

BWVH 2023

BLACK WOMEN IN HORROR

Featuring

Paula Ashe
Kai Leakes
Kenesha Williams
Candace Nola
Nicole Givens-Kurtz
Miracle Austin
Mo Moshaty
W.C. Dunlap
P.M. Raymond
K.T. Seto
R.J. Joseph
Linda Addison
Tamika Thompson
Zin Rocklyn
Michelle Renee Lane
Kenya Moss-Dyme
Sumiko Saulson
L. Marie Wood
Chanel Harry
Wi-Moto Nyoka
Tracy Cross
C.Y. Marshall
Penelope Flynn
Carolyn Saulson
Natasha Morningstarr

Special Tributes

Valjeanne Jeffers
L.A. Banks
Carolyn Saulson

Where Afrofuturism and Horror Meet

Nisi Shawl

Chop it up with Crystal Connor

NIGHTLIGHT Horror Podcast

Tonia Ransom



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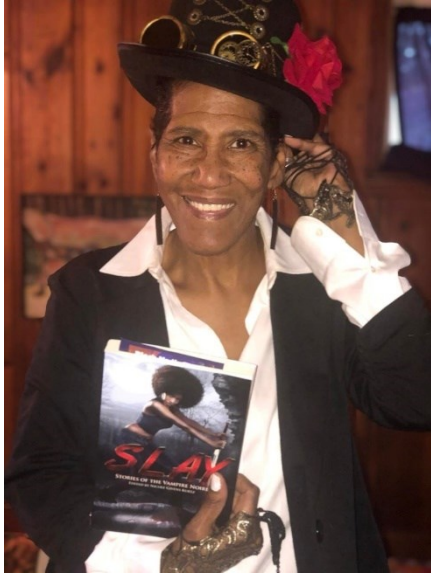
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AT THE HEART OF HORROR: VALJEANNE JEFFERS, REMEMBERED

By Sumiko Saulson



Around this time last year, I was interviewing authors for the Horror Writers Association’s Black Heritage Month blog series when I received the heartrending news that Valjeanne was coming toward the end of her life. She let me know that she was very ill, and asked if I could interview her over the phone, rather than via email, because of her illness. I said yes, of course, and proceeded to type up her answers as she dictated them to me over the phone. Valjeanne told me at the time that she didn’t think she’d be around very much longer. I asked her if there was anything I could do, and she spoke in glowing terms of her longtime boyfriend Quentin Veal checking on her regularly.

Just six months later, she was gone, taking her remarkable light from the world and leaving so many of us grieving.

Nonetheless, her legacy lives, not just in her body of work but in the way she impacted virtually everyone with whom she came into contact.

Valjeanne was an exceedingly kind and warmhearted woman, known to many of her friends and loved ones as Sister Moon, which was her email and social media tag. Thaddeus Howze spoke of this in his memorial piece honoring her, “A name to conjure by: Sister Moon, Valjeanne Jeffers,” which ran in the San Francisco BayView

Like Thaddeus, I never had the honor nor pleasure of meeting Valjeanne in person, though we were on many of the same virtual convention panels (particularly during the extended stay-at-home period at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic), and we had also spoken over the phone several times.

Valjeanne was one of the writers I profiled on my original list of 60 Black Women in Horror, which I put together back in 2013. Although I didn’t know her at the time, I met her the following year and interviewed her for my blog.

The first time I spoke to her on the phone, I remember her patiently explaining how to pronounce her name, Valjeanne. She was named after Jean Valjean from the Victor Hugo novel “Les



Miserables” and her name was pronounced the same way, the “Jeanne” is pronounced more like “Joan” than “Jean”—most accurately, like something halfway between “Joan” and “John”, just like Jean-Luc Picard on Star Trek. Her mom was a huge fan of the play.

If you haven’t read any of her work, I encourage you to start here: Valjeanne’s stories have appeared in many anthologies – Steamfunk (2013); Griots: Sisters of the Spear (2013); Sycorax’s Daughters (2017); The City: A Cyberfunk Anthology (2015); Blacktastic: Blacktastic Con 2018 Anthology (2018); Dark Universe: The Bright Empire (2018); Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler (2017); Blerdrotica I: Sweet, Sexy, and Special Dark (2020); Fitting In: Historical Accounts of Paranormal Subcultures (2016); and The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South (2007), among others.

Valjeanne, in addition to being extremely talented and prolific, was the salt of the Earth. She was a warm, kind person who was extremely well-loved by everyone who knew her. I had the pleasure of sharing a number of tables of contents with her, including the anthologies Scierogenous II: An Anthology of Erotic Science Fiction and Fantasy (2018), Black Magic Women: Terrifying Tales by Scary Sisters (2018), Slay: Tales of the Vampire Noire (Mocha Memoirs Press (2020), Horror Addicts Guide to Life 2 (2022).

She had two series under her belt, The Immortal Series (2009, 2010, 2010, & 2021; about star-crossed shapeshifters), and Mona Livelong: Paranormal Detective (2014, 2016, & 2021). She also wrote The Switch: Clockwork (2013; a steamfunk crossover with the “Immortal Universe,”) Colony: The Ascension (2020; a space opera) and Southern Comfort (2016). She was a luminary in the steamfunk subgenre, as detailed in my San Francisco BayView remembrance of her, “The Queen of Steamfunk.”

You can find many writings by Valjeanne, along with interviews and podcasts of her, by searching her name on HorrorAddicts.net. Her short story “The Lost Ones” can be heard on the Nightlight Podcast.

I shared a table of contents with her for what is likely the last release of her new original work, Blerdrotica II: Couple’s Therapy, which was released in December 2022, half a year after she joined the ancestors. I still recall speaking on Facebook with Valjeanne, Quinton, and another friend James Goodridge



about how excited we all were to have been accepted into it. The fact the anthology came out after her death has given me many moments to reflect anew on her loss.

In my heart, I keep forgetting that she isn't going to be at the book release event or conventions, that I couldn't ask her for an updated bio for Black Women in Horror Month, that despite the many online panels we were on together I would now never be meeting her in person. Valjeanne was one of those people who always showed up, who could be relied on, whose presence brightened the spaces in which she participated, and the presence of her absence still breaks my heart.



REMEMBER HER NAME: L.A. BANKS IS BLACK LIT HISTORY

By Kai Leakes

Black History Month is here. Every year my mind stays on how to honor our Black literature icons, especially our Black Women of Horror. Well, thankfully this month is Black Women in Horror Month, and as a proud contributor of the genre, I am shouting to the rafters as always to remember and celebrate all things L.A. Banks.

L. A. Banks was named a 2010 Living Legend by the Black Alumni Society of the University of Pennsylvania and was the recipient of the 2009 Romantic Times Booklover's Career Choice Award for Paranormal Fiction. She was also named one of Pennsylvania's Top 50 Women in Business for 2008 and won the 2008 Essence Storyteller of the Year award. Ms. Banks has written over 42 novels and contributed to 23 novellas. She mysteriously shape-shifts between the genres of romance, women's fiction, crime/suspense thrillers, and paranormal lore. She was a proud member of The Liars Club, a Board of Trustee member for the Philadelphia Free Library, and served on the Mayor's Commission on Literacy. Banks was a graduate of The University of Pennsylvania Wharton undergraduate program with a Master's in Fine Arts from Temple University. She was a full-time writer who lived and worked in Philadelphia.



of

Leslie Esdaile Banks passed away at the age of 51 in August 2011 to cancer, at the height of her career, and shortly after giving a speech at the White House on the problems of healthcare for entrepreneurs. - [In Remembrance of L.A. Banks, 1959-2011 | Tor.com](#)

LA Banks is the Memorial Guest of Honor at [Readercon 32](#) this year July 13 – 16, 2023 at the Boston Quincy Marriott in Quincy, Massachusetts.

Mama Banks, as us OG followers of her works (aka Street Team) lovingly called her, feels to me as if she has been relegated to an echo in the mainstream literary world, when truly she was a griot who inspired many and has been/still is imitated by many. So, I write this in hopes to inspire readers old and new to shout her name. I hope you all make all of the Book Toks and Instaposts in honor of her and her book series and add her to your lists of books to read. Too many have eaten off her influence and not uttered her name. Meanwhile, we as fans all sit and wait in hopes that her IP stops lingering in limbo. We hope that her works will be placed in trustworthy hands by her estate, so her books are produced in a quality, well-funded, respectfully

adapted series, and in movies by Black folk and a diverse collective who know her voice and spirit.

It's beyond time that we Black and NB-POC folks get to see ourselves represented in a genre that Hollywood often erases us from or relegates us to tokenism in. We deserve to be given a quality big budgeted production of vamps, werewolves, and more. We deserve to see ourselves desired, pined for, lusted after, and having all the delicious supernatural sex. We deserve to see mofos get their asses handed to them in abundance. More Blade (which we are getting) and next the works of L.A. Banks.

Outside of that, we deserve to see our communities represented in protecting each other, our kids, and teens, and connecting with each other in healthy and even challenging ways.

At the end of the day, we deserve more Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous vamps, werewolves, witches, hunters, and more, all represented in their spectrum of love, desire, and care. L.A. Banks gave us that. Mama Banks showed us that. She also spoke truth to the world and predicted a lot of things that we see going on today. She should be mentioned right there with Octavia Butler and others as an influencer, with her name on a shirt as well.

L.A. Banks deserves to have her stories told by a network and production company that would support her work and pay well for her stories. It's time to make it so. Please remember L.A. Banks and all of her books, speculative (horror, thriller, urban fantasy, para romance) and romance; she is Black Literature History. You can still buy her works at all major book outlets.

To read a more extensive tribute to Mama Banks for Black History Month you can read my first tribute to her at [Horror Addicts](#).



MY MOTHER LIVED THROUGH NIGHTMARES

TRIBUTE TO CAROLYN SAULSON

By Sumiko Saulson



Carolyn, Sumiko and Eleanor

The first poet I ever loved was my mother, Carolyn Saulson. When I was a little one still in pigtails back in the Seventies, she had already been published as a poet, whose poem about the darker sides of love graced a velvet poster sold in record stores and headshops. On the dayglo poster was the silhouette of a Black woman in profile, long-necked, regal, and powerful. A queen whose head was crowned with a gorgeous round Afro that glowed at its edges. For many years I was convinced that the woman was an illustration of my mother, brilliant and proud, even though Mom wore a Beatle wig and not an Afro.

She was born in 1948 and lived through racism I could not

imagine. The eldest of six children, she lost her oldest brother when he was denied dialysis and died when he was only fourteen due to medical racism and ableism (he was developmentally delayed). When she was twelve, her father came home from the Korean War traumatized not only from the war itself but from having been assaulted by some racist members of the troop he served with. Mom told me how her mother Eleanor was forced to work as a maid for racist people in the same era as The Help who did not want Black folks using their toilets and insisted that she and her sisters wear masks and gloves if they came in the house. According to Mom, despite the fact that California had no segregation laws regarding bathrooms, white people would chase her and her sisters out if they tried to use the bathrooms at Venice Beach.

Mom also told me about how a racist nurse at the hospital tried to refuse to give me to her, because she'd named me Sumiko and because I was born with straight, black hair. She tried to give me to a Chinese couple down the hall. Sumiko is a Japanese, not Chinese, name. The nurse asked if my mom was sure I was her child and my mom cussed at the woman, explaining that she just saw me come out of her vagina. She told me a story about how she was stopped by law enforcement when she was nine months pregnant with me and charged with prostitution for being in the car with a white man—my father, Robert Allen Saulson, to whom she happened to be married. Although she was able to get out of it in court,

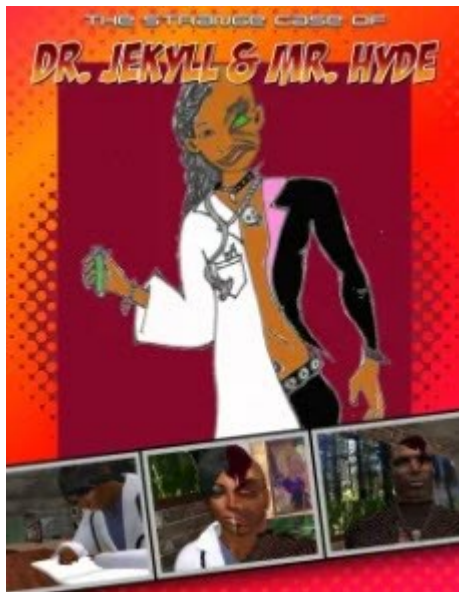


*Eleanor holding baby
Carolyn*

the law officers' behavior was indicative of attitudes at the time. Loving vs. Virginia passed three months after my parents married and around the time I was conceived. I was born in 1968, and even though Rodney King and the 1991 riots were still decades away, the Watts Riots had been just three years earlier. The LAPD already had a reputation for being corrupt. My parents, being an openly interracial couple, were dangerously challenging the status quo. Shit rolls downhill, and my mother, being a dark-skinned black woman, had to deal with the brunt of the abuse from these kinds of authority figures.

**“A woman? And an attractive woman, at that. I had no idea, sorry Dr. Jekyll, pleased to meet you.”
- Cecil Carrello, from *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, by Carolyn & Sumiko Saulson.**

One of my mother's major work (which I co-wrote) was, *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; the major themes are familiar. They concern the difficulty of keeping one's distance from a served population of clientele while serving them, and how people who have themselves been impacted by things like drug addiction and mental health issues are then told by those who already think ill of the impoverished that they are too sullied to serve those communities unless they are extremely pure and upstanding.



When I read my mother's writing in *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, a play we wrote together while taking playwriting courses from Mary Webb at Berkeley City College between 2016 and 2018, I wonder how many of its themes related to her own moral quandaries and struggles in life. Like myself, my mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder with psychotic features. Her father, my grandfather Leon, was diagnosed with schizophrenia after he returned home from the Korean War. The oldest of twelve children, Mom was tasked with helping her mother raise her siblings while her father's mental health declined.

Mom turned twenty just a month before I was born, and had divorced my father by the time I was seven. She was always a very creative person and had hopes and dreams that my brother Scott (a year younger than myself) would be creative as well. I still remember her taking us out to cattle calls (open auditions for plays and movies where you show up unrehearsed, receiving the script for the first time once you arrive) for acting as children. I remember going to one for a made-for-television movie about Annette Funicello. We sat in a room full of other aspiring actors and their parents for hours. I tested and was sent to another section where they were taking photos of actors depicting previous casts to stick on the wall to see if I could portray an African American cast member in a still. I remember my brother and I were in a printed pizza advertisement once. It was frozen pizza and tasted like cardboard, but we had to pretend it was delicious. My mother rewarded us with a shopping spree. I got watercolor paints.

“Amelia’s grandmother, Sally Fae was a very intelligent woman surrounded by others who were not that bright, but what could she do? She had been born at the wrong time for a Black woman.” – from “Amelia’s Tale” an excerpt from Living a Lie by Carolyn Saulson

After I became a young adult, my mother told my brother and I many times that her youthful goals and dreams in life had been stolen from her when she met and married my father. Dad went to college with her and developed a crush. One day, her car stalled, and he offered her a ride home. On the way back, he stopped at his mother’s house and, much to my mother’s surprise, introduced her as the woman he was going to marry. My father was twenty-four and my mother only nineteen when they married. She said she wanted to wait to have children, but much to her surprise she got pregnant with me very quickly after they married. Many years later, my aunt Vivienne disclosed to me that my father took a hatpin and pricked holes in my mother’s diaphragm to get her pregnant immediately despite her wishes.



Carolyn pregnant with Scott Saulson

If I wondered whether or not *The Strange Case of Dr. Henriette Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was based on my mother’s life, with “Living a Lie,” there was no question. Although the central protagonist, Randolph James, was a white-passing grifter with telekinetic powers hiding the fact that he was a quarter black, his mother Amelia was a full-fledged tragic mulatto tale. My mother was not biracial and I am, but it was very obvious that she was mixing various aspects of my life, hers, my nieces’ and my brother’s, to come up with this character. In the story, Randolph is taken away from Amelia as a toddler. In my mother’s life, she lost custody of my brother and I when we were 11 and 12 after she got involved with my father’s drug trafficking. She went to jail. My father didn’t, so my brother and I went to live with him.

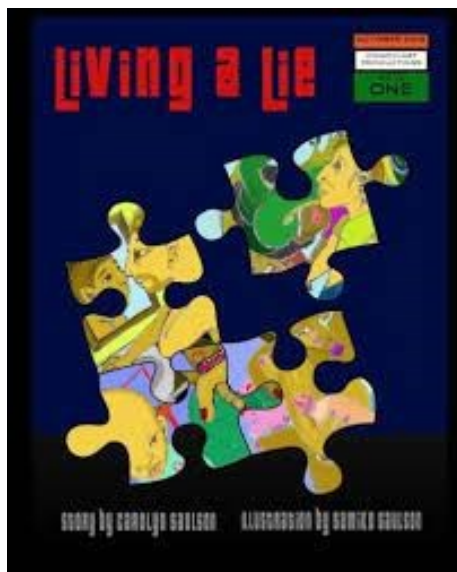
“Why had he allowed himself to be seduced into this emotion that threatened to unravel his whole world? Love. If that’s what one should call it.” – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James” an excerpt from Living a Lie by Carolyn Saulson

Just months before my twelfth birthday, my mother was separated from us. My grandmother Eleanora had been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and she and my mother had been quite close. My mother was bipolar with psychotic features, as I am, and my grandmothers Eleanor and Ruth thought, unwisely, that reintroducing my mother to my father would be a great idea. They thought my father would support her emotionally, and she’d be more stable. They were unaware that my father was not only a heroin addict, but a drug dealer. Mom was unaware, and Dad said they were going on a “second honeymoon” to Thailand. Once we got there, it turned out my dad was dope sick. He roped my mother into smuggling dope with him. She was manic and thought she could get enough money that way for her mother to get surgery, saving her life. My dad

ripped her off, so she made a second trip with a drug buddy of his, wherein they both got arrested. My mom was in jail in Thailand for 7 years, and by the time I saw her again, I was just shy of eighteen.

After she came back from Thailand, my mother took a correspondence course where she was tutored by Billy Hayes, who wrote the autobiographical *Midnight Express* about his imprisonment at Sağmalcılar prison in Istanbul. My mother had been imprisoned in Bangkok and Changmai in Thailand. She'd been given a life sentence, but sent a letter to the King of Thailand to ask for a pardon and received it. Later, she corresponded with Hayes about writing the life story of Ivy Nicholson, the mother of her boyfriend at the time, Gunther Ethan Palmer (whom she dated for seventeen years, from 1988 to 2005). Ultimately, neither of those projects was completed, and my mother and Ivy fought with each other so much that on a trip to see an agent in Los Angeles, they were told their bickering was hilarious and they should start a comedy routine. but my mother started both a band and a public access television show called *Stagefright* with Gunther, my brother Scott, and myself in 1993.

“Long ago, he had decided that love was a delusional state necessitated by the overwhelming reality that death was the only outcome to existence. The joke was death. No measures could be taken to prepare for it; after all, who could predict the accident, or murder, even. Too much randomness to process.” – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James,” an excerpt from *Living a Lie* by Carolyn Saulson



I was eighteen when I got in a band called Poetic Justice. This inspired my mother to follow her own musical dreams. She worked on a number of musical projects with Gunther Palmer and Ivy Nicholson before, and eventually, she and I started working on projects together. By the time I was in my twenties, we were in a family band with my brother called Stagefright. A few years later, in 1996, we started the African American Multimedia Conference, and a year after that, in 1997, the Iconoclast Black Film Festival.

The 1990s were a fury of creative frenzy for my family that went on strong until August 2009, when my mother got sick with multiple myeloma cancer. Just before she got sick, we put on a successful on-campus Juneteenth

Festival at City College of San Francisco that featured acts such as Rappin 4-Tay, Hugh EMC, Sick YG, Fly Mar and She-Go, as well as the school's gospel choir and Blues legend Bobbie “Spider” Webb. Stagefright also performed there. Although we played a few shows after she got cancer (including a show at the Whiskey A Go Go in 2015, our second performance at the venue we first visited fourteen years prior in 2001), my mom's cancer marked the end of our band's

heyday. The public access television show continued until 2018, although it moved from San Francisco to Vallejo and Berkeley, where my mother and brother lived, respectively.

“So, in the back of everyone’s mind, he imagined, was the fact that any moment on any day could be their last. How could a self-aware being stay sane? He imagined this all-encompassing simple solution to dark thoughts was the distraction of love and romance—to keep these thoughts at bay, and to continue the human race through families and procreation. – from “The Secret Life of Randolph James” an excerpt from *Living a Lie* by Carolyn Saulson

In addition to the band, we spent a lot of time at open mic poetry readings between 1993 and 2009. This had a profound impact on my brother’s oldest daughter Franchesca. My niece also became a poet (find her on Instagram at [TheFriscoPoet](#)) and says she can remember going to open mics with us at Brainwash Cafe when she was only ten years old. She won the 2022 Serena Toxicat Memorial Grant for her unreleased book of poetry with the working title of *Hard Times, Dope Rhymes*.



Carolyn Saulson, Davey D. and Sumiko Saulson on the TV show “Renaissance”, discussing the African American Multimedia Conference

When I was in my 40s and began pursuing my career as an author in 2011, my mom started taking writing classes with me at Berkeley City College. We also started attending conventions, festivals, fairs, and book reading and speaking engagements with my friend Serena Toxicat and groups such as the Ladies of Literature. My mom joined us, reading from her work-in-progress “Living A Lie.” By the time she died in January 2019, the work had become a novella; she also hired me to illustrate the first in what was to be a serial publication of the story “Living a Lie.”

“Giorgiana! I very much recall the sour expression on your face and snide tone in your voice when you refused to accompany me to what you called a ‘frivolous social pandering party’ this morning. Whatever are you doing here?” - Cecil Carrello, from *The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll*, by Carolyn & Sumiko Saulson

The last project my mother and I worked on together was a play called “[The Strange Case of Henriette Jekyll](#),” which we put together in a screenwriting class at Berkeley City College between 2016 and 2018. I remember putting on the play, which features a multiracial and very queer cast, in the classroom. In the story, Dr. Jekyll, a woman, changes gender when she ingests the potion and becomes Mr. Hyde. The scenes with Dr. Jekyll and her love interest Cecil Carrello take place in a clean, sterile, dot-com-economy San Francisco. There, Mr. Carrello’s older sister Giorgiana, keeper of his parent’s estate, tries to prove that the civic-minded Henriette

and Cecil are naive, being swindled by the poor. To prove it, Giorgia lures Henriette into a world of BDSM and queer nightlife with colorful characters like a drag queen named Peppermint Schnapps and a leather daddy barman named Steely Dan.



Once she arrives there, Henriette becomes a man, and starts dating an exotic dancer named Andre. Writing these scenes with my mother as a still closeted nonbinary person, I often wondered if my mother knew some things about me that I didn't know about myself. Or maybe there were things I didn't know about her. However you view it, we learned a great deal about one another working on the play together.

In August of 2018 my mother became ill and went into the hospital, where she would remain for most of her remaining life on life support until her death on January 15, 2019. She was too sick to write, and we spent time watching television together, although for most of those months she was unable to speak. During the waning months of her life, I applied for

a grant from the Ara Jo Fund, to put together a zine (a homemade magazine) called Carolyn Saulson: Tale of an Iconoclast which honored her and her life's work and included images, writing, and remembrances of her as a community activist and an artist. It came out on November 20, 2018, just two months before she died.

As [Kenya Moss-Dyme](#) said upon reading this, "I like the idea of talking about "nightmares" because so many of us claim we don't do horror but we literally LIVE horror. This is a great example." For both my mother and I, writing around the darker corners of speculative fiction was something we did to process our trauma.

My mother was an incredibly creative person, and one of tremendous imagination. She was a bright and shining star, so much so that while she lived, I felt often in her shadow, and when she died, I reeled, trying to see who I was without her.





Paula Ashe

Paula D. Ashe (she/her) is an author of dark fiction. Her debut collection — *We Are Here to Hurt Each Other* — was released in early '22 by Nictitating Books. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association and an Associate Editor for *Vastarien: A Literary Journal*. She lives in the Midwest (which is best) with her family.



THE LADIES ROOM

A sheltered suburbanite finds her life upended by a parasitic presence hellbent on revenge.



"So why *do* chicks always go to the bathroom in pairs?" a young man asks.

The class laughs. Especially the men. A few of the women. Our professor — a gracefully aging hipster who insists we call him 'Robbie' instead of Dr. Carruthers — unfolds his cardigan sheathed arms from atop his paunch.

"Y'know Travis," Robbie slides off of the table near the lectern and reaches for his leather satchel, "there are probably several different answers to that question, so let's save it for next week's discussion on gender and personality, shall we?"

The acne-scarred Travis briefly closes his eyes and nods once as if granting the professor permission. Robbie dismisses us and the room fills with the rustling of books and notebooks shoved into bags and backpacks.

Seated at the table in front of me is a female student with brown hair like gossamer, the strands so light that a few outer tendrils flutter when I exhale. For the duration of class I have ignored much of the rambling conversation between Dr. Carruthers and the others and instead watched the girl's hair dance. It wasn't until She heard that phrase — 'the ladies room' — did She force me to shift my attention. It was the place of Our birth.

I don't even know the brown-haired girl's name, but her presence is a magnetizing force that pulls at the iron in my blood. She turns around to me slowly with her head bowed and whispers,

"Do *you* know why?"

The girl is ambitious and energetic, heady on this new sense of belonging. How naive, she thinks she is one of few. She thinks this invasion is only for the young and rebellious, not women who look like me. A suburban duchess taking classes for something to do. She has no idea how much it's going to *hurt*.

"Because," She says with my voice, "She herself has become *everything*."

The girl's eyes widen and the color seeps from her face. Surprise? Shame? Probably both. Not recognizing an Elder, one of Her own. She will learn as time passes. As She grows stronger. The young woman has been marked recently, the splotch of blood in the white of her left eye vibrant and hungry. Mine dulled to an almost imperceptible pink stain. She mumbles an apology and quickly turns back around.

Half of the class has already left; a few linger behind, talking to the professor. Distracted, I need to ask about next week's reading and —

GO HOME

Her presence has remade me in Her image. Her will must be done. It is the last place on earth I want to be. I have no choice.

I go home.

Dan is still upstairs in bed. As if he could get up and walk away from this. From Her. From me. Leaning against the doorway to our bedroom, I force myself to drink in each detail of his enslavement. The air is saturated with the soggy stench of bodily wastes, rotten food, sweat, and pain. Dan's breathing is heavy and forced and I wonder if he's awake. He's lying on his side, covered from the waist down in a soiled comforter. The gray light filtering through the window blurs the curve of his back; smears the thick black metal encircling his now wiry wrists into something mundane. I can almost pretend that things are how they were before, when I would have walked in, gotten into bed and snuggled up behind him. Kissed the nape of his neck and slid my hands down the taut plane of his muscled abdomen...

He groans my name and jolts me back to reality.

His spine is a warped column of grotesque knots. His ribs protrude from beneath his skin like coils of wire beneath a loose sheet. Blue-black bruises shift on his back like stains. There are furrows in his flesh; cracked scabs and fresh crimson. He is a skeleton wearing skin. Hot tears spring to my eyes and even She cannot quash the scalding surge of guilt. I can't remember when I last fed him. Scattered on the floor are food containers and dishes, fouled with various half-eaten, rotting substances. Clouds of gnats and flies hover in dark wisps throughout the room. He adjusts his atrophied legs, spindly appendages shift under the sheet, and I crumple to the floor.

Please. Please just give me my voice back. Just for a minute. Just enough to ask his forgiveness. Just en —

All the air is squeezed from my lungs. Adrenalin. Panic.

A way out.

I love my husband. Even when you make me do things to him. You can't turn that off.
Yo —

My lungs fill with air. Against my will.

"Jesus." I whisper. My voice, weak.

I don't know what makes Her laugh more, that holy name or my reaction. Images of the past year flood my vision in fragments; snapshots of the torture She has put him – us – through.

Straddling Dan and pummeling him with my fists until my right ring finger breaks against his jawbone. I wanted to drown my guilt and anguish in that pain, but after only microseconds of suffering she dulled the nerves of my hand to senselessness. She made me go to the ER. Made me tell them that the injury happened at the gym.

The unspeakable mutilations he has endured as a result of Her imagination and a smoking hot curling iron.

Still immobile on the grimy hall carpet just outside the master bedroom, she teases me with an aural memory. At first, a wet snap. Then, my husband's agonized screams; begging, cursing, sobbing. That sound again, like a sodden cloth being torn in two. I remember my laugh warped by her parasitic presence on my vocal cords. That sound again. Recognition is slow. Another rip. Another.

"Please," I whimper. "I remember. I don't need to see."

She gives me vision.

His left hand is twisted unnaturally in mine. The bright sliver of his wedding band is dulled by blackish blots of blood as I methodically peel away each of his fingernails with a pair of needle-nose pliers. They were part of a tool set I gave him two Christmases ago.

I get up from the floor, walk downstairs into the living room and turn on the television.

Today's episode of Dr. Phil is about eliminating stress from relationships.

Her voice sneers through me, YOU SHOULD WATCH.

I glance toward the living room window.

"I'd rather not."

Needle thin talons pierce the backs of my eyes and wrench them to the screen. My eyelids are paralyzed and tears stream down my face and into the corners of my mouth. My tongue slides out involuntarily and catches them. She savors each droplet and sucks at the spongy organ until it swells. After a while She's entranced. My mind is momentarily my own. I want to think about Dan before all this. But those memories draw Her attention as fast as the sound of a broken man pleading for a quick death. Instead, I think of the beginning. My innocence.

She enjoys that.

It was a girl's day out. Zoë and Tasha and I were at a neighborhood café. Sipping coffee and gossiping, complaining about our husbands and their demanding jobs we demanded they have. The conversation had slowed to "mm-hmm's" and nods when Zoë asked me to accompany her to the bathroom. Nothing odd in this, another ritual of ours honed through high school and recently perfected to an art after our marriages.

We left the table and I heard Zoë mumble,

"That girl is *so* sad."

That girl was Natasha, an acquaintance we had made in college. We pitied her and in turn that pity made us cruel. She was a weakling. Simpering and spineless and so easy to hurt. We had lost touch for a few years, and then she managed to find me online. We became friends and things returned to the way they'd been before. Zoë and I toyed with her and speculated on when she'd get tired of our games. It seemed she never would.

I suppressed another laugh as we headed into the restroom. Zoë had flung the first arrow and now it was my turn.

"She's pathetic. I mean, you can't blame Michael, right? If I were married to her, I'd walk all over her too."

Zoë nodded and stopped in front of the long vanity mirror, set her purse onto the marble sink. I followed suit, looking for nothing in particular, just mimicking another familiar ritual between us.

"Elise, we want you to become everything."

I didn't even look up from my bag. I grinned at the nonsensical statement.

"What?"

I felt her suddenly beside me. I turned to her, thinking maybe she had a secret to tell me, that maybe she had some new lipstick to show me. I trusted her and the space between us. She said my name again and then she kissed me.

Gently at first and then her hands were on the sides of my head, her fingertips in my hair. The ridges of her teeth dug into my lips. I started to push her away but She was so strong--

I AM STRONG.

That voice was so heavy with malice it bored into my bones like a drill. I thought my skull would burst with the pressure. My screams were muffled and useless. Zoe pinned my arms to my sides and released something cold and slimy and acrid into my open mouth. It forced its way into me; scrambled over my teeth, wriggled itself over my tongue.

Gagging, I wrested myself from her grip and doubled over onto the bathroom tile.

I AM EVERYTHING AND YOU ARE NOTHING.

Zoë towered above me, laughing while tears streamed from her eyes.

The origin of that voice slid like a slug down my throat and I couldn't breathe and then--

--I can taste Her, smell Her, hear Her, feel Her; I am baptized in Her wrath, blackness pounds the backs of my eyes I clench them shut and the left one bursts open and I have no choice but to let Her all the way in --

I awoke in an empty bathroom. I awoke and I was someone else. Something else. She picked Us up and splashed cold water onto Our face, dabbed delicately at it with a paper towel. She rummaged into Our purse and found a pair of sunglasses to put over Our eyes. A red flower blossomed in the whites, pulsed with the beat of Our heart. We looked into the mirror once more and exited the ladies room.

I returned to our table and Tasha and Zoë were sitting in poses of quiet majesty; their spines straight, expressions confident. I had never seen either of them look so beautiful. Zoë placed her hand over mine and squeezed it. I grabbed Tasha's and did the same. We were silent and she showed us what we were to do and why. We were a knot of strength that became unfurled and She tied us back together. We would take back what was Ours, we would spread, and we would hurt them.

We Ourselves would become everything.

A woman on the television is crying because her baby's father wants nothing to do with their child. His paternity has been proven with a DNA test. The host of the show has asked the man three times if he wants to be involved with his son. Each time the man has said "no", in colorful language peppered with bleeps. Some people in the audience are on their feet, gesturing wildly and shouting their displeasure. The camera pans across the crowd and I catch glimpses of women, strangely still amid the chaos, stone-faced and silent.

My heart drops. There is no escape.

I can't do this anymore.

At the thought Her attention swivels inward. I brace myself for her inevitable punishment.

Warmth, soft and liquid smooth pours over me like summer rain. *Comfort*, she whispers, *is something I too can give.*

Rest in me.

I am so tired.

Heal in me.

Weeping gashes along my wrists and inner thighs. A closed car filled with carbon monoxide. Pills. Aborted attempts to collide into oncoming traffic, vehicle or no. I wanted to save him. To save myself.

Be in me.

There are still women who do not bear the mark. Why was I chosen? The girl in class? Zoe, Natasha, and the women on television? Why us? What was I before that kiss in the ladies room? Dan's petty, petulant, and co-dependent appendage. Just another prisoner who'd grown accustomed to her prison. Just another bitch that got off on hurting other women.

What if this isn't a punishment, but a reckoning? That...thing that crawled inside of me came from Zoe. Before Zoe it came from someone else, probably Natasha. Before Natasha, there was someone. We are vessels. Carriers. Wombs. From one mouth to another, She spreads. Who was first to be sanctified with that crawling kiss?

This is not an end. This is the beginning.

I could be so much more. I *am* so much more. The weariness, the anguish, the guilt, and the pain are gone. I am unpolluted. I am pure.

Picking up the remote control I turn off the television and head upstairs to the closet in the hall. Kneeling, I find the man's toolbox, lid flipped open. In the bedroom he is pleading for help. Calling My old name. I reach for the smeared pliers but then, no, select a hammer and screwdriver instead. Soon, he will be silent. I wish I could savor him for a little while longer, but it is time to move on.

For I myself will become everything.



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Kai Leakes

Born in Iowa, but later relocating and raised in Alton, IL and St.

Louis, MO, Kai was an imaginative Midwestern child, who gained an addiction to books at an early age. The art of imagination was the very start of Kai's path of writing which led her to creating the Sin Eaters:

Devotion Books Series and continuing works. Her love for creating, vibrant romance and fantasy driven mystical tales, continues to be a major part of her very DNA.



SISTERS

Don't sleep, just run. As you run, don't let the hunger of those hunting you take you over. Welcome to St. Louis, Missouri where the world has broken into chaos. A dystopian apocalypse is here, of monsters eager for your flesh. In the middle of the danger are two sisters, battling to stay safe, and hoping to find shelter, and help. But being sick and starving comes with twists and turns of its own. As the sisters are hunted, are they truly the ones in danger or is there something more in this uncertain world?



"I needed this. Had no choice but to get this, don't you understand?" My pulse quickened. A sheen of moisture dotted my temples, made the nape of my neck slick from the kick of heat in my body. Anxiety made me look around, darting my eyes at the shadows.

A loud bang made me jump.

"Candance." That was my little sister Alisha. "This puts you at risk and you know it."

"I don't care if it does." I retorted. "And you know this."

Fear darkened her golden eyes to a smoky brown while her gaunt face and the dark shadows under her eyes, gave her a haunting appearance under the 'I ain't bothered' sweater hoodie she wore. My little sister's small hand gripped my arm in a painful clasp. Her sharp nails cut into the fabric of my jacket and I did my best not to react. If she wasn't careful, blood would be drawn, and it would only add to the danger that hunted us.

"Breathe sis," I urged, feeling my body shudder.

I was scared. The wave of icy nausea which gripped my stomach disappeared. The tremor in my hands dissipated. Each digit of my fingers was tinted in red. My head throbbed with my sharp hearing and only added to my anxiousness at the falling liquid from my nails and lips.

In the vast skyline backdrop behind us was the grand St. Louis Arch. Alisha and I had taken shelter, no, more like hid for safety in the large storage hanger somewhere downtown. The bright radiance of the Arch was once hope for the city. Now it was a symbol of the threat that was running rampant in the bodies of the people of the city.

The Demented were coming bringing with them their contagion. We needed to leave A.S.A.P, but...

Exhaling, my body shook. My mouth was dry. What I took earlier had me looking like I had played paintball in blood, was helping me feel that aching need to taste Demented essence was strong and overriding my logic.

It made my skin and scalp tingle. Made my fingers flex while my throat was left with a sensation of bliss like I just drunk freezing water during a summer heatwave. Only thing was, I wasn't cooled off. I was fired up.



“Sis!” I heard Alisha say. “I’m shaking too, but you said we can’t stay here, so we gotta go, yeah?”

I hated when my body took over like this. That feel-good sensation was so intense that it had me ready to rock back and forth just to feel some balance. I was on alert, but I wasn't. My senses on height, that I could smell the enemy coming.

“Oh, my gosh, I hate this craving,” I said looking around as I swiped at my nose. We didn't have long to hide. What I had done was a risk I had to take in protecting my little sister and myself. But ultimately it left us open for attack.

With a quick glance at the huge windows in the compound, Candance and I ran to hide again. This time, further in the storage building. Jarring snarls became louder in the backdrop of the city and the compound. It made my heart pump and my stomach clench.

“I’m scared sis,” Candance whispered.

“Me, too, but we have to hide. I’m sorry sis,” I said regretfully. “I should have left the Demented alone, but I was hungry.”

“Don’t do that. You couldn’t help it...”

Stopping her mid-sentence, I pulled my baby sis to my side. We pressed our backs against the wall to the point where it felt as if we were trying to fuse with it. Again, my heart started to race. The sound of metal dragging against what I thought was pavement hurt my ears. They were here.

Nothing but the uneasy sound of feet shuffling against pavement and the outline of snarling silhouettes filled the compound we were in. From where we hid, I could see, and hear the mucous dripping liquid splatter off their bodies.

“I’m getting hungry sis,” Alisha whispered. Raising a finger to my lips, I felt my sister hold my arm tighter.

