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Prototype



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Contents

1	The Deadman's Gift (Josiah Akhtab)	1
2	Author Interview w/ Cailynn Brawffe	26
3	Little Maggie Has No Face (Jack Brennan)	34
4	Author Spotlight w/ Heather Fox	67
5	The Human Garden (Jill Nelson)	70
6	Author Interview w/ Alex Tucker	76
7	Haunted (Seth Bleuer)	81
8	Author Interview w/ Ron Corley	88
9	Pretty Isn't Pretty Enough (Jessica Daniliuk)	93
10	Author Interview w/ Eduardo J. Aleman	107
11	Prey (Melissa Dennison, UK)	113
12	Author Interview w/ Nana Hoshiko	115
13	A Winter's Wrath (David O'Mahony)	121
14	Author Interiew w/ Ryan Habermeyer)	147

1

The Deadman's Gift (Josiah Akhtab)

I'm standing atop the Empire State Building in New York City, on the other side of the guardrail. The clouds are all but pitch black and skull and crossbones form in the sky. The flashes of lightning and claps of thunder—the rain pouring relentlessly—present the perfect setting. In fact, I couldn't ask for anything more fitting. I'm soaking wet. My cargo pants are dark brown, my hoodie a drenched and obsidian black, and my Levi boots are so dark they resemble shadows. A flash of lightning strikes near the building but I don't flinch. No use being fearful when looking death in the face. Looking down, I see the lights of the city that never sleeps for miles—the cars and people look like ants from this height. White and red lights move back and forth and sometimes sit still. People go on with their lives, oblivious to the fact someone commits suicide every thirty seconds on average. I look at my watch and count the seconds. When it hits the thirty second mark, I think of the person that just finished hanging themselves, the person that drank poison, the person that jumped off a building (as I'm about to); the person that shot themselves in the head to stop the tortuous internal chatter, the

person that killed themselves because of a broken heart, and the person stricken by grief, sorrow, and loss.

That last one, I think the last one resonates the most with me.

Sort of.

Looking over the city, I see nothing but deep, blackish purple and pouring rain. I see the shadows of hell's most damned souls coming into form to greet me. The air transforms into a sea of black flames with little puffs of skull and crossbones rising, as if out of a boiling pot. I look to the sky once more and the claps of thunder and flashes of lightning continue their light show in the darkest of nights, the moon is nowhere in sight. I start wheezing, then coughing, then hacking. I look at my hand and see blood. My body is eating itself, my immune system is useless, and I feel weak. So very weak. The red blood clots on my hand look like enlarged liver spots at this point, consuming my hand in a deep, dark red turning purple. The color of rotting flesh after a person's been bludgeoned to death.

What are you waiting for? Jump! My mind says, *Jump now!*

I inch my way closer to the edge of the building and look down for what will be the final time. My vision gets blurry and the world starts spinning, I almost fall over but catch myself just in time. *No, not yet.* The sea of black flames becomes an abyss. I see skull and crossbones form and disappear. My body tries to fight, to fuel me with the will to live and my reptilian brain backs up this will with the force of self-preservation. The fact I can feel this at all astounds me, but it is futile. This disease eating my system has gained too much momentum and I've suffered too much, lost too many people I care about, people I loved, people I've had the best of times with, people that guided me when I was nothing but a stray orphan with no sense of purpose in this world. The pain, grief, and bouts of depression that surround

my heart are out to kill me and I'll be damned if I'm left on this earth alone.

What about Jasmine? The thought enters, *will you leave her alone?*

Jasmine will never be alone; sure, she'll grieve for a time but then she'll move on like everyone else. She'll hold on to the poem I gave her and find the last poem I ever wrote but, in the end, she'll move on as all people do.

I clench my fist when my eyes water and hot, stinging tears run down my cheeks, "*WHY?!*" I shout into the heavens. I try to shout again but all that comes out is a whisper, "Why?"

