I was getting the kids ready for school and lost track of the time." Buck picked up the burned toast and bit into it.

"If you can't stop it from burning, don't bother making it," Buck grumbled.

Betty bit into her sandwich, disappointed that Buck was so hard on Sheila. Maybe that was why Sheila cheated on him so often. He never gave her any credit for all she did for her family.

"Chauvinist," Sheila said under her breath. Betty about spit up her coffee, bursting into laughter.

"It's not funny," Buck said from the television screen. Betty wondered why Buck would say that. It didn't go with what Sheila said.

"Get him, Sheila!" Betty chuckled and bit into her sandwich.

"Do you know what I've had to put up with? This woman has cheated on me several times. I bring home the bacon, and she doesn't even know how to make it properly." Buck got up, slapped his napkin down, and stomped out of the kitchen. Betty was just as stunned as Sheila.

"What's going on?" Betty said to the television.

"I don't know," Sheila said back.

"Are you talking to me?" Betty asked when the doorbell rang on the television. Sheila left the kitchen to answer the front door opening it to Dr. Mark Colter, a surgeon.

"Mark, what are you doing here?" Sheila asked, batting her eyes, and ensuring her pencil skirt was straight. She removed her apron and placed it on the hook when they returned to the kitchen.

"I have bad news, Sheila," the handsome Doctor said.

"Bad news? About me?"

"No, I'm afraid it's about Buck. Is he here?"

"You just missed him. He is on his way to the office."

"That's a shame. I wanted to talk to him before he left for work."

"You can tell me, Dr." Sheila hopped up on the countertop next to where Dr. Colter was standing.

"I'm afraid what Buck has is terminal."

"Terminal? What do you mean?"

"He has a rare form of cancer that is incurable. It's in his brain."

"Buck has brain cancer. No!"

Sheila put her hands to her mouth and fainted. Luckily Dr. Colter was there to prevent her from falling to the floor. He took smelling salts from his breast pocket and waved them under Sheila's nose.

"Sheila." Dr. Colter's low voice whispered her name not to scare her.

"Yes?"

"Come back to me." He again put the vial of ammonia, waving it under her nose. Sheila sat up, coughing.

"I'm sorry, I got so dizzy. I didn't mean to cause you concern." Dr. Colter put his hand on her chin.

"Sheila, you are such a brave woman, always thinking of the people around you."

"It's a curse." She offered her hand to the Doctor, and he pulled her to a stand, his arms wrapped around her, and their eyes met with such passion. Dr. Colter bent slightly, and Sheila turned her face to his lips.

"No!" shouted Betty. The two stopped and looked at her.

"Who are you?"

"Are you talking to me?" Betty asked, astonished. What was going on? Why was the television bleeding into her life? Chet was going in for tests today to see if the lump he found was cancerous.

"Oh, Dr. Colter, what will become of me? My husband is everything to me." False tears fell from Sheila, and Betty knew she was faking it for the Doctor's support.

"Hush, Sheila, let me kiss you and make it better." Sheila was helpless as Dr. Colter pulled her in for a kiss. She threw her arms around the man's neck and nearly climbed him like a tree. Dr. Colter picked her up, placing her buttocks on the countertop. The camera panned away and blurred.

Betty could hear sounds of pleasure from the other side of the kitchen door.

"It can't end like that!" Shouted Betty. She looked at the clock. Three minutes were supposed to be left, but the commercials kept playing. She was mad and flipped off the television. The doorbell rang. She pulled back the curtain, and Dr. Krum stood at her door. Betty opened the door to him. "Dr.?"

"Hello, Betty, is Chet home?" "No, he is at the office, I would think. He did make his appointment, didn't he?" Dr. Krum gave Betty a solemn nod. "Oh no, it's cancer, isn't it?"

Betty's hands went to her mouth. "I'm sorry. I wanted to tell Chet in person."

"Oh, what will I do?" Betty fainted and would have hit the floor if it hadn't been for Dr. Krum's strong arms. He removed an ammonia pen from his pocket and waved it under her nose. Betty's eyes fluttered.

"Let me help you up." The strong arms of Dr. Krum enveloped her slender body, and she leaned against him for support. The Doctor picked her up and set her on the countertop.

"Betty," He leaned forward, and she met him with a kiss.

"Mrs. Stillwell, what are you doing?" Dr. Krum asked incredulously.

"What? I fainted. I have no idea what I was doing." Betty hopped

off the counter. "I think you should go now."

Dr. Krum left the house, and Betty paced the floor. What had she done? Betty crossed a line she would never have if it hadn't been for that bitch, Sheila Masterson. She kissed her husband's doctor. She was so caught up in the Living Our Lives storyline that it blurred her real life. Would Dr. Krum tell Chet of her attempt to kiss him?"

She turned to dinner-making and made sure the house was extra clean that night as if by cleaning, she could rid herself of the memory of what took place in her kitchen this afternoon.

Chet came through the door, smelling his favorite meal.

"Smells great. Thank you, Betty."

"Did you see the doctor today?"

She watched his face to see if Dr. Krum had turned her in.

"Yes, it's not the best news. I have some more testing, but it's certainly suspicious."

"Oh, Chet, I'm so sorry." Betty

served him his favorite meal. She made herself available to her husband that evening in bed, but he rolled on his side.

"I don't feel well, sorry." Betty cried softly. If Chet had made love to her, she would have felt like he cared.

After Chet left for work the following morning, Betty cleaned and then turned on the television when it was time for the show.

Soon, she found herself in the

Masterson's kitchen. The show recapped yesterday's events with Sheila on the countertop making love with Dr. Colter. Sheila's moaning could be heard through the swinging door when Buck came back home because he'd forgotten his briefcase.

Buck's hand paused on the swinging door, and he heard his wife in the throes of passion with another man. Buck's hand turns into a fist striking his forehead. He leaves his wife and whomever she is with, undisturbed.

"Oh, Sheila, you slut!" Betty shouted. Buck drives off and goes to his office, where he falls into the arms of his secretary, Maria.

"Oh, Buck, you were wonderful." Maria stroked his hair as they lay on the couch in his office.

"I'm divorcing Sheila. She has been unfaithful to me for the last time."

"Oh darling, then we can be together forever," Maria says, satisfied.

"What little time I have left, yes, Maria." The show panned out on the two of them kissing ardently.

"Buck, you bastard," Betty shouted. She started to make a good meal for her sick husband when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Betty, it's me. I'm stuck at the office. I'll be late tonight."

"I'll put something in the oven and keep it warm," she said.

"Thank you. I shouldn't be but a few hours late." Betty put her

finger on the receiver button, took the phone's handpiece, and smashed it over and over on the countertop.

"You bastard, I knew you were cheating on me." Betty slammed the phone into its cradle and went upstairs and cried. She needed to calm her nerves, and she took what the good Doctor ordered, a sedative he'd prescribed for her to use when she had a stress attack. He called it "Mother's little helper." She called her friend to take the children overnight because of a "family emergency."

After all her tears dried, she put on a nice dress and did her makeup. Like Buck left Sheila, Chet would probably leave her tonight, but she would look irresistible to her husband. She waited and opened a bottle of wine. Betty was on her third glass when the front door swung open.

"I'm home, Betty," Chet called out. She seethed with anger. How could he act like nothing was wrong?

"Here's your supper." Betty put the hot pad on her hand and pulled the dish out of the oven, slapping it on the table.

"Oh honey, you didn't have to do that."

"I know I didn't. You didn't either."

"Come again?"

"Buck, you know you're having an affair with Maria. I'm not stupid."

"Who is Buck, and who the hell is Maria?" Chet shouted.

Betty woke up. Her head ached in the sunlight that was streaming through her bedroom window. It was late. She panicked but remembered the kids were at her friend's house.

She noticed Chet hadn't come to bed; that was fine with her. Betty splashed cold water on her face and went down to the kitchen.

She was going to plug in the percolator when she saw her husband on the floor under the kitchen table with a bloody knife in his back.

It hadn't been a dream; the pills and three glasses of cabernet made her do the unthinkable.

Chet was dead.

She wouldn't call the cops just yet. It was only an hour before her show came on. Betty had to know what happened next on, *Living Our Lives*. Sheila Masterson would know how to handle the situation Betty had put herself in.

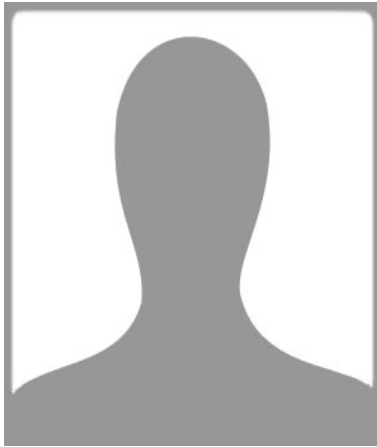
THE END

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Action/Suspense

Rainbow Dusted Dreams

By: Jessica Alexandria



Jessica Alexandria

Jessica Alexandria is a young author who started her amazing creative journey during the year 2019, previously using the pen name Alice Grim Rose.

Not only does she specialize in writing horror she is also a filmmaker, turning many of her short stories into short films.

No matter how many people told Jessica that she would never make it as an author she never listened to them and kept on doing what she loved.

In the year 2024 her debut novel will be released.

Jessica always has many projects on the go such as writing short stories, directing films, working on books, creating things to add to her fantasy world, hosting podcasts and so much more!

As a little girl I adored looking up into the sky, watching the constellations twirl just out of my reach. I would spend hours whispering my most intimate wishes to the stars in hopes they would encourage the moon to grant them. Nothing was impossible as I laid in the sweetly damp grass, looking up to the limitless sea of twinkling hopes. Like riding a unicorn with candy floss pink fur into the golden sunset while I grip the back of a knight in shining armor. Or swimming through the liquid silver sea and letting the purple haired mermaids lead me to the lost city of Atlantis. Or working my way up the world's rickety political ladder to become the world leader who brings peace to earth. Or becoming a doctor so I could cure my mother's illness. No matter how many exotic dreams I thought of in my trustful mind, seeing my mother's cheerful smile again seemed the

most impossible.

With each year that passed my dreamful childhood floated farther from me like a boat lost at sea. As my hope filled eyes dulled and my dimpled cheeks frowned, so did my dreams, hope and wishes. And I wasn't sure I ever wanted them to come back.