Growls and zombie-like shuffling, grew closer. We were watching the hatch door which protected us from those things when it bowed forward. Then it flew off its hinges with a supernatural force making us cover our mouths so not to scream.

“They got in!” I hissed low.

Each of the dark, ink splotched things crept our way. They moved slowly in a lethargic manner to sniff us out. Many were dressed in work clothes, or casual street attire. Some wore hospital scrubs with badges pinned to their chest. Some were in business suits and dresses. While others were kids with bookbags.

These were normal people once, but not anymore. Unfallen tears glazed the rims of my eyes. It was only a year ago, when we all were normal. Everyone in the U.S. had survived the great change in our nation that caused us to fall into an economic and international downwind that once used to be secure. With it came the creation of the ‘Demented,’ human things I couldn’t even begin to try to explain what they were.

With her back to me, Alisha watched on and asked, “Can we stay hidden longer?”

“Sis. I’ll need more blood soon. But...but I can protect us for now,” I said. “Please we have to go before the crave hits you harder.”

Alisha’s usually russet brown skin was now a paling yellow. She was awakening like I had, earlier. Being one of the creeping hunters we are, caused three dots to appear in her golden irises. I knew outside of that obvious change, that she needed to get out of here because of the way she kept licking her cracked lips. She watched the essence fall from my fingers, then down on the chest of the lifeless body under me.

Yes, I had killed. We dragged the body into our hiding spot.

“It’s already hitting me. Feed me please,” she pleaded with me. My sister kneeled at my side on her haunches, rocking. Currents of dark energy wrapped around her fingers, and wrists, turning her nails black. She needed a charge, fast.

Panicking, I touched the chest of the Demented under me. “There’s a little heat left. Eat.

I’ll be fine sis.”

“Really?” She asked. It was like she needed my approval first, so I gave it.

“Hurry,” I urged with a motion of my hand.

I pushed off the body, walked around my now crouching sister in a protective pace, while looking for anything that I could use as a weapon. Shifting on my feed, my hand to my wrist and ran over where my sister had dug her nails into my flesh. She has broken skin. If she had been lost to her craving as I had been earlier, then the act would have made her feed from me by drawing out my heat.

It was a scary thought and I was glad that I didn't have to fight my own sister today.

"You can't hold yourself back if you go into the craving sis. Okay?" I lectured. There was a pipe sticking out from a radiator. Snatching at it, the strength from my feeding helped me yank it out and break it from the radiator.

"Umph!" I grunted, then stepped back with it in my hand. "I know you couldn't hurt me but, we have to be careful."

The sloppy sucking from my sister's feeding was getting to me, triggering me. When she abruptly turned, her glowing golden hue eyes on me, she said "Never. I love you sis and you're all I have now..."

Alisha paused to look away in sadness.

"Since they killed Mama and Dad," she muttered.

Tears lined my eyes. The sharp memory of our parents screaming filled my mind as I tried forgetting that reality.

"Still..." I started then stopped. The snarling was closer.

"We need some more." Alisha interrupted as her long bloody nails scraped over the top of the dead thing's body.

"I need some more," she whimpered.

"Hurry and come here." I coaxed. "Give me your hands."

Only five years younger than me, my sis stopped right at the top of my nose. I was five-eight and she was five-seven. I was twenty-one, and she was seventeen. I had coiled, natural hair held back by a white scarf in a kinky fro. My sister had her long hair braided in two twisted buns.

We looked like twins in a sense, reflecting the blend of both our parents. My mother would say that I was dark brown like flawless shard. While my little sister had the color of warm brown polished topaz. Neither of us looked or were biracial.

Palms stretched out, we sat lotus style. Knee-to-knee. Eyes locked on each other as the menacing sound of beasties roared around us, I quickly laid my palms on top of hers, then gasped. The beat of our hearts synchronized. Those dark currents appeared around our hands locking us together in a gentle swirl of magic that cloaked us.

Our nostrils flared, and our foreheads bowed forward to touch each other as a powerful means of connecting. Something in our spirits felt like a dam breaking open. If we opened our

eyes, we would see our aura dancing around us like magical balls healing us. My sis and I called it magic. Feeding from each other's energy, we learned that this was the best way for us to help each other during cravings. That way neither of us could turn crazy on the other. We had seen it happen before to others like us.

I guess we were lucky in that it hadn't happened for us. I guess it was because we were sisters and could easily feed from each other in this way. Doing this form of feeding was risky though. Our bodies lifted from the floor. Our power gave us supernatural currency to float as we were.



"Don't get tired okay," I softly said. "Is this enough?"

My sister shifted her hand, then made it where our hands laced together.

"Just a little more," she said.

The dull pain in our stomachs stopped. I could feel it because we were one mind right now. Her rapid beating pulse had stalled to normal and a gentle look of peace was on her face. Yes, our craving was done for now. We could go.

A hissing sound near us made me jump. I hopped up to grab the metal tube then ran with my sister behind me. I shield her from any threats. The Demented had broken in through our barricade.

"How many do you see sis?" I asked rushing through the shipping hanger. There was a door ahead of us. We just needed to get to it.

"I see five," Alisha quickly shared.

"Five? That's it? We can take them." I said with a smile on my face.

As I looked her way, I frowned. I didn't feel my sister's presence behind me. She wasn't here. I quickly turned then ran. She was ahead of me moving like a jaguar who turned into the shadows being reckless.

"Alisha!" I yelled.

My sis was in her hunting mode. She flew through the air by leaping then landed animal-style against one of the Demented. That meant that she was hunkered over them, palms against the floor, on her knees using her strong nails as knives. Being reckless like this could have had her dead within seconds. So, I rushed forward to have her back going back and forth with her to take down those that hunted us.

Charging at the creepy, slimy things that snarled at us, I focused on a tall nasty monster in a business suit. My pole slammed against the pavement and slid up in my hand. I projected it forward, gripped it with all my might, then cracked it against the side of the ashen monstrous face of the thing that tried to reach for my sister. A loud, cracking noise made me grit my teeth.

“Bust his head sis!” Alisha encouraged.

The Demented had bones like brittle wood. Easily able to break, but only with enough force to cause it to shatter. Pieces of black teeth went flying. I watched that supple washed out gray face bunch and pucker due to the force of the hit. The things red eyes focused its hatred on me.

Its short golden hair flew out like a fan. Black ooze sputtered everywhere, and its gnarled fingers reached out to grab at my pole. The thing made a loud animalistic snarl like a dog hit’s a car. A jagged bone appeared in its hand and tried to swipe at me. That makeshift blade protruded from its palm.

I knew not to let it get me. That’s how our parents died. So, I jumped back trying to avoid it. Panic raged through me. I then felt a familiar scary coldness awaken within.

“Vampire trash!” It snarled at me.

“Please stop,” I screamed.

Aimlessly pleading I tried to reason with insanity which was dumb in and of itself. “I’m...I’m not a vampire.”

Eyes rolling in its skull the thing shouted, “Demon! Let me purify you.”

The semblance of rationalization was nowhere to be found in the monster. I knew that, but I couldn’t help myself in trying to trigger any piece of humanity in the thing. All I knew was that we had to survive this. We had to get to safety. I mean at least to sleep and wait for the sun to come out.

“Man, screw you. Leave me alone.” I yelled. “You don’t want this battle!”

Tears fell. I didn’t want to kill her. I really didn’t. I still had hope that maybe they could be stopped, or cured. But here I was, hunching over him, ready to eat him like a Big Mac. An itching at my throat started.

I didn’t want this, but I had to do this. I had felt tired from feeding my sister, yet I was hungry all over again. I needed him. I needed to feel that sweet burst of sublime pleasure hazed out the painful sensory overload that I was experiencing right now. My own mental capacity was changing. The hunter in me was coming out. The thing I had turned into was coming out and there was no return.

“Disgusting animal!” The Demented snarled at me as I leaned back and punched him in the face.

I could hear flesh tearing in the distance and a foul smell that drew my attention. My sister was tearing at a Demented feeding like a crazed thing. She looked blissful. Whereas, I shifted on my feet feeling the rush of blood in my veins signaled that it was time to battle. My nails lengthened then hardened. Amused, I bit my lower lip while a malicious smirk crept across my lips.

“Dude, come purify me then,” I said with a swing of my pole again.

An ominous groan came from my enemy. Metal hit bone and flesh. A heated pleasure ran through me causing me to enjoy the cracking sound as an orange oily sludge leaked from the blood. With a quick lunge, I pulled at the guy’s tie keeping him from falling back, then I yanked him

towards me so that I could send my nails into the side of his neck. When I felt my nails slice at the jugular, I gave a pleasing sigh of relief.

“Ahh...” I sighed.

My body began to tingle. My eyes rolled against the back of my head. I needed this. I needed all of this and more. This was a dangerous game I played. I knew it left me open for attack, but I didn’t care. I sapped at the heat in the body, then crazed currents of

power in the blood while I drank it all.

Head tilting, I smiled at the pleasure that seeped into every molecule in my body. The pleasure was sickening. It made me heady. It brought me euphoria and it brought me the pain of regret. I didn’t want this. This wasn’t supposed to be my life.

All I knew was, one day I went to sleep human. The next, I woke up in my dorm craving the very life force of the people that were turned into these things. I didn’t understand it, nor did my sister. From what we heard, a weird virus had permeated the airways the day the government decided to make us better.

The virus hurt everyone and twisted once normal people into these beings though the television, the Net, and using our smartphones against us. After turned, the Demented continued the infection through their bite or bone penetration. The nation was crazy now because of them, but that wasn’t it. When the Demented changed, a lot of us also changed into something else. We learned that this weird mutation happened due to a global mist that was released in response to creating a war against other nations.

Rumor had it our government had turned into Demented and all they could see was war, so they released the mist. Anyway, that insanity, caused a few of us humans to run from the monsters, but at the same time, once turned into what we are, hunters: we ended up craving the energy that came from the infected. Now the world was chaos and we were looking for safe havens to protect ourselves from the things that hunted us.

“*Candace!*” I heard in my mind. Outside of the heightened senses, sometimes, family could connect through telepathy.

“*Sis, it’s not clear,*” I had assumed that it was. But it wasn’t.

I could smell them. There was one more Demented. One who tried to snatch me from the side.

“Take her down sis!” Candace yelled.

Focused on the fight, I gave a nod, then stopped the female Demented by grabbing her by the throat. Carefully, I stood up, then stepped over the dead Demented under me. I turned and ended up staring into the milky-red eyes of the monster I held by the throat.

“Oh, snap! I hate this.” I said. The woman looked to be in her sixties and white like milk. She squirmed and hissed trying to fight me. She bared her teeth and tried to bite at me with saliva spewing everywhere.

“She’s strong,” I yelled. I held the old lady away from me keeping distance between us. I couldn’t risk being turned.

Demented bites were painful like the sting of a thousand wasps- so I heard. If they chose to turn you by bite, bone scrape and by releasing their dark mucus into your mouth through regurgitation, then there was nothing that could be done. The best chance to survive it was by isolating the mucus, committing suicide, or be like my sister and me.

“Let me purify you! You foul little monkey,” The thing gurgled.

“Monkey? Are you for real? Damn, Susan B. Anthony wants her racism back, ‘kay?” I spat back.

The old lady flashed a corrugated looking mouth then tried to lunge at me. “You disgusting bloodsucking thug!” She screamed. “This world ain’t right with you all in it!”

She swiped her nails at me. Tired, I kicked her away to avoid a swipe. That hit could still affect us by making us sick. Alisha and I couldn’t afford a nick by them. We had nowhere to go to heal up or find medicine if we did.

Panic ate at me. A cool chill still hung in my body. I needed just a little more blood for energy. So, I got it when the old lady hit the floor in a hard thud.

Legs in the air and scrambling on her back like a roach, I rushed the old lady then leaped on her. The look on her face was chilling. There was a mixture of fear and elated malice. Her lips curled back into a snarl and a million of tiny jagged teeth revealed themselves. Damn, I didn’t want to be touched by this thing, but the hunger was intense.

I landed on the old hag in a hard-slamming thud. My arms wrapped around her, while she threw her arms around me. The female Demented tried to bite into my neck, but I rammed my pole into her heart. Home run.

Sweet heat eloped me. I lapped at her blood. I sucked at her hand, breaking bones by snapping off her fingers with my teeth. My tongue quickly darted back and forth at her yielding flesh in between my chews.

“Ah...” I moaned.

I was drowning in her essence. It felt so damned good. Drawing my knees to my chest, I gasped, laid my hand against my rapidly beating heart then relaxed. This was delicious. Sometimes I couldn’t help but imagine how I could miss out feeling like this. This was better than my first kiss.

Ready for more, something tugged at me, stopping me.

“Mine!” A low growl began in my throat until I recognized the connection. The touch of my sister gripping my arm to pull at me, took me out of my plateau phase.

“Sis, don’t. She’s gone. The thing is gone,” she urged.

Alisha sat in front of me on the side of the dead monster. She reached to ground me by cupping my face as she stared in my eyes with an urgency.

“We need to go before more come Candance.”

“Huh?” I muttered in a daze.

Alisha tugged at me again. She was covered in black wetness. The sticky substance dried to her hair. Her jeans, the graphic tee she wore that said, ‘Nerdy and revolutionary’, her hoodie, and her kicks.

“It’s time to go, sis.” she said in a gentleness that reminded me of our mother.

“Mom.” I whispered in my dazed confusion.

To my eyes, Alisha looked like my mother laced in draping all-white gossamer. Upon her face were the white painted African marks of the great ancestors of our past. The tribes related to those marks, unknown to me. My mother’s protective loving smile filled me with reassurance as she reached out to caress my face.

I could feel her telling me to push on. To survive this and that it wasn’t my fault that she and our father was lost in this crazy world.

“Candace. You must go. Break out of the compulsion and go,” My mother urged.

Her ethereal appearance changed to that the last image I had of her, covered in her blood. Her hand was holding her side while glass dotted her flesh.

Memories played on rewind as I remembered my mother’s other hand pulling me from our flipped car as the Demented rushed her, to chop at her while she screamed, “Go!”

The sting of her urgent scream brought me back to reality. I hurried to my feet then glanced around.

“I smell them.” I said with a shuttering voice.

“I hear them,” Alisha said at my side, breathing hard as her fangs slid over her lips.

We stood shaking in our feet. Then we ran. We ran faster than the average human. Bursting through the door, we left the only place of slight security we had and headed back into the streets of St. Louis. Dark twinkling skies highlighted our way. In the mix, were pink clouds. Effects from the mists.

“We need a car,” I heard my sis suggest.

“Or a semi so we can run those mo’fo’s over!” I countered.

Both of us made our way from south Broadway to Walnut Street. Bush Stadium and the ballpark village were overrun with the Demented. So that was a no-go. Other buildings were so messed up that knowing us, we’d get trapped and the ghouls would easily find us. So, we couldn’t hide there, there were too dangerous.

“Where can we go sis? The surrounding buildings are too clustered together. We needed a place with a little bit of space and easy to barricade,” she said matching my speed. She shifted on her feet to use the energy from her feed, and cast it back at the Demented behind us. Sending them flying backwards to impale them.

Taking her arm, I felt her stumble against me in exhaustion.

“I know, sis. We’ll find a spot,” I said in worry.

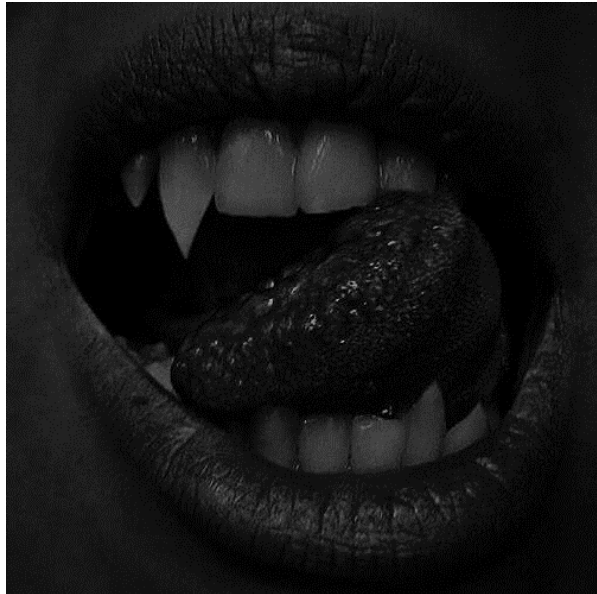
So, we ran while I mentally prayed for a place to lay our head away from the Demented we left behind.

“Sis...do you see that?” I asked pointing at the sky.

Wrecked cars blocked the streets.

“Hold on to me sis,” I made Alisha wrap her arms around my neck so that I could carry her. It was my turn to use the magic that came with our curse, so I did. I channeled that power to climbed over a few cars. Pacing myself, I, then slid us on the side of a huge SUV to look up at the sky. Flashes of colorful light broke through the dark skies like firework. One burst behind us, down a block behind us. Another followed a little away.

“Hey, is that a signal?” my sis asked peering over my shoulder.



Sitting her down, I checked the pattern in the sky while frowning. I really didn't know if it was a signal, but I knew that I could assume that it was.

"Yes, and no. I think they are leading the Demented away," I said slowly standing.

"Come on."

The snarls of Demented grew loud far behind us. With it were the jarring sound of flying bullets then a rumbling explosion. A battle was going on somewhere near us. Hope hit me heard. That meant that there were other survivors. Quickening our steps, that battle helped us in trying to get the hell outta there.

"Sis, look!" Alisha said tugging on me while we ran.

Massive headlights flipped on and off beaming our way. As we headed towards the lights, a huge street barricade came in view. We had found a safe haven. So, we hoped. People with flashing golden eyes, with the marks of the Hunters in their pupils, walked around in the distance. Many were dressed in everyday clothes. The rest were soldiers.

"Help us, my sister needs help. I need help!" I desperately yelled.

"State your class!" Some soldier yelled in the distance.

I wasn't sure what to say exactly so I yelled, "We're not the Demented! We're human!"

"Human is not a class. State your class!"

The longer we stayed in the open with the Demented around, the quicker we were going to die. So, I held up my hands and let my aura wrap around my palms then yelled, "Civilian! We hunt the Demented! Please, help!"

"DEMENTED!" Someone yelled. Followed by, "Let them in hurry."

The sound of an object being dejected followed by a quaking fiery explosion made me hold my sister close to me and look over my shoulder. Downtown St. Louis was on fire, and heading our way were clusters of Demented with snarling nasty faces. They used whatever they could as weapons, like my sister and I also have done. Many leaped in the air, and other's scaled light poles.

My stomach clenched in fear and I shifted on my feet, "Oh, come the hell on ya'll! We're on your side! Let us in please!"

Soldiers disappeared, and it grew silent.

"Are we safe?" Alisha weakly asked.

"I hope so," I responded.

As I said that, as a large barricaded door opened, and masked soldiers with rifles and blades rushed past us.

"Let's go baby sis," I said helping Alisha stand on her own.

“Good,” she said. “I’m hungry and tired.

I laughed. “Me too.”

With a sharp tremble the echo of our never-ending hunger danced through our bodies and mind, hands clasped together to keep our balance, we walked ahead, exhausted, and full of hope. Only to have it blasted away at the sound of guns going off aimed at us.

“Alisha!” I hollered as she collapsed to the ground.

Whipping around to cover my sis, my moment of gratefulness disappeared when I saw my sister hit with what I realized were darts. I was so dumb. My dad used to say, ‘Not all skin folk are your kinfolk’ – in this case, not all hunters could be trusted and suddenly that reality hit me hard.

Furious, I used my last bit of strength to plummet into a solider.

I slammed him to the ground knocking his mask off. His dark eyes with two red dots narrowed in anger. He was a Hunter! Two French braids fell on the guy’s chest. They swung out when a blade appeared in his hand.

“We didn’t come here to jump stupid dude! But ya’ll just had to be bums!” I yelled lashing out.

The Hunter’s shimmer of his aura was intense. It rushed at me like a second person. *We can do that?* Momentarily, impressed I punched him. These ‘sumabishes’ had hurt my sister and this solider was going toe-toe with me, so I had to kick his ass and protect myself. That’s karma!

“Yo, get this chomping chick up off me! She’s strong and rabid!” The solider yelled. “That’s an order!”

As I got ready to use my fangs to rip at his throat, whatever was in the nasty darts that hit me, made my world tilt and wobble. I felt the hard slam of the ground under me as I stared up at the brotha who had pissed me off. The drum of Demented ghouls rushed through the streets and the scream of soldiers grew closer. Fading to black, I had thought this was a safe place for us.

But man, was I wrong.



Sisters was first featured in 'Black Magic Women' anthology and later, in my own self-published small collections of shorts, 'A Darkness Within: Dark Fantasy and Horror Collection. On February 2nd, it will be presented on [Nightlight Horror podcast!](#)



Kenesha Williams

Kenesha Williams is an author, screenwriter, and essayist, with writing credits that include Time Magazine's [Motto](#) and Fireside Fiction. She lives in the DC Metro area with her husband, three sons, and a feisty cat named Leia.



BEYOND BIOLOGY

We knew they were dangerous. But they were so like us, they were us, sure a century ago and unchanged. They came from the ether like ghosts. We should've quarantined them as soon as they came but we didn't. We couldn't. They were our ancestors, and no one wanted to treat them like aliens.



And things were fine for a while. Things were great.

That is until we got sick.

I guess you can say there were casualties on both sides because although our population had decreased by ten percent at the end of the pandemic, they were all dead. All of them gone, no trace. Except for me and a few others like me.

My mother had met one of the survivors at a bar. She didn't tell her who he was, but she already knew. The media plastered the faces of the sixty-five crew members of the SS Elon over every telecom screen across the galaxy, making it easy to recognize him as a survivor.

It didn't stop her from taking him home and it didn't stop him from having a romp with her. And they were happy for a while. Unlike some others, he wasn't taken away when we first got sick. No, he was taken away from us by a much crueler judge and jury.

Whatever God exists took him from us when the flu epidemic hit.

I guess being disappeared for a century left out some building blocks of their immune system that the rest of society had. In a month they were all gone, but not before they'd infected so many others with a disease we had eradicated and had no longer need for immunization from.

Which is why it's odd we kept their tech. Their ship, now a museum, was my favorite place to go when I was skipping school. I felt closer to my father there. Touched all the gears and control panels trying to gain insight into the man he had been. I should've known better, the ship had been swept over by scientists and doctors from all over the world there couldn't be anything left, but still. I hoped.

"Cherie, please go to school today," my foster mother tossed out as she washed out a coffee mug in the sink.

I sat back in my chair and thought about it, thought about going to school. I was ahead in all of my classes, my classmates were idiots, boring, and I was a social pariah. So, I thought about it and I decided I wasn't going. Not today.

It was the anniversary of The Founding that's what they called the day that the ancestors arrived. If there was any day, I'd be able to find something, it had to be today.

"I can neither confirm, nor deny, that I will go to school today, but I can tell you I am far from my quota of absences that would necessitate a call from Child Services or a truancy officer to come and ask about me."

She didn't turn around to look at me, she just slumped her shoulders in defeat. I was a good kid and she knew it. She'd had problem children before. I was only hard to place because of the circumstances of my birth. No one wanted a Founding child in their home. Even after sixteen years, people thought we were still contagious.

Most other Founding children, of which I heard there were only four or five, had been placed far away from their birthplaces. The ignorant thought we were bad luck on account of our parentage and our Earthly parents dying from some cancer that even our advanced medical treatments couldn't treat.

The irony was that we, or at least I was, a perfect human specimen. I was immune to both past and current diseases. I never even had so much as a cold. That too was scary for the ignorant. Few people knew the circumstances of my birth. I didn't shout it from the rooftops. All most people knew was that I was somehow orphaned, and that made me an outcast just as if I had Founding tattooed on my skin.

"Just be careful," she said as she continued washing our breakfast dishes. I left the table and kissed her on the cheek. Sometimes I pretended she was my mother. My real mother.

She shared the same walnut-colored skin as I and she had the same habit of smiling with her mouth and not her eyes as I. Both of us were bogged down by a sadness we didn't share with the world or even each other. Though we could both guess the other's causes.

As a single woman and at her age with no children, she was a pariah in her own way. I didn't know if she couldn't have children because of a medical issue or if she still clung to some religious notion that made children verboten without marriage. I knew since the study stated that children fare better in two-parent homes, being a single woman relegated her to fostering the bottom-of-the-barrel choices of children. It also hobbled her ability to adopt if she wanted to.

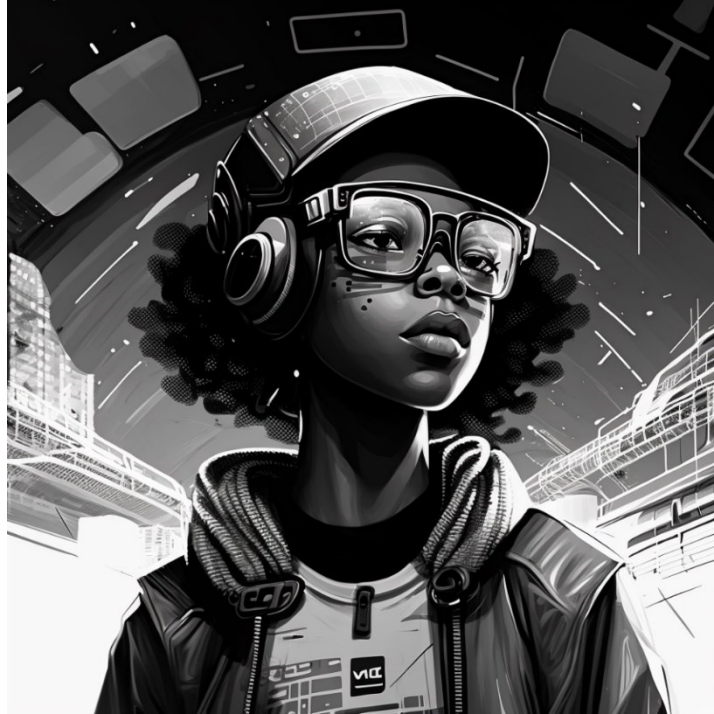


Image credit: Midjourney, prompted by the author: African American teenage girl wearing sunglasses and a cap, entering a dead spaceship museum, futuristic city, feeling of dread, line drawing

I knew I'd age out of the system in her home and that wasn't a problem for me. I loved Ms. Minerva as much as I could remember loving my birth mother. The past two years I'd spent in her company had been some of the best years of my life. And except for the occasional, no more than once a month, bout of hooky I played, I was always on the straight and narrow for her sake.

The air was acrid and the breeze was hot against my skin. It was only 82° and I was thankful for the change in weather as it turned Fall. I smiled at the cooler temps and thanked the heavens for the reprieve from the hundred and ten-degree days before that and Summer's long hot season. The air whipped sidewalk dust all around me like mini dust devils of gray and brown, the dominant colors of the city.

Walking down the sidewalk I made no eye contact with any of the other people on the street hoping no one would notice my footsteps were leading me downtown and not towards the schoolhouse a mile north. I was lucky that my height sometimes belied my age. I didn't have a very mature face but wearing my brimmed hat and sunglasses against the sun obscured my features enough I looked an indiscriminate age that could've been anywhere from sixteen to twenty-two. It wouldn't help to gain entrance to a club or get a drink at a bar, but for my purposes, it was enough.

Although I'd been visiting the museum for years, every single time I came upon it, it was like seeing it for the first time. I walked up to the massive doors and stepped in front of the

sensor. I held up my watch and paid the fare with my credits and the doors slid open without a sound.

It was like a ghost town here. I was sure I was the only person who even came and visited this old hunk of metal. The other kids treated it like a haunted house. They taunted and wagered people to enter, but mostly the museum stayed desolate. Me and my credits were the only things keeping it alive.

The robotic docent's voice began its spiel about the ship.

"Silent tour," I said to the surrounding air. The voice shut off and I was left to my own devices to explore the ship. I'd been to almost every section hoping to take in something new. The ship was small as long as a football field and only three stories.

Generation ships were the size of a small continent. The one that colonized this planet only began with one thousand people and it still dwarfed this ship that somehow with old tech made it here just fifty years after the first-gen ship arrived.

My mom had been one of the first terra born when she was a child. Was teased because of it. She'd given up hope of finding a suitable mate when she met my father, was already in her early forties, and thought having a child was out of the realm of possibility. But so was meeting a man who came from the stars before she was born but appeared as if he hadn't aged a day.

I walked down the halls and made my way to the stairs. Today I'd explore the top floor. The last time I was here I had only gone down one corridor up there before my alarm alerted me I needed to be on my way home to have any semblance of it seeming as if I'd attended classes that day.

Today, I had all day.

The temperature on this floor was cooler than the lower ones I passed on my way up and there was a metallic tang in the air that I could taste in the back of my throat. I slipped a sweatshirt out of my backpack and took off my hat and sunglasses and placed them inside.

Even with the sweatshirt on the chill seemed to seep into my bones and I wondered if something had gone wrong with the air conditioning. It's not like they had loads of visitors to complain, but you'd think one of the robotic sensors would have alerted someone to the discrepancy.

I shivered as I moved through the large hallway where rows of doors flanked it on each side. It reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of cruise ships that sailed the oceans on Earth. This floor housed the sleeping quarters for the crew and passengers on the ship and I was determined to find my father's.

As I crept down the corridor and opened random doors, peeking in and then closing them, the hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention and made me shiver. I turned around sure that there must have been someone behind me, but there was no one.

Maybe it was a sign, maybe I was getting close to where my father had laid his head and dreamt about a future among the stars. I crept down the hallway and put my hands out like a human barometer trying to feel something that pulled me closer. This wasn't scientific, I was hoping that something still connected me to him, something bigger than biology.

There was an inescapable pull forcing me to walk down the hall and something compelled me to trek down the long hall until it let me loose. I stood in front of a doorway that was in no way different than the others, except for the waves of energy that seemed to radiate off of it. It made me feel tingly as if my whole body had fallen asleep, it was a static that coursed through my body and hummed in my brain.

I opened the door to the room and stepped in. The room looked identical to all the others except for the zig-zag feeling in my body. In the room was a rectangular slab of metal that I knew from the robot docent was where they slept. They had swept the room of anything not made of metal, but I knew there once was a mattress and even a blanket. When the sickness caught they burned all biological materials and anything they thought could transmit illness.

I climbed aboard the flat bedframe and lay down looking up at the ceiling. I closed my eyes and imagined what my father would have dreamed about in this bed. The humming in my body had stopped, but the room seemed to drop in temperature. It must be the metal conducting the cold I thought and opened my eyes to resume my search of the room.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed and stood up, but then felt paralyzed in place. I struggled to move and felt the same sensation of someone behind me I felt in the hallway. I wasn't able to turn my head to see and when I tried to cry out no sound came from my mouth. I closed my eyes praying I was stuck in some type of dream paralysis and had fallen asleep on the bed, but everything felt so real.

The hand on my shoulder felt real too. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw dark brown large fingers gripping my shoulder lightly. I wanted to scream again, but still, no sound came out. At least not from me.

"It's okay," the voice said. It was a voice that was deep and rich and reverberated through me like the rumble of a volcano before it exploded.

"There are no answers here, baby girl," the voice continued and I knew then it was my father. As impossible as it seemed.

I opened my mouth to speak again, wishing upon hope I'd be able to utter at least one word. "Where?" my voice broke when I asked, but at least some sound leaked out.

"The heavens. Always the heavens."

I turned toward the voice, hoping for more clarification. And screamed another soundless scream at the sight before me.

Though the hand on my shoulder had been human in form, the rest of the body was disjointed in a way alien to me. The bones seemed to swim under the skin, constantly shifting, making the thing before me seem as if it was in perpetual motion though it was standing still.

It wasn't just fear, it was disgust that coursed through my being. If he was my father, then I was somehow like him Not human nor alien, but some type of monster.

"There's no reason to be afraid. You are the future. A future already chosen by the elder Gods of your world and ours. You will rule one day."

The static in my body had dissipated, but his voice echoed through my ears like a trick of the acoustics. I didn't know what to think or what to say, so I did what I knew best. I ran.

My footsteps clanged along the metal walkway and I ran as fast as my feet could take me. Out of the ship and away from the monster who claimed to be my father. I ran until I reached my home.

I threw open the door and ran into Minerva's waiting arms and cried. She gently patted my head and shushed my cries with comforting noises and clucks. I looked up at her face, the face that reminded me of my own, and shook away the memory from the ship.

"You know," Minerva whispered into my hair.

I looked up at her face and watched it ripple like her bones had turned into a million small insects and screamed.



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Candace Nola is the creator of UncomfortablyDark.com, which hosts her own work but focuses primarily on promoting other indie authors in the industry with weekly book reviews, interviews, and special features.

Uncomfortably Dark Horror stands behind its mission to bring you the best in horror, one uncomfortably dark page at a time!



EMPTY EYES



“How long has she been here?” Father Brantley inquired as the nun ushered him along the basement corridor.

“Seven days, Father. Mother Superior did not want her harmed so we restrained her and sent word to Cardinal O’Reilly.”

The nun pulled a keychain from the folds of her habit and slid it into the door of the small cell. She looked at the priest as he waited, worn Bible in one hand, beaded rosary in the other. His hair was black and trimmed, face neatly shaved. He looked young, but they all looked young to her. Sixty years on this earth, not much surprised her.

“I’m ready.” He said with a nod. As she opened the door, he quickly stepped inside. The nun locked him in with another turn of the key. As it clanged shut, a shrill burst of laughter from the dark corner set his teeth on edge.

“Show yourself.” He commanded, holding his Bible aloft. “Why have you come?” He squinted into the shadows that filled the room; the candles barely illuminated the small cot on the far wall.



“Why have I come, Father?” A voice snaked across the room, slithering with menace as it spat his name. “I’ve come to make you see the error of your ways. For too long, mankind has quaked in fear of the wrong thing. Your so-called demons from Hell, are mere tools of destruction that He uses. It is the Angels you should fear! The mighty! The horrible! The glorious. The all-powerful! Humanity has ignored us for the last time!” The voice roared across the small space.

The Father stared in horror as he crossed himself with the rosary clutched in his hand, then stepped back, repulsed, as the body of an emaciated novice dropped at his feet. The once vibrant initiate was little more than an empty husk with crimson hollows where her eyes should have been. Her white habit was covered in blood.

“She has already seen the truth of my words, Father. I have shown her things that no human mind can comprehend.”

Father Brantley knelt beside her, gasping as a death rattle issued from her throat.

“She’s about to die,” The voice paused, “do you wish to save her?” The voice slithered out through the rolling shadows once again.

“Yes! Spare her!”

“Very well.” The shadow flowed across the floor then became solid. The room burned with a fierce light as the Angel stepped forward, grinning, glowing from within as his wings scraped the ceiling. His eyes burned with insanity.

Father Brantley dropped to his knees, stupefied, and began to scream as his eyes burst and blood poured from his sockets. The Angel inhaled deeply, sucking the life from him and consumed his soul. He began to laugh manically as the empty shell of the holy man collapsed on the floor.

The young novice writhed as the Angel vanished into smoke, possessing her once more as her empty eyes began to bleed.



“Empty Eyes” was originally published in Cauldron of Chaos by Red Cape Publishing on August 1, 2022.



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Nicole is an author, editor, and educator who enjoys reading scary stories and watching true crime. Among many other accomplishments, she's also the editor of the groundbreaking anthology, *SLAY: Stories of the Vampire Noire*.



DOGWOOD STORIES

As a born and raised Tennessean, the Dogwood Arts Festival in Knoxville was an integral aspect of growing up southern. Over time, the festival marked many rites of passage as I grew up and this story combines the legend of the Dogwood, my east southern roots, and my love for horror. "Dogwood Stories" is a challenging tale about our connection to culture, our roots in the face of today's continued assault on our collective safety.



“Late bloomers have the prettiest blooms,” Sadie’s momma said, after she tapped her on the head with the comb. “So, stop squirmin’.

“It’s too tight.” Sadie winced, sucking in air to offset the pain. Her scalp burned like someone had set fire to it. She put her hands in her lap and tried to weather the storm, her hands rubbing each other to soothe the pain.

“Tender headed. That’s all.” Her momma pinched off a section of hair, and began another braid.

Sadie stifled a groan and squeezed her eyes tight. Once her momma finished the braid, she rubbed a finger full of grease along the parts, oiling her scalp and providing a balm to her irritated skin. The braids still hurt; the hair pulled taut and confined in the creative style.

With her hands sweating, Sadie gritted her teeth and stopped complaining. Not cause her momma’s braiding had stopped hurting. It did, but she wanted to look nice for the Dogwood Arts Festival. It happened once a year in Knoxville and she loved the early spring weather. Fresh grass, the flowers’ sweet smells and the pollen, giving everything a yellow hue.

Other places had festivals honoring dogwoods, cotton, and barbeque. Heck even bacon. Here in East Tennessee, beneath the Great Smoky Mountains’ rolling hills and purple mountains, the dogwood reigned.

Knoxville laid at the foot of the Smokies, in the valley. Protected to the east by mountains and blessed by the Tennessee River on the west, the city of Knoxville bloomed after the 1982 World’s Fair. Sadie only heard stories. The impact on the small county — the town, according to her momma, caused the town to morph into a metropolis.

“Momma?”

“Yeah baby?” Her momma popped her gum. The rush of spearmint tickled Sadie’s nose. Her hands rested heavy against Sadie’s head.

“Tell me about the dogwoods.” Sadie opened her eyes and waited. She loved when her momma read or told her stories about their people. The truth and all its messy bits her teachers didn’t tell her about in school. That’s what her momma called it—messy bits.

Momma’s stories went back as far as the Dogwood Arts Festival itself. Some of the stories Momma got from Grand momma, Sadie’s Nana. Knoxville didn’t have a lot of folks who looked like her. Most of Sadie’s schooling had been by middle class white women, some well-meaning, but confined by stereotypical beliefs and hatred, both festering inside and foaming outside in whitewashed facts. So, when her momma talked about history, their history, in her rich, southern drawl, Sadie would disappear into those words melting into the past. Those logs fueled her inner fire to burn through the present’s challenges.



“Well, back in the days, a long time ago, the dogwood was strong, as strong as the oak tree. The people who kilt Jesus used the dogwood to make the crosses people was crucified on. The dogwood was a killin’ tree. So when they kilt Jesus on the cross, God twisted the dogwood, punished it by making its limbs thin and skinny...”

“So no one could be crucified on them anymore,” Sadie finished, her heart hammering in glee.

“Right. But just so folk don’t forget, God made the white petals of the dogwood look like a cross, four points, with blood bracketed on the tips where they put the nails in Jesus.” Her momma breathed deep and sad as she started braiding again. “Dunno why you like that story so much. It’s sad, Sadie.”