I grew up in an orphanage. My father died three months before I was born, and my mother died in childbirth. I was taken to Children of The World, a local orphanage in the Bronx. The place had been founded in 1844 and had a longstanding reputation within the community. The staff there were friendly, but the other kids wouldn't play with me from what I remember. And any time one of them tried to mess with me or make my life a living hell, a staff member was there to straighten it out. There was this one kid name Bradley who always locked me in the closet and called me a worthless nigger that should've died in the hospital with his mother. He whispered it so only I could hear him, and he said if I told anyone he would come to my room and stick a branch up my ass—I know, a swell guy, wasn't he? Other than that, I was invisible. I'd watch the other kids play at recess, chase each other around, play catch, and pick their noses and hold out boogers in each other's faces. I didn't feel like I fit in with this group. I didn't feel like I belonged. I was always on the lookout for Bradley for fear he'd lock me in the closet and verbally abuse me. His words haunted me every night as I lay in bed looking up at the plain, white ceiling. The internal

chatter in my brain would go into overdrive and not let up even a bit, and the only sleep I did get was thin and broken by bad dreams and the echoes of Bradley's insults.

This went on for five years.

Bradley was finally transferred to a foster home in October 1995 and I never saw him again, I was ten. He didn't forget to leave me a little going away present, though. When I went to my room, an hour before Bradley left, it was ransacked and looked like a hurricane hit it. All my writing trophies and certificates I'd won in the monthly contests we'd have at the orphanage were torn into pieces, my trophy from when my poem about a tornado survivor won first place was broken in two and stomped until nothing remained but broken shards. My mattress was flipped over, and my sheets were torn. The words *worthless nigger* and *you should've stayed in your mother's cunt* were written on the walls. I walked in and stood at the center, asking myself why he hated me so much. Why would he do this? *How* could he do this? A staff member came in and screamed in shock, not at the mess but at what was written on the walls. She looked at me and then at the walls and realized I wasn't the one that messed up the room. She came up to me, squatted down to my level, and placed two gentle hands on my shoulders.

"Who did this, Rudy?" she asked me, "Do you know?"

I did know. It was Bradley, no doubt. Even so, those words from five years before still haunted me as when he first said them. *If you tell anyone what I said, I'm gonna come to your room and stick a branch up your ass, ya hear?!*

I shook my head.

The staff member pulled me into her arms and hugged me fiercely. She smelled like lavender and her bosom was pillow-soft. I wanted to cry but the tears wouldn't come out as if they

were dammed up. She released me, stood up with her hand in mine, and took me to the foster care specialist's office.

I remained in that orphanage for three more years.

I ran away in November 1998. I snuck out the orphanage at midnight, ran up Fordham road to the nearest train station, slipped through the security door, and hopped on the first train that came. I got off at Forty-Second Street, Grand Central. Navigating through that maze was something else—thinking back, it reminded me of Hogwarts. The corridors seemed to lead to an infinite number of places, hundreds of people walking back and forth with luggage, some in suits, some in casual clothes. Families of all races, colors, and creeds meshed together in a chaotically organized fashion which not only astounded but bewildered me. I didn't know where I was going but I knew I was going *somewhere*. I walked around aimlessly for what felt like hours. I'd already found the way out and seen just about every platform the trains arrived and departed on, the only thing on my mind then was where to go. As far as I knew, my parents were the only family I had, and both were dead. I supposed I could try the yellow books but trying to find another person with the last name Sarabelli was apt to take a million years.

It was then I met a woman named Stella Casey. She was a tall, gorgeous, blonde hair woman with deep-set blue eyes, a coke bottle body, and pale, smooth skin. She asked me if I was lost and I told her I was. She figured out quickly that I was an orphan and invited me to stay with her. I accepted. She lived in a cabin in Upstate New York, away from the hustle and bustle of the city. It was a quiet and peaceful place with a large front yard and a backyard next to a pond. The inside of the cabin was warm, cozy, and beautiful. A brown, suede sofa and two love seats with a coffee table on top of a dark brown rug sat in front

of the fireplace with a T.V. hanging on the wall just above it. There were portraits of artwork I've never seen, one was of a sunrise over a grassy cliffside with the sun's light reflecting off the blue ocean. There were no animal heads mounted on the walls like there usually were in cabins—which was fine with me—and a small, wooden dining room set in the kitchen. There was one room on either side, the room to the right led to her study and the one on the left led to two separate bedrooms and bathrooms.