I remember the last time I made a wish; I threw it up to the stars with such might they almost couldn't catch it. My mother's illness had gotten worse and that morning she was given mere hours left to live. Instead of staying by her side and comforting her, I went outside and wished upon that damned star. She was dead by the time I went back inside. I was trying to help her the only way I knew how. By the time I turned twenty I got a boring and stale office job. From nine to five I was confined to a small gray box. All day I endured torture, but I got paid for it so who cared?

By twenty five I was married to a unique man from Europe, he was a poet but as soon as he realized

that career path held no money later at work until I didn't see him staring back and after a while I his parents paid for his law school until dawn. couldn't take it anymore. I packed tuition. Another person the the urn into a small cardboard universe stole dreams from. box and drove it out to his We bought a large house with a we had a massive fight and he favorite hiking trail where I threw a white picket fence and a bright stormed out. I didn't see him for the ashes into the west wind. I flowering yard in a high class part three days. I was so terribly mad wouldn't want to be trapped with of town. To outsiders, our lives at him that I didn't care where he someone I didn't love either, I were perfect. We had money, was or what he was doing. I didn't would rather be free. love, food, and a roof over our even flinch at the fact that he As I sat in the waiting area of the heads. But deep down inside my might be screwing another abortion clinic all I could hear was heart something was still broken woman. I didn't worry. Not until the loud clock ticking in my ear as that I wasn't sure could ever be the fourth day when the police the minutes shifted by. My fixed and because of that came knocking at my door and anxious foot tapped against the everything seemed useless. told me my husband had gotten floor faster than my already Invaluable. into a car accident. He went to a racing heartbeat. Was I really At twenty seven I had a sports bar and decided to drive about to kill my second child miscarriage; I couldn't bear the home; he didn't even make it out when I had already killed my pain of being so useless. Women of the parking lot before he first? are supposed to create life, it crashed into a fuel truck. Both As the nurse called my name I got comes naturally for them, yet I drivers died. I didn't cry, not a up and walked out of the pastel failed. I killed my first child. single tear fell from my eye as I pink building. I couldn't bear the Shortly after I tried killing myself heard those dreadful words; he is thought of killing not only my first and was hospitalized for six dead. child but my second too. With months. I was locked away in a I knew he didn't love me each day that passed the world a white room with a single barred anymore, he even told me so. My around me turned paler and window and a ghastly firm bed. heart mourned for him years ago, more solemn. I got fired from my No laces, no hoodie strings, no stopped beating was the last job and my husband's family cut pencils without supervision, anti-suffocation sheets. It was hard at stitch of closure I needed. me out of their life. I was a first, but I managed to fall asleep Three weeks later I scheduled an failure. No more. No less. to the sounds of the lady in 3B abortion. I didn't want to have my When I gave birth I was alone. banging her head against the wall dead husband's child. I waited There was a ravenous storm until it bled. Once I got home I impatiently for the appointment twirling through the town, so my wasn't sure if I could sleep date to arrive, I wandered around my midwife was unable to make it to peacefully in the quiet, or my house aimlessly; reading me. Halfway through my knowing my husband would every book I owned and baking contractions the electricity went never look at me the same. Love every box mix I could find in the out and I was too incapacitated to is rumored to be blind but not back of my dusty cupboards. I light a candle or find a flashlight. foolish. He no longer took me out spent hours staring at my In the dark, completely alone, I on dates or to his family husband's urn sitting on the red gave birth to my rainbow baby; gatherings. He stayed later and brick mantle. I could feel him

Mia.

Through the first three years of parenthood, I was unsure of what I was doing. With each temper tantrum I deemed myself more and more unfit as a parent. My therapist suggested I join a local mothers group so I could make connections with some people who had the exact same struggles I did. It helped for a while. Until I got a notice of eviction. My house that I spent the last thirteen years in was being ripped away from me and there was nothing I could do but sit there and watch. The deed to the property was in my husband's name and now that he was dead it went to his next of kin. His sister, who was a selfish and spiteful woman. She never cared for me.

And now I sit here, watching her stare up at the silver powdered moon. With eyes filled with hopes and dreams and I am reminded of myself. Her soft cheeks are filled with cheerful eagerness and the soft smile touching her toothy grin is dusted with wonder and hope. I can see her whisper quiet words to the stars just like I had at her age. Yet this time her mother is right there beside her and I can feel my own mothers hand gently embracing mine across the unknown realms of life and death. The only dream I have now is to be happy. And it has already come true.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

My last night in the house was a miracle in disguise. I sat on my living room floor and cried; I screamed out in pain until my very last sorrow was heard. Everything I had was gone and it was never coming back. In a depressed fueled rage, I packed up Mia and left the state. I traded my car for an old, battered trailer then used most of my savings to fix it up. Mia and I spent the next two years traveling the country and we have loved every last bit of it. We got to see dozens of places that mostly people only dream of encountering.

Action/Suspense

In the Midst of Normalcy Part 10

By: Tom Fowler



Tom Fowler

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

29. Tim Coleman

Interviewed

It had occurred to lead investigator Baughman that he was more than likely dealing with a psychopathic killer. But Gary Baughman did not want the family to unduly suffer. They were free to go anywhere in the house as long as an officer was there to watch over whoever needed to leave the den. But, cell phones were confiscated, the personal and laptop computers in the Coleman household were shut down and relief breaks were closely monitored from just outside bathroom doors; for how did he know Ms. Edgmon's slayer had not deteriorated psychologically to the point he would attempt to harm himself? Or, he thought, wearily, was it herself? He hoped he would soon know.

Lt. Baughman would interview Big Tim Coleman, as he learned Big Tim was the family's affectionate nickname for him, in the kitchen. Bearce would speak with Jack

Edgmon outside at one of the picnic tables. A weak cool front had moved in, and it wasn't overly hot outside. It would be comfortable underneath the canopy. Lt. Quarles would interview Stephanie Coleman in the comfort of the upstairs study. It was approaching mid-afternoon and Baughman was ready to begin the interviews. A little over half a normal workday had passed but it seemed much longer. Murder cases were like that, he thought they would drain you physically as well as emotionally. So, Gary Baughman began his interview with Tim. The simple act of commencing the interview process seemed to reinvigorate him. Now, the real investigation was underway and the bloodhound in him asserted itself. Both men sipped coffee as Baughman asked his first question, wide open and simple, "Tell me about last night and this morning."

The veteran detective could see the tension in Tim Coleman's face. Soon, he heard it in his voice as he began to speak. "Well, there isn't a whole lot to tell," said Tim. "At, least, not a whole

lot I can think of. You already know some of us stayed home last night and a few of the others went out for the evening. Nobody knew about Leann until this morning."

"Tell me again who stayed here and who went out."

"I, my brother Bob, and sister Janelle stayed home. Our cousins Mike and Leann, plus Jim and Stephanie stayed here, too. That's seven of us. My brother-in-law Larry, plus Leann's husband Jack, Jim's wife Peggy and my wife Cathy went out. The idea was to give all of the Colemans – when we were children we were known as 'The Coleman Kids' -- time alone without spouses. Last night was the last night of a long reunion weekend and it was simply a nice gesture on the part of the husbands and wives. I might add, it was Cathy's idea, but everyone thought it was a good one."

"You were the first one up this morning?"

"Yes. I got up and was in the kitchen a little after 7:00. Jack soon joined me; said Leann was not in bed. He thought she may be asleep in another part of the house but, looking back, I think we both sensed something was wrong right away."

"What makes you feel that way?"

Lt. Baughman was being low key but firm with Tim. His approach seemed to be working.

"Jack said she wasn't in bed when he came in. The fact she wasn't in the guys were downstairs playing pool. They picked just that time to come upstairs and see Stephanie's humiliation."

Baughman asked, "Who was downstairs?"

Tim thought for a moment and replied, "It was Bob, Jim and Mike."

"What happened next?"

"Everyone was embarrassed. It sobered everyone up enough to realize it was getting late and the reunion would end tomorrow. Except for Janelle and me, the others went to bed. This was around 11:20, 11:30 or so. Janelle and I stayed up to clean. We went to bed a little before midnight."

"Is Stephanie gay or did she simply have too much to drink?"

"I don't know that she's gay. But she's never married so I suppose she could be. My guess is she had too much to drink. Still . . ." his voice trailed off, "making a pass at a family member was quite a shock."

"Did you or Janelle hear anything unusual while cleaning up?"

"No, nothing."

"How about after you went to bed?"

"I didn't hear anything. Cathy is a light sleeper and usually knows what's going on in this house, but she was in the group that returned home later."

Baughman rubbed his chin. The long day was beginning to take its toll and it was far from over. He said, "So, you and your house

party are all in bed before midnight. Leann is murdered between midnight and 1:00 a.m., most likely. The Plaza people do not arrive home until 1:00 a.m. and Jack claims Leann is missing from the bedroom at that time." The normal brightness in Tim Coleman's eyes had turned to dullness and despair. The good times of the last few days seemed as far away as those long ago Christmas Eve gatherings. The sentimental trip to Scotland which he and Cathy anticipated a few weeks from now was far from his thoughts as Baughman continued to think out loud. "And nobody saw or heard anything until you found Mrs. Edgmon this morning?" "As far as I know, that's right. I didn't hear any commotion in the house all night long." The look on Lt. Baughman's face was neither angry nor passive. At this point, he didn't know what to think. Softly, he said to Tim, who he could see was nearing a breaking point, "I have a lot of work to do." As Tim left the kitchen table, he thought, odd that he mentioned his wife is a light sleeper.

30. Bearce Speaks to Jack Edgmon

The patio was surprisingly pleasant for July, which was why Detective Bearce and Jack Edgmon agreed to meet there.

Jack welcomed the idea of getting out of the house. He didn't think he would ever again feel comfortable in Tim and Cathy's home. Jeff Bearce was a police lieutenant with an excellent reputation in interviewing suspects and witnesses. Bearce was 60 years old, short, muscular, and heading towards overweight. He was bald but sported a very neatly trimmed beard to compensate for it. That it was all gray generated much kidding, but he took it in good stride. He, perhaps more than the other two detectives in the Coleman home on this day, could take a non-judgmental and detached view when conducting an interview, yet at the same time sense when he was being lied to or conned. Today, no less than at any other time, this ability would stand him in good stead. The men sat down. Jack Edgmon was tall and lean with sandy blonde hair. An accountant by trade, he was naturally reserved but could get loud and rambunctious when in a good mood. That for sure was not the case today. They had not brought cool drinks with them as it was not that warm on the patio, especially underneath the table awning. Bearce began by saying, "We're all very sorry about your loss. I know that sounds hollow, but it is the truth. Working with family

members of victims teaches one a measure of compassion."