“It isn’t sad, Momma. It’s beautiful.” Sadie sat up straighter against the couch.

“You a strange child.” Her momma tapped her shoulder. “You done.”

Sadie stood. Her legs ached from sitting, but the searing of her scalp blotted that out. Still, she took the stairs two at a time to get changed. Soon, her cousin, Tina, would be by and together they’d make their way downtown to the festival.

As she changed clothes from her pajama bottoms and tee-shirt and into jeans and a long-sleeved, white University of Tennessee tee-shirt. The words "Go Big Orange" spelled out in vibrant U.T. orange. Sadie thought about the dogwoods. She loved the story, not because of God’s punishment of the dogwood. The trees had been changed. Their strength had been used for evil, to hurt people, to inflict suffering. Unable to stop the people from using them for this

purpose, the dogwood had been relieved of the burden. She didn't see it as a punishment, so much as the dogwood being freed.

No, the dogwoods did not belong to white Jesus or his believers. The dogwood belonged to black folks—southern black folks. Like the dogwood, they'd suffered, blooms of potential sliced off by hatred vile and black as the skin of those they despised. Such “nice folks” capable of such monstrous acts as decorating beautiful grand oak and magnolia trees with bodies as ornaments. Smiling families lined up to take pictures in front of those macabre Christmas trees. Those dark, empty husks, dusty and lifeless, had been her family, her people, her kin.

Sadie sat down on the edge of her bed. Not the dogwood. Its petals already bore the blood stain of death. Mostly, the thick oaks and redwoods found themselves defined by evil.

The faint knocks announced Tina's arrival.

Sadie slapped on her gold bangle bracelets and her big gold hoop earrings.

“You comin' Sadie?” Her momma shouted up the stairs to her. “Tina's down here waitin'.”

Sadie checked her braids in the mirror. Her hoops glistened along with the glossy and thick braids. Her head ached a little, but the rising excitement flooded her with a glow that numbed the pain.

“Yeah. Ready.” She scooped up her pocketbook and headed downstairs.

Once Sadie reached the bottom of the stairs, she found Tina and her momma in the living room. The front door stood ajar, but the screen door remained open. Outside, the lemon-yellow sun beamed in the early afternoon sky. Sadie rounded the short corner and walked into the living room—and a debate.

“That's so 80s. We done did that.” Her momma stood with her arms akimbo on her wide hips, watching Tina. Her satin, multi-colored headwrap hid most of her hair, except her tight spiral curls around her face. She wore a loose blue dress with pockets and house shoes she wore outside.

Her cousin's box braids swung about her flared hips as she rotated in a circle, shaking her hip-hugging and strategically ripped jeans. Sadie's momma laughed, throwing back her head, mouth wide, and humor crinkling the corners of her momma's eyes.

Sadie shrugged. “Everything dies. But then it comes back.”

The chuckles stopped. Tina turned to peer at Sadie, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“You such a weird child.” Sadie's mom shook her head and with scrunched eyebrows turned back to straightening the living room. The smile left and shadows formed on her momma's face.

Remnants of the shed hair, combs, and decorative beads littered the couch and rug where Sadie had sat.

Sadie let the words glide off of her. Those labels, strange, and, weird, had become worn and faded to her ears. Blunted like a knife that had been used too much.

“It’s a cycle, like spring. Renewal.” Sadie explained to the back of her momma’s head.

Tina rolled her eyes. “Get your pocketbook.” Her voice dipped so low only Sadie could hear. “Sassy Sadie, let’s go.”

“Bye Momma.” Sadie waved goodbye. The screen door slammed with a whap.

Once they got to Tina’s little Honda Civic, she gave Sadie the once over. “Your braids are poppin’! Dang. They tight!”

“Yeah. Momma just finished them.” Sadie shoved her hands into her jean pockets. Eager to go, she fought to keep her hands busy while Tina fished her car keys out of her pocketbook. The silence filled her with dread. Energy buzzed across her skin like lightning, like Saturday morning on Volunteer Football games.

Her cousin, Tina, lived up the street in a house that lined the edge of the projects’ apartment buildings. Older by four years, Tina had her driver’s license and an interest in art. The Dogwood Arts Festival local art show hosted a high school arts competition. Once the works are judged, students won ribbons and prizes. Tina had a few pieces showing and she wanted to show them off to Sadie. That fact alone took sheer courage. Strength. Tina had blossomed from the poor, clay dirt into a creative flower.

“Ready?” Tina unlocked the car, climbed in, and started the ignition.

“Yeah!” Sadie said with relief. At last!

It seemed to take forever, but in no time, they’d made their way from Cherry Street to downtown Market Street. As Tina parked the car, Sadie rushed out of the passenger side before Tina could remove the key from the ignition. The air felt different. It spoke to her.

“Hold ‘em horses, Sadie!” Tina called.

Sadie paused on the sidewalk. “Hurry up!”

Once she cleared the car, Tina tossed her braids. “I’m coming.”

They melded with the crowds of people streaming toward Market Square, a sea of pale faces with occasional spots of color. The Dogwood Arts Festival’s banners of white, mint green, and pink announced the celebration, but the trees showed off. Reaching high to the sky in all their splendor, they decorated Gay Street, the primary artery into Knoxville’s heart—downtown.

Sadie took in the rows of glorious trees. The tension level swelled. People bumped and jostled as people took in the new blooms, the artists, and vendors selling all manner of items. Southern fried foods’ strong aromas wafted through the air. Pink, green, and white balloons decorated vendor and artisans’ tables and booths along Market Square. The free event swelled

with individuals beneath the cornflower blue sky and the occasional white cotton ball clouds. Postcard perfect.

Sadie's Nana used to say firm footing could turn to quicksand in a blink.

Whispers circulated, like snakes slithering between people, hissing in warning, when a sharp burning sensation exploded in Sadie's chest. Her breath caught and a flash of bright light made her wince. She watched, transfixed, as a scarlet dot on her shirt blossomed across her heart, growing as if time-elapsed had been fast forwarded.

Sadie's joy gushed out of with her blood. She couldn't feel anything except the soft, downy dogwood petals brushing her cheeks.

For a crowd of branches, they weren't shy about revealing themselves. Her face—hot and tight—as the whispers intensified couldn't move. The trees leaned down close to her, their branches cracking like dry spines, shifting to mutter their wisdom into her ears. Blood roared in her ears as adrenaline flooded her system. She gave a wheezing cough. As she removed her hand from her mouth. An awareness settled on her shoulders.

I've been shot.

Life grinded to a halt.

Dogwoods didn't chase ghosts away. They were ghosts. Of her ancestors, of all ancestors of the strong and betrayed.

This. Was. It!

The moment the dogwoods welcomed her into their fold. All of Sadie's muscles strained as she lifted up her arms. They cradled her. The ivory petals stained with rust, by blood. Hers? Alarmed, she struggled, but their thin, rough bark tightened.

They whispered, "No matter. No matter. Only blood. We know it."

With this they bobbed in the breeze, and continued to convey their knowledge, such as the wonders of weather that affected their delicate branches and blooms, their wonderful stories of steam and coal, of feasts and famines, and of freedom.

"You been strong for so long," one dogwood said. It sounded like Nana.

"It hurts." Sadie croaked, mouth thick and lazy.

"Come on, chile. Rest awhile. Here..." said another dogwood tree.

"But..." Sadie said, "my momma..."

"...is gonna be alright, after a while," still another tree explained.

Their branches swayed as if cheering on this viewpoint.

“Hush. Hush,” they soothed.

“Come. Come,” they pleaded.

She savored every promise, every whispered word.

“I dunno...” Sadie started to turn away, to see the others in the marketplace. A coldness crept in chilling her. She shuddered. A grisly, gruesome scene unfolded around her. “Tina.”

“Come on, now. Do not be afraid.” Nana’s voice again. It sounded warm and syrupy with its Southern drawl, thick and sweet.

Sadie’s eyelids grew heavy. Her throat burned, but she managed to say. “My momma, she needs me. I can’t come with y’all, now.”

So hard to talk. Her tongue didn’t want to work right. So tired.

Sadie closed her eyes among the dogwoods’ sweet scent.

“This is Robin Sneed with WBIR Channel 10 at the scene of what can only be described as a mass shooting. This time at the Dogwood Arts Festival downtown in Market Square. Police are asking viewers to avoid the downtown area. The festival, usually a time for joy, spring, and renewal, now is a place of violence and death.”

A few feet away, Tina shuddered beneath the blanket the EMS tossed over her shoulders. Yellow caution tape roped off the area as if some exclusive club that no one wanted to belong—a survivor of a mass shooting. No one wanted the alternative either. Fate dealt her and Sadie a cruel blow. The reporter gave vague descriptions of the shooter. Tina scoffed. That cowardly bastard’s soul was deformed. The cops muttered about his deep-seeded grudges, but Tina knew that evil took root in places folks don’t always expect—and places they do.

The crime scene was a hive of activity. KPD and others dressed in POLICE jackets, buzzed around the area, like flies among the corpses. A flurry of activity sped up and slowed down simultaneously. Was this shock?

“Blood everywhere.” So bright against the white.

Tina’s tears flowed so much her eyes swelled and burned. Noise. Wailing. Screams of sirens switched to soft humming and back again. Everything had become jumbled. Nothing made sense.

“Sadie?” she called out.

A short distance from where she stood, her little cousin, Sadie Griffin lay crumpled on the bricked plaza. She'd felt where she stood. A duo of EMS folks hovered around her, blocking her view. Tina tried to distance herself from them, as if she could melt into the blanket, a makeshift invisibility cloak.

Tina closed her eyes, stomach lurching. The scents of copper and gunpowder hung in the air, staining it with death. She couldn't even smell the dogwoods any more.

Dogwoods.

Tina pictured Sadie's meddling with such freedom, but it had cost her. She could still see her, Sadie, practically bouncing in her excitement to be out at the festival. Now motionless. Struck down in her moment of joy.

Tina tasted the salt on her lips. She tasted pain. Grief. Of course, they were salty. Anger burned hot at the injustice of it. The police had caught the gunman—unharmful. That murderer would live.

Would her sweet cousin?

Tina remembered Sadie's face when the bullet plowed through her. Dogwood petals rained down on her. The wind blew them loose, but it looked like they wept at the ugliness of the day. Her dark, round eyes sparked as she watched the dogwoods sway in the breeze. Tina sighed and wiped her tears. She needed to be strong for her aunt and her family.

For Sadie.

"She's awake!" Sadie's momma's shout seemed to be piped in from far away. Despite this, the wavering thread of relief came through clear and defined. The thick scent of night blooming jasmine hung along with the harsher hints of something else. Confused, Sadie's eyebrows knitted together. Too much light for it to be night. Sadie's everything hurt as she tried to move or sit up. She tried to open her eyes, but the lights hurt, too. But in that brief eyeful, she could tell she wasn't in her bedroom.

"Where am I?" She managed through cottonmouth. Her lips crackled and she winced again. Each motion brought agony. So she tried to stay still.

"Here. Drink." Her momma handed her a cup of water.

She leaned up on one elbow. Sadie drank, but the I.V. pulled her dry skin on her hand. It bled.

"You at U.T. Hospital." Her momma rubbed her hair and took the cup.

Hospital? Once her eyes adjusted to the glare and the fluorescent's harshness, she looked around the room, as much as she could without moving too much. Then, it all rushed back to the forefront of her mind. She'd been shot!

"Momma, the dogwoods!" Sadie said and struggled to sit up fully. The atmosphere shifted as if certain emotion had been vanquished by her newfound secret knowledge. "The dogwoods are alive! More than that, they spoke."

Maybe Tina heard it too, Sadie thought.

"Shush, baby girl. They gonna be here. Just like e'ry year." Her momma kissed her forehead.

Suddenly exhausted, Sadie shut her eyes. Those dogwoods wagging their blooms all over town, running the thread about the foolishness of men. Tossing away life like ruined and withered petals.

Sadie knew it because she could almost hear them, chattering at the end of her consciousness. She'd join the dogwoods, just like her Nana. Later. She smiled as warmth spread through her. They'd embrace her in their creaky limbs and petal soft blooms.

She'd be ready.

So would the dogwoods.



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Miracle Austin

Miracle Austin is a Texan gal who works in the medical social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night, including weekends, as a YA/NA author. She loves horror, collecting T-shirts, *Stranger Things*, *Wednesday*, Marvel & DC, sparkles, unicorns, 80s music, and daydreaming up stories.



EL GUSANO VERDE

Can a monster control what he is or just his prey?



When he wanted something, he went after it, no matter what or who it could hurt. Someone else's possession could easily become his.

Regardless of all his extracurricular activities outside or inside our relationship, I always took him back, forgave him—too many times. He could tell me any lie, and I believed it.

I never wanted any of the plastic surgeries he recommended. He claimed how much sexier I would look for him, so I caved in. He never stayed with me for any of the procedures. A neighbor was kind enough to drive me home after each hospital visit. He refused to touch me, until I looked perfect to him. If there was something he didn't like about the surgeon's work, then he would schedule me another appointment with a different doctor.

My parents and old friends in Texas begged me to return home on several occasions. Yet, he convinced me to stay with him every time in New Hampshire. He told me that he couldn't survive without me, would be miserable, and probably off himself by jumping off Piscataqua River Bridge. So, I stayed with him and abandoned my family. He allowed me to call my mom and dad on their birthdays and holidays, if he was in a good mood.

Whenever he thought I was gaining weight, he would do the grocery shopping. He always locked the food pantry and froze my credit cards, along with my bank account, until he was satisfied with the number on the scale.

Seven months ago, I suffered a miscarriage. My physician shared my labs results and told me that high concentrations of diclofenac had been found in my blood. I knew what he'd done—he switched out my iron pills. My hate for him was finally confirmed. I wanted to leave him, but I knew that was forbidden.

Honestly, I figured nothing would ever happen to him. He was untouchable for years. However, it's true what they say. You can have it good for a long time, until you no longer do—and that worked in my favor.

Playing spin the bottle that night changed Eddie's life forever...

One hour before the party, I placed a paper bag on top of the bathroom counter while he was shaving. He glanced at it. I hopped up and sat next to him, swinging my bare legs back and forth. I tucked my hand inside the waist of his towel and pulled him in between my legs.

Grabbing his blade, I finished shaving him. He bent down and pressed his wet mouth onto my caramel lips. He started massaging my lower back and ran his hands down my thighs.

“Slow down, cowboy, aren’t you interested in what’s inside the bag?” I asked, glancing over to where the bag was sitting.

“I would rather concentrate on what’s right in front of me,” he whispered, both of his hands hugging my hips.

“You might want to take a little peek inside the bag first,” I replied and pried his hands off.

“Let me check out what you have over there,” he said, stepping back from me. He rinsed his face and grabbed a towel to dry off. Then, he opened the bag wide and retrieved two foil-wrapped gifts with white bows. “Wow, Kat!” he said. “My birthday isn’t until next Friday.” He grinned.

“Yeah, I know. I came across them the other day at this little, hidden shop called Codona’s Den of Secrets, when I was driving home one evening.”

“Sounds kinky,” he winked, sliding his tongue across his bottom lip.

“C’mon, Eddie, be serious for ten seconds,” I begged.

“Okay, please continue.”

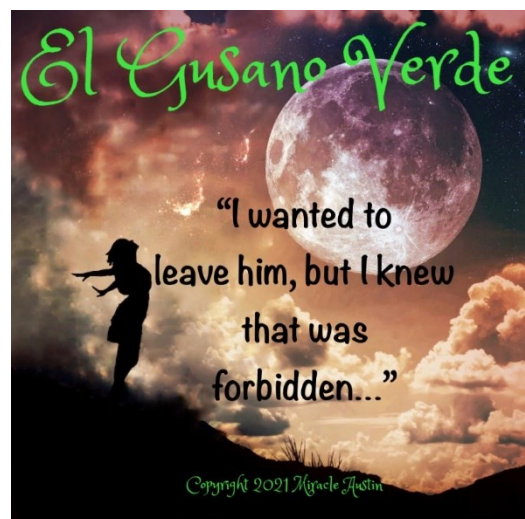
“The shopkeeper told me that they were her last ones in stock and extremely unique. So, I couldn’t resist. She promised me that you deserved them, after I told her all about you.”

“Really? What did you tell her?” he asked with his eyes glued on mine.

I jumped off the counter and said, “Oh the usual. How much you love me... Go ahead, unwrap them.”

We entered the bedroom. I lit two, raspberry-scented candles on my dresser and commanded Alexa to play my favorite playlist—I Am by Mary J. Blige, started playing. I grabbed his hand and guided him to sit down on the floor on top of the Persian multi-colored rug.

Facing each other, he unwrapped the gifts.



“I didn’t expect these two things, Kat. I haven’t played spin the bottle, since college. Our version was cheap—a broken chalk board with challenges scribbled on it. Plus, there was no full tequila bottle,” he said, holding up the flat box and bottle above his head.

“This tequila is very rare,” I replied, unfolding the game board—triangular divisions with bolded phrases written inside each slot.

“I’ve had plenty of tequila drinks. I’m sure this is no different,” he said.

“This one is like no other, according to what the shop lady told me. If your spin lands on the bottle on the board, then the person who drinks from the bottle and consumes the worm will be given an extraordinary gift,” I explained, as I placed the bottle in the middle of the board on its belly.

“Really, Kat? I’ve heard crazy stories like that before. I’ve eaten my share of worms, and I’ve never experienced any special Marvel or DC supernatural abilities. That old lady doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Let’s get dressed, we’re going to be late,” he said, tapping his Rolex with his index finger.

I stretched out my arm to block him from getting up. “Just one quick game. You know we won’t be the only ones running behind—we never are.”

Eddie remained where he was. “Alright, just one. He extended his legs opposite of mine.”

I spun the bottle first, and it landed on the truth or dare option.

“Truth,” I blurted out.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I could ask you something that you may not want to tell me.” He stared at me.

“Yes, I’m good with you asking me whatever.” I rolled up my denim sleeves over my arms.

“Alright...how many guys have you slept with since we’ve been together?”

I paused for less than a minute.

“None, only you, my love,” I said, leaning over to run my hand down his smooth face and sliding it down to his chest. “Your turn.”

He gripped my wrist, pressing his nails into my flesh, with his hand and threw it back into my face.

“Ouch!” I screamed out.

“I already knew that answer, but I wanted to hear it from your mouth, because you know that you belong to me, Kat.”

Bending over the board, Eddie spun the bottle, and it went around several times before it also stopped on the truth or dare challenge.

“Dare,” he said without any hesitation.

“Hmm... you didn’t want to choose truth like me?” I asked, narrowing my amber eyes towards him, and blowing my curly bangs up.

“Nope, I’ll stick with my dare.”

“Your choice, right?”

“Yes. Dare me to do something,” Eddie insisted.

“Are you sure?”

“You already know—I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

“I am. Let me have it!” he yelled and laughed, pulling his legs up and crossing them.

“Let me think... I dare you to drink and eat the worm inside the bottle.”

Inspired Playlist for El Gusano Verde

“I Am” by Mary J. Blige

“Before He Cheats” by Carrie Underwood

“Said I Loved You... But I Lied” by Michael Bolton

“Take A Bow” by Rihanna

“Lonely” by Janet Jackson

“I Wish I Wasn’t” by Heather Headley

“Hey, that’s really two dares.”

“Well, if you’re too afraid to take my dare on, then you’ll automatically default to the other option, truth...”

“Listen, I’m not afraid of your little dares. I’ve done a lot worse.” He smiled.

“I’m sure you have.” I looked down and back up at him.

He stared down at the bottle and watched the green maggot-like worm float up and down in its liquid home. Then, he sat it upright. He was analyzing the worm, and it was a good thing he was doing so.

Although I've never eaten one, I've seen a few worms, but this worm looked different, compared to others I've seen. Its puffy, segmented body seemed to cast off a bright, lime bioluminescence. A twirly, red antenna was centered between its mandibles.

When he tapped on the glass, the liquid seemed to glow, as well.

"Hey, are you seeing this, Kat?" he asked.

Scooting closer to him, I said, "Yes, the lady told me that it may do that."

"I'm not sure if I should drink this, and I'm definitely not eating this thing," he gulped. "It could make me sick or something."

"Eddie, don't tell me you're afraid of a little worm bathing in some alcohol, but hey, if you are, then I totally understand. Hand the bottle over to me," I demanded with my hand stretched out. "Come on now, give it to me... I'll do it."

He shoved my hand away and said, "Whatever. I got this!" He started unscrewing the metal cap off the bottle and kept his eyes on the worm. He placed his nose near the opening and took in a deep whiff. The alcohol aroma pierced his nose and eyes, making them water. He sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

I watched him without blinking.

Wrapping his lips around the bottle, he tilted his head back to take a sip. "Hmm, tastes like sweet, crushed blueberries doused with sugar and a little lime juice. Not bad." He continued to drink it all, until the worm disappeared from the bottle into his mouth.

"So, how was it?" I asked.

"Tangy, cold, and gooey. The worm slipped right down my throat before I could chew it up. I've always loved to chew the worms, to savor their taste. Like I thought, no x-ray vision. Oh, well... Let's get ready."

We both started getting dressed.

"Make sure you wear the black dress tonight," he demanded with his cold eyes piercing through me.

"Hold on, I brought a new dress," I said as I pulled out a plum, ruffle backless dress with a plunging neckline out of my closet. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Absolutely not! If I wanted to take a hooker for all my friends to gawk at to the party and pass her around later, then I would stop off at Enright Park and pick one up." He turned his back away from me and flipped his hand into the air. "Hurry up! You don't want to upset me tonight, Kat," he hissed, balling up his right fist.

Tears filled my eyes. I placed it back on the rack with my quivering hand and chose the black one that resembled nun attire.

Fifteen minutes past, and I was in the bathroom brushing blush onto my cheeks. I watched him in the mirror and saw Eddie sitting in the chair. He was bent down about to tie up his shoes.

“Damn it!” he yelped.

I dropped my brush on the floor and stepped out. I asked, “What’s the matter?”

“My body feels funny, like cactus, thorn bullets are shooting inside of me. My hands feel numb.” He rubbed them together and flexed out his hands. “Kat, something’s wrong, I can’t read the numbers on my watch. There’s loud ringing in my ears, and my legs feel like Jell-O. Now, I can’t feel my hands, fingers, or toes.”

Eddie’s eyes closed, and he collapsed on the floor. He rolled over onto his back.

When he opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, my golden heels were facing him. “Kat, my vision feels like it’s returning.”

I knelt next to him and rubbed both sides of his face with my hands.

“Oh, poor Eddie doesn’t feel well.”

“What did you give me?” He stuttered out in broken words.

Picking up the empty bottle, I dangled it in front of his face.

“You’re about to get everything coming to you, Eddie Luciano,” I said, pointing at the bottle. “I’ve known about your disloyalty for a long time and never said a word. Plus, you’ve been so cruel to me, since we’ve been together. I was searching for the perfect solution for you. Finding that little shop was it! I knew you would take the bait so easy.”

Frowning at me, he screamed out, “What the hell did you give me!”

“Just a little gift that you can never give away.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That little worm you ate is going to change you. You’ll never cheat on me, or hurt anyone else again!”

His body began to shake, then his eyes rolled back.

“What’s happening to me?” he begged in a shivering tone.



Be careful what lurks in the dark... you never know what's watching you and waiting. Immerse yourself in 29 creepastic tales from the author of Boundless, and the Doll trilogy.

“Let me help you out. That little worm you consumed is called El Gusano Verde, The Green Worm—it’s an assassin. They were specially designed for monsters like you—cheaters and heartbreakers. The curly antennae are called proboscis. They impaled one or more of your inner organs and injected a lethal venom inside you.”

“I promise you, Kat, if I make it out of this, I’m going to kill you...” he said as foamy, bloody saliva flowed out the sides of his mouth.

“Stop talking, Eddie, you’re not going to do anything to me. It’s paralyzing you. Soon, it’ll liquefy all your organs and slurp up its dinner. After that, it’ll hike up your gastro tract, throat passage, and then crawl out of your mouth.”

His body started twitching and his eyes rolled back again. He clenched his fists. A pale, greenish tone covered his face.

In a deep, gargled voice, Eddie spoke his final words, “You won’t get away with this...”

“Yes, I will. The club always gets away with it. According to Mrs. Codona, the shop owner, your demise will be ruled a strange, allergic reaction with little to no explanation to why your insides dissolved. The evidence is going with me.”

I carefully placed the wiggly, full El Gusano Verde in its padded case and slid it inside my purse to return back to Mrs. Codona to gift to a new member.

“By the way, Eddie, you remember Mrs. Codona, right? Prue’s mom—she told me about you two, and how the police located Prue’s car in another state, but never found her. It’s been over five years, now. I know I would’ve been your next victim, but not after tonight.”

He glared at me, until his eyes froze.

“Don’t worry about the party. I’ll let your friends know that you didn’t feel well and needed to stay in. Karma is alive and well.”

Blowing out the candles and exiting the scene in the plum dress I chose for me, I locked the door behind me, and descended the stairs. Goodbye, Eddie, I whispered to myself, as I sung, I Am, into the night air as snowflakes began to fall.



El Gusano Verde was first published in The Sirens Call Winter 2021 issue #56



Mo Moshaty

Mo is an Afro-Latina screenwriter, author and producer. Raised within the clash of her mother's Yaqui heritage and her father's strict Southern Baptist upbringing, Mo's work contains worlds in which characters of color strive for identity, sentiment and belonging within the psychological horror genre.



HENRY

A young boy is confronted by death and an ominous natural force. Henry is written in retribution for the missing, murdered and exploited children of color in Atlanta from 1979-1981.



“Now, I told you. Three whacks with the hand broom if I caught you runnin’ up on that farm, didn’t I?”

Mama said that was all because I carved my name, well half my name, in Mr. Henderson’s willow tree at the edge of town. Now, I’ve seen boys carve worse than that. Bad Words. Real bad. But I was the one that got caught and I can barely feel my backside anymore. Mama wasn’t mostly mad that I was carving you see, just mad ‘cause a lot of boys been missing lately. First was Andy Willers, he disappeared about a month ago.

I understand how the brain works, a little. It gets mushy, mama said, when you’re too tired or didn’t eat enough or just worked too hard on something. But I wasn’t mushy. I know what I saw. I saw Andy Willers right there in my room, with half his head missing. Why? I don’t rightly know. But I remember wetting myself and screaming. Mama let me stay home from school that day but scolded me for making up such horrible stories. I knew I hadn’t, and I know what I saw but I wasn’t gonna argue.

I had taken to falling asleep with the lights on and our dog Royce on my bed, which was working pretty well until a tap on my shoulder set me flying against the wall. There, three of them stood, side by side. Andy with his head outta sorts, Mike Fuller, with no nose and mouth, just a big hole, and Ferris Stunt with no arms.

I’m not mushy, I said over and over, and I closed my eyes shut tight and opened them again, but they were still there. I was alone. Trapped in my room with these dead boys. At least I think they’re dead, but I can’t be sure with them walking around so. Andy motions for me to come and comes closer to me. His eyes widen, he motions faster and looks at my clock. Royce bolts and heads to mama’s bedside.

Andy stands closer to me, he smells real bad, but I still follow. I walk past mama’s room as quiet as I can, Royce glances up and me but makes no sound and I can feel the sweat down my back as Andy’s hand brushes my

shoulder. Mama is dead asleep, so I take the stairs as slow as I know how hoping to wake her, to stop this. We reach the bottom and I know there's no going back now. I turn the lock and knob and say goodbye to Royce at the top of the stairs.

We're walking forever and I'm cold and damp. I smell real bad too. Coming up over the edge of the hill I notice we're at the back of Mr. Henderson's farm, that monster of a willow tree looming. The first scarecrow I see looks lumpy and leans to the side. Ferris Stunt, or what's left of him heads towards the scarecrow. I sorta whisper shout for him. Andy places his ice-cold hand on my shoulder, and I jump. He puts his finger to his lips. Mike Fuller takes a sharp left turn and stops to stare at me and Andy. The shock of his face sends my ill stomach lurching and I lose all my supper. Mike heads through the corn to the other scarecrow. Andy and I walk in silence. We come upon the last scarecrow and Andy stands for a bit before he points to a window in Mr. Henderson's house. The light is on in what looks like the kitchen, Mr. Henderson is crying harder than I've ever seen anyone. Andy shoves me forward and points again towards the house. He too, disappears into the corn.

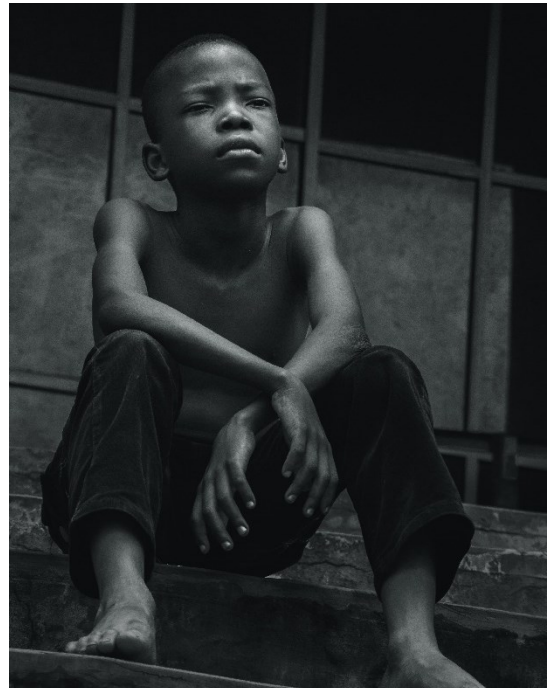


Photo by Daniel Tijesuni: pexels.com

Before I've got my wits, I stand outside Mr. Henderson's window and knock. He runs to the front of the house to let me in.

I stumble up the steps and he hushes me, pulling me in. He drags me to the kitchen, looking out the windows every now and again.

"They came for you, didn't they?" He says.

"Yes, all three of 'em. Are they dead?"

"Yes." His face is sad and mean at the same time.

"You kill 'em?"

"No. No I did not. She did." Mr. Henderson points to the giant willow tree that seems to be staring right through us.

"Why?"

"I was going to cut her down. The moment I put the saw blade to her she shrieked like nothing I've ever heard. And I felt it in my chest. Gave me a heart attack. So, I tried to be

gracious to her. Plant flowers around her, read to her. And she was silent again. And then the boys came. And they cut into her flesh, her screams too high for them to hear her.”

“So, she cut them.”

“Yes.”

“And the scarecrows to hide them?”

He nods, sobbing loudly. He stands quickly and grabs the bread knife off the table. I turn to run, and he grabs me.

“You see, you have to finish your name, or they will keep coming. People will know what she’s done! And she will come for me again”

“What you’ve done!” I’m not mushy, I’m NOT mushy. And trees don’t kill little boys. Crazy old men do. His hand is on my throat from behind, he shoves the knife in my hand.

“Please. Finish it.” He shoves me.

I run to her and fight through the branches to her trunk. I see the etches of the boys, strangely glowing somehow and off center of theirs, is mine. My half- name. I kneel beside it and through tears I know what I’m supposed to do. I think of Andy and Mike and Ferris and I know it’s gotta be so hard to be dead. They must be so lonely. Lonely enough to get me. Me.

I begin to carve solidly after the N, I’m ripping through. I hear it, small moans then high shrieks. I turn back to Mr. Henderson, he’s bent over like he’s gonna run, teeth bared.

I cut harder, few more strokes, then I’m done. I drop the knife and stand back. H-E-N-D-E-R-S-O-N.

I start to run home, faster than I ever have before. I shake my mama. I tell her everything.

Several policemen and the coroner are on Henderson’s farm wheeling out bodies covered in white sheets. A cherry picker is helping a few men cut down Mr. Henderson hanging by several willow branches wrapped around his neck over 50 feet up. Some folks said there were branches runnin’ all through him, like a wire tangle and through his face like a mask.

We moved that summer to a town upstate. I love everything about the house, except for the willow tree on the edge of the yard.



“Henry” appeared as part of Brigids Gate’s “A Quaint and Curious Volume of Gothic Tales (2021) as well as produced as a Radio Play for [A Bad Feeling Horror Podcast run by the Write or Die Chicks \(2021\).](#)



WC Dunlap

WC Dunlap draws her inspiration from the complexities of a Black Baptist, middle class upbringing by southern parents, and all that entails for a brown skin girl growing up in America. Equally enthralled by the divine and the demonic with a professional background in data & tech, she seeks to bend genres with a unique lens on fantasy, fear, and the future.



GRITS, GOBLINS, AND GOOD TIMES

Attention, dear reader: This is a love story, complete with grown folks' business. This is not for the kids. But there is also a moral to this story, a cautionary tale for the young and the young-at-heart alike. Listen carefully and be thee forewarned.



On a typical day, the hungry will enter the old kitchen with a need that cannot be sated by mere physical sustenance, their souls growling like empty bellies churning with acids that have set upon the flesh. The old Cook can hear these growls even before she sees the person, the bubbles and groans speaking to her in a language requiring a higher cognition to comprehend. With her cookbook as her cipher, she'll tie back salt and pepper coils, squint through spectacles slipping down her round nose, and flip pages until she finds the remedy. This is more ritual than necessity, for everything in that cookbook has been committed to memory and modified to perfection ages ago. She'll be cooking before the sustenance-seeker steps through the threshold and into her kitchen. After eighty years in this warm magical place, a stomach growl speaks louder than a human tongue.

Today is no different, in that regard.

Today, like every day, the old Cook can be found sitting in the old kitchen, in a new house, in the middle of a neighborhood in transition — a concrete landscape dotted with corner stores and check cashers gradually uprooted by gourmet coffee shops and hot-yoga studios. The air, once filled with the warm scents of cornbread and adobo, of collards and curry, now smells of oat milk and unseasoned chicken. The sounds of bachata and hip-hop are suppressed by noise complaints and the occasional blasts of Journey.

Now, this old kitchen cannot be seen from the street — or, for that matter, by the natural eye. But scents of comfort and curing map the way. It is hidden deep in the back, with its soot-covered hearth and wood-burning stove. An ancient ice box rattles against the wall, keeping eggs and dairy cool. Cast iron pots and dried herbs dangle from brick walls. Scents of rosemary, cinnamon, basil, and garlic mingle in the most delightful way. In a small dark corner closet hangs salted meats and sausage — some dried and jerked, others raw and awaiting hot oil and the skillet. Colorful jars of

preserves and pickles sit on pantry shelves. Containers of sugars and spices clutter the table and counters. The sun pierces lazily through the warped glass of the kitchen's old windows, filling the room with a muted, warm yellow glow. Every item, including Cook herself, is a throwback to ages long gone.

Through the kitchen is a back door that leads to a lush garden concealed by drooping trees and a high metal fence. A stream, running from nowhere, feeds vegetation with clear, cool waters. The tops of turnips, onions, carrots, and beets burst forth from rich soil and blankets of soft green moss. Grapevines twist lazily around silver trellises. Trees dip heavily with peaches, pears, and apples. Pecans and walnuts litter the ground. It is all seasons in this yard, fall and spring harvests co-mingling. Butterflies and blue jays flutter through the haze of dawn, and fireflies dance to the chirps of cicadas at dusk. A hammock swings between two trees, and that is where you can find Cook when she isn't in her kitchen.

She heads there now, to cuddle her cat and rest her eyes.



Image created at dream.ai by Wombo

Mister Chauncey keeps the house up front, coming and going in the guise of a harmless old man, hunched over and shuffling to conceal his impressive six-foot-five height and ageless physique. Goblin features — pointed ears, yellow eyes, crooked nose, and green-tinted brown skin — are obscured beneath dark shades, a derby hat, and his one indulgence of expensive tailored suits with spit-shined Italian leather wingtips. Ever the aristocrat, he moves with an air of nobility, confident in his superiority over just about all things.

Cook hears the heavy front door open and close, and she knows he has returned from some goblin excursion or another, no doubt discarding his disguise before relaxing in the front parlor. He'll come on back when he's ready. Mister Chauncey doesn't much care for the smoke and chaos of the kitchen, which serves Cook just fine. He often carries the sourness of the outside world, and its bitterness taints her meals. This is the reason she rarely leaves the kitchen herself and delegates the out-worldly stuff to him, his constitution being steelier than her own.

But when things are right with Mister Chauncey — Cook smiles to herself as she recalls — he'll take a seat at her wooden kitchen table, and she'll serve him a plate. She'll dish white corn grits boiled in seasoned salt, thickened with freshly churned butter, and stirred until the grits stick to her wooden spoon and drip slowly back into the pot. She'll cut thin slices of cheddar from a cheese brick and stir them into the grits until the white is clouded orange. A cast iron

skillet, greased with animal fat and heated to sizzle, will receive the farm fresh eggs, whisked with a little cream cheese until fluffy yellow clouds. She usually keeps the seasoning simple with a pinch of tarragon, a sprinkle of sea salt, and a dash of red pepper flakes. A couple of hot links, seared from the broiler, are set strategically between the grits and eggs, a savory barrier. A thick slice of freshly baked bread, toasted and buttered, is placed lightly on top of the sausage to soak up any excess oil. Plating complete, she'll place it down in front of Mister Chauncey with a cup of strong black coffee flavored with notes of hazelnut, cardamom, and clove.

Like foreplay, Mister Chauncey will take his time mixing the grits with the scrambled eggs, then add a dash of homemade hot pepper sauce for a little extra kick. Cook will watch as he lifts fork to full lips and a delicate tongue capable of tasting the most subtle flavors — her arousal growing with each bite her lover takes. He'll taste, chew, and swallow, then grimace like it's not good. But Cook knows that's a lie, because he'll wink and continue to eat.

Goblins just like to pick.

It doesn't take too many forkfuls before Mister Chauncey will rise with a full belly but a persistent hunger. He'll pull down those expensive trousers and bend Cook over that wooden table. She'll quickly slip out of her drawers and he into her, Mister Chauncey moaning obscenities and declarations of love alike, his stamina and skill unmatched by any mortal man, his syrup precious nectar for her cakes and pies. Cook feeds off of his magic and Mister Chauncey from her passion, giving them both a vitality that has endured for almost a century and will last a century more. This kitchen knows love. And it is that hunger that Cook can fill best.

Not surprisingly, lovers are frequent patrons of her kitchen.

Today is no different, in that regard. Two lovers approach now.