"You can put your stuff down in the first room to your left." She said as I made my way cautiously to the room.

This one room was larger than two rooms in the orphanage combined. There was a large dresser to my right and a queen-size bed to my left sitting between two nightstands. A large window looked out to the pond and the tire swing that moved back and forth like a pendulum. The bed was made up with a dark brown comforter, white sheets, and brown throw-pillows.

I'd never seen a room so nice.

The first two months of living with her were the best. It turned out she was a freelance writer that worked from home and made decent money. She wrote about politics and occasionally did movie reviews when she had the time. I told her I wrote poetry and she said she wanted to read my work. I wrote a poem called Locked in The Closet describing my experience in the orphanage and gave it to her to read. I turned to go to my room, and she grabbed my arm and held it while she read. The warmth of her hand was soothing. I saw the sadness consume her face like shadows consuming the light at sunset. A tear dropped from her face and she was speechless at first, then, she pulled me into her arms and hugged me the same way the staff member did when she saw the words *worthless nigger* and *you should've*

stayed in your mother's cunt on the walls. Her bosom was warm and soft and smelled of lavender, just like that staff member. She asked if I ever entered my work into writing contests and I told her I did, that I'd won a couple of trophies and writing certificates back at the orphanage. She smiled with tears still dripping from her face.

As the months went by, she taught me how to write sonnets, blank verses, golden shuffles, and narrative poetry among other forms. She made me go over drafts again and again until they were either short and powerful or long and thoughtful. She watched me as I looked through the *Writer's Digest* magazine, wrote and stamped envelopes, and walked to the mailbox and put them in.

She forbade me from going out there and taking them out.

One day, while I was writing poetry and she was washing the dishes in the kitchen, I got thirsty and went to get a drink. When I got in the kitchen, I saw a black aura surrounding her; it was thick, smoky, and dark and smelled of death and decay. She was whistling a tune without a care in the universe. I closed my eyes and opened them, and the aura was gone as if it'd never been there at all. She looked back and flinched.

"Oh my god, Rudy." She said with her hand on her chest. "You scared the living Christ out of me."

"Sorry," I said as I made my way to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water.

"So, how goes the poetry?"

I sighed and shook my head.

"That bad, huh?" She said then smiled. "You know what that means?"

I shook my head again.

"It means you're a writer."

We smiled at each other for a moment then I turned and went back to my room, not knowing that'd be the last time I'd see her alive.

The next night she died in a car accident while coming back from the grocery store—which was three miles from the cabin. She left while I was still in bed, looking at the ceiling. A drunk college kid in a dusty gold Chevy Tahoe was having a night on the town with his girl and a couple of buddies, swerving recklessly down the back road while Stella was driving home and obeying the speed limit. She came up to a stop sign and looked both ways then went when the college kid sped around the corner and hit her blue Toyota Camry dead center, killing her instantly. I'd just finished writing a poem called A Sudden Crash. I found out when I got out the shower and turned on the T.V., her blue Camry looked like a person entering the fetal position and the Tahoe looked like an accordion. They showed the faces of the people injured and then the one fatality. Stella. I dropped the remote and stood there in shock, mouth agape, eyes watering. My knees gave out and I fell on them hard but didn't notice, all I could do was watch helplessly as tow trucks and paramedics crowded the scene and got Stella's mangled and lifeless body out of the car and onto the stretcher. They showed Stella's face again and she was smiling, those deep-set blue eyes brimming with life with white teeth to complement them. I knew what I had to do next, but I couldn't. My legs refused to cooperate. My arms were in better spirits, though. They listened to me when I instructed them to pick up the remote and turn off the T.V.

I left the cabin thirty minutes later and never returned.