Jack was appreciative of this remark and also a bit surprised and said so. Mechanically, he answered, "Thank you. The way police are depicted on TV and in the movies doesn't suggest that." Bearce laughed softly. How the gullible viewing public never questioned Hollywood fantasy never ceased to amaze him. To Jack Edgmon he said, "I'm sorry we have to do this. I know you would rather be alone."

"It must be done. In fact, I'm kind of anxious to tell you what I know."

The flatness in Edgmon's voice bothered the detective but realized it had been a very stressful day for the victim's husband, and the pressure was not going to let up anytime soon. Bearce, as he normally did, started out low key, saying "Let's start at the beginning. You and the other three who had been out on the Plaza arrived back here around 1:00 a.m. this morning?"

"Yes."

"You immediately went to bed and Mrs. Edgmon was not there? "No, she wasn't."

"In the den, you said the nightstand clock read 1:04? "Yes."

"She never came back to bed at any time before morning?"

Bearce, like his good friend and counterpart Gary Baughman, was very good at being non-

accusatory and remained low key in his approach.

"Well, she could have," said Edgmon, with emotion in his voice for the first time, "but I was pretty wasted and may not have noticed. Besides, if the coroner said she died between midnight and 1:00, she sure wouldn't have been with me."

"Did you fall into a heavy sleep right away after going to bed?"

"Yeah, it was more like passing out," Jack answered, sheepishly. His voice cracked as he told Bearce, bitterly, "We wouldn't have partied so hard if we had known this was going to happen." Detective Bearce did not say what he was thinking: Mrs. Edgmon may have been killed because the entire family had too much to drink. All except for one and the timing for that person was perfect. This particular night after a partying binge could have been the murderer's plan all along. But, considering this caused him to think of something else: if the murderer killed Mrs. Edgmon before the husbands and wives arrived home, he or she took some risk in being caught. Perhaps that is why Mrs. Edgmon was murdered quickly in the downstairs rec room. Out of sight and out of mind, especially when everyone else was drunk. Bearce's face gave away nothing. Instead, he asked, "Did you get up from bed at any time during the early morning?"

"No, and that's unusual for me, especially when I've had a drink or two. My plumbing system isn't too good and usually I'm up a time or two in the night."

"Did you wake up and hear anything; anything at all?"

Anger rose in Jack's voice as he said, "No, I was out like a light. I'm embarrassed and heartbroken that I was drunk on the night my wife was murdered, but that's how it was and will always be. Besides, Detective, why does it matter if she was dead before I came in?"

"There is no such thing as useless or irrelevant fact or data when somebody has been murdered, Mr. Edgmon."

"I know, sorry."

"No need to apologize. Just one more thing for now."

"What?"

"Did you suspect anything was wrong when you got up this morning?"

"Well, I didn't suspect it as much as I sensed it. Feared, it, actually. That's why I came downstairs to Tim even though I had a pretty bad hangover headache. Otherwise, I would have slept in with no worries."

Bearce looked at the broken man across the table from him. Edgmon's ruddy complexion had grown more pronounced during the interview, and it served as a striking contrast to his white, blond hair. He did not believe and could not imagine Jack Edgmon as his wife's killer, but he had seen stranger and worse things in his time. Opinion is one thing, facts another and he had been surprised more than once. But he said nothing to indicate what he was thinking. Instead, he said, "OK, Mr. Edgmon, let's go back inside." Managing a weak smile, he added, "We're lucky it wasn't hot out here."

"No kidding." Jack had returned to his numbness. Jeff Bearce had seen that many times. Jack Edgmon was coping as best as he could.

As they walked back into the house to rejoin the others in the den, Bearce thought to himself that Jack Edgmon may prove to be the least useful witness, for there was no reason at this time to believe he had done anything but arrive home after his wife's murder and slept soundly through the several hour aftermath. Still, Jack Edgmon's words had done nothing to clear him, and he was anxious to compare notes with Gary and Peter. He didn't need anyone to remind him there was much to learn about this case.

He was also very aware of Jack Edgmon's status as husband of the deceased. That alone would keep him on the suspect list.

To Be Continued...

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Science Fiction

Working Out

By: James Rumpel



James Rumpel

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

Andy looked at the façade of the warehouse. The place looked like it had been abandoned for years. It was not at all what he had expected. "I don't know, Jay. Maybe this isn't such a good idea." "Don't let the outside scare you," replied Jay. "As I said, it's a new company, the product is still experimental, but in a couple of months when it's approved, fancy distribution centers will be popping up all over." "That's just it. Maybe I should wait till it gets approved." Jay laughed. "Take a look at me. I've been using it for three months and nothing bad has happened. In fact, everything's better than expected. I lost fifty pounds and am in the best shape of my life." Andy had to admit that Jay was quite the physical specimen. From the first day they had met at the gym, Andy had been impressed by Jay's work ethic and conditioning. He still found it hard

to believe that the modern-day Adonis standing next to him had once been as overweight and out of shape as himself. Jay had shown him pictures. There was no denying that whatever this place was selling worked.

Jay knocked twice on the rusty metal door. Moments later, the door creaked open and a pretty young woman wearing a white lab coat over workout clothes motioned for them to enter.

"This is Rita," said Jay. "She'll give you the orientation. I'll be waiting here when you're done."

"Follow me." Rita walked toward a nearby cubicle. It was all Andy could do to keep from staring at her well-toned backside.

Rita offered Andy a seat. As he sat, he surveyed his surroundings. Very little effort had been made to hide the fact that they were in a warehouse. About a dozen cubicles were spread out in the middle of the cement floor. The only other things in the building were a row of treadmills and a collection of free weights in a

corner. One wall was covered with full-length mirrors.

"So, let me guess," said Rita. She looked Andy over from head to toe. "You're finally sick of being overweight and lazy."

"I don't think of myself as lazy," protested Andy. "I have a slow metabolism."

"I'm sure you do," continued the woman with a wry smile. "I bet you've tried all sorts of diets and exercise plans, but none have worked. Am I right?"

Andy nodded.

"Do you know the reason most diets and workout schedules fail? Lack of motivation. It's just too easy to skip a day. Pretty soon skipping one workout turns into taking a whole week off and eventually you're right back where you started."

"I'm motivated. I would love to lose weight and be healthier."

"Then why aren't you?" asked Rita.

Andy lowered his head. "I don't know."

"What makes our program different and better is that we provide the strongest and most basic motivation. Do you know what that is?"

"I don't know. Money? Positive results?"

"No. I mean it when I say basic. The most basic motivation is pain avoidance. I'm talking M.C. Skinner stuff."

"What?" Andy stared at Rita. "Are you saying you beat people up if

they don't exercise?"

"Oh, nothing as crude as that," laughed Rita. "We use nanobot technology. It's been developed by government scientists, and we've found a very practical use for it."

Andy started to stand up. "I'm not sure. This sounds too weird."

"Please, let me explain. When I finish, if you decide you want to stay fat and listless, then you can go. But the process is safe and . . ." She gestured to her own body. ". . . very effective."

"You mean you use it?"

Rita grinned. "I used to weigh over one-hundred-eighty pounds. Now I'm one-fifteen and have maintained that weight for six months."

Andy settled back into the chair.

"Okay. Explain it to me."

Rita pulled a syringe, a small medicine vial, and two pill bottles from a drawer.

"Don't worry. I'm not the one who administers the treatment. I just want you to see how it works."

Are you at all familiar with nanobot technology?"

Andy shrugged, "I saw something on the Sci-Fi channel."

"Well, to be honest, this is futuristic stuff. Nanobots are microscopic machines. So tiny that they can be injected into someone's blood with no effect. If programmed properly they can perform functions within the

human body. They're being developed to fight cancer or

break up arterial blockage."

"So, they phaser my fat away?"

"No. Just getting the fat to disappear doesn't work. You have to be motivated to get in shape. Our nanobots are programmed to give you incentive. You see, if you don't meet a prescribed exercise goal each day, the nanobots will give you a . . . slight electric shock."

"You're kidding right." Andy, once again, began to rise.

"I'm very serious. Now, I won't lie. It's painful but totally safe. There are no aftereffects. However, it does hurt enough to make you want to avoid feeling it again. Also, the shocks get worse each time."

"That's crazy,"

"It seemed that way to me at first, too. But after two shocks, I haven't missed a workout in months. It's to the point where I look forward to working out each day."

"I don't know. What if there's a day where I just can't make it to the gym or what if I pull a muscle and can't work out?"

"That's where these come in."

Rita picked up one of the two pill bottles. "One of these pills will cancel the nanobots' adverse effects for a twenty-four-hour period. Just be sure to take it at least twenty minutes before your exercise deadline. It takes a while to get into your bloodstream."

"How many of those pills do I get?" asked Andy.

"We give you two dozen to start with, but you can always buy more." She handed a business card to Andy. "Here's my card. You can call anytime to set up an appointment to get refills or use our exercise equipment."

"And if I want to quit the program entirely . . ."

Rita grabbed the other bottle.

"This pill permanently disables the nanobots."

Andy stood in front of Rita's desk.

The whole thing sounded insane. A joyous yell from behind grabbed his attention. He turned to see Jay stepping off one of the treadmills.

Jay held both his fists in the air and shouted, "Yes. Four miles in under twenty minutes. New record." One of the employees walked over and gave Jay a high-five.

Andy's eyes wandered over to the mirrors. He looked at his image. His face was way too round, and he had multiple chins. He tried to suck in his gut, but it didn't help. There was no denying it; he was obese. Maybe it was time to get desperate.

"One more. You got this," yelled Jay.

Andy finished the lift and, with Jay's help, set the bar back on its stand. "Thanks for spotting me, Jay."

"No problem. I'm surprised you

didn't ask that pretty redhead to help you out."

"Oh, you mean Heather. I've already asked her to dinner, and she accepted." He couldn't suppress his grin.

"Good for you. Dropping some pounds and getting fit has really improved your self-confidence.

You've got to admit, the treatment has worked for you."