• • •

The doorbell rings, and a harmony of organ pipes plays throughout the house, their echo reaching into the magical little garden. Cook is shaken from daydreams of new recipes and scents to lure Mister Chauncey back into the kitchen. She sits up in her garden hammock and listens as he grumbles and shuffles begrudgingly to answer the door. The massive metal and wooden gateway to a new world creaks with the resistance of magic against reality. Mister Chauncey forces it ajar. Cook senses two magic-struck patrons, both their stomachs growling a deep hollow sound. She almost feels the rancid gas traveling like lightning through their groins to settle uncomfortably in their bellies. She hears their hunger as clearly as her own voice.

“Oohhh,” she cries in empathy and heads mission-bound into the kitchen. “These babies need a meal!”

Muffled words are exchanged with Mister Chauncey. Goblins prefer payment in gold, and although a half-breed, Mister Chauncey is no different. Cook hears the gentle clink of jewelry dropped into a glass jar.

“That’s all you got?” Mister Chauncey clicks his tongue in disapproval. It is enough, but Mister Chauncey grumbles that it is not.

Goblins just like to pick.

After a few tense moments, he relents. “Alright, then. Come on back.”

Cook hears murmurs of thanks, and so much more. These two lovers are holding on to memories of passion-flavors grown stale and tasteless. If left untreated, their emotions will mold and become toxic. She puts on hot water

for the grits.

These young lovers need a binding.

Mister Chauncey enters the kitchen first, the couple fidgeting nervously behind him. Unbothered, he leans in the threshold, taking a moment to admire his lover with those piercing golden eyes.

Although the years have been kind to her youthful deep brown skin, Cook knows that her body has changed. Her hips are fuller and press against her cotton skirts, her round breasts stretch the silk of her blouses, and her stomach creases with gentle ripples of flesh. Now her body sways when she moves, a study of angles and curves as she glides from stove to ice box to cupboards. Mister Chauncey watches her with a mischievous smirk. Cook throws him a wink. The goblin licks his lips with a low hungry growl that sends shivers up her spine. Cook wonders how she got so lucky to find this love. What she doesn’t know is that Mister Chauncey wonders the same.

“Hey, Cookie,” he purrs, biting his bottom lip.

“Hey, Cey.” She suppresses a girlish giggle. He looks good enough to eat in those shiny shoes and pleated pants. She makes a note to set aside a pot of grits for him later. She’ll make him keep the shoes on tonight.

“‘Cey,’ is it?” asks a masculine voice from behind the goblin. “Mister Chauncey to you, boy,” the goblin sneers.

Apologies muttered, Mister Chauncey reluctantly steps aside to allow the couple to enter the kitchen. Cook turns to greet the hungry lovers — a Black man, almost as tall as Mister Chauncey

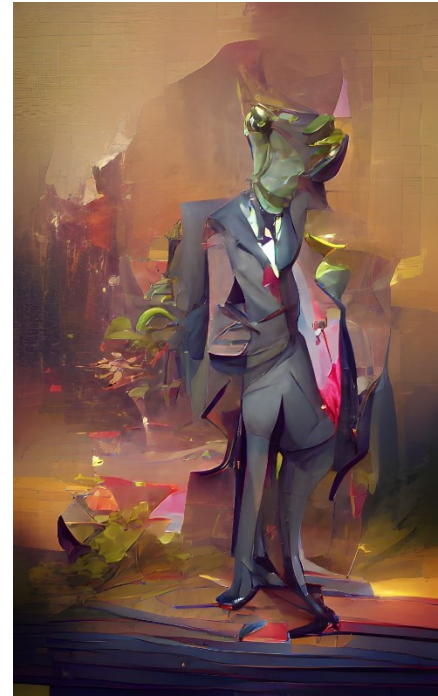


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but wider from fast foods that cannot fill his void, and a tiny white woman with unnatural auburn hair that looks like fire against her pale skin. She is frail and — from the scent of it — anemic, her soul hunger eating away at her body. These two found one another, but neither has given the other what they need. Their hunger has simply dug too deep.

Cook intends to fix that.

“Hello,” she greets them with a warm, sympathetic smile. “You can call me Cook.”



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“That’s a little on the nose,” the young woman chuckles nervously.

“My surname was Cooke with an E. That was ages ago. Guess I fell into the role. What do I call you?”

“Marcus.” The young Black man steps forward, holding his hand out to Chauncey and then to Cook. Both stare at his open palm until he drops it awkwardly to his side. “Uh, this is Lizzie.”

“Welcome, Marcus and Lizzie,” Cook says and means it. She likes her kitchen full. “How did you find us?”

“We smelled the food,” Lizzie struggles to explain, “from the street. It felt like we needed to

come here to... to... eat, I guess.”

“Indeed, you do.” Cook gestures for them to sit. “You’re practically starving. Please make yourself at home. Mister Chauncey will pour you some peppermint tea while I prepare you a special meal.”

“I don’t like peppermint,” Lizzie whines. “It reminds me of being sick.”

Cook frowns. Baby, you are sick, she thinks, but instead says with strained patience, “Chamomile, then.”

Lizzie nods with a grateful smile. She and Marcus take a seat at the large kitchen table, their wide eyes anxious and questioning.

“I don’t really understand how or why we’re here,” Marcus says to no one in particular.

“Shush,” Lizzie scolds. “I’m hungry.”

Cook and Mister Chauncey exchange a concerned glance.

“That ginger smell like succubus to you?” Cook whispers to her lover.

Mister Chauncey's eyes narrow, and he sniffs the air. "If it's there, it's far down the line. She's just a tad demanding, and him not demanding enough. Give them some cake and throw their asses out. Now that I'm in this kitchen, I'm feeling a bit peckish myself. Woman, you look like a meal." He pulls her close.

Cook playfully pushes him away. "Cake won't fix this. They deserve the same chance we had." She pushes the empty tea kettle against his chest. "Now make yourself useful if you're going to stay in my kitchen."

Mister Chauncey shrugs and grabs the kettle to fill it with water. Cook stuffs dried chamomile leaf and orange peel into small metal infusers.

Eventually they find themselves side-by-side at the stove. Chauncey nudges his lover to get her attention. "Did you make this?" he asks, sticking a long brown fingernail into a pot of homemade jam. He slowly licks it off.

Cook rolls her eyes. Goblins are about as subtle as a blow to the head. "You know I've touched every edible thing in this kitchen." She picked those wild grapes herself from the vine in the garden, boiling and seasoning them with sugar and pectin made from apple scraps. Of course, he knows this, but goblins like to pick.

"Every edible thing?" He pulls her toward him. "Touched by you?" He runs his sticky finger across her plump lips. Cook savors the salty taste of her lover's skin laced with the sweet stickiness of jam.

Mister Chauncey slips behind her and wraps his arms tightly around her thick waist, his warm body pressing into hers. He blows hot breath into his lover's ear and whispers, "I need you."

Cook glances over her shoulder at the young couple, who watch them with longing. Mister Chauncey follows her gaze and smiles devilishly. "Let's show them what they're missing." He flips her around and kisses Cook deeply, his full lips and forked tongue twisting and massaging.

Cook does not want to pull away. Her lover smells of citrus and tastes of ripe fruit juice warmed in midday sun. She drinks greedily as she feels Mister Chauncey rising against her. The whistle of the tea kettle breaks their spell, and they reluctantly pull apart.

"How did you meet?" Lizzie asks, envy dripping from each word.

"She made me a meal," Chauncey replies. "It was the worst I'd ever tasted. I was offended, really, but she did not care. Then I realized that I wanted her to care."

"So, he wooed me until I could no longer see a life without him," Cook adds.

"Nor I without her."

"And my cooking became better." "One might say almost magical."

“And how did you two meet?” Cook returns the question as Chauncey sets two delicate cups of tea before the couple.

“Coach wanted me to take yoga,” Marcus explains. “I am — I was — a semi-pro football player in Europe. Lizzie was the yoga instructor.”

“An athlete, huh?” Mister Chauncey raises an eyebrow at Marcus’s soft girth.

“Former athlete,” Marcus corrects. “I had a career-ending injury. Guess the yoga wasn’t enough.”

“Apparently not,” jeers the goblin. Cook pinches him.

“I support him now,” Lizzie chimes in a little too eagerly. “Family money. I really don’t mind...” Her voice trails off.

“Okay, then.” Cook nods and adds a little more seasoning salt and butter to the grits.

“Hmm. It’s got to be hard not having your own money,” Chauncey says with an impassive tone. “I’d imagine a bit emasculating, being a kept man and all. Of course, I myself am only half-man, but the other half is far superior. You are not so fortunate, though. I’m curious — what does that feel like?”

Cook frowns as Marcus stutters a non-response. Mister Chauncey is baiting him. He can’t even help himself. This is the sourness she doesn’t need in her kitchen.

“Baby, pay him no mind,” Cook comforts Marcus. “There are all kinds of partnerships.” She sets down a plate of flaky biscuits and pushes jars of jellies, syrup, sugar, and cinnamon towards the couple before leaning in close to explain, “Sugar, like infatuation, is fleeting. It cannot sustain the passion necessary for true love. It will burn off from its own heat, and you will be left empty before you can forget you were once full. But enjoy this lil’ sweet now while I whip up something more enduring.”

Marcus and Lizzie immediately dig into the biscuits, and Cook casts another disapproving glare at Mister Chauncey. The half-goblin throws up his hands in mock surrender and takes a seat on the hearth. He stretches his long limbs before crossing his legs and leaning back on his elbows in one elegant motion. He puckers his lips and blows Cook a kiss.

Cook rolls her eyes. Give a goblin some looks and a little height, and they are intolerable. “Why are you still in my kitchen?” she asks him.

“Cuz I have something for you when you’re done.”

Cook pretends to pay him no mind, but the sooner she can take care of this couple, the sooner Mister Chauncey can take care of her. She pushes a couple of hot links into the broiler and risks a glance over her shoulder at Chauncey. They lock eyes as he bites his bottom lip again.

Cook fans herself with a dish towel. “Good lawd, this creature.”

...

Marcus and Lizzie look up eagerly from empty plates with crumb-littered lips. Cook turns to see Marcus reach for Lizzie's hand and squeeze tightly. Cook smiles to herself. She's become quite the conjurer over the years. The sweetness of the biscuits won't last for long, but it will give them the spark that they've been missing.

"Tell him why you love him," she encourages.

Lizzie leans her forehead against Marcus's and unloads her heart in a hushed whisper meant only for lovers' ears. When she is done, Marcus begins.

Mister Chauncey scoffs.

He is a distracting presence. I wish he'd leave until I'm through. Cook glares at him but continues with her conjure. She sets the grits to simmer and turns to the skillet to crack and scramble the eggs. The spicy aroma from the oven tells her the hot links are almost ready. From the corner of her eye, she watches Marcus and Lizzie kiss. It is a shallow, polite kiss, but it is a start. She hums to herself as she sets the coffee to percolating and begins to plate.

"Shoot," she says to herself, "I forgot the cheddar." She quickly cuts thin slices of cheese on top of the hot grits.

"Something not right about those two." Cook jumps at the sound of Mister Chauncey standing directly behind her. Damn Goblin shadow steps!

"Succubus?" she asks again.

"No. Why do you keep saying that?"

"Maybe it's the red hair." Cook shrugs.

"Anyway, money has a way of wedging between lovers. If they can check their egos and ignore the out- side world, they'll have a chance. I'm going to remind them of why they found one other in the first place."

Mister Chauncey shakes his head. "They don't deserve you." "You don't deserve me," Cook jokes.



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“That much is true,” Mister Chauncey agrees, “but I’ll live forever trying.”

Cook bumps him playfully with her hip as she switches past, carrying two plates laden with food. She sets the plates quietly before Lizzie and Marcus, who remain engrossed in one another.

Best not to disturb them and let the conjure do its work, Cook decides and backs away to rejoin Mister Chauncey by the stove. He’s already dipping his finger into the pot of hot grits and slowly licking them off.

“You with the finger and the licking.” Cook slaps his hand away. “This conjure is not for me and you.”

Without a word, Mister Chauncey pulls her to him and buries his head into her soft coils. Cook knows he is smelling coconut oil and lemon, intoxicating scents to his sensitive nose. The appetites they inspire will need to be sated soon. Cook wraps her arms around his waist as he rubs her neck, shoulders, and back, his hands sliding down to the roundness of her hips — massaging, grasping. She releases a soft moan, silenced almost immediately by Mister Chauncey’s lips. The world quickly drops away until it is but the two of them in this kitchen.

“Is this cheese?” Cook does not hear Lizzie groan. “You know I don’t do dairy.”

“It’s not melted yet. Just scrap it off, babe,” Marcus advises.

“Plain grits are like eating cardboard.” Lizzie reaches for a jar of sugar and a shaker of cinnamon.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Marcus cautions.

“Why? She wants us to enjoy the food. It’d be rude not to eat it.”

Marcus nods slowly. “Yeah, I guess. To be honest, I prefer sweet grits too.”

“See?” Lizzie smiles as she scrapes the cheese off the top of the grits and stirs cinnamon and sugar into the corn mixture. She takes a large, satisfying bite before offering a forkful to Marcus. He hesitates, but only for a moment, before opening wide and tasting the sweet concoction for himself. They both moan with delight.

“This is good.” Marcus digs his fork into Lizzie’s plate for another taste.

Mister Chauncey looks up casually from biting Cook’s neck and freezes as he watches Lizzie sprinkle sugar over the grits on Marcus’s plate. “Oh shit.”

“What?” Cook follows his gaze to the couple and gasps in horror.

“Oh shit,” Mister Chauncey repeats. He backs away from Cook. “For the record, I never liked these two.”

Cook steadies herself against the counter as the room turns red and begins to spin. “HOW DARE YOU!” She stomps towards the couple, her voice deeper now, rising from some ancient well of rage that reverberates off the kitchen walls. “You disrespectful, ungrateful little beasts!”

A startled Lizzie pushes back from the table, a fork of sugar grits still dangling from her lips. Marcus immediately stands, his athlete's reflexes ready for fight or flight.

"You really shouldn't have done that." Mister Chauncey's voice is filled with amusement. "There's disrespect, and then there's sugar in grits. Holy shit, kids, you done fucked up now." His smile widens, the sharpened edges of goblin teeth fully visible.

"I CURSE YOU!" Spittle flies from Cook's mouth. "I curse you with a suffocating loneliness that will swallow your remaining moments of life in a haze of dark despair! You will feel nothing but emptiness and pain as your flesh is torn from your bones, and your ability to love is consumed like watered-down syrup, burned away as quickly as the sugar that you use to taint my grits! Your souls will wander aimlessly in search of a fullness that will be forever denied. I name you Agony and Despair, and that is all you shall know."

"I'm lactose intolerant," Lizzie cries.

"My god! It's only sugar, lady!" Marcus shouts as he protectively pushes Lizzie against the wall.

Cook reaches for the pot of hot grits on the stove. Mister Chauncey swats her hand away and places a kitchen hatchet in it instead, goblins being handy in a brawl. Cook nods in thanks and growls, "You want to act like animals? Well, welcome to the slaughterhouse!"

"This neighborhood is going to shit," Mister Chauncey says to his lover. "It really is," Cook agrees.

Together, they pounce.

...

Dear Reader: Today things went a little differently. The moral of this story? There are many reasons not to put sugar on grits, but being butchered by a witch and her goblin lover is a big one.

Epilogue

"Well, that was unfortunate," Cook sighs, breaking the silence.

The grits have hardened in the pot, and the animal fat has congealed in the skillet. The setting sun fills the kitchen with a blinding orange light as the cat licks bits of Lizzie and Marcus off the floor. Mister Chauncey finishes salting the meat while Cook wipes down the kitchen floor and counters. They both drip with sweat and blood.

"Was it?" Mister Chauncey asks, hooking the last chunk of meat in the corner closet.

“This suit has certainly seen better days.” He wipes bloodied hands against the rich wool. “At least we got fresh meat.”

“I lost my temper.” Cook’s voice is filled with remorse.

“You did,” Chauncey agrees. “You sure you don’t have a little goblin in you?”

“I really did want to help them.”

“I know, Cookie.” Mister Chauncey wraps his lover in a comforting embrace. “But not everyone is worthy of a love as powerful as ours.”

Cook rests her head on his chest as he rocks her gently. But the adrenaline and blood are a heady blend. Mister Chauncey’s hands and lips begin to explore her blood-soiled flesh. Their caresses grow more frantic. Growls and snarls escape from them both as they tear clothing from each other.

Cook gazes down into her lover’s brilliant golden eyes as he kneels before her naked body, kissing below her navel and gently parting her thighs. She grabs the back of his head as that talented forked tongue finds her sweet middle and digs in with a ravenous yet controlled zeal. She is always feeding this creature, and it is always a delight.

The familiar harmony of organ pipes rings through the house. A hungry patron stands at the threshold, but for now, Cook and Mister Chauncey give in to their own hunger. Once again, they lose themselves in one another, but this time writhing on a bloody kitchen floor, giving and receiving pleasure through all manner of pose and position, filling one another up as only old familiar lovers can do. Praises to ancient gods, declarations of love, and the blaspheme of obscenities fill the air. The entire kitchen shakes. There is rumor of earthquakes in Brooklyn that day.

It is hours before their hunger is quenched and they finally part, rising from that kitchen floor sticky and glowing from one another. Cook heads to the garden and Mister Chauncey to the front of the house. It may be days before they meet again, each living full lives apart. But theirs is a love as savory and fortifying as a plate of sausage, eggs, and cheese grits.



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P.M. Raymond

P.M. Raymond hails from New Orleans but currently lives on the East Coast with 27 cookbooks and an imaginary dog named Walter. You can find her enjoying a café au lait and indulging in the storytelling mastery of Shirley Jackson, M.R. James, Joe Hill, Tananarive Due, and manga maestro, Junji Ito.



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P.M.

RAYMOND'S

THE JOHN HUGHES GUIDE TO HIGH SCHOOL GIRL TRANSFORMATIONS

Lyla's sleepover was supposed to secure her place in the pantheon of Rosemount High's 'in crowd'. She'd studied the John Hughes Guide to High School Girl Transformations – Sixteen Candles, Pretty in Pink, and The Breakfast Club. Lyla dissected every pout, every bitchin', to solve the Rubik's cube of teenage angst. But there was one move left. Shannon.

Shannon was the gatekeeper to coolness. Lyla tried desperately to flip her afro-curled outsider status, but little digs from her nemesis kept her off-kilter. The worst was at lunchtime. Shannon would pull Lyla's ringlets, orange pizza grease still under her nails, and howl "boing". The entire table would laugh. The message was clear. Shannon had control, and Lyla had to endure it

That fateful night, five pajama-clad girls wiggled in anticipation. The VCR whirred as it sucked the black cartridge inside. Instead of Ferris Bueller's mug filling the screen, grainy footage glared from the television. "What the hell?" Shannon grumbled with low-key indignation, arms crossed, ponytail swinging. "Food stamps don't cover VCRs?"

"What's your damage, Shannon?!" Lyla blurted out, frantically pushing the eject button. The moment Shannon rolled her eyes, Lyla realized her mother was right.

Lyla's gaze turned dark like marbles. Claws tore through her nail beds, facial bones cracked as her snout elongated. Lyla reached for Shannon like a hideous Elasta Man. Lyla's hooked fingers grabbed Shannon's golden ponytail and yanked. A bloody chunk of scalp rested in Lyla's hands. Teenage voices shrieked and cried, but it was Shannon's screams that gave Lyla life. "Boing!" Lyla yelled from the top of her guttural lungs. It feels so good to be myself.



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BW/1H



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What's next for P.M. Raymond?

A short story in the wedding-themed anthology, *Malice, Matrimony, & Murder - A Collection of Cozy Mystery and Crime Fiction Stories*, scheduled for release in November 2023. Pamela will be bringing a character from one of her horror stories, Lyla, a six-year-old demon, in to solve the mystery of a missing puppy and a wedding ring.



K.T. Seto

Katryna considers herself to be primarily a Science Fiction and fantasy writer whose work frequently crosses genres while never really leaving the Speculative fiction umbrella. She's very active on social media so click and follow!



NUMBER 99: A MIST FAE TALE

The letters came once a month, three nights before the full moon. The man who delivered them always wore the same finely cut gray uniform, which looked expensive enough that it likely cost what Marshall made in a month. Marshall's instructions were to let the delivery man in the moment he appeared in the antechamber of the Warden's office. He never heard the man speak and never stayed more than a minute after the first time. No one ever had to tell him something twice. The assistant stood eyes down, holding open the hallway door. Marshall held open the door to the Warden's office. Then they left. Every month, three days before the full moon, for the past five years.

Marshall didn't fidget. Age and experience had taught him there were reasons for these types of procedures. Reasons it is often better not to know. So, he held the door and stared at the crack in the plaster for 45 seconds. Then they went to get coffee from the communal mess.

"Marshall, come into my office." Warden Whittaker's voice startled him. He turned to look at the intercom- the box sitting innocuously in its place on the corner of the cabinet behind his desk. He looked up and saw his assistant pause and grasp the door to stop it from closing behind him. Marshall shook his head, and the assistant nodded and shut the door with a click that sounded loud in the emptiness of the shared space. Marshall took a moment to tidy his uniform before reaching for the door, wiping his sweaty palms on his pants before he pulled the office door open and stepped into the room.

The delivery man faced the Warden across the scarred expanse of mahogany atop the antique desk. Marshall kept his eyes on the Warden as he sat down. His first name was Jason, but Marshall never used it. It was always Warden or Sir. The Warden's face was grim, which wasn't unusual. He seldom changed his expression. The only hint that he felt anything at all was in the way he sometimes fiddled with the gold bracelet he always wore. Marshall saw him smile once- it was disturbing. Thankfully, he wasn't smiling now, so Marshall felt reassured.

"What I am about to say doesn't leave this room." The Warden said without preamble and paused long enough for Marshall to nod his acquiescence. "I've solved both our problems."

"Sir?" Marshall squirmed in his seat but didn't get up.

“I’ve put up with it for 6 months. We both need a solution and I’ve found it. I’d planned to turn this over to you in a few years when I retire, but given the circumstances, I think this is a way to bring things back to normal.”

The Warden gestured as he spoke. The delivery man moved back, tempting Marshall to turn and look at him, but he resisted. He took a breath and waited for the Warden to finish speaking.

“It’s number 99.” At those words, Marshall moved his hands from where they lay on the armrests of the chair into his lap, spreading his fingers to keep from balling them into fists. It



Photo by Jimmy Chan, pexels.com

took some effort, but he kept his breathing slow and his face blank.

“What about him sir?” He said once he was sure he could speak without inflection.

“He is going to die.”

“I wasn’t aware he’d lost his appeal.” The Warden waved a hand and Marshall closed his mouth.

“To hell with appeals. You haven’t been able to focus since he arrived. It just so happens that this time I can supply what’s asked for and get rid of the distractions. He fits. He’s not the only one, but given the situation, I thought this was the perfect way to get things back to normal. And I want you to take him.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If you agree, Mister Sídhe will explain. The question I am asking is if you would like to deliver him. He’s going to die. I want you to see him off, considering.”

“Considering.” Marshall frowned.

There was room for 100 prisoners on death row, but they never seemed to hit that number for long. They always lost a few. No one cared. The residents were the demons of society. Some were worse than others, but 99- well, he made the rest look like girl scouts. Everyone wanted him dead, Marshall included. Did he want to see him off? Hell, he'd been dreaming of it.

"I'll do it." Marshall turned to look at the delivery man. Mister Sídhe reminded him of a gymnast or martial artist. Slim, with attractive but vaguely feline features. There was something about his eyes. He had a gaze that said he'd happily provide you with a heaping helping of pain. It made him wonder what kind of person delivered messages that resulted in them sending a prisoner to his death. Marshall stared, waiting. Mister Sídhe inclined his head but didn't speak.

"Ok then, at midnight three days from now, you'll go scoop 99 from his pen and take him to the address on this card." The Warden tapped the card that lay face down on his desk but made no move to hand it over. "Mister Sídhe will meet you and ride with you to your destination." Marshall opened his mouth to speak, but the Warden cut him off.

"Save it for Wednesday."

"I guess I should say thank you."

"Talk to me afterward. If you still feel like thanking me, I will accept your gratitude then. I just want this done." The Warden nodded, and Marshall recognized it as a dismissal.

**

At 11pm three days later, the card was on his desk. After a moment's hesitation, he scooped it up. It reminded him of a wedding invitation. There should be some sort of ceremony for this day. Normally, prisoners get last requests and special meals. Number 99 hadn't had either. He'd checked, as he always checked. To make sure 99 was alive and locked away. Incarceration was a paltry punishment, but it was all the justice he would get.

Pocketing it, he grabbed his things and walked to the hole. When he got there, he stopped in the doorway, staring in disbelief.

"About time you showed up, Warden said wait for you to move the body." The guard stood next to a gurney; a cloth draped form lay atop it.

No.

Somehow. Somehow- he'd escaped whatever punishment awaited him at the address. A second guard joined the first, and Marshall realized it was the delivery man. He wore a copy of Marshall's uniform so exquisitely made it was barely recognizable. Mister Sídhe tilted his head and Marshall stepped back, allowing them to precede him down the dimly lit hallway towards the exit, pushing the gurney as they went.

The guard slid it into the back of the van positioned just outside the exit, collapsing the legs, and slamming the door in one disinterested motion. Then he knocked on the rear and walked over to Mister Sídhe, who sat in the passenger seat and allowed the man to close the door for

him. Marshall got in and shut the door, clipping his seatbelt in place before turning to look at the man seated next to him.

“He was fine two hours ago. I checked,” he said, as he pulled into the lane that led to the exit.

“Indeed.” Mister Sídhe replied, and Marshall’s fingers clenched the steering wheel spasmodically.

“He’s dead.” The man laughed softly at his proclamation.

“Oh, not yet, but soon.” Marshall took the exit and turned onto main street to drive through the center of town. The reply confused him. The other guard said the man was dead, the delivery man said he wasn’t. Who was right?

The address was for an enormous old house with a stone façade and red sloped roof of the type popular with German immigrants in the colonial era. It had more than one chimney and thin lines of smoke traveled up from one of them despite the heat of late summer in the air. Marshall parked the car at the entrance and then got out and went around to the passenger side to open the door for his passenger. As he did, a tall, large man exited the house.

“Cat, you just made it. You have problems with this one?” The man said, all but ignoring Marshall to walk swiftly to the rear of the car. Marshall moved to open the back, but the man waved a hand, and the door flew open. Marshall stared at the latch- he was lucky it hadn’t opened on their drive over.

“We had a leisurely drive. It’s his first time.” Marshall stepped back to allow the man to pull the body from the gurney and sling it over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “If you want to come in, you can. Just pull the door shut behind you.” Mister Sídhe said dismissively. Marshall watched the two men mount the porch stairs before shutting the rear of the van and following them inside and down the hallway.

The tall man, who Sídhe called Jim, tossed the still unconscious prisoner onto a table in front of the comically large armchair near a lit fireplace in what obviously was a library, complete with an antique grandfather clock in the corner. At the rear of the room was a desk and enormous chair which faced away from them, leaving only the tall seat back was visible in the shadows created by the flickering flames. Marshall closed the doors and stood just inside. The two men swiftly rearranged 99’s restraints, fastening them to the table legs. Then they pulled another larger set out of an ornate chest by the fireplace just as the clock chimed midnight.

At the sound of the first discordant notes, the two men moved faster, ignoring 99, who lay splayed like some obscene offering. The desk chair creaked, and Marshall turned, holding his breath in anticipation. What are they doing? 99 let out a low moan. Marshall’s eyes darted from 99 to the chair and back again, hardly noticing that the men now stood silently watching the chair.

“Sir Sídhe! Is it that time again?” the words were a hissing sound that floated through the air punctuating the sounds of the prisoner stirring on the table.

“Aye.” Mr. Sídhe said and then, from one moment to the next, he was gone. Marshall took an involuntary step backwards, his back hitting the door, hands frozen at his sides, looking fruitlessly for projectors or something else that could generate what he saw. Finding nothing, he groped blindly for his service weapon. Wishing he had the uniform he’d worn in the military. Clothing with pockets and layers holding the tools he needed to survive impossibly dangerous situations. Yet, he doubted any of those tools could help him with the beast he faced now.

There was no other word for what stood before him in the spot once occupied by Mister Sídhe. Its head now sat several meters higher than his own, maybe 2 meters below the ceiling. Quite impressive as the ceiling had to be 8 meters high, which previously made the room seem cavernous. Its body sported a fine pelt of fur that matched the color of the hair on Mr. Sídhe’s head and large black wings which lay folded against its back. It had fangs to go with the large white teeth in its mouth, and claws. And it still wore the uniform, leaving little doubt that this beast, whatever it turned out to be, was also Mr. Sídhe.

The thing smiled, a sight made more frightening by the way it stepped fully into the light and gestured with one long claw in a parody of a salute. Then it turned and leaped upon the figure rising from the desk chair. The being gave no warning to its actions, likely using its transformation and Marshall’s presence to take the chair’s occupant by surprise. An answering roar sounded and for a time there was only the sound of flesh meeting flesh and angry cries as the two battled in the shadows, the entwined combatants oblivious to everything but each other as the Sídhe beast inched them closer to the waiting chair and the bound criminal on the other side of the room. When the battle moved from the shadows into the flickering light, Marshall gasped. The involuntary sound rousing 99 to full wakefulness.

He looked to his right and noticed that the man- Jim stood to one side of the room, his gaze fixed on the two combatants. Jim had one arm extended and held what appeared to be a gnarled wooden stick pointed in their direction. 99 let out a scream, the sound echoing through the room. It startled them all, allowing the Sídhe beast to get the upper hand, pinning his foe beneath him. Marshall took that moment to get a good look at it, and at once wished he hadn’t. As frightening as the Sídhe beast seemed, it was nothing compared to what it fought. The chair’s occupant was larger, scaled, and horned. The red brown tinge of its flesh glistened in the firelight, giving off a faint but distinctive glow. Marshall froze- locked in place by fear and confusion. 99’s screams built in volume as he tugged at his restraints, desperate to get away. Marshall felt the numbness he’d felt for months, giving way to something he didn’t want to put a name to as he realized that the battling monsters had effectively trapped 99 behind them. Good, he thought, the *schadenfreude* filling him with a bitter *mélange* of glee and horror. Then his conscience kicked in. He’d taken an oath. Cursing the absurdity of life, he unclipped his holster, placing his hand on the hilt of his service weapon. It was likely he couldn’t pull it free without someone noticing the movement, but he had a duty to protect, even when the potential victim wasn’t an innocent.

“Don’t” Jim hissed at him, and Marshall stilled, watching as the Sídhé beast swiped at the horned thing and the restraints on the chair rose, flying unassisted towards them. Marshall watched Jim mutter and wave his stick like a puppeteer, the shackles floating in tandem with his movements as if controlled by invisible strings. Marshall struggled to block out the sound of 99’s frantic screams and movements atop the table. Was he going to just stand there? The smell of 99’s urine joined the smell of his sweat, mingling with the scent of wood-smoke overwhelming his senses. A loud clicking sound jolted him into motion just as the grandfather clock chimed its 12th and final chime, and he pulled his gun from his holster and aimed it at the pair battling before him.

The Sídhé beast leaped nimbly from its position atop the monster, deftly sidestepping the shackle on the beast’s ankle to land on the floor. Then it turned in a circle and disappeared. A moment later, a black cat whose size was somewhere between a Jaguar and a Maine Coon stood in the spot the Sídhé beast had last occupied. He winked at Marshall and spread his mouth into a very un-catlike smile. Jim waved the stick frantically behind them, directing the rest of the shackles into place so that the monster was bound at ankles and wrists. It sighed in resignation, as if the will to fight left him the moment the shackles snapped closed and Marshall let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, his heart still pounding a terrified staccato in his chest, but his hands were rock steady on his gun.

The monster stood, and Marshall noted with horror that he was wearing clothes. It took a moment to smooth the trim navy suit it wore so that no hint of the preceding battle remained. Then he turned and walked to the chair behind the table where 99 struggled futilely against his bonds and seated himself, his bonds clattering merrily. Marshall took a deep breath, then another, and another, willing himself to push past his fear and incredulity and do something. The thing tilted its head and glared down at 99 and then nodded and both the cat and Jim seemed to relax, the cat’s smile becoming wider and more disturbing at the sight. Marshall forced himself to take a step away from the door, anger rising in direct correlation to the fear that coated the back of his tongue, leaving the bitter taste of terror to overwhelm his other senses.

“What are you going to do with that gun, Deputy? Do you think it will help you should we decide you’re too much trouble? It won’t. The world isn’t what you think it is at all. Not even a little.” The words came from the cat, but his brain struggled to accept. 99 screamed again, alternating between begging and babbling incoherently. The thing seated behind him seemed to enjoy this. Poking at him with one long claw and smiling as a thin line of blood appeared where he’d touched. Like a bully with a magnifying glass watching ants turn crispy in the sunlight.

“You wanted explanations. Do you not believe your eyes when you see something?”

“I believe things that are possible. What is happening isn’t possible.” The cat tilted its head at this but remained silent. The only sounds in the room were 99’s breathless cries. Marshall’s eyes slid back to the writhing form. 99’s terror enveloped the room, tainting the air with the sounds and smells of his fear. Marshall’s head cleared a bit more as his brain registered the suffering of the man on the table. How many of his victims had he kept alive and afraid, hoping

for rescue? Had his sister been like this? Bound and scared and wondering what would happen to her and her child?

“If this is real. Why?”

Jim walked over to Marshall and handed him a glass of whiskey, which he tossed back, holding the glass out for a refill the moment it was empty.

“This, my dear Deputy, is justice. Have a seat.” Jim gestured to the chairs by the fire and waited as Marshall fumbled to put his gun back into its holster one-handed. The cat smiled again and continued speaking. “It’s a payment for his crimes and our debt to the five. They have to live here to protect us, and if they’re living here, they must eat.” Marshall looked back at 99 and the man screamed again as the cat smiled its creepy smile.

Marshall walked to one of the three normal sized armchairs that flanked the fireplace next to the monster and 99 and sat down heavily, unable to tear his eyes from the pair. His mouth moved soundlessly several times before he could form words.

“You mean...” He couldn’t finish and saw with some horror that the monster had shredded the uniform 99 wore so that his body lay mostly naked before him.

“That’s enough noise, don’t you think?” Jim said, and the monster nodded, breathing out a cloud of red vapor that stilled the sounds and movement 99 was making. The only clue of his terror was the shifting of his gaze and the tears leaking in a steady stream from the corners of his eyes. Jim took another of the chairs and the cat- Mr. Sídhé, because some part of him accepted that the man and the beast and this odd large talking cat were one creature- took the other. Marshall looked down at the half empty glass in his shaking hand, not realizing that he had taken another gulp of the liquid despite the evidence.

“This is real.”

“Very. You wanted answers, Deputy. Are you satisfied?”

Marshall thought for a moment. An hour ago, he had known there was no such thing as monsters. Now he was talking to one while another tormented his sister’s murderer on the other side of the room.

“Almost.” he said. Jim and the cat exchanged a look.

“Almost? Hmm, one would think that you have quite enough answers about things to last you for some time, Deputy.” Marshall shook his head.

“Just one more. I get it. 99 is on the menu tonight. It’s going to eat his fear, right?” Jim and the cat exchanged another look and Jim shrugged, lifting his glass to his mouth, and taking a large swig as if washing away a sour taste.

“Not just his fear. The Magus will eat everything he finds palatable and dispose of the rest. He doesn’t waste his food, although he sometimes plays with it for a while. To improve the flavor, so to speak.” The cat lifted one shoulder as he said this, imitating a shrug, the human

action jarring on something so... not. Marshall looked over at the table again. Jim, he noticed, hadn't glanced that way at all, staring alternately at his glass or the fire. The cat hardly seemed bothered, turning his smiling gaze from Marshall to the Magus and back again as it pleased him.

Marshall watched them silently, trying to figure out how he felt about doing nothing while a monster ate a human. To push this new knowledge into a place that felt right. Was this revenge or justice? Did feeding evil to monsters balance the scales? Someone like 99, who had done so many unspeakable things to so many innocents, deserved it, right?

Jim finished his drink and rose, crossing to the shelf behind the desk and pulling down a carved wooden box. The cat was oblivious, stretching, and kneading the chair in imitation of the motions Marshall had seen his pets do many times before. None of this was right.

Jim set the box on the desk and lifted the lid, removing something small before walking over to where Marshall sat nursing the rest of the whiskey in his glass. He looked up as Jim approached with a bit of metal dangling between his fingers.

"So, now you know. The issue with that is that you don't have what the rest of your kind have anymore because of it."

"My kind?" Marshall asked, unable to tear his eyes from the finely wrought gold bracelet as Jim fastened the clasp about his wrist and waved his hands over it while muttering under his breath again.

"Humans, my dear Deputy. Humans have protection because they don't know. When they do, they need help hiding." The cat said lazily, closing its eyes, clearly on its way to sleep.

"Hiding from what?" Marshall asked, and Jim stepped back and walked to the library door, pulling it open and gesturing for Marshall to join him at the entrance.

"Us." The Magus said and ran one sharp claw down the center of 99's abdomen, laying the flesh open like a surgeon preparing to operate. He stumbled backward into the door at the sound of that hissing voice. Marshall couldn't stop staring at 99's mouth moving soundlessly while the Magus thing yanked delicately on at the layer of muscle that sat just under 99's skin. He knew he'd hear that voice in his dreams later. Maybe forever.

Tearing his gaze away, Marshall followed Jim back down the hallway and waited mutely while the man opened the door and gestured for him to leave.

"Never take it off. You don't want to know what else is out there."

Marshall paused.

"Are they all hungry?" he asked. Jim smiled mirthlessly.

"No." Jim waited as Marshall stepped through the opening.

"Some of them want to play." He shut the door and Marshall stood staring at it for a long moment before turning to go.

The drive back to the prison took time. How much he couldn't remember. Enough. Enough that what he'd seen replayed in his mind a dozen times before he'd parked the van in its spot and made his way back to the office to finish his shift. Just after sunrise, the Warden entered and motioned for him to follow him into his office. Marshall did so slowly, fingering the bracelet on his wrist as he pulled the door shut behind him and took a seat in the chair in front of the desk.

"Do you still want to thank me?" The Warden said without preamble. Marshall tilted his head and pondered the question. Was this justice? Was what happened to 99 enough? He took a deep breath, let it out. Attempting to feel and not think for the first time in months. Yes. Yes, it was. He fingered the bracelet again and felt rather than saw the Warden's eyes drawn to the movement.

"You know what, Jason? I think I do. Thank you." He nodded and moved towards the door. The Warden smiled that disturbing, seldom-used smile. This time it didn't bother him, and he realized he was likely wearing the same expression.