In March 2003, I met a man named Stan Jackson. A tall, dark, and handsome man with jet black hair that went down to his shoulders and light brown eyes that had a way with the

ladies. He worked at an ad agency where he had to come up with catchy slogans for clients or companies like *Low price, high quality* and *Check out Zeal's and seal the deal!* Before I met Stan, I was homeless. Living in train cars and stations, taking up residence in the abandoned houses and then getting kicked out by construction companies with government contracts, living under freeways and bridges, and inhaling tobacco, asbestos, and other cancer-inducing chemicals. I also did some work off the books at local restaurants, washing dishes and taking out trash for a few extra dollars. I even sold drugs on occasion and made quick five hundred dollars—which I spent on food over a long period of time, eating only one meal a day. I was sitting on the sidewalk in Times Square—after a twelve-mile walk—tired and exhausted when Stan came along and read my sign which said if you gave me a dollar, I'd write you a poem. Stan gave me a dollar and I got out the sheets of paper and pen—which was running out of ink—I'd been carrying at the time and got to writing. The poem was called A Sudden, Painful Death. I handed it to him, and he read it in front of me.

"This is pretty good," he said, "dark, but pretty good."

I nodded and he walked away, a few minutes later he came back with a BLT and a bottle of iced tea.

"I read your poem again and I must say," he smiled, "it's worth way more than a lousy dollar."

I nodded and bowed from my sitting position.

He said his company was looking for more writers for the creative department and asked me if I wanted a job. I looked up with dumb gratitude and nodded firmly. He told me to come with him and I did. He gave me the BLT and iced tea and went to the store and got a bacon, egg, and cheese and a coffee for himself. We sat outside in the freezing cold and talked for hours.

I told him my story and he listened intently, and he told me his and I did the same. He gave me money for a hotel room at the *Night Hotel* and asked me what size suit I wore, I told him I didn't know. He said it was no problem and gave me some more money to at least get a pack of tee shirts, and I did.

A week later, I was working under Stan as an apprentice at an ad agency called QuickAd's Inc., an agency that promised to deliver ads to clients and companies within twenty-four hours or less. The place was always moving, changing, evolving. People never sat idle, assistants flashing in and out to get people their coffee, people sitting in small conference rooms looking at a projection screen, piles of magazines stacked on top of low, gray coffee tables, people at the water cooler talking about random things. It was a whole different world. Stan took me up to the sixteenth floor and into a small room with a plaque on the side of the door that said **QuickAd's Creative Department**. He opened the door and motioned me to go in first, I went in. The room was medium-size and messy. Piles of magazines sat atop shelves attached to the walls, coffee cups filled the trash can, magazines splayed across the keyboard, the sink to the left was filled with dishes and styrofoam containers from Chinese takeout, and the mixed smells of chicken and broccoli, chow mein, and other spoiled meats and veggies took me for a loop—even though I'd smelled worse.

"I know," he sighed, "not exactly the cleanest room in the world but it gets the job done once it *does* get cleaned." he grinned at me, "which is our first order of business. You ready?"

I grinned back and nodded.

"Alright, let's do it."

We cleaned the room and began working on slogans for ads.

The first few months went splendidly. We sold ads like no-

body's business and the company became a known name. Stan said I had the potential to be head of the Creative Department within two years if I kept going at this rate. Every slogan and jingle I came up with was a hit for the clients, especially when they rhymed. When I wrote *A little bit of this, a little bit of that, buy Lisa Crafts and keep coming back*, the client, Lisa Campbell, reported that her business increased by one hundred percent. When I wrote *Looking for a place to get your fill? Try a burger at Famous Grill*, the owner reported that he was booked for the next six weeks at least and gives a million thanks to whoever came up with the slogan.

I got an apartment on West 4th Street through someone Stan knew for a good price, $1,000 a month. I bought a laptop and continued writing poetry when I wasn't creating ads. Stan often visited on his days off and read my work. He'd also ask if I considered selling my poems to Magazines and I said I hadn't. He said he knew of a literary magazine called Deadman's Tales and thought my work might be a good fit since I wrote about death a lot. I said I'd give it a try, but he pushed me to do it right then, in front of him, and that caught me off guard. It also reminded me of Stella, her smiling face on the news moments after her death, those deep-set blue eyes, and those white teeth. I hesitated a moment then found my resolve and wrote four more poems and sent them to Deadman's Tales.

Stan watched the entire time.