"You're right," replied Andy. After a short pause, he added, "So have

you ever missed a workout and been shocked?"

"Only once," replied Jay. He grabbed a couple of weights off the rack and started adding them to the bar. "I vowed to never miss a workout again. How about you?"

"I've been zapped twice. Forgot to take the cancellation pills both times. The first was tolerable but the second was pretty bad."

Jay laid down on the bench and prepared to lift. "You better be more careful. You realize that by the eighth time, the nanobots punishment has the potential to be fatal."

Andy stared at his friend. "What? They never said anything about that."

"It's in the contract. You should have read the fine print. Nothing to worry about though. You just keep working out and it'll never happen. Besides, you have the cancellation pills and the total-stop pill."

"I took a couple of cancellation

pills during the first few weeks when I couldn't get to the gym because of work. There's no limit to how many of them I can take, right?"

Andy helped Jay settle the bar onto his chest.

"No limit," grunted Jay as he began to press the weight upward.

The pill bottle was almost empty. Andy shook his head. Had he really already taken twenty of the cancellation pills. Sure, he'd been neglecting his workouts quite a bit the last month, but work was busy, and he'd been spending quite a bit of time with Heather. For a moment, he considered just taking the total stop pill. The program had helped him but did he really need to keep pushing himself as much as the daily workouts required. He decided to wait a week. He would do a better job of sticking to the workout plan moving forward. Today was supposed to be a cardio day but he wouldn't have time. He was going to help Heather move some of her stuff into his apartment later. After popping one of the remaining pills into his mouth, he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge. He was going to have to get more pills.

He searched his desk drawer for the card that Rita left him. He'd

have to find time to get down to the warehouse and get a refill.

Rita let him into the warehouse and lead him to her desk. Andy quickly noticed that there were fewer cubicles than last time and that the treadmills and mirrors were gone.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"We're closing down," replied Rita. "There are some . . . legal issues we just haven't been able to work out."

"And you weren't going to tell me."

"Oh, you're on my list. That's why I'm still here. I've been contacting all of our clients and telling them that we're going out of business and that they won't be able to get anymore cancellation pills."

"But on the phone, you said I could come here and pick more up."

Rita handed him a small envelope. "I scraped up another five for you. There's no reason you can't continue with the program for as long as you want. You don't have to take the total-stop pill until it's absolutely necessary."

"Maybe I should take the stop pill right now," said Andy. "I've already been shocked five times." Rita's eyes opened wide. "Five times. That must have hurt. You know you might not be able to

survive more than one or two more."

"Yeah, I figured that out. No thanks to you."

"I think it's a good idea for you to take the total-stop pill. I don't think you should risk it."

"Do you have one of those pills here?"

Rita shook her head. "No. You've still got yours, right?"

"Yeah." He handed the envelope of pills back to Rita. "Here, somebody else might need these. I'm going straight home to take the stop pill."

When he got home, Andy went to the medicine cabinet. It was filled with all sorts of perfume bottles, make-up, and other things that Heather must have brought over. He found a small bottle containing his acid-reflux medicine, but the cancellation pills and the total-stop pill were nowhere to be seen.

After a frantic search of the apartment, Andy called Heather.

"Yes," she said, "I put some of my stuff in the medicine cabinet. It was a real mess."

"What did you do with the pills?" shouted Andy into the phone.

"Ah . . . what pills?" replied Heather. "There were about a half dozen empty bottles or bottles with expired dates. I threw them out. You're not supposed to keep

old medicines around . . ."

Andy hung up.

He checked the trash can in his apartment, but it was empty.

He raced to the garbage bin.

There were only a couple of bags of trash inside. The truck must have emptied the bin recently. Hopefully, the bags in there were the ones Heather had thrown out. Andy dove in, tearing the trash bags open. He inspected every cubic inch of the rubbish but never found the pills or their bottles.

Chasing the garbage truck to the dump would be futile. His only chance was to find another pill.

Andy pounded on the warehouse door. No one answered.

The number Rita had given him was out of service.

Jay wasn't answering his phone, and he wasn't at the gym.

Desperate, Andy ran to Jay's apartment. Without knocking, he burst through the door to find Jay sitting at his kitchen table, eating pizza.

"Did you hear?" gasped Andy, between deep breaths.

"Yes," replied Jay. He continued to chew as he talked. "I just took my total-stop pill. I'm not going to risk anything."

"Do you have another one?" begged Andy.

"No. Why would I?"

"I don't have one. It got thrown

out.”

Andy stopped in mid-bite. A chunk of cheese fell from his mouth. “What? How’d that happen? What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll go see a doctor. Maybe they can take the nanobots out.”

“You do that,” said Jay. “I’ll see if I can find someone from the company. There’s got to be some way to get you another pill.”

The next morning, Andy did an upper body workout and ran three miles on the treadmill just to be safe. His doctor’s appointment was at ten o’clock.

“I’m sorry, Andy,” said the doctor.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I think I should schedule an appointment for you with a psychologist friend of mine. He might be able to help.”

“I’m not crazy,” insisted Andy.

“There’s got to be something you can do. Can’t you get me in contact with some government scientists or something?”

The doctor shook his head. “I ran your blood work. There is nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe they were just pulling some kind of power of suggestion trick on you.”

“It’s real. I know it is.”

The doctor sighed. “Okay, I’ll see if I can find someone who knows anything about this nano-stuff. I’ll

call you if I find anything.

Meanwhile, here’s my friend’s card. She should be able to help you.”

A day later, Andy had just finished his second set of fifty push-ups when his phone rang.

“Andy, this is Jay. I think I’ve found something.”

“What? What did you find?”

“I’ve spent two full days searching the dark web and I think I located the man who started this whole thing. He used to work for NASA, but he was fired a few years ago. As far as I can tell, he’s some kind of a hermit. He’s hiding from the law, too.”

“How’d you find him?”

“I didn’t,” replied Jay. “But I do know that he was last reported to be living near a small town in Arizona, Mesquite Creek or something like that.”

“Thanks, Jay. I’m leaving now. Do you want to come with me?”

“Sorry, I can’t. There’s an all-you-can-eat place that I’ve been wanting to try. I’m heading there tonight.”

It was a three-day drive to Arizona. The trip would have been quicker, but Andy had to take at least an hour each of the first two mornings to get his

By the third morning, he was only a few hours away from Mesquite Creek. Being so close to his destination, he decided to forego his exercise regimen and get to his destination as quickly as possible. He had enough time to get there and begin his search before the nanobot’s negative reinforcement kicked in.

Three hours later, he passed a sign announcing that Mesquite Creek was twenty-four miles away. Andy was sick of listening to the two CDs he had brought along so he hit the seek button on the radio. The first station that the radio stopped at had on a boring talk show. While Andy reached for the seek button a second time, the host of the radio show announced the current time to be 9:59.

That couldn’t be right. Then it dawned on him. He’d been crossing time zones, but Arizona didn’t follow daylight savings time. What time were the nanobots using? Were they going by Arizona time, or the time Andy thought it was? He started looking for the next exit. Maybe he could get a quick workout in. Before Andy could pull off the freeway, the nanobots kicked in.

Andy slowly opened his eyes, blinded by the bright light that seeped through his eyelids. “Oh, you’re awake,” said a female

voice. "You had us worried for a while."

"What happened? Where am I?"

Andy asked as his vision adjusted.

He answered his second question before the other voice answered him. He was in a hospital room.

"You're in Kingman General Hospital. You had an accident," replied the nurse. "You've been unconscious for quite a while."

"How long?" asked Andy, nervously.

"Oh, almost twenty-four hours. We're doing more extensive tests, but it seems that you haven't suffered any significant brain injuries. You were pretty lucky."

"Twenty-four hours! That can't be. I can't stay here. I have to get up. I've got to get my workout in."

"I'm afraid you won't be getting a workout in for quite some time."

The nurse pushed a button and Andy's head slowly raised as the bed adjusted.

"No!" screamed Andy as he looked at the large casts on his right arm and both of his legs.

The End

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Humor

The Real Magic of Christmas

By: James Rumpel



James Rumpel

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

Nick looked at the glorious array of candies and sweets spread out before him and sighed. He picked up an iced cookie that was supposed to be shaped like a Christmas angel but looked more like a duck with a back defect. At the moment, there was nothing he wanted more than a thick, juicy steak with a side of garlic mashed potatoes. Rolling his eyes, he bit off the angel/duck's head. "Excuse me, Sir," said a mild voice from behind. Nick turned to see Atticus Slumberstich bending down to enter the room. Once, Atticus was through the undersized doorway he straightened up, rising to an impressive six foot eight inches. That wasn't quite true. Atticus never stood at his full height. The man was always slouching. Probably due to self-consciousness brought about by the fact that he spent the vast majority of the last twenty years

working with people less than half his height.

"Hello, Atticus," said Nick. "Is there any way I can get a break from eating this . . . stuff?" He motioned towards the multitude of treats. "I would like some real food. It's been years."

Atticus shook his head. "You know we can't risk any more breaks in Christmas magic. The Christmas spirit levels are at all-time lows. In fact, that's why I'm here to see you. Didn't you hear the alarms go off about an hour ago?"

"No, I went for a walk. I went south for one mile, then east for a mile, and then north for a mile until I got back here."

"White," said Atticus.

"What?"

"The color of the bear was white."

Nick glared at his assistant. He wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of admitting that he had seen a white bear at the end of his stroll. "So, anyhow, what was the alarm about?"

"Well," began Atticus, "as near as I can figure, the Hallmark channel in the US was pre-empted by a presidential address. Something to do with impeachment proceedings. When Hallmark stopped showing "Single Bells" and "Single Bells 2: Marry Mary Christmas" there was a major dip in the amount of Christmas spirit. There's a possibility that the drop might have caused a slight lapse

in the elven containment spell.”
 “What?” shouted Nick, spitting out bits of sugar cookie and vanilla frosting. Did any of them revert?”

“I don’t think so. But I thought you might want to join me in reviewing the surveillance videos.”

“I do.” Nick jumped to his feet. “I told Michael this whole elf thing was going to be a problem someday.”

As they walked to the security control room, Nick’s thoughts flashed back to early in the nineteenth century.

“Greetings, Saint Nicholas,” called a deep though still melodious voice, causing Nick to nearly drop the wooden doll he was carving.