"You're welcome." Marshall reached the door and pulled it open but didn't step through as the Warden's voice stopped him.

"Oh- and Marshall?"

He turned to allow the man to capture his gaze with his own.

"Never take it off."



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R.J. Joseph

When R. J. isn't writing, teaching, or reading voraciously, she can usually be found wrangling one of various sprouts or sproutlings from her blended family of 11...along with one husband and one hell beast that masquerades as a dog sometimes. R.J. is also an instructor at The Speculative Fiction Academy and a co-host of the Genre Blackademia podcast.



INTO THE NOTHINGNESS

Chantale is a graduate student who has lived in the southern United States her entire life. Once she decides to attend grad school in a northern state, she is introduced to snow. Alien and somehow off, the frost proves itself to be as all-encompassing as it appears.



The ice covered the lake like the film on a corpse's eyes. I could make out swirling patterns I wanted to pretend made up the water, still alive beneath the nothingness. But I knew better. Nothing could survive the wrath of the snow and freezing temperatures. I had a friend who was a social worker who claimed to turn off her diagnosing when dealing with her friends on a personal level but really didn't. She'd told me point blank, "It's just snow. It happens all the time in other parts of the country. You're simply afraid of new things and going to graduate school is the unknown you're actually afraid of. And even though you ought to be used to it by now, you're a little afraid of being one of the few Black bodies on that campus."

She was wrong. The snow was wrong.

I hadn't travelled much but I wasn't afraid of the airplane ride. And despite what my sister friend said, I wasn't afraid of being the only Black person on campus. I didn't run into very many writers of color in academia so I figured that was part of the game.

I just hadn't been prepared for the blanket of white covering everything miles below the aircraft. Even from our flying height, there were miles and miles of blank emptiness. The stark landscape was interrupted every so often by a gray, lifeless tree, or a dingy plowed road through the ice. I was amazed at how much detail I could see from the window.

I was amazed that the major details to be seen were the snow and ice.

I grabbed my cell when the plane slid into the gate at O'Hare to pick up more passengers. I turned it on and sent a text.

"The snow has taken the airport hostage. Looks like a beach of white." That was the only thing I could liken my alien view to. The airport did have the infinity of the sea, the white blanket of snow all that existed between the airplanes on the tarmac and beyond.

Making my final landing in an area that was similarly covered did nothing to improve my outlook.

I walked outside to the shuttle bus and the shock of the cold sank into my bones. It wasn't that the cold was uncomfortable—I actually welcomed it in opposition to the humid seventy-degree weather Houston called winter. But the frigid ache gripped my teeth and sent my wide welcoming, Southern smile into hiding.

I holed up for the night in a hotel room that was stifling hot. I turned on the air conditioning and flipped to the weather channel. Didn't that beat all. The area was expecting the most snowfall it had seen in several years. Obviously, because I had come to the area. I settled into bed, half under the covers and half out, falling asleep to the rhythm of the flakes shadow dancing against the window.

The next morning found me staring out the same window, marveling at how the snow was still there. I couldn't have said where I'd expected it to go. It just seemed so...permanent. Elementary school science nipped at the back of my brain. As long as the temperature stayed below thirty-two degrees, the ice would not melt.

I bummed a ride to the campus and took in more of the dead world beneath the chilling blanket. The snow was falling again, and on the walk up the hill, the tiny flakes skittered across my face and hands like chilled feet. I laughed at the fluttery, tickly dance, then painfully remembered I couldn't walk outside with my mouth open. I smiled with tight lips and bent to touch the fallen performers. They melted as soon as I stretched out my hand to examine them, and an unexpected sadness overcame me at having caused the demise of such cheerful creatures. A classmate suggested I get gloves to further my examination, and I was thankful for the suggestion.

They lasted longer atop my gloved hands, and I squinted to try and identify the distinct crystals that made up each flake. All I saw instead was tiny clumps of ice.

I brushed the remnants from my hands and tipped across the campus yard as quickly as I dared in my cowboy boots. I'd been thinking warmth and comfort when I'd packed the Texan stereotypes, not traction. I walked on the outside of an overturned bench. The snow had piled up on both sides of the seat and was threatening to cover the side that was face up. Small blue spheres lined the sidewalk and the snow seemed to retreat from them. There were no blue circles around the bench.

I knew I was running behind for class, but I had to know what that was about. I waved to the first handyman I saw. "Hi. What is that blue stuff?"

His eyes crinkled up and his smile stayed just below an outright laugh. "The blue stuff on the ground?"

I nodded.

"That's salt."

“Salt?”

“Yep. It keeps the snow off the sidewalks and the roads.”

“How does it do that? Is it a chemical reaction?”

This time he did laugh. “You’re not from around here?”

I returned his smile. “No. I’ve never seen such a thing as all this white. And this blue.”

“It’s something like a chemical reaction that keeps the ice from building up on the places we need to get around town.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Keeps roads and sidewalks clear of ice. Not magic, simple chemistry.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that explanation. Now I know how this thing goes.” I turned to leave, and his laugh followed me into the building.

I took a seat next to the window in class and remained mesmerized by the weather. The snow fell non-stop for the couple of hours I was supposed to be learning. The class was interesting, but I was spinning my own story. The snow was a creature. It created and lived in a cold, bleak world. And it took over everything in that world, eventually, because it was indestructible.

I watched out the window as the snow fell on the massive school building, covering the entire spired top and slanting down the slopes to the ground around the building. Within a couple of hours, the grounds were covered with a foot of snow. The view was pretty in its sparkly white, where the waning sun made glitter between the crystals.

During our first break, someone suggested sledding down the big hill in front of the campus on lunch trays. My heart thudded at the thought and I was ecstatic when the idea was talked down. I was hardly getting used to seeing the snow; I certainly didn’t want to actually get in it and engage with it. I walked outside, onto the patio. Further examination of the flakes found them to be light and airy, so the piles it made were higher than they would have been if the ice were compact.

I’d have thought I would have felt better about the light snow, but instead it felt off in a way I couldn’t explain. I leaned on the gate that surrounded the veranda and looked over into the back courtyard where I’d come in. There was a larger white expanse over the yard than there had been that morning.

I returned to class and sat at the front so I couldn’t be distracted by what was going on outside the school. I managed to concentrate during the last part of the day. The entire class time had not been wasted with me daydreaming out the window.

We all packed up to go to dinner, but I stayed behind so I could have my mentor meeting on time. There wasn’t enough of a time gap for me to leave the campus, so I would wait in the library. All I needed was a quick snack from the bookstore. Everybody jetted off quickly and the

campus felt extra desolate in the cold, dark night. The moon already shone high in the clear sky, and the air smelled of frost.

I took tentative steps onto the sidewalk heading towards the bookstore. Two other benches lay on their sides, already covered in snow. Three lumps of white stood where upright benches had been. I tipped slowly along the sidewalk. The blue lines had grown closer together and I felt like a model on a catwalk, trying to get my feet within the blue lines that made up less than half the sidewalk. Behind the new salt lines were new snow lines.

The bookstore was closed and I peered out at the sidewalk that would take me around the courtyard and to the library. I could get there much faster if I cut across the yard. I took a slow step onto the snow on the sides of the sidewalk. My foot sank as if inside a newly dried marshmallow, crunchy on the outside but still squishy on the inside. The feeling was unsettling, but still I proceeded. My next step fell into a section of ice that was even softer. Steadily, I made my way to the middle of the yard, halfway to the library. I glanced at the landscaping alongside me and my next step took me sliding directly into it. For moments, I couldn't catch my breath as I lay flat on my back. I shouldn't have left the sidewalk.

The snowflakes began their wild dance across my face and my uncovered neck. Fluttery before, the routine was harder this time, more purposeful. I struggled to wipe the ice off my face, but more crystals covered the areas I wiped. They came down into my mouth and my eyes, until I closed them both. The heat of my body did not melt the flakes. Instead, they expanded and covered my throat and marched down into my esophagus and into my stomach.

I gagged, but I couldn't expel the ice. I willed my arms to move so I could turn myself over, but the appendages couldn't obey from underneath the flakes that covered them and pinned them down. As my stomach froze from the inside out, and my breath burst out of my nose in frosted spurts, I understood the mistake I'd made.

I should have stayed on the sidewalk. Although the snow was pushing its way through the markings, the salt was magical, having been used for millennia to defend against unearthly creatures. Someone else may not have realized the snow was alive, but I had. I'd known it when I'd first seen the blankness from the airplane.

How had I expected to live beside the nothingness, when everything would eventually wind up beneath it? My thoughts grew hazy, fuzzy on the edges like the frost on the window of a warm room. There was no more warmth for me. I faded into the nothingness.



This story first appeared in R.J. Joseph's horror collection, Hell Hath No Sorrow like a Woman Haunted, published in August 2022 by The Seventh Terrace.



Linda Addison

Linda grew up in Philadelphia and began weaving stories at an early age. She currently lives in Arizona and has published over 400 poems, stories and articles. Look for her story in the Black Panther: Tales of Wakanda anthology (Titan/Marvel).



SECRET PLACES



There are wolves at the door

don't look at the light in their eyes

they only want to lick your sweetness

harm is not in their hearts, they are only animals

what could they be thinking,

There are dreams in the trash

don't look at the dying light in their hearts

they only want to live in your eyes

lick the tears from your denial, they are not real

what could they be thinking,

There are nasty things in the shadows

don't look at their outline in the light

they only want to tear at your mouth

remove hope from your tongue, they are only you

what could you be thinking?



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Tamika Thompson

Tamika is a writer, producer, journalist, and author of the speculative fiction story collection *Unshod, Cackling, and Naked* (Unnerving Books) which Publishers Weekly calls "powerful," "unsettling," and "terrifying," as well as author of the horror novella, *Salamander Justice* (Madness Heart Press), co-creator of the artist collective POC United, and fiction editor for the group's award-winning anthology, *Graffiti*.



THE DOOR IN THE ATTIC

What do you do when you find a red door in your attic, one that beckons you to enter? Read this claustrophobic tale about the curious and the unheard.



I noticed the door in the attic on the second night in the home, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Mesmerized, I dropped the box of sweaters I'd brought up for storage and stepped forward. The wood seemed to breathe. The knob pulsed in my hand.

As I eased open the red portal, the hinges moaned, the sound pleasing to my ears. I squeezed through the frame, relishing the sigh of warm, moist air, the snugness of the room pressing against my skin. I could almost hear the darkness whisper "welcome."

Yearning to see, I caressed the wall, but, before my fingertips reached a light switch, the room satisfied my desire. Overhead bulbs glowed orange, revealing an empty room and another crimson door.

"Honey. Come. See this."

I imagined my husband one floor below, mounting his television to our bedroom wall, hearing me, yet silently carrying on. He rarely answered me.

Tickled about what I'd find, I thrust forward and through the second door.

"Sweetie. Come. A second!"

I wasn't alarmed by the color's blood-like brightness. Silent as the bottom of a lake, the room was wider than the previous one and smelled of something so new it lacked odor, like a newborn's flesh.

In my defense, I did question it all, if only briefly. How could this much space extend from the top level of the house? Wouldn't the floor beneath me hover above the neighbor's driveway? But a third door enthralled me; approaching it was ecstasy.

"Honey, can you hear me?"

And another door.

"Sweetie, it's exhilarating!"

And yet a fifth, where paper and pencil rested against the wall. I knelt to enter.

“Honey, come. See for yourself!”

Dimly lit and dank as a cavern, the fifth room’s ceiling was only four feet high. I hunched to walk. When I extended my arms, my fingers met the walls. I only noticed the change later. After.

My husband, whose company relocation had necessitated the new home, still didn’t answer. Not surprising. My record for missed calls in a row to his phone was fourteen, and whenever I told him things, he didn’t believe unless someone else concurred. I figured he only listened to other men.

I’ve considered this question since that day—why was the sixth door green? At the time, I felt I was being let in on a funny mystery, with that olive-colored wood the final clue. But when I tried the knob, nothing happened.

“Well, this was silly.”

It occurred to me only then to turn around, to go back through all those red doors, back into the attic with the boxes of winter sweaters, back down the carpeted stairs with a funny story for my husband. But a look behind me revealed there was no longer a door.

I blinked a few times, ensuring I’d seen correctly. There was only the wall. My hands shook as they reached for the writing tools. The pencil bore teeth marks. The water-stained note contained a message from the room’s previous occupant.

It began: If you are reading this, you made the same mistake I did.

Each line was a fist to my stomach, a curse upon me.

She told of how she’d become enchanted by the red as well, had called to her husband, also with no reply. The pale specks on the paper were her tears.

Look behind you, she wrote. The green one is gone too.

My lungs heaved as I obeyed, my chest sensing the finality before my mind did. There were no doors. No windows. Just white walls, a gnawed-on pencil, and tear-flecked paper.

The air thickened around me. I struggled to breathe, to understand.

One room. Zero ways out.

Maybe the doors were actually mirrors; I’d thought I’d entered, and instead was hunching in place in the first room.

But I stroked every surface and only turned up drywall and a cement floor.

Cement. Dear God.

I stopped considering earthly answers.

Were the doors an entryway to another dimension? To infinity?

If not inside my new home, where was I? An alternate house? With a mirror husband? Did he ignore his wife as well?

What if the previous occupant had been another version of me? Did my panicked mind merely imagine the handwriting was similar to my own? Was my own?

The first day, I screamed my husband's name until I grew hoarse. No more "sweetie" or "honey." He was "James! Help me!" He still never answered.

The second day, I scratched at the drywall until my fingernails broke and the nubs bled.

The third day, I tried unscrewing the bulbs; perhaps I could get a finger through. But the dim orbs wouldn't give. The glass wouldn't break. They merely reflected my disheveled image back to me—white tears streaking down brown skin, tangled curls, blood-crusting lips.

The fourth day, I kicked the walls until I sprained an ankle, pounded with my fists until my bruises ached.

The fifth day, my fitness watch died, my tongue was so dry it burned, and my stomach rumbled every time I moved. So, I started this note while still in my right mind. If you are reading this, you are trapped here, somewhere, as well.

I've concluded the room swallowed my voice. That my husband couldn't hear me in here because he never did out there. I blame myself. Why did I go along with being ignored?

I don't know where the previous occupant's bones are, as the only remnant was her note. Any remains you find are mine—denim skirt, white tank top, a platinum wedding band. I'm sorry this has happened to you. I pray a miracle occurs, and you find a way out. Or maybe you'll get lucky and someone will hear you. Will drill through time and space until they can embrace you. That would be a mercy, wouldn't it? To finally be sought out. To actually be heard.



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Zin E. Rocklyn

Of Trinidadian descent, Zin E. Rocklyn (she/they) is a horror and dark fantasy author hailing from Jersey City NJ. Their Nebula and IGNYTE-nominated, and Shirley Jackson award-winning debut novella *Flowers for the Sea* was published by tor.com in October 2021.



OBLIGATION

The first time we fucked was at the back of the red barn on the Meyer's property.

His cock had a mean 30-degree angle and no amount of warming up could get a woman ready for such brutality against the splintery wall. When we finished, he kissed me tender, thinking the blood was from my first time. I bit my lip and hoped I wasn't losing my baby.

I didn't and we married three months later. I let people assume our big-head boy was born early and surprisingly the rumor held weight. No one doubted those bright blue eyes had been inherited from my doting husband. Plus, ain't too many of those looking like me snagging a white man.

It may have been my Daddy's ties that kept me safe. Or my Mama's ability to hold secrets loose enough to pass them to the next generation.

Me and my brother held that town in the palms of our sweaty, black as fuck hands.

We held it delicate. Until we buried our parents side by side, death claiming them in the form of a mean cough within days of one another. They'd refused the doctor and we weren't ones to defy them.

They left us with nothing but those secrets.

Somehow, they knew we would be okay. Somehow, they were pleased with the dexterity with which we held and balanced the white lives of so many dirty motherfuckers.

My brother was the first to snap, squeezing the contents of his left hand a bit too hard and bucking at white boy Jim. Jim had exactly three screws loose and not one fuck to give. My daughter found her uncle strung up against an oak tree, his hands cut off and his tongue stretched.

Hostility grew, but gall didn't. I still had my white husband on my arm, still had my hands full. My heart was heavy but my lips remained sealed.

Just once, I took a bite. Held the gaze of Mary Mulligan in Centre Square as I held her secret in front of her and let my teeth sink deep into its center, light bursting all around us. The town froze, watching as they tried to grasp the words floating, swimming, dancing all around Mary Mulligan and her hourglass shape. I chewed as the shadows converged, standing tall,

melding until a man we both knew too well stood before her, translucent, but solid enough to let his tears smudge her makeup.

I swallowed and he was gone.

Mary Mulligan didn't meet my eye after that. None of the town did, which was fine by me.

I still showed my face, still walked with my husband, still had my children play in the Square.

No one bothered us. No one ever will.

Because every night, just before bed, I share my burden with my babies, all six of them. And they recite them right back.

We are the glue of this town, whether they want us or not. We are obligated to them to keep their lives pure and they are obligated to us to make sure we do. No relationship is perfect. But this will do.





Michelle Renee Lane

Michelle holds an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. She writes dark speculative fiction about identity politics and women of color battling their inner demons while fighting/falling in love with monsters.



HUNGER

Consumed by guilt for his war crimes in Vietnam, a soldier seeks atonement by volunteering to rebuild a Catholic church and orphanage, but finds a much darker secret lurking in his soul.



When Saigon fell, I found myself at a Catholic mission post. After all the terrible things I'd done in the war, I needed to do some good in the world. The Vatican had sent Father Enrico Crocetti to convert the locals and care for abandoned children with the help of two nuns in a small village outside Saigon. How he managed to keep the children, the nuns and himself safe for five years was nothing short of a miracle. But the buildings had been damaged to the point of being uninhabitable. I volunteered to rebuild the church and orphanage.

My days began at sunrise and I worked until I thought my back would break in the heat that draped itself around me like a sopping wet wool blanket. The work was miserable, but the time passed quickly when I sang spirituals my momma had taught me while working side by side in the Louisiana cane fields. At sunset, I ate with Father Crocetti, the nuns, and the children before falling into a deep sleep. My time in the jungle had plagued me with nightmares, and dreamless sleep was a welcome change.

Although the work was hard, I preferred the physical pain to the emotional trauma waiting for me back home. I'd heard stories of soldiers returning home to find hippies and draft dodgers waving signs and shouting, "baby killer." They weren't entirely wrong. Children died in the war, but their blood wasn't on the hands of every soldier who fought in Vietnam. You couldn't always control where the bullets and bombs landed.

About a month after I started my penance, Sister Evangelista's screams made me drop the stones I was carrying to repair one of the outer walls and run to the garden behind the church.

"What happened?" I said, trying to catch my breath.

Her hand shook as she pointed at something hidden under the sprawling leaves of wild burdock. "There. He...he's under there."

What initially looked like a skinned mouse deer, turned out to be the body of a four-year-old boy. I'd seen a lot of terrible things during the war, but nothing had prepared me for how badly his body had been butchered.

Tigers would occasionally wander into villages and snatch unattended children, but the child's body wasn't torn apart. There were no bite or claw marks. Tigers didn't carve out children's eyes with surgical precision and they certainly didn't eat only choice cuts from the body. All the limbs were still attached and an incision had been made from throat to groin. I didn't have any formal medical training, but I'd dressed wounds in the field and eaten enough offal growing up to recognize what was missing from the boy's body: the heart, liver, and pancreas.

Sister Gabrielli kept the other children inside while Father Crocetti and I carefully wrapped the boy in a sheet and carried him to the tiny graveyard in front of the church. Given the fact that the boy's wounds were obviously the work of a human, I insisted on contacting the local authorities, which at the time were the military police. The priest refused to listen to logic.

"We can't let the body decompose any longer. The smell will only get worse and I don't want to upset the other children," he said.

It was too hot to argue and he was right about the smell. Together, we dug a grave and he gave the boy last rites before we buried him.

Sister Evangelista didn't come to dinner that night. The heat and memories of the boy's corpse made me thankful for the vegetarian meal Sister Gabrielli prepared with the older children. Rather than announcing the boy's death, Father Crocetti spoke to each child during confession the next day. None of them had seen the boy for three days and had no idea what had happened to him. Sister Evangelista and Sister Gabrielli asked the children to include the boy in their nightly prayers before bedtime. A few weeks passed, and it was like the boy never existed. The priest and the nuns viewed the tragic death as an anomaly and didn't see the need to make further inquiries.

That is, until Sister Gabrielli found the second child a month later. This time I insisted on having the body examined and offered to transport it to the nearest military post ten clicks away. Father Crocetti agreed to my request and the following day I began the ten-kilometer hike at dawn. Sister Evangelista felt guilty for not doing more when the first child was discovered. She helped me wrap the child, a five-year-old girl, in sheets and then fashion a stretcher from odds and ends around the crude construction site, so that it would be easier to carry the girl's body.

Although the war had officially ended, with America claiming victory, it was still dangerous to walk through the jungle alone. No matter how beautiful the jungle was, with its exotic plants and wildlife, it had plenty of hidden dangers. Aside from landmines, trip wires, and punji stick pits, the Viet Cong wasn't exactly ready to concede their defeat. I didn't have any civilian clothing and was still in uniform, making me a walking target. Dragging the girl's body behind me made me a slower target. I wasn't technically AWOL, but I had yet to return to base and still had all of my Army-issued gear, including my M-16. The gun hung at my side like a talisman warding off evil as I hacked through the underbrush with a machete. The repetitive slicing motion made me think of the wounds on the bodies of the dead children. Who had killed them?

And why? I'd always had a macabre imagination, and people often accused me of being a pessimist. As a Negro child raised in poverty in a country still recovering from the wounds of slavery, I thought of myself as a realist. The horrors of war had given me an even darker view of the world, and as my imagination wandered, I wondered if the killer had eaten the children's missing parts. Why else would they have been butchered with such care? The war had driven some people to cannibalism, Vietnamese and soldiers alike. I had read somewhere that once you get a taste for long pig, it was hard to give it up. Were locals poaching the orphanage as if the children were wild game? I shuddered at the thought and tried to get the idea out of my head as I continued my mission.

Normally, it would take me two hours to walk ten clicks at a leisurely pace, but walking through the jungle dragging a body took me roughly three hours to reach my destination. The temporary military post was located inside a walled fort constructed mainly of bamboo. Although I was clearly an American soldier, the jarhead at the gate made me show my military ID before letting me in. Once inside, though, he didn't seem unconcerned by the fact that I had a child's corpse with me.

"Which way to the medic tent?"

The jarhead laughed, and pointed at the dead child with his cleft chin. "I think it's a little late for a doctor. Looks like you need a mortician."

A commanding officer approached the gate behind the jarhead, surprising him with a reprimand. "This soldier asked you a question, Private."

The jarhead stood at attention. "Yes, sir, Major! The medical tent is two doors down from the mess tent. Can't miss it."

"I'm headed that way," he said, squinting at my uniform, "Sergeant...Freeman. Need help with your load?"

I nodded. "Much obliged, Sir."

The officer picked up one end of the stretcher and we carried the corpse to the medic tent.

"Not to state the obvious or be rude like the Private back there, but this child is dead, right?"

"Yes, sir. I brought her here hoping that someone could examine the body and give me some clue as to who may have killed her. You know, an autopsy."

"Well, today's your lucky day, Sergeant Freeman. We have one of the top medical examiners right here. But, if you don't mind me asking, why are you interested in this particular child when there are dead children all over Vietnam?"

"I've been helping a Catholic mission rebuild their church and orphanage. This is the second child we've found dead in about two months."

"I see. Well, I'm sure the doc can help," he said.

The Major backed into the medic tent still carrying his end of the stretcher, and shouted over his shoulder. "Hey Doc, I got a new patient for you."

A young man wearing wire-rimmed glasses, who looked like he hadn't slept in weeks, appeared from behind a row of filing cabinets. "You can put the patient on the first exam table."

We did as he asked, and then the Major introduced me to the doctor. "Doc, this is Sergeant Freeman. Sergeant Freeman, Doc."

Doc looked at his new patient skeptically. "Is this a joke?"

"No joke, Doc. I'll let Sergeant Freeman explain why he's here. I have other business to attend to. Pleasure to meet you, Sergeant Freeman. Good day, gentlemen." And he was gone.

"So, why is there a dead body on my exam table?"

I sighed and told my story. Halfway through my account of how the first child was discovered, Doc interrupted me. "You say the boy was hidden under a burdock plant?"

"Yes, and we found the girl hidden in the woodpile."

As Doc began unwrapping the sheet to examine the girl's body, he speculated on what the killer's thought process might be. "Hiding a body suggests guilt. And you think whoever did this is eating the missing organs?"

"Yeah. I mean why else would someone take the time to carve them out so carefully?"

He shrugged. "Trophies? There are grown men who were raised in Christian households wearing necklaces made of human ears they carved off dead Vietnamese. If you would have told me that American citizens were capable of doing something so morbid, I would have laughed at you a few years ago. Now? Well, let's just say I'm more open-minded when it comes to the darkness lurking in men's souls."

Despite the stench and state of decomposition, Doc didn't bat an eyelash when he examined the girl. I supposed he had become desensitized to the site of broken bodies and death. "She still has both ears, but no eyes, liver, heart, or pancreas. Those are all delicacies in the Orient. But restaurants don't usually serve human children. Are you thinking someone ate the flesh for survival?"

"Look, Doc, I've seen people starving before at home and here in the jungle. You don't leave behind perfectly good meat when you're hungry. This is a different kind of hunger."

"Speaking from experience?"

"I haven't gone hungry in a long time," I said.

"Without the other body to compare the girl's to, I'll have to take your word that they were most likely killed by the same person or persons," Doc said.

"You think more than one person did this?"

“I can’t be sure. But what I can tell you is that these cuts were made while the child was still alive. Obviously, once the heart was removed the child died, but my guess is whoever killed her left the heart in until everything else was removed.”

I shuddered at the thought of someone systematically cutting pieces of the little girl while she was still alive to feel it. I had seen a lot of cruelty, violence and death over the past few years in Vietnam, but I couldn’t wrap my brain around torturing an innocent child in such a grotesque way. For what? Who could possibly gain pleasure from doing something so evil?

“Are they expecting you to bring the body back?”

“Probably, but I don’t think it matters where she’s buried.” I felt a twinge of guilt for my selfish desire to walk back to the mission without the burden of the dead child.

“Are they expecting you back tonight?”

I eyed Doc suspiciously. “Why?”

He laughed. “I have a bottle of Bourbon I think you’ll appreciate as a southern gentleman, and this has been the most intellectual conversation I’ve had in ages. Join me for a drink?”

I laughed, too. If conversation with me, someone who’d barely finished high school, was stimulating, I guessed I could stick around for at least one drink. “Sure.”

About an hour and three drinks later, I decided to spend the night on base. No one seemed to question why I hadn’t returned to my own base. There was plenty of food in the mess tent, and even an empty bunk for me to sleep in. The next morning, I thanked Doc and the Major for their hospitality and headed back to the mission shortly after sun up.

Several weeks passed without incident, and things seemed to be getting back to normal. Father Crocetti and I were making progress on the roof and wall repairs, Sister Evangelista was busy harvesting herbs and vegetables, and Sister Gabrielli was busy teaching the children to read and write in Vietnamese and English. All was right again. However, that sense of peace we felt was nothing more than an illusion of security lulling us into a less heightened state of wariness.

About a month after I returned to the mission, I dreamed that I was back with my platoon, hiding in the jungle preparing to invade a village where we believed Viet Cong had settled in. It was a night raid and we painted our faces to camouflage ourselves and make ourselves harder to see in the dark. As we quietly made our way into the village, we heard the screams of children and coming from one of the huts. No one wanted to see what was happening inside, but we didn’t have time to draw straws. Rather than wait for someone else to volunteer, I went first. Inside, at the center of the hut was a man with his back to me. All around him were piles of dead children that had the same wounds as the two orphans, evidence of his rampant gluttony. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew by the screams of the child in front of him what he was doing. I placed my hand on his shoulder to stop him, but before I could, I was awakened by the sound of nuns screaming.

When I opened my eyes, I was shocked to find that I was not only out of bed, but also covered in blood and wielding a carving knife. A young boy lay lifeless on the ground before me with his eyes, liver, heart and sweetbreads missing. A meaty metallic taste filled my mouth, and Father Crochetti was pointing the M-16 inches from my face.

There would be no absolution for my sins.



“Hunger” appears in Midnight & Indigo: 22 Speculative Stories by
Black Women Writers (2020)



Kenya Moss Dyme

“There’s nothing scarier to me than HUMANS and the unimaginable depths of depravity of which we are capable.’ That’s what I love to explore in my writing, characters that are like the people you think you know – but you really don’t know after all.”



GROUNDHOG

The phrase, “You can’t keep a good woman down” takes on new meaning in this short and not so sweet tale about a dinner time standoff between secret lovers.



Fucking liars.

With one, she shared a mother; with the other, she shared a bed. But they had betrayed her in the worst possible way – and they would pay, oh, yes, they would pay.

Smile at me, go ahead and ask me about my day as you try to throw me off the scent. But I can smell the guilt and deceit coming out of your pores – or should I say – between your filthy legs!

My loving husband: come and kiss me on my cheek like you’re happy to see me. I’ve trembled a thousand times under your hands on my body but tonight you will tremble under mine.

My dear sister: pick up your eyes from the floor – my face is up here! That’s right, you ARE a fledgling actress, but tonight will be your final curtain call.

Alana paused at the mirror in the foyer to give them time to adjust their clothing. She frowned and plucked two crisp dead leaves from her blonde-tipped locs, adding them to the pile on the small table beneath the mirror.

“What would you guys like for dinner?” She asked, kicking off her pumps.

Keyon’s eyes moved nervously between Alana’s stockinged feet and the deepening red stains in the carpet by the chair.

“Whatever you decide is fine, Constance mumbled without looking up from the pages of a magazine she’d selected from the sofa table.

“Chicken it is.” Alana breezed through the kitchen and into the garage where she peeled away a small pill case taped beneath the fuse box.

Humming softly, she began preparing the meal. Never let them see you sweat! After fixing the plates, she turned her back to the living room and crushed a small white capsule into the potatoes on each of their plates.

She’d considered many ways to make them pay for their crime, from disabling the furnace to ensure a carbon monoxide leak, to triggering a

house explosion, both of which would be perfect scenarios since she herself would be out of town. But ultimately, her profession provided her with the perfect weapon of destruction in the form of a convenient little cyanide pill.

She'd dispose of the bodies and then make the "discovery" that the two had simply ran off together. Never fuck with a chemist.

"Dinner's ready," she called out sweetly, taking her seat at the end of the dining table so she could watch them devour their last meal.

The treacherous pair shuffled over and took their usual seats at the table.

"I need your share of the rent today, sis," Alana said, narrowing her eyes at Constance as she took a bite of her food. "Yesterday was the first."

"I got it, don't worry – you'll get it," Constance sighed and rolled her eyes.

Stay calm, it'll be over soon. "By the way, I have to drive some drug samples to Ohio after dinner. I missed the courier so I'll do it myself – will you two be okay here while I'm away?" Of course, you will.

Keyon cleared his throat. "Well, I mean, I guess – we'll manage, we always do."

You always do IT, you mean!

"I've got some lines to rehearse anyway," replied Constance, shooting Keyon a side glance that was unmistakably full of secrets. Alana cringed and resisted the urge to leap across the table.

"I need hot sauce," Keyon said around a mouthful of chicken.

The legs of his chair scraped loudly across the floor as Keyon pushed away from the table and passed behind Alana on his way to the kitchen. She opened her mouth to fuss about the scuff marks when Constance suddenly turned sideways and slammed her hand on the table.

"Do it! Do it!" Constance screamed, pounding the table with her fist.

Alana heard the swish of rough fabric and caught the quick flash of the belt as it dropped past her face and tightened against her neck. Fear and confusion took over as Constance taunted her and she struggled to understand what was taking place. Keyon pushed his knee into the back of her chair and pulled harder until he felt a soft pop; Alana's body went limp.

Constance jumped out of her chair and leaned her weight on her elbows to stare at her sister's lifeless body crumpled on the floor.

"That's your rent, bitch!" she spat vehemently. She looked up at Keyon and forced a reassuring smile. "Don't look so worried – we're safe now. Let's get rid of her and start practicing our alibis so you can report her missing."

Together, they carried Alana to the backyard and tossed her into the hole dug earlier. Keyon emptied a carton of lime over her body to mask the scent of death and they both shoveled dirt back into the hole until she was covered.

Out of breath, they returned to the house and greedily devoured the dinner Alana had prepared before her demise. Murder sure had a way of revving up the appetite.

“One thing I’ll miss about her – she sure could cook!” Keyon mumbled over a hearty belch and dropped his fork loudly onto the empty plate just as his throat began to close.

“I can cook just as good as....” Constance stopped mid-sentence and clawed at her stomach as she fell out of her chair, spewing the bloody contents of her stomach across the carpet.

The lovers locked eyes as they lay convulsing on the floor until death thankfully ended their torture.

Alana stumbled barefoot around the side of the house and into the front door. Fucking liars, she thought as she stopped to look at herself in the mirror. She picked a dry leaf from her locs and laid it on the foyer table before entering the living room to greet her disloyal family.

“What would you guys like for dinner?” She asked, kicking off her heels at the door.

“Whatever you choose,” replied Constance, using the tip of her shoe to dab curiously at a red stain in the carpet.



“Groundhog” is shared with us from The Mixtape (2017) Kenya’s published collection of digital-only shorts.



Sumiko Saulson

Sumiko is a Bram Stoker nominated poet and award-winning author of Afrosurrealist and multicultural sci-fi and horror. Author of *The Rat King: A Book of Dark Poetry* (Dooky Zines). *Within Me Without Me* (Dooky Zines) and the novel *Happiness and Other Diseases* (Mocha Memoirs Press), Afrosurrealist Writers Award (2018).



ON DARKEST NIGHT OF FAERIE BRIGHT



In an anxious child's maw wiggles a single tooth
 When he bites on a carrot, it comes hastily loose
 Sell it off late at night for the price of two quarters
 To the grim faeries famously known as tooth hoarders

Ignorant parents open windowpanes wide
 To invite all the night's hungry faeries inside
 Little thieves glimmer bright stealing teeth in the night
 Shining like fireflies in the low firelight
 Faerie flight enters tiny, aloft glowing sprite
 But they stretch and they grow to an enormous height

Talon-like finger claws drag on the ground
 On the floorboards they scrape, such a nail-biting sound
 Sunken eyes of deep red glowing like a hellhound
 Rows of sharp shark-like fangs gracing sardonic grin
 Three-inch denticles stretching from nostril to chin
 These can easily slice through a soft human's skin

How the bright faerie drools, all its hunger to sate
 Inhaled lovely aromas arouse its palate
 For the teeth of a child aren't its only cuisine
 Nor the only ones that it enjoys loosening



First published in the 2021 Horror Writers Association's Poetry, also appears in the poetry collection The Rat King.



L. Marie Wood

L. Marie Wood is an award-winning dark fiction author, screenwriter, and poet with novels in the psychological horror, mystery, and dark romance genres. She is also the founder of the Speculative Fiction Academy, an English and Creative Writing professor, a horror scholar, and a frequent speaker in the genre convention space.



MY HOUSE



The door was ajar, standing open wide enough to give a glimpse of its dark innards to anyone standing on the steps leading toward it. It had been that way for years, decades even. No one ventured close enough to close it, not even the kids on the street who enjoyed a good scare. People avoided the house, not because of the atrocities committed inside, but because of the house itself. The brick and wood seemed to breathe the same air we did.

I haven't been back here since the day I found my brother's friend dead in the hallway. He laid between my room and Nate's, face down in a pool of his own blood and vomit. I had been out on a date that evening, hanging out with the boy I left behind when I went off to college. I came home late. My parents' car was in the driveway. Nate and Corey's bikes were lying on their sides in the grass. My eye caught sight of them for a second before Robert covered my mouth with his and kissed me again. Mom was usually a stickler about the appearance of the front of the house. No skateboards, no balls, no toys of any kind had ever been allowed to sit on the lawn for more than an hour before she had a fit. Anyway, it was past midnight. What was Corey doing at the house so late? My concerns melted in Robert's mouth.

Fifteen minutes later, after I had gotten out of the car, straightened my clothes, and patted down my hair, I walked by the bikes without another thought. Corey was probably sleeping over, and if he and Nate got home late enough, Mom wouldn't have known the bikes were out there. It was easy enough to believe so I bounded up the steps, forgetting about them by the time I hit the second step. At the top of the stairs, I turned to wave goodbye to Robert. He backed out of the driveway slowly, his headlights blinding me as he turned onto the street and drove past the house. I knew he wanted to get back together, long distance or not. But I couldn't do it. I was having way too much fun at school.

I unlocked the door and walked in. The living room was dark except for the light coming from the television set. An 80s sitcom rerun was on, complete with requisite laughter and quips that aren't really funny. Dad usually sat up at night to watch the old shows, laughing when he was expected to, getting up at commercials to get a glass of soda. Mom slept lightly, so he watched the set in the living room. This way he didn't disturb Mom while she slept, and he had less of a distance to walk for midnight munchies.

I didn't hear his familiar laughter that night when I walked in and I thought he might have fallen asleep in front of the set. I walked up the stairs as quietly as I could, trying not to wake him up. I figured I'd go upstairs, wash up, change into my pajamas, and join him on the couch. A scary movie sounded pretty good to me then, and I hurried up the steps trying to think of what video to watch.

I hit the switch to the hallway light at the top of the stairs, but it didn't turn on. I sucked my teeth, remembering that I told my brother to change the bulb before I left that evening. At fourteen, he rarely did anything I asked him to, but I threatened that I'd squeal about him and the neighbor's daughter if he didn't do it. I thought that would have been enough, but obviously not. I felt my way down the hallway, gliding my hand along the wall, until I reached a door opening. Nate's room.

"Hey you jerk," I whispered. I didn't want to wake Mom and make it a bigger deal than it had to be. This was between Nate and me.

Nate didn't answer, so I walked further into his room. I shut his door as quietly as I could and flicked the light switch. Nate's bedroom light didn't come on either.

"You idiot! You won't even change your own light bulb?"

Nate still didn't respond. I walked over to his bed, kicking at the clothes strewn all over the floor.

"Dumb ass, I know you hear me," I said irritably. I couldn't wait to get close enough to him so I could punch him in his scrawny shoulder. I took an unsteady step closer and tripped over something hard. I tumbled forward onto the bed, gasping in shock. I expected to hear my brother and his friend laughing at me in the dark, but I didn't. I steadied myself on a hollow feeling thing on the bed that was cold to the touch. I know now that it was Nate's body that I was touching, lying dead on his bed. His eyes were open and staring straight ahead. Had the light been on I would have found that he was staring at me.