A month later, I got an email from Deadman's Tales saying they loved my work and were honored that I chose them to publish with. I showed Stan and he was more excited than I was and said we should celebrate. We did. We went to a seafood place called The Angry Crab and ordered the biggest dish they had, something called The Angry Feast. Stan paid the bill. We

went to a bar and got drunk. I told Stan I was only nineteen and he said if an eighteen-year-old could hold a semi-automatic and shoot Iraqis in war, then a nineteen-year-old could have a goddamn beer. He had a point. After that, we went to a free comedy show. The jokes were alright, some were funny—even funnier since we were buzzed. I laughed so hard at one joke I fell out of my seat and made the audience laugh and the comedian happy.

Stan was laughing so hard his face turned red.

He took the train with me home because I had trouble standing on my own two and when we got to my stop, he put one arm around me and hauled me down the block and up to my door. He asked me if I could handle getting upstairs and I said I could. He told me not to sleep on the floor and to drink coffee for the hangover and went about his way like a creature in the night, surrounded with a black, shadowy aura.

That was the last time I saw Stan alive.

I woke up the next morning without a hangover. I felt rested and thirsty, so I went to the kitchen and drank a large glass of orange juice. I went back to my room and saw that I had twenty missed calls from Arthur, our coworker, and called him back. I asked him what the matter was, and he told me Stan was dead, that on his way home someone stuck him up in an alley and shot him, took his wallet, and left him to bleed out. Half an hour passed before anyone showed up and called the ambulance but by then it was too late, Stan has bled to death. I dropped the phone and stood there in shock. The sound of Arthur's voice calling my name seemed far away, as if on some distant planet in the deepest part of the galaxy. The room started spinning and my heart started beating rapidly. I walked with shaky legs over to my bed and sat down.

Stan . . . is dead? The thought stood alone in my mind in the ringing and deafening silence of the room. *Stan . . . is . . . dead?*

Tears had been falling down my face, but I didn't notice. The suddenness of the news rendered me incoherent.

Stan . . .

I screamed at the top of my lungs and broke into sobs, trying to console myself to no avail. I picked up the lamp on my nightstand and threw it at the wall and it shattered. I tore sheets off my bed, flipped over my mattress, knocked over the nightstand and sat on the floor holding my knees and sobbed into them. I looked up with watery eyes and saw a picture on the floor, it was when Stan and I went to the NASCAR racetrack together and test drove the cars a month before. He was in a red suit stamped with various brands and I was in a blue suit, we were both smiling as the sun shined bright over our heads in the cloudless blue sky.

I picked up the picture and looked at it until the sun went down.

In October 2005 I met a woman name Jasmine Sullivan, an English major at NYU. I quit the ad agency and wrote poetry full time and made some decent money, even won a couple contests with prizes as high as forty thousand dollars. I still lived in the place he got me out of respect and because I was still grieving. She had hazel eyes and caramel skin, a wide, radiant smile with pearly white teeth and long, dark curly hair that flowed down to the small of her back. I was sitting in Washington Square Park on a bench, facing the road, when she came up to me and complimented my outfit. I wasn't wearing anything special, just a simple black V-neck with chinos and suede, lace-less shoes from ALDO. Nevertheless, we struck up a conversation. I found out she wrote short stories and poetry and I told her I

wrote poetry as well, she asked if we could swap work sometime and, still thinking about Stan's abrupt death, I said why not—he wouldn't have wanted me to cry over him forever.

We met at a Starbucks at West Ninth Street. I sat waiting for her with a black coffee and one poem called The Deadman's Holiday. She came in about ten minutes later with a black leather bag and a colorful assortment of folders held to her chest. She saw me and waved with her free hand and I waved back when she came over and took a seat. She slapped the folders on the table, and I saw they had labels such as *short stories, poetry, essays, journal entries, research papers.* A writer after my own heart, I thought at the time. She took all but the folder labeled *poetry* and placed them in her leather bag neatly and out of sight. She slapped both hands on her poetry folder, sighed deeply and looked at me with a let's-get-to-work expression. We did. I read about five of her poems while she read the one poem I had with a red pen in her hand like an English professor. Her poems were rather good, they were clean and concise, no unnecessary words or clunky and awkward phrases, and they talked about things that mattered such as the social and political climate of the United States, the senseless wars and violence, police brutality toward blacks and Latinos. I could tell by her writing that she was meticulous and liked control, I chuckled and supposed my writing would drive her crazy since it was predicated on spontaneity and divine muses.