“Hello, Michael,” said Nick, slightly miffed at the interruption. “What brings an Arch Angel to my humble workshop?”
 “We’ve been watching you. You are doing a bang-up job. The Christmas joy and magic you are generating is way above our initial estimates.”

“Thank you, but it is getting to be a lot of work. It was fine when I only had to supply toys to a village or two but last Christmas Eve, I didn’t have time to visit all the believer’s homes. I didn’t get back here till after dinner on Christmas day. My steak and

potatoes were cold.”

“That’s one of the reasons I’m here,” said Michael, turning and pointing toward the front door of the workshop. “Follow me.”

Nick, reluctantly set the wooden toy he was working on aside and followed the angel to the doorway. “Okay, that’s a nice sleigh and all but I already have one.”

“That isn’t an ordinary sleigh. It lets you travel anywhere instantly. That is, as long as you have the right propulsion.”

“You mean my horse, Bob-Tail, isn’t going to be able to pull it. Then what good is it?”

Michael held up a finger. “Watch this.” He pulled a long, thin horn out of nowhere and gave it a quick toot.”

Suddenly, a half-dozen reindeer swooped down from the sky, landing next to the sleigh.

“Wait, that’s not right,” said Michael. He studied the collection of caribou for a second and then yelled, “Vixen, Blitzen, get down here. You’re going to have to watch Vixen, she’s quite the flirtatious troublemaker, if you know what I mean.”

Two more deer, alit next to the others.

“With this sleigh and those reindeer, you’ll be able to cover the entire globe in a single night.”
 “I don’t know,” said Nick. “Isn’t that going to take a lot of Christmas magic?”

“Sure. But you’re creating it faster

than we could ever hope to use it. Every day, more and more humans are being overcome with joy and love. There is no way it will ever run out.”

“I just thought of another problem,” said Nick. “If I’m going to deliver toys to the entire world, how am I ever going to make enough? Me and the Mrs. are working full time just to fill the requests now. And that’s with giving half the kids oranges and those terrible ribbon candies. If I get any further behind, I might have to start giving out peeps.”

“I have a solution to that, too,” said Michael, a self-satisfied grin on his face. He snapped his fingers and an even longer horn appeared in his hands. He raised the angelic trumpet to his lips and gave a long blast that shattered the windows of Nick’s workshop. There was a popping sound. The smell of sulfur bit into Nick’s nostrils and the sound of snarls and growls assaulted his ears. He looked to see a massive cage containing dozens of the foulest-looking creatures he had ever imagined. Most were deformed in one way or another: extra limbs, misplaced eyes, gnarled fangs, or grotesque protrusions. They shook the cage’s bars, howling and swearing.

“Meet your new helpers. I captured them this morning.”
 “What? Are you crazy? I can’t work with demons.”

“You will when I’m done with

them." Michael brandished a flaming sword, which, like everything else Michael summoned, materialized from thin air. He drove the demons back far enough to open the door. Grabbing the nearest spawn of hell, he pulled it out of the cage and slammed the door shut. "Foul Creature," commanded Michael, "tell us your name." The demon fought against Michael's grip, spitting fire at its captor. Michael placed his blade against the demon's neck. "Your name." "I am Bechlavarius. I will destroy you and tear your entrails from . . ."

The Arch Angel touched his index finger to the creature's forehead. Nick heard the sound of bells jingling and there was a brief flash of golden light. Before his eyes, the demon was transformed into a little man, barely three feet tall. He wore a green tunic, red tights, and a funny-looking pointed hat. Most noticeable, however, was the gigantic grin he wore on his face. "Tell us your name," said Michael. "I'm Blappy. What can I do to help? Do you want me to start making toys or maybe get new windows for the workshop? You know what, I'll do both." Without another word, Blappy started walking toward the shed. The bells attached to the curled-up toes on his shoes rang happily with each step.

"See," said Michael. "You're going into sneers. But then everything to have all the help you need." He went back to normal. prepared to enter the cage for the next transformation recipient. "I don't know," said Nick. "That's going to need an awful lot of magic." "Like I said before," replied Michael, "you've done so well and created so much spirit, we have an infinite supply. Christmas magic will be around for thousands of years. What do you think is going to happen? Do you think people are all going to turn cynical and self-centered someday?"

"Okay, here's the video from the workshop at the moment when Christmas spirit hit its lowest point," said Atticus, snapping Nick away from his memory. The 80-inch flat-screen TV, much like the one asked for by Billy Hooper, a seven-year-old from Topeka, flashed to life. The monitor showed the entire workforce of elves, happily constructing all sorts of toys. They were singing a joyous Christmas song, in perfect harmony. Multicolored Christmas lights flashed in beat with the music. Suddenly, for about ten seconds, things changed. The lights all flashed red at the same time. The singing was infused with a barrage of badly out-of-tune notes. The elves' smiles turned

dip in magic wasn't enough to cause them to return to their original form." Nick nodded his head. "Yeah, I think everything will be fine. I mean, even if they reverted back to demons mentally, what harm could they do in a couple of seconds."

"Welcome home, Dear," said Mrs. Clause. "I bet you're hungry after your long night. Look, I baked you some cookies."

Before Nick could politely decline his wife's offer, Atticus burst into the room, hitting his head on the doorway as he did so. "Saint Nick," he yelled, "come quick, you have to see this."

They raced to the security room where the TV was already on and showing a news broadcast. The banner scrolling along the bottom of the screen read, "Christmas toy catastrophes all over the world."

Atticus grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

"We repeat," said the haggard-looking newswoman, "do not open your Christmas presents. There have been widespread reports of chaos and devastation. In London, a boy's toy gun fired with real bullets, severely injuring his older sister. In Tokyo, a robotic toy dog attacked a family. In

Miami, a soda-making machine started producing nitro-glycerin. Again, these are only some of the thousands of reports. Please, stay away from anything Christmas-related.”

The camera panned over to the show’s co-anchor. “Well, I for one,” he said with a smile, “and glad that I wasn’t a good boy this year. All I got was this stupid orange. What harm can an orange do?” He dug his fingernail into the peel and pulled back. An explosion filled the screen, flashing red and yellow. The screen went blank.

“What are we going to do?” shouted Atticus.

Nick shrugged. “I’m going to go make myself a steak.”

The End

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Poems

The Blind Date

By: G. Lynn Brown



He's handsome with a great personality—
sweet as sugar— that's what she told me,
but there must be a full moon,
'cause this lamb of a man
is more of a wolf—
toothy grins,
wet kisses,
and all paws—
who knew lycanthropes
were so much fun?

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

G. Lynn Brown

G. Lynn Brown is a published poet and prize-winning writer of flash fiction and short stories. Her work has been published in over fifteen different literary journals, including Spillwords Press, Alien Buddha Press, Prosetrics, Paragraph Planet and Fictionette. She is a contributing author at Friday Flash Fiction, where her Pushcart Prize nominated story, "Her Best Bud," was published (June '23). Along with writing, she is also a digital illustrator and editor of poetry and drabble.

Poems

A Piece of Bread...

By: Angela Kosta



Angela Kosta

Angela Kosta was born in Albania in 1973. She has been living in Italy since 1995. She has published 9 books: novels, poems and fairy tales in Albanian and Italian. Angela Kosta is deputy editor-in-chief of the international newspaper 'Albania Press'. She is also a translator and her publications are seen in various literary magazines and newspapers in

A piece of bread
To quench the hunger
For day and night;
A person shouts out for a sad existence,
Searches for it, but fails and finishes in a while.
Being born with the cruel fate, whose fault is it?
Am I to blame myself?
Were we unwanted?
Did we get into the wrong world?
Insatiable hunger,
public negligence,
disappearance of rejoice...

I want to live in clouds and fill myself with air in the universe;
Still the heat from the sun is increasing not enough to melt the
frozen blood and faded heartbeats of my brothers.
The ground beneath your feet;
Where a piece of bread,
Don't fall apart!
Where is the Jesus who takes care of all?
There is no answer!
I have the piece of bread only except my wealth here.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆☆

Albania, Kosovo and Italy.

She writes articles for the Italian
newspaper 'Calabria Live'.

Poems

Don't Let Your Ranties Get Knotted

By: Ken Gosse



Ken Gosse

Ken Gosse usually writes rhymed, humorous verse in traditional meters. First published in First Literary Review—East in November 2016, his poetry is also in Pure Slush, Home Planet News Online, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Spillwords, and others. Raised in the Chicago, Illinois, suburbs, now retired, he and his wife have lived in Mesa, AZ, over twenty years with rescue cats and dogs underfoot.

Most folks get rants in their pants now and then;
perhaps it's because we feel misunderstood.
It seems that they're cherished by many good men,
like most of the people in your neighborhood.

A peeve, I believe, is the usual source;
taking cue from our anger and actions, their plots
are a nuisance, increasing if they stay on course,
ensuring our stomachs get tied up in knots.

At first, we might not know they're there and not care
as they feed on the quirks of each innermost quark
with their deep need to breed in that dark, secret lair.
Uncontrolled, we will find their bite worse than their bark.

The damage they do isn't done to a few
and their first bite is us, more than others are bitten.
They mutter "screw me" while we holler "screw you!"
and many words far worse than what I have written.

Caveat, peevees! When you feel itchy
don't fall for the ploy of their bickers and snickers
and if they should holler, "Veni, vidi, vici!"
fight on! Never let them tie knots in your knickers.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ☆☆☆☆

Poems

Life

By: Jasna Gugić



Jasna Gugić

Jasna Gugić was born in Vinkovci, Croatia. She is the Vice-President for public relations of the Association of Artists and Writers of the World SAPS; Global Ambassador of Literacy and Culture for the Asih Sasami Indonesia Global Writers, P.L.O.T.S USA the Creative Magazine Ambassador for Croatia; and a member of Angeena International, a non-profit organization for peace, humanity, literature, poetry, and culture. She is also co-editor of the anthology, Compassion—Save the World, one poem written by 130 world poets.

Jasna is a multiple winner of many international awards for

This life is
soaked with tears
and the words are too small
to pronounce
all life in an instant
and my love
hidden in the corners of solitude.
This life is
soaked with tears
and the pain of the past
is stronger
than the impending ecstasy
in the kiss of the night
and my escape is stronger
than the strength of your will.
This life is
soaked with tears
and the joy gets crushed
by the sorrow of the
desperate and disbelief in a
new longing.
This life is
soaked with tears
but today there is a smile
in my eyes
so don't walk away
from my smile .
Don't let the grief
to put out these embers
at least sometimes
when I forget
that this life is soaked with tears.