I stood up and turned around in place. The darkness was so complete. No moonlight, no street lamp rays penetrated the room.

"You know what? Fine. I'll just tell mom about you and Carrie in the morning. We'll see how much you like that."

Still nothing. I opened the door and walked out of the room in silence, my arms outstretched in the dark.

I felt along the wall toward my room. My foot slipped on something about halfway down the hallway. I cursed out loud, almost losing my footing. Those idiots had probably spilled water on the floor and forgotten to wipe it up. Mom and Dad would be pissed in the morning when they saw the watermark. I shook my head and kept walking.

Finally, I felt the molding that framed my door. I turned to walk in, but cast a glance over my shoulder. My parents' bedroom was right across the hallway from mine. I couldn't tell if the door was open or closed, but that wasn't what bothered me. I didn't hear anything coming from the room. My Mom wasn't one to fall asleep with the television or radio on, but she did snore. It wasn't one of those loud, obnoxious sounds, but you could certainly hear it if you were standing outside the door. There wasn't any sound coming from the room.

I turned toward their bedroom door and walked toward it. The door was pulled to, partially open. I opened it and took a step inside. I still didn't hear anything.

"Mom," I whispered. I didn't want to wake her by turning on the light if she was sleeping. I felt goose bumps rise on my forearms as I stepped into the dark, silent room.

"Mom?" I called her again, but still there was no answer. I took a couple of steps toward the bed, thinking that maybe this was a night without snoring. I tried to hear her breathing, found myself begging to hear it, but there was no sound coming from anywhere in the room. I walked toward the bed, terrified now, and knelt next to where her head usually lay. The door to the bedroom slammed shut and I whipped my head toward the sound. Someone stood in front of the closed door, the body nothing more than a shadow.

"Dad?" I called out. "I think there's something wrong with Mom."

The shadow didn't move or say anything.

"Nate, is that you? Seriously, I think there's something wrong with Mom. I can't hear her breathing."

The shadow seemed to grow taller, its pointed head stretching past the inner molding of the door and up to the ceiling of the room.

"Nate, you asshole! I'm not playing a game. Go get Dad. Hurry!"

The shadow seemed to dance along the ceiling, watching me. I reached for the lamp on the nightstand and struck it with my hand, knocking it over. The sound of the crash was deafening in the silence. My mother didn't move.

I put my hand on her arm. Her skin felt cold and rigid. I shrieked and snatched my hand away. I turned toward the door and ran, clipping the leg of the chaise lounge near the bed as I did. I ran through the shadow that stood in front of the door. I turned my head right and left and called out again, "Dad? Nate?" No answer.

My fear tasted tinny, and metallic, like blood. I grabbed for the doorknob and turned it. It didn't budge. I turned it again, yanked at it, pulled as hard as I could. Still it didn't move. My heart was beating fast; I could hear each pump in my ears. The shadow was behind me and drawing closer.

I turned my back to the door to face the shadow. "Who are you," I asked feebly. "Why did you do this to us?"

There was no answer. The shadow seemed to be looking at me with unseen eyes, enjoying my terror, my grief.

“What do you want from me?” I lost myself in my frantic tears; their heat blurred my vision of the shadow and burned my eyes. Once the tears slowed, the room came back into focus and I could see that the shadow had advanced toward me.

I screamed so loudly that I hurt my ears and turned back to the bedroom door. I turned the knob again and it opened with ease. I ran halfway down the hallway toward the stairs before realizing that the light was on. Corey laid face down on the floor. The liquid that I once thought was water was his blood. My bloody footprints led from his body to my bedroom, to my parents’ room. I screamed again and ran down the steps.

The television was still on in the living room, laughing voices filling the room with sound. I took hesitant steps toward the room, not wanting to see what was in there. I clung to the wall, pressing myself as flat against it as I could. When I reached the edge, I stopped. I breathed deeply once, twice, three times, before summoning the guts to look beyond the wall. I knew that if my father was dead, the television set would illuminate his face, giving me sight of his final expression. I didn’t want to see that. I didn’t think I could take it. But I had to know.

I peered into the room, gripping the wall tightly. The light from the television flickered and bounced. I saw my father’s hand in his lap, his fingers covered in black.

With weak legs I staggered out of the house and into the night. The police picked me up behind my old high school the next afternoon. My Aunt took me in, helped me get back on my feet. They never found out what happened at my house that night. But I know. Me and my shadow.

It watched me as I stepped through the door and into the house today. I could almost see it smiling.



“My House” was first published in Caliginy (2004), a short story collection by L. Marie Wood.



Chanel Harry

Chanel Harry has been writing since she was four; her calling came when she wrote her first horror story to her parents after they put her on time out. Besides writing, Chanel also enjoys playing The Sims 3 & 4 or The Witcher with her brothers or living for drama. She has traded in her NYC apple for a Georgia peach and lives there with her son and fiancé.



THROUGH THE LENS: THE SPRINGBROOK CHRONICLES (EXCERPT)

After his parents' divorce, Ace Barnes, an aspiring photographer, and his mother and little brother, are now the new residents of the suburban town of Springbrook. Although the new living dynamic has changed, Ace is all for the move. Their new house is spacious, beautiful and somewhat eerie to Ace.

His mother, on the other hand, sees it as a new and refreshing start from such a tumultuous time. Unbeknownst to them, Springbrook is a town full of mystery and unrelenting horror that Ace will soon come to know.

It wasn't late when I got home but it was too late for me. I never intended to have that long talk with Nicolette either, but there I was walking her home like my name was Kash. Something was off about that girl, and I didn't want to know what it was. Stepping into my house, as if I needed more stress, mom was in the dining room chuckling over coffee with some Shemar Moore looking dude. They were both cracking some old people jokes from the 90's, I guess. Where the hell was Ant?

"Oh hey, Ace!" Mom finally noticed me. Her tone of voice was high as if she was caught doing something she shouldn't have.

"How was school?"

"It was um revealing—" I replied. That was the only word from my vocabulary that I could pull from my stress fried brain.

"Oh, this is my friend I was telling you and Anthony about," Mom gestured to him. I hope she wasn't expecting me to shake this stranger's hand.

"I'm Lance. Lance Rutherford," he outstretched his hand to me. I reluctantly took his hand; if it made mom happy, then I'll do it for her. Nonetheless, something about this dude already rubbed me the wrong way. He was taller than my dad, in fact, he practically towered over me, and I was tall for my age. He looked like one of those guys on the S-Curl box or in a Tyler Perry movie. I bet he even owned his own business.

"Nice to meet you, Lance," I gave him a weak smile. Where was my little brother? He was missing out on our potential new stepfather. I laughed at this idea.

"Your mother tells me that you're a photographer,"

“Yep, that’s me,” I glared at my mom. I bet she told him everything that I didn’t want him to know.

“Mom, what’s for d-dinner?” Ant stuttered. I never seen this look of shock on my brother’s face in a long time. I wished my mom didn’t bring her friend over on us so quickly. My brother looked as if he’d been shot in the heart.

“Um, who is this?” Ant asked flatly.

“This is—” mom started but Lance got in front of her.

“Lance Rutherford. I’m a friend of your mother’s.” He extended his hand to my brother. As expected, Ant didn’t take it. My brother was like that, he didn’t like strangers, but my mom never told us that she wanted to date again.

“Anthony, have some manners,” Mom exclaimed.

“It’s alright, Raquel,” Lance answered, still smiling. “It’s just good to meet you both. I get it! If I had seen my mother drinking coffee with some strange man, I’d be skeptical, too.”

“Thanks,” Was all I could muster up. I put my hands in my pockets, staring at Lance as he was getting up to leave.

“I hope to see you both again and perhaps it will be better,” he grinned. “Thanks for the coffee, Raquel.”

“No problem, let me walk you to the door,”

Before my mom left the kitchen, she gave me a pleading look.

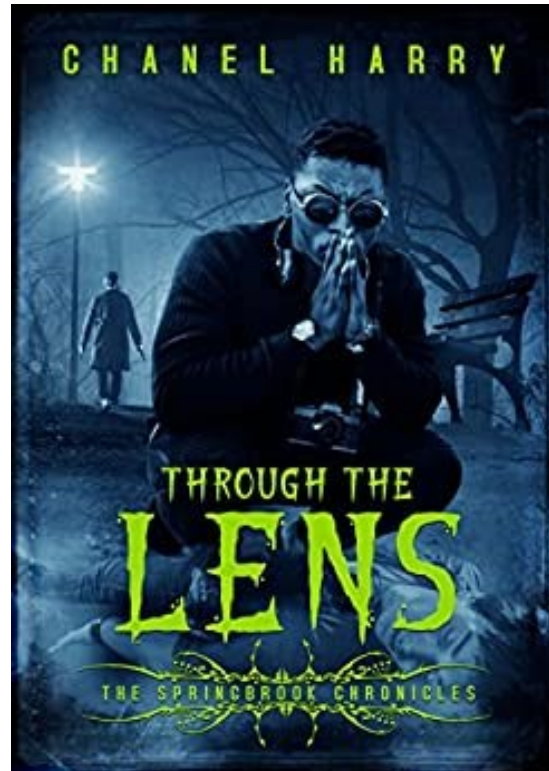
I gave her back a look of worry. I don’t know why, but I just did.

“Is mom crazy?” Ant fumed. “She doesn’t need a boyfriend!”

“I don’t think you should call him her boyfriend,” I replied. I was looking for a way out of the convo. My brother seemed to be getting major anxiety from Lance’s presence. Hell, in general, his whole demeanor changed. Something was off with my brother.

“So, what do you boys think?” Mom interrupted.

“What do you want us to think?” I asked feeling myself become upset the way Anthony did.



Mom raised her eyebrow in confusion. “Aw, come on you two,” she groaned. “Give him a chance?”

I gleamed at my brother who just shrugged his shoulders at the both of us. Going through our parents’ divorce was enough to drive my brother and I insane. Getting to know some strange dude and him potentially being our future stepdad was going to be hell on earth. We just weren’t ready, but I know mom wanted it. I could see it in her face that she really like this dude.

“Okay, mom, but we’re just going to complain about it,” I joked. “I’m going downstairs.”

Not wanting to further the talks about her personal life, I rushed past the both of them straight into the basement. I wanted to get to work on the pictures that I had taken earlier. Once I made it to the basement, I noticed that it felt colder than usual. With every step I took down the creaky stairs, the colder and thinner the air got. It felt like the air was stifling me. I shivered a bit, but I needed to finish my damn pictures. I made a mental note to tell mom to turn on the heat full blast.

I immediately got to work on developing the pictures. The music was right and so was the vibes. I was back in my zone. I didn’t have my headphones in, but I started to feel like something wasn’t right after a while. I kept looking over my shoulder trying to figure out what in the hell was creeping up on me.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Now, shit was about to get real. The hairs on my neck stood up from hearing those noises coming from behind me. It could have been a rat in the walls, or I could be tripping. I don’t know.

Turning back to my work, the scratching evolved into thumps. My head was on a swivel trying to find out where the mind-pounding sound was coming from.

As my eyes scanned the room, I spotted a door smack dab in the far end of the basement.

An old board stood against the door as if it was put there to block something or someone from coming through. My feet felt like they were moving on their own towards the door. My skin felt so cold as if a thick blanket of ice covered me as the room got even chillier. I made it to the door, my hand wrapped around the freezing knob, turning it. Nothing. It was locked. I pressed my ear against the door slowing down my breathing so that I could hear who or what was on the other side of the door. My palms went icy when I heard some whispers behind the door. I took a step back, trying to gather my racing thoughts. My mind was playing tricks on me.

My first instinct was to run up the stairs, to my room, forgetting what I just heard. Just like the picture with the creepy ass figure.

That’s it!

I took my camera from the table and snapped a picture of the door. My heart almost stopped when the distorted image appeared through my camera lens when it flashed. The figure was

white and covered in blood. Maybe I was hallucinating but the figure was in the shape of a woman. I turned around and stumbled over to the processing table. My fingers trembled as I fumbled with opening my camera to take out the film. My adrenaline was on ten as I quickly developed the film. I needed to see if what I saw was real. I needed to see if I was going crazy.

I shook the photo paper carefully as to not distort the image. I set the timer, waiting with bated breaths as the picture started to develop. I tapped my foot on the basement, concrete floor, impatient. These were the times I could use a blunt to mellow out, but I didn't want my mother on my case like she was back in Yonkers. Still, times like this, a good pull of that sour diesel would have made me decipher what the fuck I was seeing in this house!

Ding!

The timer went off, stirring my stomach with butterflies. I carefully pick up the wet photo, taking in the gory image. It was clear as day! The picture depicted the same blood drenched woman pointing to the closed door that was just a few feet away from me. My lungs felt tight like it had no air circulating in and out of them. My head turned toward the closed door, but it remained closed with the same old board pressing against it. There were no whispers, no woman.

I quickly snapped a picture of the photo with my phone.

I pivoted and darted up the stairs, panting as hard as I could through tightened lungs.

"Ace!" mom yelled. It looked as if she was passing by with a bag of popcorn in her hands while she was in her PJ's. "What in the hell is wrong with you?"

Sweat streamed down my forehead as I tried to come up with an explanation as to why I looked like I was running in a track meet against Usain Bolt.

"Uh...mom, you're not going to believe this but—" I stammered.

"Going to believe what?" My mother shoved some popcorn into her mouth. The sweat I was producing was now making a puddle on the floor. My nerves were shot and the fear I felt was rampant. I had to tell her though, but would she believe me? I doubt it. Using split second thinking, I decided not to.

"I thought I saw a possum," That's all I could come up with. My mother let out a low giggle as I watched her ferociously chew on her popcorn.

"That's funny! What would a possum be doing in the basement?"

"I-I don't know. Um, I guess it was a shadow." I start to inch away from the door toward the stairs. I just wanted to get to my room.

"I hope you're not smoking weed again," Mom chuckled. I didn't know if she was serious or trying to laugh off the idea. The last time she caught me smoking, she almost put me in rehab.

"Nah, mom." I replied. I was almost to the landing of the stairs, almost home free.

“Mhmm.” She rolled her eyes and walked past me. She was serious but I couldn’t dwell on that right now. With my eyes, I followed my mom to the living room, watching as she plopped on the couch to watch her movie. I let out a sigh of relief or maybe the fear that I was holding in. I bolted up the stairs and into my bed. After closing my eyes shut, I just tried my best to not think of the bloodied woman in our basement.



“Through the Lens: The Springbrook Chronicles” (2022) is available now, wherever ebooks and paperbacks are sold.



Wi-Moto Nyoka

Wi-Moto is an award-winning horror and sci-fi writer, and the founder of Dusky Projects, which creates and produces horror & sci-fi projects for young adult and adult audiences.



LUZ

Magic is about love but when Luz Santiago's love drives her to vengeance, no one in her city is safe.



I'm not good at being a witch.

To say that I'm incompetent wouldn't even cover it. My witchcraft is an amateur cocktail of earnest internet searches and a few conferences on Hoodoo which turned out to really be crash courses on homeopathic remedies for self-care. I have no idea what I'm doing and figure I will most likely get the whole thing wrong and not survive the ritual. At least it's a nice night.

I love Dia De Los Muertos. Ever since the trip I took to Mexico after the funeral, I've been a little obsessed with the idea of walls breaking down so that different worlds can touch. My belief is that people love so fiercely they can do it across space, time, realites, dimensions, and differing planes of existence. They bend the rules of the universe because the truth of the universe is that it's designed for that, and all anybody has to do is love enough.

I, Luz Bautista, love enough.

I became sure of this when the cold blunt email announcing that my mother's grave would be moved to a new location due to real estate development found its way to my inbox. There was a list of reasons given but, honestly, I don't remember because all that stuck was that folks were totally okay with building a new life on the graves of other people. So, I did what anyone would do, and became a witch in order to raise the dead.

That brings us to the here and now.

I spread a ring of ash around myself and the tombstone, put down my mother's necklace, and a lock of baby's hair I had cut off one of the toddlers in the daycare I worked at. This last item had cost me the job but I was already tired of the diapers, the low pay, and the total lack of respect for my time. Nothing has felt the same since my mother died and I know that if this doesn't work people will just say I've gone crazy from grief. They wouldn't be wrong.

I close my eyes to concentrate fully on my desires and how far I'm willing to go for them. Magic wasn't about words, I discovered, but about intention and having the will to see it through. I take a deep breath and let everything go quiet in my mind. Then, with no fanfare, I bring the dove's blood to my lips and throw it back. It tastes like liquid copper and my torso goes hot instantly. As I swallow the last drop the circle of ash ignites and I can feel the warmth on my cheeks from the small ring of fire that surrounds me.

Before I even get the chance to celebrate my success, my whole body jerks and I fall forward as if being pulled by my guts. All my courage disappears and the terror starts to set in. 'What was I thinking? Who do I think I am?' I think to myself as I dig my nails into the dirt and brace for impact.

The trembling in my body intensifies and spreads until I feel a wetness trickle down the inside of my thighs.

"Oh shit," I grunt to the stoic tombstones around me.

I lift my autumn dress to find blood and a wave of cramps brings me down to all fours. The bleeding doesn't stop and I figure this is probably the end. I had written two notes, one of which is in my jacket pocket and the other I left in my apartment, making sure that my mother would know why she had been brought back and what to do.

The dirt underneath me begins to bubble but I don't sink. Instead, I watch my blood stretch out and mix with the earth as it travels inward and shapes itself. A forehead followed by a nose, a mouth, and a chin, stretch up towards me. Hands grip me by both wrists as its eyes snap open. No mistake, it's my mom, and a scream rips through me while I continue to bleed. My thighs feel hot and my face is wet with tears. My mother uses her grip to pull herself up from the grave. She opens her mouth and an incredible gasp comes out that takes out the lights on the whole city block. She starts to glow like a deep sea fish as she moves over to me.

"Luz? Where am I?" she looks around then lets her new eyes settle on me. "You look awful."



Photo by Micael Widell: pexels.com

I laugh but it turns into a sob almost immediately. We reach for each other and then we're hugging and the whole world falls away. I forget about the blood, in the cup and on my thighs, I forget about the funeral and the painful days afterwards. I forget that I'm an orphan and I hold on tight to my mom because everything is how it should be. Moms should live forever and now they do. I don't need to do anything else.

She pulls back to get a good look at me and I let her eyes trace my face and body. Her gaze stops at my blood covered thighs.

"Oh, love," she looks at me with such love and concern that I have to turn away as shame stretches across my face.

"Nothing is worth the price for this," she says gently.

Tears sting my eyes but I hold them back and press forward with my plan.

"I command all the souls to rise."

My mother can do no more than obey and she springs upwards on to a nearby mausoleum. She begins to shimmer as the dirt ripples out far and wide, and the dead start to pull their way up.

I feel exhilaration as I soar through the night sky. The real estate company's head office is on the 19th floor of a glistening building located in the financial heart of the city. We crash through the windows into a well lit empty office space and start destroying everything in sight. I head straight for the manager's office, hoping to find whatever paperwork that greenlit operation live-on-the-dead-because-who-cares, and destroy it. Instead, I find the manager cowering behind his desk. My mother jumps onto it to get a better look at him and he starts to pray.

"What're you doing here?" I demand.

"Please, oh God. God, help me," he continues to whimper.

"Where's the files that let you move graves?"

His eyes move from the animated glowing corpse to me.

"I'm sorry. It's too late. The-the-the construction...umm..they're gonna move everyone starting tomorrow. I-I-I didn't do it, it wasn't me. They told me--"

I can't hear the explanation over the sound of my blood rushing into my head. My face feels hot and I'm tingly all over from rage. I order my mother to grab him and I watch as she slowly lifts him up by the neck until his feet are dangling above the floor.

"I don't care. Don't care if it's your job, don't care if you're sorry. No one's gonna take my mother's grave. No one's gonna take anything, ever again."

I watch his body go limp before deflating onto an office chair. I thought I'd be exhausted but instead I feel awake, horribly awake, and a warm sensation spreads out from my heart to the tips of me.

"Luz, please," my mother says softly, "forget about my grave. Just leave."

"And then what?" my voice is cold, even to me, and my mother shivers at the sound of it. "We need to set an example. It's the only way this type of thing will stop. No one steals from people they're afraid of."

"What do you want?"

I pull myself up to my feet as my mother and all the dead listen. I turn to look out at the city, my city, one last time.

"Take out everyone that helped them do this."

"And what will you give?"

Dryness coats my throat and I have to swallow before answering. To ask for something like this comes with a hefty price and the intention has to be clear.

"I give up all my ties to creation in the name of vengeance."

The dead levitate all at once and smash through any windows that haven't already been broken. I gaze out as darkness falls on the city one mile at a time. I can hear cars crashing, horns honking, and finally, people screaming.

"I'm staying with you," says my mother.

I'm grateful and try to smile but the pain takes over immediately. I spit up a tooth and get the chance to stare at it in my palm before my breasts begin to compress and shrivel. The taste of pennies fills my mouth as more of my teeth fall out. My mother hovers near me as I fall to my knees in anguish. I'm bleeding from my crotch again and this time it's really thick. I feel as though I'm being pulled by my tendons and have to lay out on my back.

There's nothing to be done.

My body caves in on itself an inch at a time until I'm hoarse from screaming. My voice gives, my tears dry, my blood empties out and death takes over. I see the shimmer of my mother before all light disappears.

A stillness fell over the city the morning after as people slowly came out of hiding from the night of terror. Everyone had to take in the damage and do the math. Buildings had to be fixed, bodies had to be collected, and whole communities had to begin making funeral arrangements.

People thought it was God. No one guessed it was a woman. No one ever connected me to the event or even considered that someone could've, must've, summoned the dead.

By the time they found my body it was nothing but a husk. I spent months in a cold drawer with a "Jane Doe" tag before anybody bothered to match my dental records with my remains. No one came to claim my body and I was cremated, and tossed into the river with the other collateral damage in a televised memorial.

The reconstruction only took a month but the recovery never came. Folks abandoned their luxury condos, their studios, their brownstones, their apartments, their homes. Downtown slid into emptiness except for those who couldn't afford to go anywhere else, or just couldn't bear to give up. Everything slid into affordability as the city stopped being a destination spot.

As for the rest of the nation? They were nostalgic. They created new franchises reliving the night, and they told the story of the once-juggernaut metropolis and its gruesome demise.

But in the city, people mourned together and a tenderness bloomed between them. No one took from anyone, anymore. Ever. At long last, my city found love.

I hope we love enough this time.



"Luz" was originally published in Midnight & Indigo Speculative Fiction Issue and featured on The Lunatics Radio Hour Podcast.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING BY DUSKY PROJECTS

Here's a fantastic opportunity to support Black Women in Horror! [Dusky Projects](#) is accepting donations for their upcoming comedy/horror short "Affordable Housing". Contributions will go towards food & transportation for the cast and crew, as well as keeping the set Covid safe. All donations are tax deductible.



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BY WI-MOTO NYOKA

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The project has been supported by the Independent Public Media Foundation, Leeway Foundation, and Scribe Video and is currently in pre-production.



Tracy Cross

Tracy's first novel, "Rootwork" was published by Dark Hart Publishing in 2022. She has had work appear in several horror anthologies, blogs and podcasts.



SIDE EFFECTS MAY VARY

Always read the side effects on any medication or vaccination.



The air tasted like metal.

"Do you taste that? It tastes like..." I smacked my lips and looked around while my daughter grabbed my hand.

"No, Mom. I don't taste it."

"Well, you don't understand. But I'm telling you, the air is different."

My daughter laughed and pulled my arm, "Here comes the bus. Let's go home."

This was our last round of immunizations...wait...no...injections... against the virus that people ignored. The government said it didn't exist and it would go away. When dead bodies filled stadiums, they noticed and fast tracked everything. Vaccinations, respirators and protective wear -- face masks and such.

But it's the little things.

Like waking up and feeling different.

Wait...you see, it started strange. It's hard to remember back to when it started because we've been living like this for so long. We can only see our families in these literal plastic bubbles. It goes like this: someone books a suite at one of these "bubble hotels". Everyone meets up and gets tested. If the tests are negative, we get put in a bubble for some time -- like a day, I think...to decompress. No books, nothing else inside the bubble but you, your family bubblemates and these white robes you wear (because your clothes could be infect-contaminated. Someone turns on a tv outside the bubble and watches us all until we get the all clear. Then, we are allowed in our suite.

They lock us in the suite-which is like a small house. Like two container homes -- divided -- with everything we requested when we made our reservation. We all hug and have fun. Sometimes, I cook. My brother-in-law is a chef and he cooks real good. We used to pretend fight over who

was going to cook, then he pulled out his chef's knives and I sat in the corner.

"Spoils go to the victor!" I yelled.

My mother had this yellow cloth she used to dab at my brother's mouth because he did this drooling thing. He had...no...has cerebral palsy. Today, during our monthly visit, she's using the cloth to dab at her mouth. She's not drooling. She says she has too much spit in her mouth. My brother is sitting in his wheelchair doing mobility exercises...on his own. He's stretching his legs and I swear, he focused on me when I spoke to him.

Before we left, I told him that I loved him and I would see him next time.

He rolled his eyes up, looked at me and said, "Yes, see you soon."

Like perfect.

See, it's hard to understand him because he slurs a bit when he speaks. This day, this day of our visit, he stared right at me and said, "Yes, see you soon."

My daughter walked over and said, "It was nice to see you again."

Again, perfectly clear for a kid that had to repeat her sentences because no one understood her good...no...well. My daughter had...has...Down syndrome. She's smart and stuff but...jeez, it's like I can't keep a thought in my head.

She led me outside and before I could stop myself, I said, "The air tastes like purple."

"Mom, you are so funny." She tugged my hand, a little softer this time and pointed to our shuttle bus to go home.

Ch-ch-changes. I woke up with a headache thinking I could write what happened. It's hard because words are looking real strange on paper. I'm a writer. This should be pretty easy for me. In my home office, I have painted one set of walls black with chalkboard paint. On the chalkboard walls, I have written several story scenarios and notes. There is one enormous window where I keep my sunshine loving plants and my daisies that I grow.

I'm looking around and see all these things. Books and papers. It's so hard to focus, but I'm going to try. My screen is so dark because my head hurts but this is how it started...I'm sorry to repeat myself. It's really hard.

Maybe four years ago, there was a virus. It just blew in from out of nowhere. I mean, everyone wants to say it came from here or there, but honestly, people were gross. They didn't wear masks and flew all over the world. It was the contamin...contamination of it all that they didn't care for. Mouth breathing in Paris. Sneezing in Spain. Coughing in Brazil. No one cared, but the kids...they watched us. They learned things.

The schools started coming down on the kids pretty hard. Teaching them about germs and right ways to sneeze. I will never forget the first time I sneezed in front of my daughter, while we were quarantined in our homes. She grabbed her laptop and walked out of the room, disgusted.

“The right way is into your elbow, Mom.”

I apologized. I thought it was only allergies.

Um, so, let’s see. Okay, the schools sent us parents these schedules and phone numbers or links to dial into classes. It was a mess. My sister was a teacher and she told me that she had to yell into the screen daily to wake up the kids.

“They don’t even change out of their pajamas, sis.”



“Trifling.” I groan, “My girl gets up and gets dressed. I make her breakfast and she eats it during class.”

My sister said into the phone, “Hmm.”

“I’m a wonderful mom. At least I’m making breakfast for her...still.”

“But is it hard to understand her when she has a mouth full of blackberries and yogurt?” My sister asked me.

“I don’t know. I log her into classes, then I go to bed.” No, I think I wrote that wrong,

“Then, I go to my room because she has to talk loud and it disturbs me.”

“Oh.”

“I go back and log her into each class though.”

Until that one day, I was being lazy. Maybe I was thinking she was independent or something. I made her a chart with all the times for her to log in on her own. I set up a little workstation for her. She had classes from about eight in the morning until two in the afternoon. Later, she had her Speech Therapy and Therapy sessions. She also had this...group therapy. Like lots of kids doing Speech Therapy.

She would laugh and laugh until I told her that I didn't think she was learning.

“She gets the giggles sometimes.” Her teacher or therapist told me, “But she's doing pretty well. It's like this works well for her or something.”

Soon, people started dying. See, they got the vaccine wrong. The virus thingy was changing. It kept changing. And we all kept pushing back on the vaccine because how could they make a vaccine that changed as fast as the virus?

“Wait until summer.” A friend with an inside track told me, “They will have their shit together by then.”

By the third year of online schooling...virtual school? We started having to get the vaccinations based on something. It was like essential workers, then students. They wanted to put the students back in school. The government decided it was too long for the kids to be home and stopped giving us all sick leave.

People started dying because they believed they didn't need to wear the masks, you know? Like screaming about their freedom and rights. I wore a mask all the time. My kid made a kit-hand sanitizer, extra masks, lotion, juice boxes, change of shirts and all kinds of other stuff. She carried it in her little purse when we went out.

“You want to clean the steering wheel with this.” She passed me a napkin dripping in hand sanitizer, “At least until I can make something better.”

“Oh.” I sat behind the wheel of our hourly rental car, “Thanks.”

“Scrub scrub, Mom.” She giggled.

“Seventeen and you are taking care of Mommy.” I laughed.

“Mmm-hmm. Yup.” She nodded.

We lived...live in Washington, DC. They came to us by our Ward after essential workers were vaccinated. All the kids had to go to the neighborhood school and get vaccinated. I got the shot, too. They had extra for parents.

And that's when it happened, the first day, my mouth tasted dry.

“Side effects.” The nurse gave me a pamphlet and I slipped it in my pocket.

We went back for vaccinations a lot. Well, it felt like a lot. Then, I noticed something. My kid did not need me. She became more independent and kinda moved away from me. No, that's not it. She just did more things for herself. When the school asked if she wanted to stay on track to receive a certificate (she goes...went...to a special school), she said she liked the certificate but wanted to get a certificate and a diploma.

"You are going to have so much more work." I said.

She shrugged her shoulders and walked out the room.

Her certificate was going to be in "Culinary Services".

The next day, I woke up to her already in class, eating a yogurt parfait.

"I set my alarm. Don't worry, Mom. Go back to bed."

I thought nothing of it. I went back to bed.

After about our third round of vaccines, I noticed the little things. She was studying something on her tablet. She used headphones a lot more. She had an extra pep in her step and then her Papi stopped by.

"Hola Papi, como estas?" She opened the door for him.

He looked at me, "ahh..Bien, mi nina. Como estas tu?"

She answered him, in Spanish, and said something about her class and I mean, I don't even remember. She was so fluent and she walked away before raising her hand and dismissing us, "Go spend some time with Mom. I'll be okay."

"Uhh...okay." He said.

We spoke in frantic Spanglish whispers in my bedroom until she finished her class for the day.

He asked me "When did she learn Spanish?"

I said I couldn't remember.

He said, "It's strange to hear her speaking in Spanish to me. I mean, it's just strange."

She poked her head into my bedroom, "All done. Class is over. I'm going to do some yoga. Is that okay, mom?"

"Sure?"

"Then, lunch. I have Speech this afternoon."

I nodded but it wasn't until she said what she was going to do this afternoon to her Papi in Spanish, that I knew trouble was a brewin'.

What the hell is 'trouble a brewin'? I don't even know where that came from.

It wasn't just her, though. The conversations between her and her cousins became deeper somehow. For a group of four/five kids who play video games and painting nails, they would sit together and have these discussions.

"They are talking about how the world will change when the new president terminates." My sister told me on the phone.

"Transitions, dear." Her husband corrected.

"What did I say?" She asked.

The more vaccines we received, the more confused everything seemed to become.

We went to the grocery market. My daughter took the list from me and started shopping while I stood by the lemon cake and cried because I wanted it.

"Why are you crying?" She asked.

"Because I'm fat. I want that."

"Well, let's get it for you. You can eat little slices and workout. Is that okay?" She pushed me to grab the cake.

"I like riding my bike inside." I said.

I paused and looked around.

Other kids were pushing shopping carts while parents had tantrums. One mom laid on the floor and kicked her shoes off because she forgot a coupon for toilet paper.

While we stood in line, my daughter said, "Let's just have the food delivered from now on. These adults...huh?"

I agreed and sucked my two fingers, like when I was a child.

"Not in public, Mom."

My mother called me. She remembered how to do the thing where I can see her face. Only it was strange...different...because my brother was walking around behind her. She could barely sit up, let alone talk.

"How he get up and walk?" I say.

"He been walking for some time. After shot." She leaned closer to the screen, "I told you shot was dangerous."

"Mom, move your head back from the screen. You're going to get headaches." I heard him say.

"Mom, he big and tall." I didn't understand where my vocabulary went.

“Strong. He learning to drive. I stay home sometimes. He take care of me good.” She smiled into the screen.

“Hey sis! I think that’s enough for her today. We’ll call next week.” He smiled and pushed a button.

Mom gone.

Sister talk about planting flowers now. All she say is, “I gotta plant the bulbs.”

What happen?

We did all the shots. Vaccines? Now, we can hardly purple.

My girl take my thing away with words. She say I no write good because I bang keys.

I say green robot dog and she look at me.

“That’s enough stimulation for today, Mom.”

Her mouth do thing. I lean back and suck fingers.



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BLOOD RITES: RISE OF THE BEAST (EXCERPT)

There is an evil that is lurking in Philadelphia in the vicinity of The Renaissance Nightclub. Strange occurrences and grisly murders are taking place which has the city on edge. Detectives Pierce and Rolston have been assigned to investigate the murders. Reality and myth will have a blurred line as the two embark upon an evil that is as old as time. As they come face to face with it, they will ask themselves, "do vampires really exist?"



Chapter 1

Darkness had covered the Jefferson Plantation as Gamba sat outside on the hard, dust filled, wooden porch of his little shack that he shared with his wife. As he looked around, he could see the flicker of candles that filled the rest of the slave courters. A long, sweltering day in the fields and working the plantation gave the slaves weary and tired bodies that brought rest and sleep quickly. Gamba sighed and took in a deep breath as the sweat poured from his face. The air was heavy, and the heat was stifling. Although the night air offered no breeze, he welcomed and embraced the peace it gave. He knew when he sat in silence with the night that it was the only time, he truly felt close to God. Gamba closed his eyes and began to pray. Despite living his entire life being a slave, his faith and spirituality is what kept him grounded. Gamba believed that God would deliver him and his people from bondage. He had too, because without that faith, he would perish.

While Gamba sat praying, he could hear the rustle and quickness of someone approaching. He continued praying until he felt the presence in front of him. “Amen,” he said and opened his eyes to see Antony standing in front of him. Gamba could see the frustration in Antony’s eyes as he stood up.

“I see you prayin.’ What for”? Antony angrily asked.

“Prayer is needed.”

“Why? It don’t work. Did you hear what happen’ today?”

“Yes.”

Antony looked at Gamba and waited for a reaction of anger, but it did not come. At times, Antony found Gamba to be weak. When he should be angry and react as such, he never did. It was no secret that Gamba was the spiritual man on the plantation who brought faith and hope to the other slaves, but sometimes Antony thought that was not enough. Besides, he did not believe in the God they wanted them to praise. He looked nothing like them. In Antony's opinion he was nothing to praise because he had not answered any of their prayers. Antony wanted to see bloodshed and riot. He wanted to see their wives and children slaughtered. That would bring him vindication for everything they had been through.

"So, whatcha think about what Master Jefferson did? He almost kill Coffey. Dis can't keep going on. We gotta do sumthing!" he exclaimed loudly.

"Lower your voice. Kianga will hears ya. It's nuttin' we can do." He quietly said.

"We can fight?"

"No. We ain't fightin.' God got us."

Antony pounded his fist on his hand and grunted. Gamba knew that he was a hot head who resorted to violence for everything that happened of which he did not agree. Gamba was just as angry as everyone else when it came to the mistreatment of the other slaves, but he understood that there had to be at least one rational person who would think first and not react. He was that person who others respected and followed. Antony, on the other hand was someone people shied away from, unless he had them in his clutches from fear. Gamba walked away with Antony following him because he did not want Kianga to hear any more than she already had. He leaned against the big willow tree and looked at Antony.

"You can't always wanna fight."

"Why not?! Fightin' is da only wayz they hear us."

"I move when God says so."

"Well, I ain't waitin' on no God. He ain't here and neva been. You wait, but not me."

Gamba shook his head as Antony walked away. Kianga stood in the doorway of their shack and looked at Gamba. She did not have to know what they discussed, but if Antony was involved then she knew it was nothing good. Gamba gave her a smile and wave as she closed the door and went back inside. While he stood thinking about their conversation, an uneasy feeling came over him. It was a foreboding feeling. Whatever it was felt evil and dark. Immediately he began to pray as the feeling became intensified. Gamba dropped to his knees and clutched his hands together. He looked to the dark sky filled with stars and prayed. As he prayed with his eyes tightly shut and his hands held together, a faint voice whispered, "I am eternal." Gamba quickly stood up and looked around as he rushed to his shack. He opened the door and rushed inside, leaving whatever lurked in the darkness, outside.

Chapter 2

The blaring sun hovered the plantation like an oversized blanket. There was no breeze for relief against the power that the sun inhabited, for today she was in control. The sun's intensity gave no comfort as sweat poured from the bodies of the slaves. Children ran and played tagged wearing nothing but their underwear and a cloth which covered the girl's chest. As the children ran and sang, the dust from the dirt they kicked with their feet looked like a tornado brewing from the earth. Gamba smiled and watched them play while he put the final additions on the table he made for the big house. When he stood to wipe the sweat from his forehead, Kianga walked over to him with a bucket filled with water and a tin cup. Gamba drank it without taking a breath. He handed her the tin cup and she refilled it. It was refilled three more times before his thirst was quenched.

"On my way to Massa Jefferson house. I gotta make the pies." Kianga said.

Gamba hated that she had to go to the big house because he knew how Master Jefferson felt about her. It was no secret that whatever slave woman he wanted for his self-gratification, he could have. It sickened Gamba to think about another man, especially Master Jefferson, violating his beloved Kianga. She was his queen and he held her to that standard. Kianga could see the reluctance in his eyes but there was nothing either of them could do.

"I hate you gotta go der by yourself."