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

poetry and literature, and her work has been translated into several world languages. Her first independent collection of poetry was published in 2021, a bilingual English-Croatian edition, entitled Song of Silence. She lives and works in Zagreb, Croatia.

Many of her poems have been translated into several foreign languages and are represented in joint collections. Her poems have been published in magazines in around the world.

Poems

Malevolence

By: Kate MacDonald-Dunbar



Kate MacDonald-Dunbar

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

From the corner of my eye, I see a shape shimmer
ripple, and then leave
There one minute, gone in a trice, or is that what
I'm supposed to believe?
I've heard cold spots denote restless spirits, they
cannot move into the light
which explains the waves of malevolence I feel
a mixture of anger and spite

I am afraid to sleep in my bed because I know
if I open my eyes
I will see something hovering above me planning
my painful demise
Does this spirit hate all living things now—Pagans, vegetarians,
or just me?
Have my ancestors wronged him so that he's anchored
here until I set him free?

This dank miasma of other-worldly enmity is slowly
depleting and eroding my will
I need the help of a traveler in his world, who has
much more experience and skill
I call on Verona, a witch with other-worldly wisdom
to discover what he demands
she says he feeds on my horror, so I'm playing
right into his hands

The battle lines are drawn, I now know I can show no fear
I need to cut off his source of energy, make him disappear
I spend the day smiling, hugging my family and friends
suddenly the weight lifts, he's gone, his reign of terror ends

If there's a moral to this story, here is one thing I will say
take your pleasure where you can. Embrace it every day
All you can do is arm yourself with humor, fun, and glee
say no to the glum and tedious, you will then stay demon-free

VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Creative Youth Art Gallery

Sylvie the Meer-Cat

By: Bethany Law



Bethany Law

Bethany Law is a young illustrator from a little town in Southern Australia called Murray Bridge. She lives with her mum, dad, older brother, and older sister, four cats and a rabbit named Thumpy.

Bethany has loved to draw from her pre-school days, her favorite things to draw are friends and animals (mostly cats).

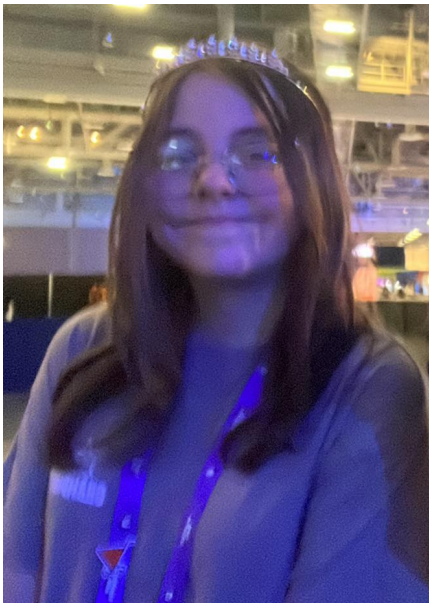
When she is not drawing or playing Minecraft with her friends, she enjoys being mummy to Patches the cat.



Creative Youth Art Gallery

At School

By: Zoie M. Montoya



Zoie M. Montoya

Zoie M. Montoya is an twelve-year-old who loves to tell stories, draw, stream and hang out with the people she loves.

Oh! And, looks forward to the day that she will become CEO of The JayZoMon Dark Myth Company!.



Art Gallery

Home Sweet Home

By: G. Lynn Brown



G. Lynn Brown

G. Lynn Brown is a published poet and prize-winning writer of flash fiction and short stories. Her work has been published in over fifteen different literary journals, including Spillwords Press, Alien Buddha Press, Prosetrics, Paragraph Planet and Fictionette. She is a contributing author at Friday Flash Fiction, where her Pushcart Prize nominated story, "Her Best Bud," was published (June '23). Along with writing, she is also a digital illustrator and editor of poetry and drabble.



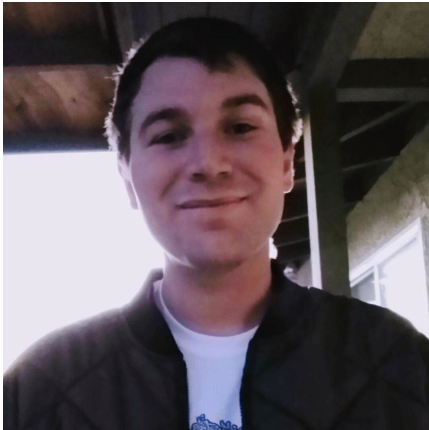
VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

HOME 90

Art Gallery

Pig God

By: Ryan Scherfenberg



Ryan Scherfenberg

My name is Ryan Scherfenberg. I am from Hesperia, Ca. I think the High Desert has a lot of potential for being a creative hub in Southern California. I try to capture a humorous grittiness with my art. My subject matter varies from piece to piece. You can really learn a lot from sketching things that interest you. A sketchbook can be so much more than something you doodle in. Animation and video game design are two things I am tinkering with. I can't wait to see where that goes. I am finally seeing my hard work pay off. Keep at it guys don't stop pushing! Some big inspirations of mine are R. Crumb, Gary Larson, and old school First Person Shooters.

Check out his [Instagram](#) Page



VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

Art Gallery

The Eye

By: Trevor Saunders



Trevor Saunders

Trevor Sanders is a freelance writer and graphic artist from southern Utah. He is currently working on a novel series of his own, a graphic novel which he writes and renders, and now and again he writes short fiction.



VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

HOME 92

Art Gallery

What the Future May Bring

By: MOK JR.



MOK JR.

The man known as MoK Junior is a retired artist from Carthage, Missouri. While there is no bloodline between him and the original MoK, he carries the name in honor of the man who once owned a used bookstore in Tulare, California. If you know, you know.



VOTE FOR THIS PIECE ★★★★★

HOME 93

MOVIE REVIEWS

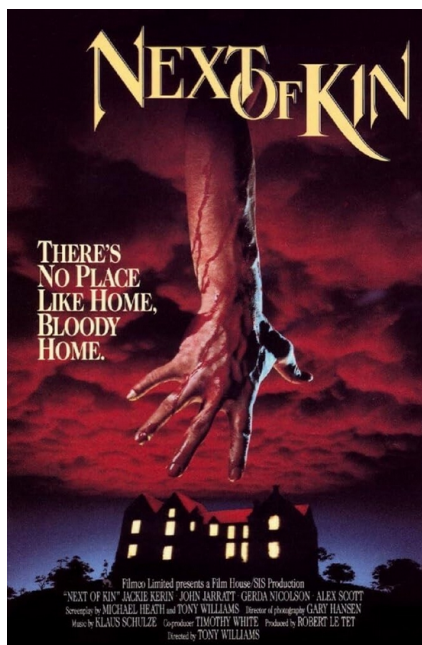
Review of Next of Kin

By: Sarcastically Cynical Sally



Sarcastically Cynical Sally

Sarcastically Cynical Sally spends time watching endless movies with her boyfriend Moviegoer Grim. She enjoys keeping a running commentary on how she would do it so much better but doesn't actually want to put in the effort. She has a mouth that could get her into trouble, a heart just as cynical, but every now and then you will see her shed a tear over a movie. Whether it's because it touched a place inside her, deep, deep, deep inside her,



Ever have a sneeze that you get this great build up, you feel it coming, you know it's gonna be a good one, and then.....nothing. No sneeze. That is what this movie felt like. It had the potential to be passable, and it kept bringing me closer and closer only to leave me disappointed and, well, feeling like I had been on a bad date. The piece of unfulfilled enjoyment is Next of Kin. No, not the 1989 one with

Patrick Swayze.

No, not the miniseries either. No, I was not that lucky. This is the write up from IMDB.

"In a rest home for elderly people, a daughter reads her mother's diary. Soon events that are mentioned in the mother's diary begin to happen to the daughter."

Rotten Tomatoes

"A young woman (Jackie Kerin) and her boyfriend (John Jarratt) witness strangeness in an Australian old-folks home."

Which, yes, I'll admit, sums up what happens. But the next two reviews are what get me. Made my eyes roll almost right outta my head!

"Although it doesn't quite deliver the full-blown terror the patient build-up promises, and the old folks in the house are used mainly for hit-and-miss comic effect, Next of Kin is a nifty little film with a consistently uneasy ambience and sturdy work by a cast including Jacki Kerin and a young John Jarratt of Wolf Creek (2005) fame. Technically and like that fumbling teen, it

or it really is that bad, no one will ever know.

polished and highly imaginative, Next of Kin was all but ignored in Australia yet won Best Director (ahead of Sam Raimi for Evil Dead, 1981) at the Sitges International Festival of Fantastic and Terror Films – one of the most prestigious awards in fantasy cinema”

“Next of Kin is a 1982 Australian psychological horror film co-written and directed by Tony Williams, and starring Jackie Kerin and John Jarratt. The film was featured in the documentary Not Quite Hollywood where it was praised by Quentin Tarantino.”

I’m not sure we were watching the same movie.

I had high hopes because it was an Australian film and I have had generally good experiences with films from that country. I do have a running commentary recorded so I could refer back to some of my more colorful comments and Moviegoer Grims responses to them and to the debacle we watched on the tv. So, I will say, if that is ever released, we did do a poor imitation of Crocodile Dundee, and his knife.

That being said, this movie had potential. It really did. It just didn’t follow through. Like a misguided teen trying to cope his first real feel. It’s all about execution and follow through,

failed to impress this chickie.

First, and here come the spoilers, if you can actually spoil something that was rotten from the start, they start you at the end of the movie, then jump back in time to the same place but before all the attempted horror. Linda, the main character, goes into the diner, and they attempt some mood building but all I could get was bad acting, disjointed events and some creepy dude giving me bad touch vibes at the pinball machine. I needed a shower and the movie was only 5 minutes in. Then she is off to Montclare. The old age home she was left when her mother died. Complete with old people. How nice. Now, seeing as this movie is set in an old age home, one would expect some interaction with the residents in some way.

Nope. They are nothing more than set dressing. Except for one, who seems to be a groundskeeper.

Then the mysterious new resident shows up with her creepy adult son. Okay, so now we are talking, things are gonna get good. I ready myself, grab my pillow, which is my defense against the blood and gore I am anticipating seeing. Shut up, it keeps me safe. It is raining, they have to carry the old woman to

her wheelchair, which all of a sudden doesn't want to move in the mucky grass (I need to mention that a perfectly good paved driveway was RIGHT BESIDE THEM) so she gets up and walks with her cane to the door.

And that is the last we see of these two until the end of the movie.

We see a dead guy in the bathtub, who they leave lying in his bed for days. I'm sure he started to smell at some point but no one seemed to notice.

There was a pesky cat that kept going to the dead man, for reasons that still escape me.

Unless it was to reiterate what Linda was reading in her mother's diary, which only actually happened maybe three times in the whole movie.

People end up dead that have nothing to do with the main story and just add to the confusion of the whole plot.

Which is what I am sure this review has done for you, but welcome to my miserable world. This movie sucked in more ways than I can describe here. I'm not that kind of girl. I did save the best review for last though.

"Next of Kin went unnoticed for a number of years in Australia, but fans kept its memory alive.

Quentin Tarantino, one of the film's most vocal admirers, called it wonderful and

compared it favorably to The Shining. High praise indeed, but also right on the mark."

Blink blink.

fish gapping mouth and stunned disbelief is actually written across my face at the moment.

Do what now?

I mean, okay, Tarantino is a bit out there, and not known for his...sanity or normalness, but come on! The Shining?? Really?? The acting was below subpar, there was very little blood, and it had no satisfying conclusion because you don't know what the hell is going on!

Oh! I forgot to mention the catatonic state Linda is in as she builds a totally unrelated sugar cube pyramid! The kid with her has to attempt to save them as the black van comes slamming through the front of the diner.

Which, again, makes little sense except that he is trying to kill her, which again, is never explained. The old lady isn't really an old lady, and it is never explained how she is so young, and why she wants Linda dead. Ugh.

I may have to watch something I know is good just to cleanse my abused pallet.

BOOK REVIEWS

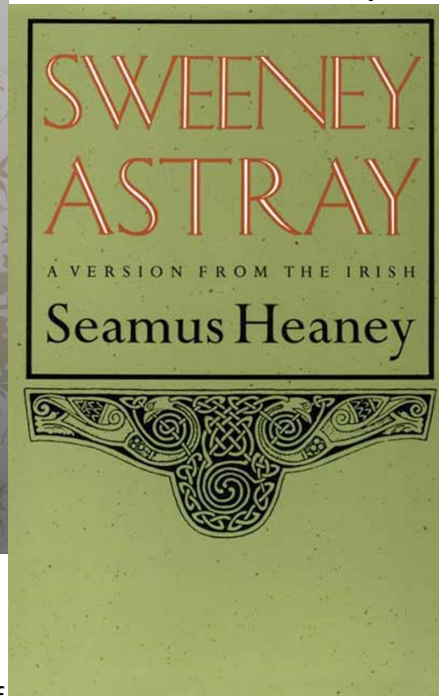
By: Michael A. Arnold



Michael A. Arnold

Michael A. Arnold is a graduate of the University of Sunderland and Northumbria University. He is based in North East England, and has previously published essays and short fiction. His influences include George Orwell and Robert Frost.

Sweeny Astray By Seamus Heaney



It is a shame that Irish mythology and its medieval literature is not better known. It is so rich, and full of magic and great stories - and are seemingly no rules. Sometimes things just happen without any logic or any real introduction. People can be turned into fish or birds, islands appear and disappear seemingly at random, and monsters can appear at any time. Books like

Sweeny Astray by Seamus Heaney show how strange and wild the mythology of ancient Ireland can be.

Like the Old English epic *Beowulf* from the earliest days of England (when the English had recently arrived on what is now the British Isles), this story of the mad king Sweeny represents a now long lost time and culture, and shows the diversity that culture had.

This story is also from a time when the Christian God and the ancient Pagan gods lived somewhat side by side, and there is a relationship between the two religions. Two worlds were colliding when this was written, and the meaning of the story is one of purgation (rather than redemption), but that Celtic mythological strangeness is what gets this story moving. Fantasy writers ought to take notes from this.

Mentioning *Beowulf* here is appropriate, Heaney translated both it (his *Beowulf* was published in 1999) and *Sweeny Astray* (published in 1983) is a rendering of the medieval poem 'Buile Shuibhne'. I'm reliably told means something like 'The Madness of Shuibhne', an old

Irish name that has become Anglicized as 'Sweeny'. The 'Buile Shuibhne' is in Irish Gaelic, and dates from roughly the twelfth century - but the story certainly started to form or be told much earlier than that. Often with medieval writings like this, they had been told and retold for hundreds of years before being written down – the names of both the story's original creator and the first person to write it down becoming lost, fading into the darkness of history. This is also what happened with *Beowulf*, and many other medieval writings too.

The original Irish text is not included in this version, but it is easily found online. Sadly, I cannot read Irish, and so cannot comment on the accuracy of Heaney's version. His other translations are quite loose so he can of bringing out something in them he likes, essentially making his own, new work that is just based on an original. This is certainly the case with his translation of *Beowulf*, which for academics has become known (sometimes dismissively) as the 'Heaneywulf' and is also true of his versions of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (Heaney's version is called *The Cure at Troy*, and Sophocles' *Antigoni* (which Heaney called *Burial at Thebes*). This is further suggested by Heaney's own introduction and the Notes and

Acknowledgements page in this book, where he admits he rendered the best and most poetical lines as poetry and had the rest as prose, and also that he left out entire stanzas of the original poem for various reasons – mostly to keep this English language version concise and to help keep the plot moving at a good pace.

So, this is not the whole of a medieval Irish epic, to be a scholarly translation for students and academics, this is a new version of an old poem for modern readers. There will be 'translation purists' who will want the whole thing in English and will find this editing and rendering in both prose and verse (instead of just one or the other) disappointing but it is also easy to see the logic behind these decisions, and the mixture of verse and prose does help to make the story feel somehow a bit more mythical. It also helps to separate the bits that just move the plot forward from the dialogue – where the themes of the story are talked about, and our characters get to say what is on their minds.

Sometimes the line between prose and verse is smooth and actually helps establish the 'heroic' mood that was clearly intended, and the conversation in verse makes you look harder at the words for possible alternative meanings or things being quietly

said or unsaid that might change the dynamics of the scene. This is where this prose/verse style really shines. However sometimes when there is a conversation it starts as prose ends in verse, and because there is no clear break between them it does seem like an admission of defeat in some way. It is as if Heaney was simply not able to capture enough of the original poem in verse as he wanted.

That might be the one big criticism you could make of this otherwise magnificent book.

Another criticism that can be made is that occasionally the language itself is too familiar.

Since this poem is in some ways a Christian text (as are most medieval poems that we still have), there would have been echoes and references to the bible interwoven into the original Irish text and it's not-quite-pagan landscape. Quotations from the bible can be found here, and they all seemingly taken from the King James Bible, but there is a fine line between reinforcing a biblical theme through language and writing cliches. Heaney is always on that line – which is not a comfortable place to try and stand on.

But even if there are cliches, they do help to reinforce the theme of the story and give it a kind of weight. But what is the story here? Sweeny, a brave if somewhat arrogant

warrior/king/poet bullies the Christian saint Ronan before going to fight at the Battle of Moria, where after a further insult (Sweeny throws a spear that shatters an ancient bell around the saint's neck) Ronan curses Sweeny to be like a bird until his death. This is all the justification the story needs to literally transform Sweeny into a bird-like monster, and he spends the rest of his life going from place to place, having experiences that teach him the values he previously lacked. This is described as 'madness' in the poem, but this is not the madness we might typically think of when we hear that word. Sweeny is quite lucid throughout this story – even meeting another 'mad' king, a Breton and in England, who is affected by the same curse as Sweeny and who rationally explains his fate before going to fulfill it after a period (like Sweeny has) of having both enjoyed and suffered his curse. Because Sweeny's 'madness' is not incoherent, it leaves us a lot of room to interpret exactly what it means by calling the protagonist 'mad'. Instead of being insanity like you might expect, does 'mad' here mean anger? He was cursed because of his wrath after all. There is another dimension to this too: location. The Battle of Moria is thought to have occurred in Northern Ireland, and Heaney

himself was born in Northern Ireland – not becoming a citizen of the Irish Republic until he was an adult. The Troubles is a constant shadow that looms throughout most of his work, especially the period in which he translated this poem. There are a number of interpretations and implications that could be made about this, and we do not necessarily need to consider them here, but behind the sometimes staggering beauty of the writing, and the heroism of the story, politics is always in the next room.

But the writing here, which is typical of Heaney, is often good, sometimes exceptional. One passage that deserves highlighting is the following, a lament where Sweeny complains about the lack of creature comforts during his wondering around Ireland:

Without bed or board
I face dark days
in frozen lairs
and wind-driven snow
Ice scoured by winds.
Watery shadows from weak sun.
Shelter from the one tree
on a plateau.
Haunting deerpaths,
enduring rain,
first-footing the grey
frosted grass.

This writing is magnificent, and really does a lot to both allow you into the world of ancient Ireland where this poem takes place, and it also lets you feel the pain Sweeny is going through. The descriptions are stark, with long e and a sounds that when read aloud make you slow down and feel the intensity of the language. Sweeny's story is tragic, and it is full of moments of humanity confused by fear and distrust, but it is also one (atypical for Heaney) of hope for a world beyond our life. We can compare this with his mini-epic *Station Island*, which came out the following year, where Heaney is writing as himself – there he is much more noticeably agnostic and unsettled. Obviously this is because here Heaney is a translator of another's work. Instead of writing something as himself, but you can also tell from both his introduction to this book and many of his other writings that Sweeny and his story was never far from Heaney's thoughts. Whatever this story meant to Heaney, we might find something in it that we too can relate to too. We are all going to die, and perhaps this story can help us come to a kind of peace with that fact, like Sweeny does during his adventures in the wild as an outcast from his home and paradise.

ART REVIEWS

By: Michael A. Arnold

Venice – art brought to life



Michael A. Arnold

Michael A. Arnold is a graduate of the University of Sunderland and Northumbria University. He is based in North East England, and has previously published essays and short fiction. His influences include George Orwell and Robert Frost.