Kianga smiled and gave him a kiss. "I love you," she said turning to walk away. Gamba watched her walk off as she continuously turned around to wave good-bye. She had the prettiest smile, with two deep dimples that sank in each cheek. When he imagined the softness of the clouds in the sky, he compared that to how she felt. Although her eyes were a piercing black which were filled with love and admiration when she looked at him, they also told the pain that lied behind them. Secrets that he wanted her to share but they were too painful to speak. When he could no longer see her, he finished the last touches on the table and went into his shack to wipe off and put on a clean shirt. Gamba was proud of the table he made for the mistress, and he could not wait for her to see it. It would also give him an opportunity to check on Kianga. Gamba made his way to the big house, stopping briefly along the way to talk. Everyone he encountered praised him for the lovely table he made. One couple asked if he could make a crib for their baby who was due by Christmas. Gamba graciously agreed. The request had allowed him to take his mind off worrying about Kianga. Gamba hummed a tune as he walked around to the back of the big house. It was an old spiritual tune that his grandmother used to hum to him after she returned from the cotton fields. To the far left of the house was a workman's shed and fruit and vegetable pantry. Gamba noticed the door slightly ajar. He placed the table down, looked around and quietly walked over to the door. He hoped that Kianga would be inside gathering peaches for the cobbler she was to bake for the mistress. Gamba was eager to tell her about the crib he was going to make for the young couple. With a smile on his face, he slowly opened the door. His heart sank and he felt nausea as he witnessed Master Jefferson lying on top of her. Her dress was pulled up around her waist as she lay on the table with his hand covering

her mouth. His body was forcefully entering her as the table shook from his violation of her. Gamba could see the tears on her face, but she was not moving. He felt his body completely turn hot. Sweat began to pour down his face as he balled up his fist. The veins in his neck pulsated quickly and his breathing intensified.

Filled with heartache and rage, everything turned blood red in his eyes. He charged toward Master Jefferson and forcefully pushed him away from Kianga. He fell towards the shelves of fruit with his pants down by his ankles. Master Jefferson tried to get up, but his pants kept tripping him. Gamba ran over to him and began beating his face with his fist. Blood began to gush from his mouth and the deep cut over his eye. From his screams, several men ran into the pantry. They tried to pull Gamba off him, but his strength was like a thousand men.

“Kill’ em,” yelled Master Jefferson. One of the men picked up a board of wood and slammed it against his head. Gamba fell over and Master Jefferson rolled over coughing and trying to gain his composure. The two men turned to look at Kianga whose lifeless body was lying on the table. Master Jefferson stood up and pulled up his pants. He wiped the blood from his mouth and smeared it on his shirt. The blood from the cut over his eye trickled down his face as he wiped it away. He looked down at Gamba and spit on him, then kicked him several times in the face and ribs. Gamba was already unconscious and did not move. “Throw that trash in the hole,” he said. The two men each took one of his arms and dragged him outside. One opened the latch as they both pushed him down in the hole. His body made a thumping sound when it hit the ground.

Master Jefferson walked over to Kianga and looked at her. Her eyes were wide open, with an expression of fear and her face was wet from tears. He shook her but her body only moved from his touch. Master Jefferson kneeled over putting his ear to her mouth, hoping he would feel a whiff of her breath, but there was none. There was no life left in her. The two men returned and stood waiting for further instructions. “Move her over there and lock up the pantry. Don’t let nobody in here. You understand?” he asked as they both shook their heads and did as they were told. Master Jefferson left the pantry and went over to the well beside the big oak tree. He splashed water on his face and tried to clean the blood off. After he washed away his sin, he



headed to the big house. He had to tell his wife something because she was expecting Kianga to return.

The smell of urine and blood filled the hole and burned Gamba's nose as he slowly gained consciousness. He looked around at the darkness and felt a throbbing pain from his head as he tried to focus his eyes on the blackness. Gamba could hear the squealing of rats and the sharp touch of their nails on his bare feet. He pushed them away with his hands while trying to gain his strength. He sat up and attempted to stand but his legs were too weak, and he stumbled back down. Gamba quickly grew frustrated as his heart lay heavy with grief. Suddenly, like a buried memory no longer suppressed, he remembered why he was there. The vision of Kianga being raped at the hands of Master Jefferson burned in his psyche. Gamba knew that she was the delight of the master's appetite. He made it no secret in the way he looked at her. He found any reason to touch her hand or rub her back; although he felt he needed no reason. If he wanted her, he would have her. Kianga always felt uncomfortable from his advances, but she could do nothing. She knew what resisting the Master would bring, which was death and she had seen it before. Gamba knew he could do nothing as well and it weakened him because she was one of the most beautiful, precious, gems that God created. His beloved Jahzara Kianga. They had stripped her of her name by calling her Lizzie, but he could never find himself calling her that name. His wife who he was pre-destined to marry by their families before their lungs breathed in the air of the earth. He adored her. She was his life and without her in it, life was not worth living.

Gamba felt like he could not breathe as he tried to stand once more. The pain throbbed in his ribs and head while he moaned in agony. He wanted his beloved Kianga, and his heart was pained the most. He wanted to see her once more. With the little strength he could muster up he began screaming. "Help me! Le'me out!" he yelled before falling back to the dirt floor. He looked around the darkness hoping for some sign of refuge. A sign from God, he prayed for but there was nothing but silence. Gamba held his side as he scooted against the wall. As he sat in the darkness, he heard the lock of the door to the hole open. He raised his hand and shielded his eyes from the sun. He could not make out who the person was while trying to stand. "Wata please" He softly said. The person standing outside laughed and said, "Master Jefferson said since you want her so bad you can have her." As Gamba tried to speak Kianga's body was thrown in the hole. The door to the hole was slammed shut as laughter was heard above. Darkness swept the pit again while Gamba crawled over to Kianga and held her. He let out a gut-wrenching cry that filled the hole. Gamba had always considered himself a righteous man, a Godly man who never questioned Him. He just believed that God would one day deliver him, and he would be free. He had to believe in something bigger than himself or he would have perished a long time ago. He never questioned, but today, he was going too. Gamba rocked Kianga in his arms begging God to bring her back. He begged for her life in his place. Out of everything that happened to him since being brought from Africa and sold into slavery, losing his beloved was the worst he had endured. Although his faith was never broken, at that moment it was. He thought to himself why would a God who professes to love him would continue to hurt

him? Why would he continue to let his prayers go unanswered? Why would he continue to forsake him? Gamba rubbed her hair and told her how sorry he was for not protecting her. Because the pit was so dark, he could not see her face, so he gently touched her lips, her nose, and her eyes. He prayed once more for life to be restored but her body remained lifeless. No more heartbeat. No more breath. No more life. Gamba quickly became infuriated again and began screaming. “Why!!?” he yelled as he held her body close to his.

Within the darkness and through his cries, Gamba heard a voice. The voice, which would forever change his life and destiny asked, “If it is revenge you seek, then choose me. If it is everlasting life you desire, then choose me. If you no longer want to serve a God who leaves you and forsakes you, then choose me. If you are ready to rule all that live above and below earth, then choose me. What say you Gamba Ajani?” Gamba sat still and silent not knowing how to answer the questions. He did know that he felt alone, and that God was not there. Through the pain, he replied, “yes.” As he sat still holding Kianga’s lifeless body, he felt a surge of intense pain on his neck and throughout his body. It felt like his neck was being ripped apart. Although the pain was intense, it was also invigorating. The force succumbed his body. He could not move as his body began going through a metamorphosis. Gamba opened his mouth to scream but there was no sound. In the darkness Gamba could see and hear everything as his senses heightened. He looked down at Kianga and took her hand holding it as his heartbeat slowly faded. Gamba stood up and took a deep breath. He knew he was different but was unsure how.

“What happened? What am I? he asked.

“You are eternal,” replied the entity.

Chapter 3

Gamba sat back down in the darkness and could see and hear everything so clearly. Sounds of insects and their movement on the dirt ground was magnified. The squealing of the rats and the dripping of the water that formed a puddle made a distorted sound of which he never heard before. This sound was new to him, and he liked it. He could feel the chaos and unholy of it all and he welcomed it. Gamba turned to Kianga and gently lifted her body and held her in his arms. Although the place where his heart once resided no longer beat, it did not stop the pain he felt from losing his beloved.

As he stood holding her, he could feel the rage brewing in him while the images of her life lost invaded his thoughts. With the strength of Sampson and a thousand soldiers, he pushed the door open to the hole. It ripped from its hinges and broke in half. The moon shined brightly in the sky while he climbed out of the hole with Kianga. When he turned to look back inside, he saw a piercing set of red eyes disappear in the darkness with a menacing laughter heard. The plantation had an eerie silence to it. It felt like God no longer resided there. But did He ever truly reside there with all the atrocities that took place? Gamba knew that the God he once loved and served was dead to him. He looked around to see if there was any movement on the plantation

and there was none. With his newfound strength and life, he carried Kianga to their shack and laid her on the bed. He lit several candles and placed them around the shack. Gamba removed her clothes and stood admiring her beautiful body. She was flawless. No blemishes or scars. Just pure, silky, soft, Black skin. Her breast was full and round with thick nipples. Gamba loved every inch of her slender body that never got the chance to house his children. He could not stop looking at her lifeless body that was once filled with joy and laughter. Her laugh was infectious, and it lit up any place where she was present. Now, the shine was gone, taken by a madman who Gamba had to kill, slowly and torturously.

Gamba filled a bucket with water and a rag and kneeled next to her. He wrung the rag out and started to gently wash her body. Wanting desperately for her to sit up, turn to him with a smile, he knew that would never happen again. After washing her, he combed her long, thick, black hair and crowned her with a beautiful flower. He kissed her forehead and went to the trunk in the corner of the room and opened it. Lying perfectly on top was her dress she wore when they married. She told him the next time she would wear the dress would be after the birth of their first child because of its sentimental value. Gamba picked it up, closed the trunk and walked back to the bed. He delicately put it on her while ensuring it was perfect. Gamba refixed the flower that had moved out of place on her hair. She was as beautiful as the day he married her. As the tears began to fall from his face, he could hear the door to the shack open. As quick as the speed of light, Gamba found himself standing in front of the person who had entered. He was fiercely squeezing his neck, draining the life from him. His eyes began to glow a bright red as the candles began to flicker uncontrollably.

“Gamba, Gamba, it’z me!” Antony squealed trying to remove the grip of his hand from his neck.

Realizing it was Antony, Gamba removed his gripped and backed away. Antony doubled over while he coughed trying to gain his breath. When he could breathe normally again, he stood up and saw Kianga’s body on the bed. Gamba was kneeled next to her with his head resting peacefully on her breast. He would give anything to feel her every breath and chest moving up and down. Antony walked over to her and stood, looking at her with sadness. She looked so peaceful, like an angel.

“What happen’?” he asked.

“Master Jefferson. He killed my beloved.” He said crying out.

“How? Why?” Antony angrily asked.

“No matter. Gather the men and bring them to me.”

“We fight now?!” he said with enthusiasm.

“No. We gonna slaughter. I’m not the same Antony.

“What ya mean? He curiously asked.

Antony looked at Gamba and could sense something different about him. There was something in his eyes that not only showed his pain but also his deep anger. His eyes were lifeless and devoid of a soul. Antony saw pure evil in his eyes, and he liked it.

Gamba asked, "Do you want to live forever?"

"How"? Antony responded with curiosity.

"Through death."

"Yes!" Antony quickly replied.

Gamba walked over to Antony and grabbed him. He forcefully tilted his head and dug his long, sharp, fangs into Antony's pulsating veins. The blood was warm as it trickled down his neck and into Gamba's mouth. Antony groaned as he felt the life in his body began to purge from him. His heartbeat started to faintly beat while his eyes rolled in the back of his head, showing only the white. Gamba sucked his neck harder, drinking the blood that was giving him strength. Within seconds, Gamba released his fangs from his neck and Antony dropped to the floor. He panted like a wild wolf as the life he knew seeped from his body. Gamba smiled, watching as his friend went from life to death, to immortality. It was sweet. It was evilly divine. Antony sat up listening to the vivid sounds of the night that had been intensified by his rebirth. The crawl of the insect on the dirt, or the rubbing of the wings of a male cricket briskly amplified. Antony stood up and stumbled. The change he felt in his body was exhilarating. It was unlike a feeling he had ever experienced before. He felt an uncanny strength as if he could conquer the world.

"What did you do?" he asked. Antony looked around at the voice he heard and could not believe it came out of his mouth. "Is that me talking like that? How is that possible?"

"Through the rebirth, everything changes. Even the way we talk." Replied Gamba.

"What am I Gamba? I don't feel anything. Not even a heartbeat."

"You are reborn, as a son of Akeldama. You live for darkness now."

"Darkness?" Antony confusingly asked.

"Yes. And are you ready to serve him as my first in command?"

"Yes, I am.," said Antony.

"Then go gather the rest of the men and bring them to me."

Antony smiled and walked away, feeling enormously powerful. He was ready to bring bloodshed to the Jefferson plantation, and now even more so since the murder of Kianga. He went to each shack, telling the men how Kianga had been murdered and they were looking to get retribution. The men agreed, grabbing anything that could be used as a weapon while the women and children looked on with concern. Antony, led by a pack of fifteen to twenty men headed

back to Gamba's shack. They all stood looking at Gamba waiting for what he had to say while Antony stood by his side.

"The way you knew me is no more. I am not the old righteous Gamba. My beloved Kianga is gone, dead, taken from me. Now blood will spill from Master Jefferson, his wife, and his family. Who is with me?"

The men all yelled in unison as they raised their weapons in their hands. Gamba knew that he needed the men to become what he was to defeat Master Jefferson and anyone who tried to stop them. He walked over to one of the men and yanked his neck back, sucking his teeth into him. The other men looked on in fear and surprise as the man's lifeless body fell to the ground making a thumping sound. They all backed up as he squirmed and squealed in pain. Then, as quickly as it began the movement stopped and he darted up. The men backed up in awe as they tried to rationalize what they saw. They looked at Gamba with pure terror as he wiped the excess blood from his chin.

"Do not fear me gentleman. I bring you no harm. I bring you life. How do you feel?" He asked as he turned to the man who was looking his new self over.

"I feel sovereign!" he said with authority.

Gamba smiled as the man stood next to him and Antony. The other men looked on in confusion and curiosity. They mumbled amongst themselves while trying to figure out what to do.

"We do not have to live our old lives anymore. We no longer have to be slaves, being at the disposal of our white oppressors. We, gentleman, can rule all of this. Here and beyond. All you have to do is take our hands and life as you know it will end and eternal life will begin. Who's with us?"

Gamba and the other two men extended their hands. Their fingers had grown extra-long and unhuman like as one by one the men took their hands and became something from which they could never return. When they were done, Gamba smiled and turned to face the big house. He could see the silhouette of a figure moving in the upstairs bedroom as he turned to Antony. Gamba knew that Antony was ready for bloodshed. He wanted the blood of Master Jefferson and his children to soak in the grounds of the plantation so that nothing would ever grow or live there again. Gamba walked toward the house with the men following. The silhouette of the figure he saw in the window became clear and it was Mrs. Jefferson. She looked out the window with wide eyes and a gapped mouth and quickly went out of sight. Gamba could hear her screaming for Master Jefferson. The door to the house flung open and Master Jefferson appeared with a shot gun.

"Get back! I swear I'll shoot!" he yelled.

"So, shoot." Gamba said condescendingly.

Mrs. Jefferson came to the door and peaked her face out as she stood behind him. “Get back,” Master Jefferson yelled. Gamba walked slowly toward the steps as Master Jefferson backed up. His hands trembled as he put his finger on the trigger.

“Aren’t you going to defend your home Master? Shoot me.” He said walking up the steps.

“I swear Gamba, I’m a kill you! Back up!”

“You’re going to kill me like you killed my precious Kianga”? he angrily asked.

“What?” Mrs. Jefferson softly said still hiding behind the wall.

“I ain’t kill nobody now back up!”

“I don’t think I want to back up,” Gamba said quickly charging into Master Jefferson like a bolt of lightning. His eyes glowed like hell’s fire as he felt the fear seeping through Master Jefferson’s body. The other men ran into the house grabbing Mrs. Jefferson as she tried to run upstairs. She screamed a piercing scream while her children ran out of their rooms and stood at the top of the stairs. Gamba dragged Master Jefferson into the house and threw him across the floor. He grunted as he lay there listening to his wife screaming. Gamba walked over to her and looked her in the eyes. Tears rolled down her face while she shivered in fear.

“No need to cry. It will be all over soon.” “Sit her down and get those bratty children!” he exclaimed.

Several men ran upstairs and grabbed the children as they screamed and tried to run back to their rooms. The men dragged them downstairs and pushed them into the room with their parents. Mrs. Jefferson held each of them close to her as they buried their faces into her chest. Gamba walked over to Master Jefferson and knelt next to him. He picked him up by his hair and slammed him against the fireplace. Gamba put his hand around his neck and began choking him while he gasped for air.

“Mrs. Jefferson, or should I call you Clara. Did you know that your piece of scum husband is a rapist and a murderer?”

Mrs. Jefferson cried as she stumbled through her words. She tried to speak but nothing audible was coming through her mouth. Master Jefferson gasped for air while his eyes began to roll in the back of his head. Gamba released his grip but kept his hand around his neck. He coughed uncontrollably trying to regain a normal breathing.

“I can’t hear you Clara,” he sang. “Did you know your piece of shit husband was a rapist and murderer? Did you!”

“No, no I didn’t know.” She answered.

“Yeah, well he is. I caught him red handed. He raped my beloved Kianga and then strangled her with his bare hands. So, Clara, what do you think his punishment should be?”

“I don’t, I don’t know. Please Gamba.” She pleaded.

“Please Gamba what? No mercy here Clara. Now, I want you to tell me what his punishment should be for killing my beautiful, beloved Kianga?”

Mrs. Jefferson cried as she looked at her husband and held her children close. She did not know what to do or how to answer.

“I don’t know.”

“Okay, well I’ll help you answer.”

Gamba ordered one of the men to grab her son from her arms. Mrs. Jefferson yelled as she tried to hold onto him. Her son wrestled to stay in his mother’s arms, but the man was too strong for him to hold his grip on her. The son yelled and kicked as the man picked him up and held him. Gamba instructed another man to go into the kitchen and retrieve a butcher knife. When he returned, he handed the knife to Gamba. Gamba released his hand from Master Jefferson’s neck, and he dropped to the floor. He walked over to the little boy who was squirming in the man’s arms.

“Stop moving” He sternly said.

Gamba put the knife up to his neck and the sharp tip of the blade penetrated his skin, allowing for a small droplet of blood to fall. The small sight of the blood stirred a frenzy in the men as their chest heaved in and out from the excitement of seeing it and smelling it. Mrs. Jefferson continued to scream and beg for mercy for her son.

“As you can see my men are hungry. So, this is your final chance, Clara. What should your husband’s punishment be for killing my Queen?”

“Gamba, I don’t

Without hesitation Gamba took the knife and slit the boy’s neck from ear to ear. He dropped to the floor as the blood flowed heavily from his neck, soaking into the wooden crevices of the floor.

“Eat.” He said to the men. They dragged his lifeless body into the foyer of the house and kneeled beside him. Mrs. Jefferson screamed while the men covered her son and gorged at his neck and the rest of his body.

“Are you ready to answer me now?” he said with a smile.

“Kill him! Kill him!” she screamed.

Gamba looked down at Master Jefferson who was trying to crawl away, and he stepped on his back. He laughed at his cowardice. It gave him pleasure to see Master Jefferson in a vulnerable state. Antony stood up from feasting on the little boy and walked over to Gamba. His face was smeared with blood as he took a napkin from the table and wiped it. Antony smirked while he turned to look at Mrs. Jefferson and her daughter who were terrified.

“Well kill him Gamba.” Antony said. But what about them?” he said pointing to Mrs. Jefferson and her daughter.

“Do what you want with them.”

Antony smiled as he and the other men walked over to them. Mrs. Jefferson screamed while she held onto her daughter. “No! No!” she yelled, kicking, and fighting while they pulled her daughter from her arms. The little girl grabbed onto her mother’s nightgown and held it tightly in her hands. “Mommy! Mommy!” she screamed. Mrs. Jefferson tried to get a grip on her daughter’s hand but the men’s grip on her was too strong. They pulled the girl away and carried her out of sight. Her screams filled the house as Mrs. Jefferson continued to fight for her life. Antony pulled her to her feet and smacked her across the face. Her expression turned to shock. With everything that was happening to her and her family, she still felt a sense of superiority.

Master Jefferson said, “I’m gonna kill you Gamba, kill you dead!”

Gamba roaringly laughed as he looked down at him. His laughter was so loud and menacing that the men stopped and looked at him. They feared him as well. Gamba picked up Master Jefferson from the floor and looked him in the eyes. His eyes turned black like coal as Master Jefferson’s eyes grew as large as the universe.

What are you?” he asked with a trembling voice.

“I am hell.”

Gamba’s fangs grew and he tore into his neck so deep that Master Jefferson’s head tilted to the side and fell off his body. It hit the floor and rolled before it stopped. The eyes were widened with fear as Gamba dropped his body to the floor. He walked out of the house and stood on the porch. Screams filled the house for a few more minutes until it became as silent as the night. The rest of the men walked out of the house with evidence on their faces that they had feasted on their victims and thoroughly enjoyed it. Antony stood by Gamba feeling victorious.

“Now what?” Antony asked.

“We kill those that won’t join us and give life to those who will. Now, burn this place to the ground.”



Excerpt from the book, Blood Rites: Rise of the Beast (2022) by C.Y. Marshall



Penelope Flynn

Penelope creates mixed genre adult-targeted speculative fiction and illustrations featuring elements of dark fiction, horror, suspense, science fiction, fantasy, and erotica and erotic romance. Her works are included in the Dark Universe anthologies, Steamfunk, Scierogenous II, and SLAY: Stories of the Vampire Noire. She authors the Sci-Fi/Horror/Erotica mash-up series, the Chronicles of Renfields, and co-edits and contributes to the Blerdrotica Black erotica anthology series.



REGARDING KOESCU: REVENANT LINEAGE BOOK 1 (EXCERPT)

Regarding Koescu, Revenant Lineage Book 1 is a bloody, erotic, thrilling and sometimes humorous (NSFW) tale of loss and found and a perfect point for taking your first bite into the epic Chronicles of Renfields



Koescu sat straight up in the bed waking in a cold sweat. His heart thumped hard in his chest, but he was grateful to have been delivered from the horror of his dream, his nightmare. But to whom or what did he owe his gratitude? Something had awakened him... a noise... no... a smell. His nostrils were roused by a scent that was heady and sublime. It was exquisite... intoxicating. He had vaulted from the bed and to his feet nearly in the center of the room even before he was aware of it. His senses were sharper than they had been in over two hundred years. He was drawn to the sound of running water from the bathroom. For as long as he could remember his staff had always made it a point to silently draw his bath in the morning. This was the first occasion he had ever recalled having been awakened and hearing the nearly soundless trickle of the water running in the bath. He moved toward the area from where the sound and scent were strongest and was surprised to find his House Manager, Gertrudis leaning over the edge of the tub washing the wide basin, preparing it for his morning rituals. He watched as she moved slowly, painfully. He could smell the wounds from her eighteen lashes. They were still raw and open, and being irritated by the fabric of her uniform. The blood sense, the perfume of blood vented in small and moderate quantity enveloped his body activating all his senses in the same manner that a fine vintage wine's bouquet enticed the Paradoxan nose.

He looked up to the right and was surprised... but not too much, by the image of himself in the reflector. He didn't have to touch the vertically hanging water to know that he had again metamorphosed. The powerfully built man who for all the world looked to be in his early thirties with flowing locks of strawberry blonde hair was the man he had always been on the inside... and now after so many centuries here he was again. But this, in and of itself, did not marvel him... not at the moment. At that moment all of his senses were being guided by the erection nearly as thick as his wrist, throbbing and brushing against his abdomen. The fleams that had engaged

even prior to him leaving the bed were sharp and bared to their full length. He salivated and his talons emerged as he stood less than a foot behind the tantalizing Gertrudis. He credited himself with managing to hang onto some semblance of self-control as her blood and curves beckoned.

“Gertrudis,” he said calmly, successfully negotiating his tongue around his bared fangs, “You appear to be in distress. What can I do to assist you?”

Gertrudis turned to reply but was struck speechless confronted with the now youthful form of the formerly decrepit Koescu.

She sniffed the air around her and took a deep inhalation in his direction then asked incredulous “M-Most Eminent Koescu?”

“With some changes, yes,” Koescu smiled.

“B-But how?” she stammered still in the grip of amazement.

“We will explore the means in due time. But for now we should address your dilemma.... Come,” he said extending his hand.

Gertrudis accepted the offered hand and stood on shaky legs.

“Under the circumstances, I am certain that you must be very uncomfortable in this uniform,” he said as he guided her toward the bed.

“Oh no, no Majhones. I am fine,” she protested as the large four-poster bed came into view.

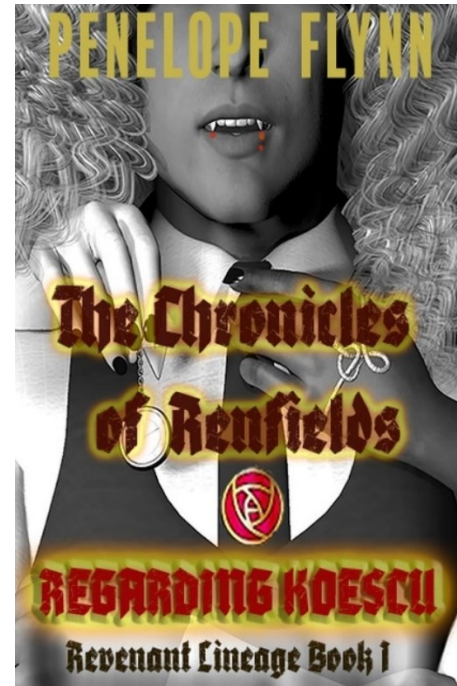
“Gertrudis,” Koescu said firmly, “It is clear that you are still injured. I realize that your Renfield managers have made you feel that they are in charge here, but they are not. It is their mischief that has caused this change in me and this harm to you.”

“Most Eminent, I am quite fine,” Gertrudis said, “It will only take me a few moments more to complete the bath.”

“You must allow me to help you, Gertrudis,” Koescu pleaded as he gripped her gently by the shoulders, “I understand your trepidation but I beg you to have faith that going forward I can and will protect you from their barbarous whims.”

The expression on her face confirmed her reluctance, but Gertrudis yielded to Koescu’s request and slowly sat down on the bench near the foot of the bed.

“Ahem,” Gertrudis coughed and turned her head as her positioning placed his semi-erect member squarely in her field of vision.



“A crimson blush crept over his face as he hurriedly retrieved and donned his dressing gown which overnight had become almost painfully snug around the biceps, chest and shoulders.

“I would like to examine the wounds,” he said.

“They are not easily accessible Most Eminent Koescu... I would have to disrobe.”

“Very well, then,” he replied folding his arms across his chest.

Koescu focused on his breathing and on controlling the beating of his heart as Gertrudis efficiently unbuttoned her uniform and peeled the garment down to her waist. The silence in the room was deafening as Koescu viewed Isaac’s handiwork. Gertrudis wore no brassiere. He knew that the lack of the undergarment was not wantonness. He couldn’t imagine that she could have worn one in her condition. The pain would have been unbearable over the eighteen bright red ribbons, a sworn testament to Isaac’s expertise with the lash. Recalling the cruel spectacle and Sebastian’s orchestration of it all, Koescu’s fury was only eclipsed by his stirring bloodlust.

“I-I am so, so sorry Gertrudis,” Koescu lamented, “This is my fault. I should have stood up to him, to both of them.”

“If there is fault Most Eminent Koescu,” Gertrudis responded, “then according to Renfield protocols the fault was mine. I accept that.”

“Dear Gertrudis, we can sit ‘til nightfall attempting to assess blame and it will still not heal your wounds,” Koescu said firmly, “You should let me help you. The punishment was administered by my blood. I should, therefore by my blood be able to heal the wounds.”

“You forget, Most Eminent Koescu... the blood of my punishment was infused with rose petals—”

“—I know, to keep the wounds fresh—”

“—And to keep an overzealous Majhones from imprudently unwinding a properly sentenced punishment.”

“So that was their game?” Koescu knit his brow in anger, “They believe that this stunt will stem my resolve? If they believe that I will not minister to you simply to avoid a modicum of pain, they are both sadly mistaken.”

“Dear, Most Eminent Koescu,” Gertrudis replied, “That you would even consider such an act to relieve my suffering is salve enough. Believe me. I will be fine. In my lifetime I have withstood worse.”

“I will relieve your pain. These rose petals are but a trifle,” Koescu snorted.

“Believe me, they are not. Were a Paradoxan Revenant to attempt what you are suggesting, the pain would be intense, but for you... a child of Abyssia; coming into contact with the rose-infused blood would be a torment of unthinkable measure. Leave this as it is, Most Eminent. The punishment was just. I will endure.”



“No,” Koescu said firmly gripping her by the shoulder, urging her to stand and then turning her to face the bed.

He leaned her forward declaring, “The Praefect and the Regent may manage all Renfield affairs, but I am still Majhones of this household. By my order, by my blood you are to remain still until I have tended to all these wounds. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Most Eminent Koescu,” she answered just barely over a whisper.

Koescu examined her back. Eighteen individual ribbons of red, eighteen times his tongue would be required to run from shoulders to rump. That didn’t seem an insurmountable task, however even as he leaned forward to begin, the burning, acrid scent of roses wafted upward to singe his nostrils, threatening to suffocate him. At a distance the only thing his hungry senses could appreciate was the blood. But close to the wounds the rose scent was overpowering. He drew back sharply, turning his head to inhale over his shoulder then a second time moved into position to begin the healing process.

He began as close to the center as he could determine, raked his tongue over his left fleam drawing blood then instantly held his breath and delivered a long measured lick from the tail end of the mark near her spine up to the area near her neck. He didn’t want to think about the stinging as he quickly ran his tongue back downward catching the stripe that ran to the left of the one where he began. Again he raked his tongue over the left fleam then ran his tongue upward. It seemed that the change in direction set off a new more intense level of discomfort and he gasped in pain as he completed the fourth stripe. By the time he had addressed stripe number six, his lips and tongue had begun to blister. He refused to consider the fact that he was only one third of the way through the process. When he arrived at the ninth stripe he worried that his tongue would not be able to produce sufficient blood to continue. Additionally, he realized that he had made a mistake by swallowing between applications and now the rose infusion was burning its way

down his throat doubtless scorching his entrails. But despite the broken blisters that covered his lips and tongue and the inflamed condition of the membranes in his mouth he persevered. A consistent stream of saliva ran from his mouth uncontrolled even as he arrived at the thirteenth mark on her back.

The only positive element in the scenario was that Gertrudis, true to her disciplined training remained still. He wasn't sure he would be able to continue if she moved even one inch, He could no longer feel his lips and in fact could only feel the rake of his teeth against her skin pushing the bloodied slaver he managed to produce, up and down her back. Fifteen. The pain was beyond excruciating. He wanted to quit. He had not listened to Gertrudis when she warned of the agonizing torment. At the fifteenth stripe, he realized that he should have. His tongue, or what was left of it was a blackened stump and it took all his self-control not to sob and cry out. Fifteen, he told himself was a perfectly good outcome. Gertrudis herself said that she was fine, that she could manage. She was far better off with three lashes from the whip instead of eighteen, he rationalized. She would be grateful, eternally grateful. But even as he attempted to convince himself, all he could see in his mind's eye was the smug expression of Sebastian Forza leveling the indictment of failure against him.



He bit back his anger and pain and started the sixteenth stripe and then the seventeenth without stopping. Eighteen. By the time he reached number eighteen, his tears were flowing unabated. The pain had radiated to encompass his entire face, his mouth, his throat and his viscera. He wanted to scream but no sound could travel through a throat so raw and mangled. But the result was worth the pain. Not one wound across her back remained. The skin was smooth and perfect. He had prevailed.

With the completion of the task, Koescu staggered backward crashing onto the floor, his internal organs feeling as if they were being rent in pieces and simultaneously consumed by acid. When Gertrudis turned to address him, she was unable to hide her horror and she crammed the hem of her uniform into her mouth to hold back the vomit that threatened to spew and soil the floor.

“Most Eminent Koescu!” she cried, “What have you done?!”

He turned to catch a glimpse of himself in the reflector, and despite the ravaged condition of his throat he screamed, he bellowed. Where only a half hour earlier a muscular handsome visage greeted him, at that moment a horrific mask of peeled away blistered lips, sallow eyes, and a blackened nub where a tongue had been were all reflected. His throat was shrunk and misshapen and his chest was black and green with boils the evidence of his swollen and blistered viscera desperately pushing outward, attempting to break the skin.

Gertrudis rushed to the door of the suite and bolted it shut saying, “Most Eminent Koescu you must drink. You must slake this thirst, now!”

Unable to speak, Koescu reached out to Gertrudis psychically as he rose from the floor his body wracked with pain, I will not, his thoughts alone causing pain as he ground them out, I can bear the suffering, I will bear the suffering. SLAP! A harsh, heavy sting across his face knocked him back to his knees.

“You fool!” Gertrudis hissed standing over him with balled fists, “It is not your suffering that concerns me. What do you think will happen to me if anyone in the household should see you like this?!”

I – I was attempting to help, Koescu moaned through the psychic link.

“You were attempting to antagonize Sebastian,” she replied as she paced the floor, “and now look at you!”

I said what I meant, Koescu lamented, I will protect you from them.

“You think I am first and foremost worried about Sebastian and Yannara?” Gertrudis laughed hysterically, “They are the very last of my worries as there will be nothing left of me for Sebastian and Yannara to punish if anyone on the staff sees you like this!”

Gertrudis, do not worry, Koescu labored even in his thoughts, I will be fine.

“I know you will be fine, Most Eminent Koescu, because you will drink, and you will drink, now!”

~FOUR~

Koescu pushed away from his House Manager, raising his arms to hide the mass of charred, misshapen flesh and bone that was formerly his face, lying stubbornly through the link, I do not care to drink.

“The truth is, Most Eminent Koescu that since you witnessed my lashing at Isaac's hands, without a doubt the thirst has occupied the majority of your thoughts,” Gertrudis said stepping toward him, gingerly, “And the row you had with Sebastian only momentarily slaked your thirst. You are in a terrible state of need, Majhones. Why do you not allow me to help you?”

Koescu collapsed onto the floor. He could no longer feel his feet. Searing pain radiated from everywhere in his body providing him a distinct sense of what the place Paradoxans called hell must be like. But even so, the continued presence of Gertrudis in his chambers coupled with the successful but painful healing rendered him a pointed, throbbing mass of need. And only the unbearable, soul scarring pain prevented him from attacking her, dragging her to the floor and endeavoring to drain her of nearly every vital fluid in her body.

“It does you no dishonor to admit it, Most Eminent Koescu,” Gertrudis said as she knelt beside him and gently raised his head, “Drink.”

Before Koescu could respond, Gertrudis' fleams were engaged and piercing her wrist drawing blood. The sense of the vented blood, even in his deplorable state was intoxicating. He wanted to resist the urging but could no more deny the urge to slake the thirst than he could deny the admiration he held for his House Manager at that moment. He ravenously latched onto her wrist. He heard Gertrudis' soft gasp as he drew back the first few draughts instantly calming the burning sensation in his mouth and chest. The next few bathed his bowels, and then his extremities. His skin, which had previously felt as if it was on fire began to cool. He could feel his face reshaping and reforming and his breathing again became smooth and even. His body ultimately relaxed and he fell satiated and smiling onto the floor.

“Come, Most Eminent Koescu, let me help you,” Gertrudis urged as she lifted him from his prone position and led him to the bed. Koescu rolled into the disheveled covers of the still unmade bed, not caring that his hair was fly-away and tangled or that his robe was open and askew. He found himself humming an old Abyssian tune nearly drunk with contentment. Even as he lay he could hear the birds singing outside his window; could smell the enormous varieties of plants that he had nurtured years long past but never truly enjoyed. He felt the motion of the bed as Gertrudis stood and prepared to continue her work. Without stirring from his relaxed position his arm shot out grabbing her by the wrist as he slurred, “I am lonely. Come lay with me, Gertrudis.”

“Your invitation is well-taken Majhones, but I must finish drawing your bath.”

“I am not up as yet. The bath will wait. Lay with me,” he said as he drew her back down onto the bed. An inordinately long silence followed, so much so that he wondered whether he had made his request aloud or just thought it. Then Gertrudis cleared her throat and remarked, absently, “Most Eminent, Koescu it appears that you are quite intoxicated by your drink and I believe... in danger of becoming... mischievous.”

“Mmm,” he growled contentedly not countenancing anymore of her words as he brusquely pulled her body down onto the bed beside him reveling in her softness as he began to doze. He

marveled that he felt no pain, no pain at all... not even the daily pain he had become used to over the past hundred years. It was a miracle... miraculous... “Leviathan,” he sighed and slipped off into a deep sleep.



Excerpt from The Chronicles of Renfields: Regarding Koescu (2019) by Penelope Flynn



Carolyn Saulson

(February 24, 1948 - January 14, 2019) The author of *Living A Lie: Tales of Intrigue, Homelessness and Telepathic Power*; the comic book *Living A Lie*; and the plays *The Strange Case of Dr. Henriette Jekyll* and *Song of Solomon: A Love Story*. She was the lead singer of the Afrocentric gothic band Stagefright, and co-founder of the media arts non-profit Iconoclast Productions, the San Francisco Black Independent Film Festival and the African American Multimedia Conference.



THE SECRET LIFE OF RANDOLPH JAMES

February 24, 2024 would have been Carolyn Saulson's 75 birthday. This is an excerpt from her novella "Living A Lie," which also appeared in *Wickedly Abled*. In the introduction to *Wickedly Abled*, Seruus Ualerium Tristissima Liber (Emily Flummox) says of the piece:

"Carolyn Saulson's 'The Secret Life of Randolph James' shows the problem with the idea of 'high-functioning' even more clearly, even as it shows more resonances between sanism and racism, adding classism to the mix as well. Randolph's life is consumed by his efforts to pass, as white, as sane, as upper-class. There is a subtle horror here, one that resembles that in 'Secundum' the way a trickle of liquid down the back resembles a catastrophic tidal wave. Carolyn shows here how we must harm ourselves to be treated as people by a society that refuses to think of us as such. The horror of how we must turn our own agency upon ourselves as a weapon, cutting off love, putting ourselves into the social equivalent of a pile of razors, lurks throughout this tale."



Randolph

His hair was short-cropped and brown; he managed to look like an upwardly mobile thirty-to-thirty-five-year-old Anglo-Saxon Protestant, but who was he really? Not who he was pretending to be. He had been in jail and he'd come from the wrong side of the tracks in a town in Northern California so small and of such ill repute that it seemed ridiculous to have a bad side of town.

What did she say?

Let's meet at which restaurant tonight?

Things were getting too serious.

"Oh well," he thought, "It's another Monday. I need to be at work on time."

So he uncurled his long, thin, pale body from around a pillow and sat up abruptly. He looked over at his old-fashioned alarm clock, noticed that it was about to go off, and sighed. Time to get into gear.

He went to his closet, and took out a very conservative gray three-piece suit, after which he selected an also-conservative tie to match. After

gathering his necessities for faking the image he was trying to perpetrate, he took a bath. His eyesight was nearly perfect, but he preferred the way he looked in glasses, and he wore some sharp, expensive brand that he thought made him look more subtle or intelligent.

Lately, he'd been going by the name Randolph James, of course this wasn't his real name, but he made it work. Looking into the full-length mirror in his bedroom, he forced his body to stand erect, checked his stance.

He wasn't who he was pretending to be.

He was neither white, upwardly mobile, nor Randolph James.

Love

Why had he allowed himself to be seduced into this emotion that threatened to unravel his whole world? Love. If that's what one should call it.

Long ago, he had decided that love was a delusional state necessitated by the overwhelming reality that death was the only outcome to existence. The joke was death. No measures could be taken to prepare for it; after all, who could predict the accident, or murder, even. Too much randomness to process.

So, in the back of everyone's mind, he imagined, was the fact that any moment on any day could be their last. How could a self-aware being stay sane? He imagined this all-encompassing simple solution to dark thoughts was the distraction of love and romance—to keep these thoughts at bay, and to continue the human race through families and procreation.

As he daydreamed the improbable, he put in a little discipline and effort and it all made sense; not a bad life, either, unless you had so badly run awry of morality and the law that your fantasy or distraction could never quite be realized. A pinprick to his euphoric bubble.

Oh God, his mind was slipping away again, toward her, even toward marriage. He knew better. What was wrong with him?

Maybe it was because he was almost thirty now. Yes, his age. His body was betraying him, making him give way and yearn for what was dangerous to even think.

"Well, how dangerous," he thought. "I'm not a felon, petty crimes; embarrassment, if I tell the truth. If I must, what is the worst I'd be facing? Rejection?"

Somehow, he'd lost track of his beliefs and what was once a convenience had become intrinsic. What was two individuals coming together for fun and sex became a fusion of weakness and incompleteness, and some symbiotic wholeness.

False, thought it may be, his need and his hunger for this illusion of completeness was getting out of control. He could no longer tell reality from illusion. How could he live without her?

He told himself that he was a survivor, and somehow he'd break it off. He'd make an excuse for a fight. She was getting too close. It was that. Or tell her everything.

Impossible! His whole life was a lie! It seemed every lie necessitated another, even more elaborate lie. So far, so good.

But once more, maybe?

No...not even he could manage it.

Or could he?

Mother

When he was thirteen, living in his seventh foster-care situation because of his “moods” or “fits”, as his foster parents liked to call them, things weren't going well. In those times he often thought about his mother, Amelia. He wondered where she was and what she might be thinking at any given moment.

At this moment, things weren't going well for her either. His mother was having a more intense version of the same problem. She was having trouble focusing on her daily tasks because she heard voices and was hallucinating. His mother believed that she inherited these genetic “gifts” from her father Jimmy Dee. Being homeless did not help; she often was unable to get a good night's sleep and sometimes her medication got stolen along with her other belongings. She had tried sleeping in local shelters, but she got hassled for being unruly; the men working there seemed to expect deference and sexual favors; it wasn't safe; and nobody seemed to believe her when she complained to social workers, or homeless clinics. Their favorite response was to ask her if she drank or used drugs; she was regularly drug tested then ignored.

Her only sanctuary was found in an alcoholic friend or perhaps boyfriend who sometimes slept in People's Park. He brought her cigarettes and coffee, and watched over her physically at night—when he wasn't too drunk—so that other men didn't bother her or her things. She called him Ben; she knew that wasn't his name, but it was better than calling him has-been, as others tend to do. Ben wasn't always around—he was a party animal and drank profusely. When he ran into some good old boys with enough spirits to get him good and drunk, he would spend the night and part of the next day in a gutter sleeping it off. His drunken unruliness often led to incarceration.

Randolph's mother's life was never without challenge of one type or another, it seemed no matter what measures she took. Could she get off the street and find a way to get him back?

Today she was meeting Ben at a free food program near People's Park, at 8:30 if he remembered. He had promised several days ago, but he hadn't showed up for 2 nights; today they were going to the free clinic to see a doctor.

Amelia watched and waited for Ben. She got into line with the rest of the homeless people thirsty enough and hungry enough to drink bitter coffee without milk or sugar and eat oatmeal overcooked with no margarine, butter, sugar, or milk, and cold to top it off. In walked Ben, and her heart leapt with relief.

The Girlfriend

Randolph could remember the days he dreamt of being included in a meal such as the one he would have with his “girlfriend” and her family. Back then, he was busing tables, always aware of his status, his clothing, his assumed political affiliations, his haircut, and what they insinuated about him and his past or current life. He already had the feeling that there was no way out. The pretentious friends that he had were always looking for weaknesses and had placed him at the bottom of their pecking order; he was already feeling trapped.

Life was not as simple as he had thought. Nothing like “they” said it would be...if you were a “good nigger,” you could always work hard, get a decent job and place to live, find acceptance, and work your way up.

He wondered who really believed all that, or was it just a societal justification—like keeping his mom, or anyone else who ever got overwhelmed in life, on psych drugs and “stable” (under control) for the rest of their lives. When he thought of the effects of drugs like lithium, and the patients he'd seen on dialysis as a result, or dying from kidney failure at an early age after being over-medicated...

He put two and two together and decided it was best to hide his so-called condition the best way he could. From his point of view, he was too intense and maybe a bit too imaginative, kindly put: creative...and on the downside, when he was manic, his inventiveness took on some interesting attributes. He was a few steps in front of himself, and others too if he wanted to be and had the resolve to use enough discipline. But back to the problem at hand.

Did he even want a family? Could he take such a step now, or later? Maybe he could placate them? After all, he was a busy man. Needing to take a trip or travel wasn't inconsistent or unreasonable. That would buy him some time to think about the future he might be getting into, or make it easier to get out of it without too many hurt feelings if that is what he decided to do.

The Memory

The smell of the homeless man on the side of the street brought back a memory, but what was it? Somehow, he thought of his mother, Amelia, and, as always, he wondered where she was and how she was doing.

In that moment, his mother was in her office. He didn't know that she had managed to graduate school and to finish a partially-accredited law school; he was completely unaware that

her heart had been broken because, no matter how she approached it, as a single parent she was unable to get him back.

Things had always been difficult for his mom.

The harshness of homelessness gave no quarter for a young, pregnant girl who couldn't go home.

She had been beaten up more than once. She tried getting involved with teenage runaway organizations but they inevitably asked about her background or tried to get her to put her child up for adoption.

As bad as it was, it was better than what she had run away from: the repeated beatings and sexual assaults from her mother's boyfriend with the threat of death hanging over her head like the sword of Damocles if she told anyone what was going on.

The guys in the park were no better; it is true that they always started off being friendly enough, but when it got cold or food was scarce, the façade ended; they took what they wanted or needed and left her to deal with the pain and fear she felt on her own.

Birthright

Randolph wasn't his name, but he'd been using it for so long now that it made little sense to tell his fiancée, Marjorie, that his real name was James. Named after his grandfather, Jimmy Dee. It didn't make much sense, but that was what he was going to have to do, and soon.

He'd been writing to his birth mother once again, and there had been a lot of talk about reconciliation as of late. How ironic—two things he wanted, seemingly in conflict with one another. How he had yearned for an ordinary life all of these years...and now, two opportunities. An outwardly-normal relationship with Marjorie, or the biological family that had been stolen from him when he was less than a year old?

Perhaps he could have both? Maybe he could start a new family with Marjorie, even have children? But if he did, and also renewed his relationship with his mother, Amelia, he'd have to come clean about a number of things.

Although Randolph himself was white passing, he knew damned well that the man he was named after was a black man. James Rodney Daniels, or Jimmy D. And while he had been given Amelia's last name, Ferguson, at birth, he knew his middle name was Daniel. James Daniel Ferguson. Jimmy Dee Ferguson. Jimmy D Junior.

That's what Amelia and her grandmother, Jimmy Dee's mother, Sally Mae Daniels, used to call him as an infant. Jimmy Dee Junior.

Maybe if Sally Mae had lived to see his first birthday, Amelia could have stayed in housing and Randolph wouldn't have ended up in foster care. Maybe if she had severed her parental

rights voluntarily instead of trying to get him back for a few years, some nice couple who wanted a white baby would have adopted him as a toddler, pretended he was white—the way the Johnson family did when he was in their foster care as a teenager and they didn't want to get any shit from their neighbors.

Then, he'd still be Jimmy Dee Junior.

Not Randolph James, the latest in a long series of pseudonyms he used for convincing nice young ladies and sometimes not-so-young ladies like Marjorie Brentwood that he was an up and coming lawyer with a high-heeled lifestyle at an obscure law firm and larger pay grade than they. These ladies were free with the spending, and their wallets might dry up if they knew he was a thirty-year-old former waiter whose closest relationship to law school was performing as a lawyer in a Berkeley Repertory Theater production of Merchant of Venice.

A quarter blood quantum of African genetic heritage, a.k.a. quadroon, wasn't the only birthright Randolph inherited from his maternal grandfather. Neither was his name. Like his mother, Amelia, he'd inherited Jimmy's bipolar disorder and his mood swings.

He'd also inherited his psychic powers.

Not everyone understood properly his mental abilities. Like his mother, he had a smooth way with people, an ability to talk them into almost anything. One might easily conflate these with the simple manipulations any con man was capable of, but it was more.

A form of telepathy he could use to influence minds.

Jedi mind tricks.

But his doctor assured him this was untrue. He was basically insane.



The Andersons

As for Marjorie Anderson—she could never know who he really was. Poor. Uneducated. A quarter black. Out of foster care. While not exactly a person who swindled women, Randolph was known for befriending those who were economically generous and more than often a bit lonely—older women, widows looking for a second chance with open pocket books they used to fuel his playboy lifestyle.

Her parents would surely never allow the marriage if they found out.

Marjorie's parents were never openly bigoted against black people—no one in the Bay Area ever really was—but they made little snide comments whenever they ate fancy meals out at the Ethiopian place that let Randolph know how they really felt. Ethiopians, Indians, and Thai people were great, as long as they stayed in their place, which was usually in the kitchen, or behind the desk at some fancy spa white folks attended, or in a dress or spice store offering things that the upper crust and the upwardly mobile needed to perpetrate an image of superficial liberality.

Although Marjorie herself claimed to be an independent, having lobbied with equal vigor for Ron Paul and Bernie Sanders, both of her parents were Reagan Republicans. Horrified by the nude model First Lady Melania Trump, disgusted by Barrack Obama's progressive reforms such as support of gay marriage, and horrified by his public identification with Travon Martin.

The Andersons were well to do—a real estate mogul with a chain of local hotels to his name and his charming wife, an optometrist he met while she was working. He babbled on at parties over his usual one-drink-over-the-line champagne glass about how he met her when she fitted him for glasses. Sherry Anderson was UC-educated, charming, and professional. Joe Anderson was self-made, one of those guys who listened to a ton of self-actualization tapes by various inspirational speakers and attended real estate seminars until he flipped property after property and jetted his way out of his boring office job into a stellar career, first as a real estate developer, then a professional rent collector with a string of rental properties and hotels.

In a way, Randolph and Joe were a lot alike: likeable, outgoing, and able to sell swamp water to crocodiles. But Joe had a B.A. in English and had been working as a professional administrative assistant, considering following in his parent's footsteps as an English professor, when he started flipping houses and forging his own path instead.

He hated homeless people even more than he hated Melania Trump. Not that he hadn't voted for her husband while crying into his morning coffee about how great the Bushes had been and how the mighty Republican Party had fallen. He'd been a proud, gun-owning, country-club-joining, deer-shooting member of the GOP for three decades now.

Randolph was beginning to develop a headache.

How much telepathic energy would it take to convince Mr. Anderson that he was a lawyer? Would he have to keep up his Jedi mind tricks indefinitely in order to get past the engagement?

His future father-in-law was insufferable. Randolph began to wonder if he had enough mind-power to change the man's politics. Bored and pensive, he began to quietly fantasize about exerting enough mind control to turn Joe Anderson into the Manchurian Candidate, while the good old boy bragged about shaking hands with Ronald Reagan and playing cards with Tricky Dick Nixon.





Natasha Morningstarr

Natasha has a deep affinity for all things supernatural and uncanny, which she frequently puts to use in her writing. Her love of horror began with an early fascination for horror movies that blossomed into a passion for creating her own tales of terror. She is currently working with her husband on their first horror novel together.



MIDNIGHT OF LILITH

A story of desperation and terror, Liza is a woman so desperate to remain youthful and beautiful that she turns to dark magic. Her obsession for eternal youth leads her down a twisted path that results in her body becoming ravaged by an insidious evil force, aging her beyond repair and slowly consuming her from the inside out.



Liza sat in front of her mirror, staring at the reflection. She had always been proud and confident, but now she felt ugly with sagging skin that didn't look like hers anymore. It was as if someone else's face were looking back from within those aging eyes peering out across wrinkles-filled brows above thin lips decorated by lines around the nose bridge & mouth. Liza's 37th birthday party seemed like weeks ago; instead, time seems to have caught up. Then, the crush of her dreams, Jason, reminded her that father time was catching up with her.

"The lines under your eyes make you look like a sexy Shar Pei. You're still gorgeous, but you're getting old."

Liza held back tears as she reached into her purse to apply another layer of concealer under her eyes. It was true; she was getting old. All her friends from college had husbands, children, and careers. Liza had nothing except a job at the local bookstore and an empty apartment. It took months of overtime to afford the lavish birthday she wanted.

She thought back to her days as a cheerleader in high school. Then, she was the envy of every girl and the object of desire for every boy. Now, at 37, she felt invisible. Men didn't look at her twice; women no longer saw her as competition.

Liza was desperate to find a way to turn back the clock. She tried every new fad diet and miracle skin cream on the market, but nothing worked. She even considered cosmetic surgery, but that was too expensive, and she wasn't sure she could trust a doctor to not botch her face.

"I need to find a way to stop this," she said as she got up from the vanity and began pacing around her small apartment. Then, in desperation, Liza turned to glamour magic. She spent hours pouring over spell books.

“Maybe that's the answer,” she thought to herself as she began to search online for beauty spells.

She read article after article and watched video after video until she understood the basics well. Then, she got to work crafting her own spells.

Liza spent hours upon hours casting spells, beseeching the universe for help. Finally, her skin began to look smoother and more youthful, and her hair became shinier and fuller. She was thrilled.

The only downside was that the spells required her to use some blood, making her feel a bit uneasy. But she was willing to do whatever it took to keep her youth and beauty. Liza sought animal blood for the ritual and found a beautiful bunny hopping across her yard. Liza had always loved animals, so this bunny seemed the perfect candidate. She followed it into the

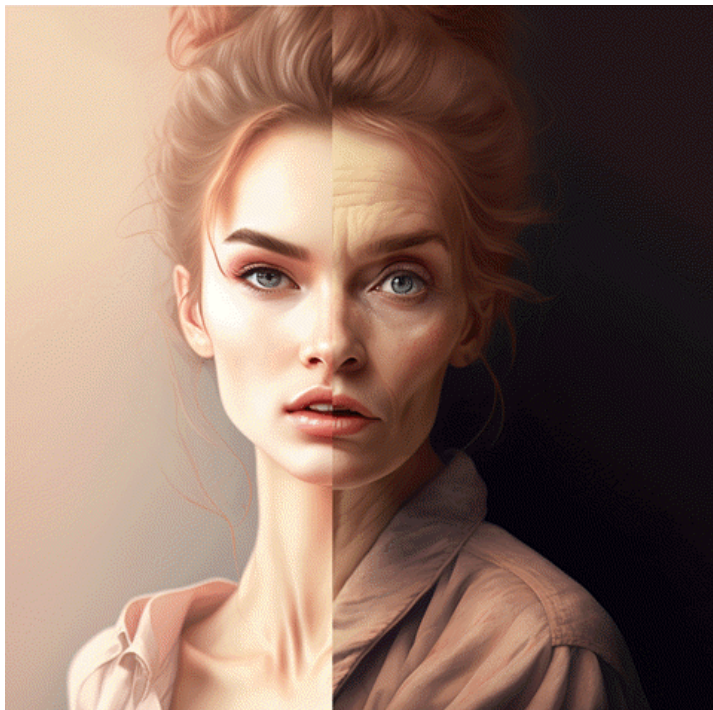


Image credit: @DrewLettner

woods, where she found a secluded spot to perform the spell.

As she began to chant the words of the spell, she felt a dark presence begin to materialize around her. First, she could see the bunny's eyes go black as it stared at her. Then, it suddenly leaped at her, its teeth sharp and deadly.

Liza screamed as the bunny began to savage her flesh. She felt its teeth tearing into her skin and its claws raking across her body. She tried to fight back, but it was too strong.

Then, she felt something else enter her body, and she was filled with unspeakable terror. The bunny's eyes turned red as it continued to attack her. Liza knew that whatever possessed the animal was now inside of her.

She could feel the dark magic coursing through her veins and knew she would never be the same again. But maybe, this was the price she must pay to look 20 again? After fainting from the attack, she awoke to find herself in her living room.

Liza's friends were astonished at the transformation. They could hardly believe that the beautiful young woman before them was the same person they had known for years. Liza was happy to finally have her youth and beauty back, but she couldn't help but feel a little uneasy about the dark magic coursing through her veins. She knew that this was only the beginning.

For weeks, Liza continued to cast spells to manage her youthful beauty. But then, one night, she went to sleep and had the most horrifying dream. She dreamt of looking in the mirror and seeing her face wrinkle and sag. She watched in horror as her once beautiful features became twisted and grotesque. She tried to scream, but no sound came out.

She woke up covered in sweat with her heart racing. It took her a few moments to calm down, but when she did, she realized that the dream had felt all too real. She got out of bed and went to the bathroom to splash water on her face. But when she looked in the mirror, she saw that her skin was already beginning to wrinkle and sag.

Her hair fell out in clumps, and her eyes were sunken and dark. It was happening, just like in her dream. The dark magic was wearing off too soon. Liza was horrified. She had to find a way to reverse the spell before it was too late. But she didn't know how.

She spent the next few days frantically searching for a solution. Still, She couldn't find anything until one day, she stumbled upon a forum on the deep dark web. "Midnight of Lilith" is where she found a community of people practicing dark magic and worshipping Lilith. And Liza was told this deity could assist her with glamour magic. But she had to sacrifice: give up her soul to Lilith. And she would have to do it willingly.

Liza was desperate and decided that she had nothing to lose. So, she performed the ritual and summoned Lilith. She made her offer, and Lilith accepted. Liza knew she had to try it. Even if it meant descending further into the darkness, Liza had to find a way to save herself. But as Liza felt the dark goddess enter her body, she realized too late that she had made a mistake.

The dark magic coursing through her veins was more potent than ever, and she could feel herself changing. She was no longer human; she was entirely different, but she was once again young and beautiful.

Keeping Lilith satisfied required more than Liza realized. She performed the spells and rituals with reckless abandon. Blood sacrifices, dark offerings, nothing was too extreme. The cost of her beauty was her soul, and she knew it. But she couldn't stop; she was addicted to the power and attention.

Liza had become a monster, but she didn't care. That was as long as she remained young and beautiful, but Liza had changed. The experience had left her feeling cold and empty inside. And she knew that she would never be able to forget the things she had to do to be beautiful again. The thoughts alone made her puke. She didn't want to cut out the homeless man's tongue, but she would make her cut out hers if she refused Lilith's orders.

Liza fell into a deep depression as she fought with the spirit of Lilith inside of her. She became distant from her friends and family, spending hours staring at herself in front of the mirror. She was disgusted with what she had become but couldn't escape Lilith's hold. Then, one day, she decided that she had had enough. She couldn't go on living like this. So, she took a knife and slit her wrists.

As she bled out, she could feel Lilith leaving her body. And as she took her last breath, she saw the spirit of the dark goddess disappear into the shadows. But even in death, Liza was consumed by thoughts of her appearance. She knew her loved ones would shed tears at her funeral and wondered how she would look.

The funeral was a somber affair. Liza's loved ones were all gathered to say their final goodbyes, but one person was there that didn't quite fit in. They were standing off the side, snapping pictures on their phone and taking pictures of the proceedings. No one paid much attention until they took pictures of Liza's body in the casket. That's when people began to get uneasy.

Someone finally approached the person and asked them what they were doing. They simply replied, "I'm just taking pictures for Lilith. She'll want to see how her handiwork turned out."

The funeral attendees were horrified. They realized then that Liza hadn't just taken her own life - she had made a deal with a demon.

The pictures of Liza's funeral were uploaded to the Midnight of Lilith forum with great fanfare. The community members were thrilled to see the results of her dark pact. They congratulated the person who had taken the pictures and praised Lilith for her work.

Some of the more squeamish members were disturbed by the sight of Liza's body in the casket, but most found it fascinating. To them, she was a martyr for the cause of beauty. They saw her as a brave woman who had made the ultimate sacrifice to remain young and beautiful.

Others saw her as a cautionary tale. This a reminder that there is always a price to be paid for dabbling in the dark arts. But they couldn't deny that she looked terrific, even in death.



Midnight of Lilith was originally published at <https://www.natashawrites.info/twisted-tales> as a part of the annual Twisted Tales series.

Look for Natasha's latest work, "Broken Ones" in the 'Out of the Darkness' anthology by Wolfsinger Publications. Proceeds donated to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

ALL ABOUT NIGHTLIGHT, THE HORROR PODCAST

Tonia Ransom is the World Fantasy Award-winning creator and executive producer of NIGHTLIGHT, an IGNYTE Best Fiction Podcast featuring creepy tales written by Black writers. In this interview with Kenya Moss-Dyme, Tonia talks horror audio and why NIGHTLIGHT does it better!



How long has Nightlight been around and what's changed during its evolution?

I started [NIGHTLIGHT](#) in summer of 2018. The quality of our productions has definitely gotten better as we've been able to invest more in our voice actors and our authors, as well as pay our sound designers. We've also been able to use paid sound libraries for better quality sounds. I'm so proud that we're now able to pay everyone who works on the podcast for their skill, and have been able to raise author rates very close to pro pay.



Tell us about your crew.

We have a couple of actors, like the amazing Cherrae Stuart, who frequently voice the stories. Our sound designers are Jen Zink and Davis Walden. Jen previously worked on the Hugo-nominated Skiffy and Fanty Show, and now also works with me on my second podcast, Afflicted. Davis has been with NIGHTLIGHT almost as long as Jen, and it's been amazing to see his growth as a sound designer.

I'm not a big podcast listener, but I checked out some of the episodes at Nightlight and they sound really incredible as far as production and quality! For someone like me who is new to horror podcasts, what would you tell them to expect that's different than other podcasts?

Thank you so much! As for what's different: most narrative anthology podcasts do not add sound effects to their productions. Most are just straight narration, much like an audiobook, or narration with ambient music. We don't add as many sound effects as a full-cast audio drama, but instead use sound to enhance the story. That said, I do think this is changing — we're starting to see more narrative anthologies add sound effects and music so they are closer to an audio drama vs an audiobook.

Do you all participate and record remotely or do you get together in a studio to create?

Our actors all record remotely. Since each episode is just a single narrator, it doesn't really make sense to record in a studio, or with real-time direction from me, though I will often leave some director's notes for the narrator if the instructions are important to the way we want the story produced.

There are dozens of episodes available on the site. Do you have any personal favorites?

I still love Wilson's Pawn and Loan by Lamar Giles. It's one of our first episodes, and did very well when it first came out, but it gets less play as an older episode vs some of our other Season 1 stories. I wish more people listened to it!

What is the selection process for your stories - do you seek out the content or is there a submission process?

I both seek out content and accept submissions. We're open for submissions on even months February through October, and it works pretty much the same way any other literary publication works, except we evaluate stories primarily based on pacing since that's so important in audio. I also read stories in other magazines and anthologies and reach out to authors directly if I find something I like.

Podcast tales have a way of getting under your skin, a little more intensely than books. Have there been any stories featured that you just couldn't shake?

[Desiccant by Craig Lurance Gidney](#) - Episode 12 of Season 3. I love this non-traditional take on vampires, but the reason this one is so hard to shake is because of the people being hunted by the

creatures. They are society's castaways, and their treatment is a reflection of reality that is unflinching and heartbreaking.

I'm excited to work my way through the rest of the episodes - I'll have to pace myself though, because your selection is huge! How often do you develop new content?

We release 2 new episodes every month from February to September, then weekly episodes in October, culminating with a full-cast season finale every Halloween.

What's in store for Nightlight in 2023? Any new features or events?

This year is going to be all about growing our podcast listenership. It's the cornerstone that will allow us to pay authors and actors more. We had our first live show last October, and I'm hoping to do more this year. We're also bringing back author interviews, which we'll eventually start publishing to YouTube.

And since you are also one of our featured Black Women in Horror Month writers, please share with the audience which of your own works you'd like them to check out.

I would love for folks to check out my newest podcast, Afflicted. It's like Lovecraft Country meets True Blood with a heavy dose of hoodoo and science. It's free to listen wherever you get podcasts, or at pod.link/afflicted.

Look for Tonia's debut novel -- **Risen: A Horror Thriller Novella**.



CHOPPING IT UP WITH CRYSTAL CONNOR — THE TRUSTED NAME IN TERROR

This award-winning Bram Stoker nominee is also a bougie glamper and pet mom to a spoiled Fox Rat Terrier named Ceaira LaShae Napoleon Connor, who just so happens to have her own Facebook page.



I'm so excited to interview the Trusted Name in Terror, especially during Black Women in Horror Month!

Are you kidding me dude, I'm excited to be here!

First, we're gonna do a round of Random Shit About Crystal. Five quick random questions:

Fastest way for a guest at your house to piss you off?

Oh, damn we're just jumping right on in uh? Ok so I am a triple Virgo my Sun and rising signs are both Virgo and my moon is in Cancer which has strong Virgo traits so the quickest way to get kicked out is to touch or move my stuff.

Doordash or will you cook?

Cook. If I want gourmet burgers or chain restaurant Italian food I'll just go eat there because I don't like eating lukewarm or cold food that's supposed to be enjoyed hot.

Freddie, Jason or Michael in a fight - who are you riding with?

Freddie because he's a bundle package with insomnia and insomnia is a monster in its own right.

A gift card to any place you choose – what's it gonna be?

Kicking Horse Mountain resort in Canada. The year before Covid-19 I was there to cross there via ferrata (a sky bridge between two mountains) but I wasn't prepared for how tough the hike



would be to get to the bridge and I only made it half way across before turning back. I want to go back and finish it.

Gym shoes or flip flops?

Both! And 6-inch heels.

Thanks for playing along! Before we get into this huge project you kicked off this year, let's talk about your books.

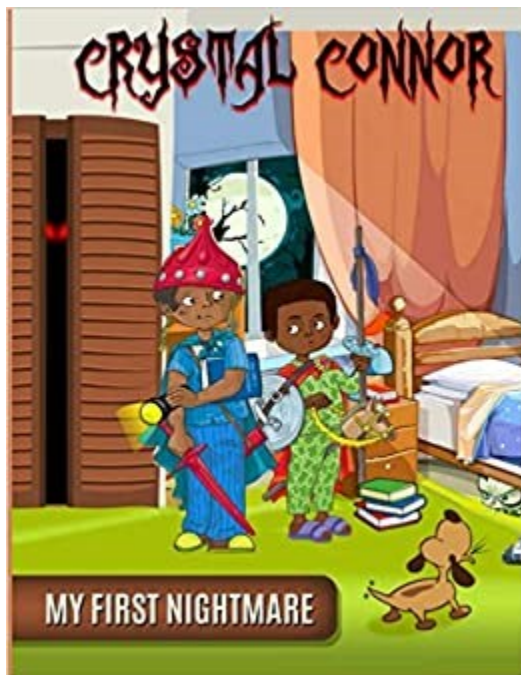
Out of all of your work, what are YOU most proud of? And would you change anything about it?

Well, after I finish a project it becomes my favorite, lol All of those projects as a collective is what has brought me here, so I wouldn't change anything.

Any new books on the horizon for 2023 or 2024?

Yes. I haven't been writing for a while because ... life, but I've promised myself to get back into it. The three projects that I need to finish are two stand-alone books and the 1st book in the 2nd series. Really looking forward to getting back into the swing of things

I don't think enough people know about your ABCs of Horror book for kids, titled My 1st Nightmare. Tell us more about that one.



Oh my gosh, so it all started when a fan of mine came up to me at a horror convention and said I should write a horror book and I laughed it off because I traumatize adults, why would I do that to a kid.

I remember being in an airport 6 or 7 years ago and I saw a preteen reading *The Darkness* and she was crying her eyes out. I felt so bad because I don't write for kids and seeing her like that only reinforced that notion.

When I was on tour at Days of the Dead in Kansas a 13-year-old girl came up to my booth to buy a copy of *The Darkness*. I asked her if she wanted to take a selfie but she didn't have her phone. Turns out she was on restriction and she renegotiated the terms and conditions of her punishment because she really wanted to meet me and get a copy of *The Darkness*.

Her parents bought a day pass, came straight to my booth and immediately marched her back out. But while she was there, she asked if I had anything for her little brother who couldn't have been older than 7. I didn't.

The final straw was at a party I was complaining about how my fans were asking me to write a children's book. And one of the guys there said "my kid's 1st nightmare thanks to Crystal Connor" and everyone started laughing so I started to really think about it.

So, I came up with the concept of introducing kids to the horror genre by using actual myths, legends, and folklore from all around the world. I was really worried about the cost because illustrators aren't cheap and I need a LOT of illustrations.

So, I reached out to the artist I have been working with for several years who help develop my logo a brand. I told him what I wanted. It was a heavy lift because I wanted a custom alphabet, 26 country flags and all the monsters redrawn to be suitable for children and icon legends. And the numbers he came back with were stunning. I asked him not to low ball it because I was a client and he said he wasn't. So, I started to get excited because it was in budget. But I still needed illustrations of the narrators and all the kids from around the world who would be encountering the monsters.

I reached out to an African American award-winning children's illustrator and told her what I wanted to do because I wanted to know how much I'd need to save, beg, or borrow in order to have the type of illustrations I wanted.

I was floored with the numbers she came back with it was a little out of my budget, it was in reach if I just ate spam and noodles. I knew my long-term illustrator was giving me the homie hook up but I had never worked with this illustrator before so I was confused as to why she would give me a homie hook up. So, I emailed her back and asked if that quote was for everything. And she confirmed and even offered a pay-as-you-go option so I was able to purchase 5 images at a time.

And after that it was all systems go. This was one of the most fun and stressful projects to date. It was stressful because the stories are from other people's cultures and I didn't want to make any mistakes. So, I took my time and really did my research. Super happy about this book turned out. And now it's priced affordably so everyone can buy a copy!

Anyone who follows you knows that you watch a lot of movies. Name some of your favorites that you just never get tired of rewatching?

Ok, so my favorite horror genre is religious horror and my favorite right now is a 3-way tie between Blumhouse's "Mercy" (2014), IFC's "Welcome to Mercy" (2018), and Vincent Grashaw's "What Josiah Saw" (2022).

Okay, you were teasing a surprise and then you burst out with a whole film festival!! (mind blown) BIG congratulations!! Tell us more about that - how's it going?

LOL, thank you! OMG I am having so much fun, of course I am super nervous because no one has a horror film festival like this. My festival is called Cabin in The Woods Film Festival. When you are attending film festivals all the films have already be judged. But with mine the films are going to be judged by the VIP Cabin Guest who will be watching these films in a cabin in the woods!



What's different about yours compared to other film festivals of a similar size?

So besides that, another thing that makes my festival different from all the other awesome horror film festivals is that theater is a small and intimate venue.

I cover film festivals with Live Action Reviews! by Crystal Connor. Sometimes I don't get to interview the filmmakers I want because there are so many people there and other times interviews aren't viable because there is so much background noise.

Don't get me wrong I LOVE attending huge festivals. I love all the people, the chaotic vibe and being in a theater screaming at the people in horror films along with everyone else. But I also like the vibe of a smaller festival so I decided to combine the two.

Attending a festival can be costly but with Cabin in The Woods Film Festival all tiers of ticketing are all-inclusive. Another thing that's different is the virtual film track. For those who will be logging on from home will be treated to a film track that is completely different from those who are attending in person. The guest from home will be able to sign in to the festival's social wall. They will be able to 'meet' other festival guest and compete in contests to win

awesome prizes. They will still be able to enjoy a festival experience.

What are the requirements for someone to submit their film to The Cabin in the Woods film festival?

Sure, the biggest requirement is the run time. This festival celebrates short horror films and is accepting films of 30 minutes or less. All film must be horror or horror adjacent, international films must have English sub-titles, and of course any film with hate speech will be immediately disqualified.

Are there dreams or plans for Crystal to go deeper into the world of moviemaking? Screenwriting? Directing? Producing?

Well, I've already written two screenplays. One is being reviewed for an anthology and the other I am going to enter into contest and see if I can get it made. But other than that, I just wanna live a rock star writer's life by attending conventions and posing on the red carpet of film festivals.

Any appearances this year? Any cons or events where fans can pick up some books and merch?

I'm not attending any cons this year but I am going to be attending more film festivals and pushing really hard to get my promoted so I'm super happy you're giving me this huge shout out. Again, thanks for having me, this was really fun.



Crystal is an author of Horror, Science Fiction and Dark Fantasy, the host of "Live Action Reviews!", and a popular correspondent for horror events.



Visit [Cabin in the Woods Film Festival](#) to learn more and submit your film!

WHERE AFROFUTURISM AND HORROR MEET:

INTERVIEW WITH NISI SHAWL

The 2019 Kate Wilhelm Solstice Award-winner for Lifetime Achievement, Nisi co-founded the Carl Brandon Society in 1997 to help give people of color greater visibility in the science fiction and fantasy worlds. They are also the co-creator of “Writing the Other” workshops and have taught thousands of writers new ways of thinking about diversity and representation within fiction.



BWiH Magazine

Most people know you for your work as an Afrofuturist, but you've written some amazing horror and dark fantasy. What can you tell our readers about it?

Nisi Shawl

I'm not sure that horror and Afrofuturism are mutually exclusive categories. Is horror a genre? Maybe? But I truly don't believe Afrofuturism is a genre--it's an aesthetic. Sure, some of my stories are set in the future, like the Making Amends series. The latest installment, "Over a Long Time Ago," has definite horror overtones, though, if you ask me. It'll be appearing in Lightspeed Magazine sometime this year, so then readers will get to judge for themselves. Meanwhile, they can scrutinize the stories collected in Our Fruiting Bodies.

The three Brit Williams stories ("Street Worm," "Queen of Dirt," and "Conversion Therapy,") are purely what John Jennings calls "ethno gothic," for instance. "I Being Young and Foolish" could qualify as dark fantasy, I guess--but dark for whom? I'm way more interested in what readers can tell me than what I can tell them about this stuff.



BWiH Magazine

SPECULATION is your first middle grade fiction work. What can you tell our readers about writing for younger readers and this work in particular?

Nisi Shawl

There are hordes of gatekeepers involved when you're writing for younger readers--more even than are involved in most traditional publishing projects. These gatekeepers will challenge your word choices, your topics, your unintended messages. Do you want your work included on banned book lists, or do you want it to be found on school library shelves? Do you want it to be read by flashlights under blankets?

Think about your goals as you pay attention to the advice of your editor, agent, beta readers, cultural consultants, and so on.

What I can tell you about *Speculation*, in particular, is that it's full to overflowing of love: love for my characters, for the real family members and friends they're based on, for the stories that live on when the people they're about are long gone. Of course, I was also writing it to challenge certain things, like the stereotypes equating Black people with cities rather than with the countryside, or the dominant culture's preference for denying the presence of our ancestors.

But the main thing about *Speculation* for me is its deep, powerful connection to sweetness, joy, and love, love, love, love, love.



A master of speculative fiction, Afro-futurist Nisi Shawl, often mentioned alongside names like Octavia Butler, is releasing their debut novel for middle-grade readers this month, SPECULATION. A timely book for the next generation, written by one of the most compelling award-winning science fiction writers of our time, SPECULATION is the perfect time to look more closely at Tiptree award-winner and Nebula nominee Nisi Shawl.



ABOUT THE CREATORS OF BWIH MAGAZINE:



Kenya Moss-Dyme began writing short-form horror in her teens but *Prey for Me* - the hard-hitting story of a monstrous child-abusing preacher - was her first published work in early 2014. She has since firmly established her place in the horror genre with the 2014 release of *Daymares*, as well as appearances in several anthologies and publications.

"The only genres in which I don't feel comfortable writing are comedy and romance. Whenever I try to write a romantic story, it ends up turning dark and the couple will go from taking marriage vows to going on a honeymoon murder spree!"

Stay tuned for the upcoming release of "Deadzoned", a novel about an undead uprising in a fictional Detroit-area city -- but with a conspiratorial slant. And also, "The Candy Lady", the surprise follow-up to *The Playground*, one of the short stories in *Daymares*.



Sumiko Saulson is a Bram Stoker nominated poet and award-winning author of Afrosurrealist and multicultural sci-fi and horror. Author of the Bram Stoker nominated *The Rat King: A Book of Dark Poetry* (Dooky Zines, 2022) *Happiness and Other Diseases* (Mocha Memoirs Press 2022), and the LOHR Reader's Choice Award-winning collection *Within Me Without Me* (Dooky Zines, 2022), and the novel.



Winner of the HWA Scholarship from Hell (2016) BCC Voice "Reframing the Other" contest (2017), Mixy Award (2017), Afrosurrealist Writer Award (2018), HWA Diversity Grant (2020), LOHR Fiction Grant (2021), and the HWA Richard Laymon President's Award (2021).

They have an AA in English from Berkeley City College, write a column called "Writing While Black" for a national Black Newspaper, the San Francisco BayView is the host of the SOMA Leather & LGBT Cultural District's "Erotic Storytelling Hour," and teach courses at the Speculative Fiction Academy.



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- Follow the authors on their social media and let them know that you like what you read. (We love when readers reach out!)
- Subscribe and keep up with the [Black Women in Horror website](#) for the latest news and events featuring our ever-growing community of creatives.
- Shop the [official merch shop](#) for BWiH tees, hoodies and caps! All proceeds go directly to support BWiH projects.

While this was a dedicated project for 'Black Women in Horror Month', we celebrate black women in horror all year 'round!



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