A lot of art is made in contrasts, that can take into another world. When we first got to Venice, we were passing factories, some windows were smashed or broken through. Train lines were crossing in almost every direction, and there was a stark modernity to everything. Where were the Gondolas? The Venice we were imagining? We all have those images and expectations, which have been put there by the media or cultural osmosis, of what places just must be like and this was not it. This was, we were told, the part of the city on the mainland, the industrial part. Like other modern cities this was the outskirts. The famous city of our imaginations was still ahead. Soon we were on a bridge, moving fast across a seemingly endless sea. Images of the Studio Ghibli film *Spirited Away* kept coming to mind as we left the mainland behind. Then something was coming up from

the waters. Something strange. It looked like a blurry mound emerging from the calm Adriatic Sea. As the blur became clearer you could see it was not just an island. There were church towers and streets coming into focus, and the colour of individual houses become more distinct and take shape out of the misty horizon's blue. Dickens was right: Venice feels like a dream. The city started to take shape, and we got close enough to see windows and balconies in the far distance, but then we were moving right, and the image and mood disappeared behind more large industrial blocks of steel and concrete. Our bus journey ended on a harbour full of cranes and large, sea-worthy boats. Here you walk through a small bazaar full of people trying to sell bottles of water or hats saying, 'I love Venice,' and you are lucky if you aren't immediately stopped and pressured into buying something. 'Aqua! Acqua! Una acqua?' 'No, grazie.'

Soon we on a boat sailing into wide-looking waters. Everything was blue, azure, or lighter because of the horizon misting in the heat. The city came to us, and the houses suddenly appeared on both sides as we sailed on a great river between two islands of homes. You could even see people sunning themselves on their balconies or hanging out towels, and the sound of bells were ringing and echoing across the waters. That surreal, dreamlike feeling was back – it was like the start of BioShock when you are seeing the game world for the first time, and hints of all the places you will visit along the way.

Then the huge columns of St. Mark's Square were emerging from a line of buildings and the sea opened up again. Our boat was clinging to one side, and we drifted toward buildings and things I recognised from books or films: the Doge's Palace, the Bridge of Sighs, a small canal leading a way into the city between two long rows of houses. It had sunk in by then: we really were in Venice.

St. Mark's Square, the political and cultural centre of Venice, is strange to remember. It is as if the whole place was deserted in my memory, but I know it was actually so full of people that it could be difficult to breathe. Our tour guide had said that even the most outgoing person would be sick of people by the end of the day, and she was right, who knows how many bodies moving around, all being baked in an oppressive, windless heat. The columns of San Marco and San Todaro that look out to distant islands, themselves covered in buildings, marked the start of a long walk to St. Mark's Basilica (crowned with gold and marble statues of gargoyles, dragons and heroes) and a huge square or piazza just off to the side that the city's main museum, the Museo Correr, wraps itself around. We didn't have the time to go inside, we only had a few hours, and the city by itself was enough.

We were directed into what looked like a narrow alleyway between two shops bedecked with gold. Then it felt like if you were transported into some kind of medieval fantasy world where narrow streets were clogged with people wondering around shops, bars, and barbers of all kinds as the old stone buildings reached high into the sky, blocking out a lot of the sunlight.

The shadows retreated, we were on a wider street where the sun could shine, then after dodging a stream of people we were back again into the close darkness of that narrow-alley fantasy world with posters hanging on just about every inch of wall, advertising local concerts or businesses, or the Vivaldi opera that would be playing soon. Still people were wondering in every direction. We must have walked for a quarter of a mile.

Then we came to a canal. A gondola, painted entirely in black and gold, was lazily pushing its way through the street. A tall footbridge arched high, and the gondola pushed on into its tunnel. I went up to see the gondola coming out the other side, and it slowly emerged into the hot sun the people onboard, who had the air of wealth about them, looked unphased by everyone taking photos. Whoever they were, this had happened to them before.

A few steps on and we were back into another crowded alleyway where men smoked in the doorways of bars, filling the air with a narcotic haze. You passed by life encapsulated in those narrow streets – shaded from the hot sun by the tall buildings all around, everyone was wandering the shops, talking, and arguing, sitting in doorways eating, and giving no attention to anything around them. Then the sun was touching your skin again and it was quiet, and you found yourself on another bridge – another gondola, this time crewed by a tall man singing in a white and black striped shirt, as if he would have done it even if there was no one around to hear him. Then again you were back into the shadowy people-laden streets, covered in shop windows or

posters of some show or another forget. means something. What it means as everyone walked everywhere. Art is found in many places in this is a mystery, which is tangible – Eventually we came to The Grand wide and diverse world, and you can feel it even if you cannot Canal, famous from so many films sometimes (like Venice) a place explain it, like any really great – the one that came to my mind can be art itself. It is both real and work of art. was *Indiana Jones and the Last* you can touch it, but still Too soon, we were back in the *Crusade*. We were being directed something that feels like could real world. toward the Rialto Bridge. only have come from the

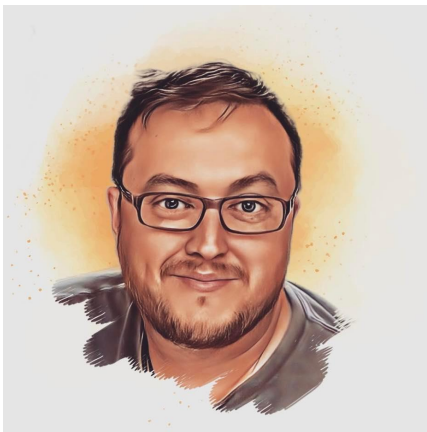
Everyone who visits Venice is told imagination. It is difficult to know about it, in many ways the symbol quite how to describe the mix of of Venice itself. Type ‘Venice’ into emotions, images, and sensations Google Images and most of the that you can feel by simply first photos are either taken of it walking Venice’s streets, but is or from it – looking out on the that not true of every other city Grand Canal. It is a huge, almost on earth? pearly white, an ornate marvel In a way, all cities are like that that was finished almost five when you think about it: they are hundred years ago in 1591, and it made by many hands and many was difficult to decide which view artists over hundreds or was better, from the canal looking thousands of years. They are the at it, or looking from it at the rest result of a long series of of the city. The hundreds of little collaborations, and not just by the stalls and gold shops dotted all people who designed and built the way across it reminded me of them. People who describe, and the Ponte Vecchio in Florence, create impressions of places also but while that was finer, the help make those places art. Not Realto Bridge was grander - you all places are, or need to be, as really felt the power the city had grand as Venice – the impressions had in the old days when standing of which will stick with you there. forever. But it stays because it is

But there was the never-ending so like the Venice you have in swarm of people all around. Try your head before you even arrive, hard enough and you can get to and that Venice has been crafted. the apex of the bridge. From the Not many will imagine the bridge’s sides a thousand industrial, mainland part of the buildings spread out in the vista city, they will imagine the before you as the waters of the beautiful, almost unreal part, grand canal rest peacefully below. built on so many islands. That Boats were drifting in every normal part was like the world we direction in the always warm sun, leave behind to get there. As and that will be one of those happens every time we go moments you will never quite anywhere new, that contrast

COMMENTARY FROM THE FOUNDER

More from my Soapbox!

By: David K. Montoya



David K. Montoya

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

Hey Boys and Girls, and welcome to 2024. I know that many were not thrilled with the previous year, but just like with tomorrow, and new day brings a new beginning. I have been reflecting over the past six years since I decided to return to the interwebs as an Entrepreneur and Entertainer, and how the relaunch of The World of Myth Magazine was the first step in building an imaginary world that would rival *Willy Wonka's*. In the time now passed, we have seen the one-hundredth issue of the magazine, the relaunch of our publishing arm known as Dark Myth Publications. The return of our podcasting network, with great shows like The World of Myth Bits, My Public Life as a Nerd, and Lupa's Bits. The birth of our annual

publishing contest, of course, I'm referring to the Open Contract Challenge, and the five grand prize winners it has spawned. The impossible came true with two live events at JayZoMon's Pop Culture Expo! This year marks the sixth year, it's been an amazing run. I know that sounded *waaaay* more cryptic than I had meant it to be. Don't worry we are not going anywhere in 2024, while I admit that we have felt the economic burden of inflation and recession as a company I promise we are doing the best possible to keep our prices down. So, one has to wonder what we have in store for 2024—see what I did there? We have been working on producing the most books this year than we have ever! In 2018, we published two books and in 2019 it was only one. But 2020

boomed in production with seven books and in 2021 we topped out at eight, and eight again in 2022. Last year we really pushed forward and broke the eights with a total of twelve! In 2024, we have a total of thirteen-lined up and three anthologies that will have open submissions. One of the books that is coming out this December will be The World of Myth Anthology: Volume 5 as a part of the celebration for the magazine's **TWENTIETH** Anniversary! More to come as we move closer to the time frame.

This we will *finally* see the release of our comic book series **American Smash!** I have personally been working on this project since 2021. It will all begin with FREE COMIC BOOK DAY, May 4th, 2024! We are GIVE AWAY copies of the one shot! It is to introduce everyone to the amazing characters of the series which launches July 2nd! The sixth year of the Open Contract Challenge starts in the final weeks of March, this time around I have made reach around forty days in hopes to give our contestants more time to craft their very best product possible.

For a small entertainment company, we are doing the absolute best we can in bringing you multiple mediums of

entertainment. Our company motto is "an independent company, with big business quality," and I truly hope that we meet and continue to meet everyone's expectations.

But I am calling **ALL** of you to arms. We absolutely love doing what we do, but please this is a business. If people do not support us (the company, not the creator), I honestly don't know how much more we can keep going.

While we have had amazing sales here and there, the business runs on my dime. I am nothing special and because of the economic decline, it is really being felt. I'm not going to go through the thousands and thousands of dollars I spend to keep everything running, but I am personally asking you to help us. Pick up a subscription to Book of the Month Club over at Myth Mart or buy a book or two, check out the shirts and lithographs. Every little bit helps. I apologize for the sudden shift in this month's commentary, and my pride is a bit hurt for asking for help, but that is where we are at. I need your help!

Okay, folks, I guess I'm finished with this issue. You can always drop me a link and give me your thoughts, I haven't received a "YOU SUX" email in a long time. Until next time!

With love and respect to you all!



David K. Montoya

Founder of The World of Myth Magazine And Other Stuff Too.



DARK MYTH PUBLICATIONS

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