"I love it." She said, pulling me from the reading trance I was in.

I looked at her and found an expression of marvel stamped on her face. I never really thought of my poetry as good or bad, I just wrote them when the mood struck me.

"'The snow falls and the wind blows/ specks of hail slice my

face/ Christmas will be white again this year/ but the blood that runs down my cheek spells my fate.'" She recited. "Such mystery and sense of dread, I can feel the uncertainty of the speaker in just four little lines."

I complimented her on her clean and concise style of poetry that acknowledged important social issues and she feigned modesty. She asked me if I'd considered publishing and told her my work was published in a magazine called Deadman's Tales.

Her jaw dropped.

"You're published in Deadman's Tales?!" she whispered loudly. "Rudy, that's amazing!"

It was my turn to feign modesty.

She asked me if I could write a poem specifically for her and I told her yes and that in fact, The Deadman's Holiday was the very poem.

"You want me to have this one?" She asked.

I nodded.

"Are you sure?" She asked again. "You can make some real money off this, even enter it in a contest."

I told her I was sure and that she should keep it.

She smiled and relented.

We started dating shortly after, she'd come to my apartment and we'd swap poems and talk about all the greatest writers and who our favorites were. Her top five were Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Lord Byron, and Shakespeare. I told her I didn't have a top five and that I didn't read much after my friend and mentor, Stella, died in a car accident when I was thirteen. She said she was sorry for my loss, but I waved it away. Condolences weren't necessary. She asked me how often I wrote poetry and I told her when the mood struck me, she looked at me disapprovingly.

Over the next few months, she would come over and make me write at least five poems a day on command. It was infuriating. Not Jasmine, I always enjoyed her company, but the process itself. I felt like I was falling into a void of darkness with no way of getting out or at least stopping my descent. The blank page became an infinite space and made me feel like a speck of dust in the universe. The only time I remembered feeling like this was when I looked at the stars at night and when Bradley used to lock me in the closet and call me a worthless nigger. It took hours for me to write just a couple of lines and when Jasmine saw the sweat flowing from my face onto the keyboard, she told me to take a break.

She placed two gentle hands on my shoulder and said I was trying too hard, that I was too tense. I tried to relax but to no avail, the internal chatter in my mind was in full force with no sign of relenting until I was dead or unconscious, which rendered sleep impossible. She leaned down and hugged me from behind, the warmth of her body causing goosebumps to rise on my arms, legs, and chest. She nuzzled my neck and gently kissed it, working her way up to my cheek. I turned slowly, rose from my chair, and embraced her in my arms. We kissed for what seemed an eternity, her lips against mine were the definition of ecstasy itself, dopamine rushing from my brain to my groin as her soft breasts pressed against my chest.

I picked her up and took her to my bed.

Jasmine graduated two years later with a bachelors and associates degree in English Writing and Liberal Arts. I attended the ceremony with her family I met a year earlier. The Sullivan's were nice people, they welcomed me into their home as one of their own. Her father asked what my intentions were for Jasmine and I told him to help her become the best person she

could be. He smiled and nodded approvingly. Jasmine was the Valedictorian and graduated with a 3.9 GPA. She said she wanted to be a journalist for the *Associated Press,* and I told her she'd accomplish it easily. I, on the other hand, still wrote poetry only when it struck me and published to various magazines. One time the editor from Deadman's Tales called and asked me if I could write a collection of poems by next month for an anthology and I told him I could. That month I wrote five poems: A Deadly Present, Death of a Friend (Stan), Mentor's Last Lesson (Stella), Twisted Mind, and A Deadman's Kiss. Each poem only consisted of one stanza containing four or five lines. That was fine for the editor, he said it was less space and less money.

I didn't see Jasmine much after her graduation, she was doing internships with various news organizations like *CNN*, *CBS*, *ABC*, among others. She would call occasionally to tell me how her life was going and that the times we had together were enjoyable. I took that as her way of letting me down easy, as saying her life had become too full for us to continue our relationship.

I understood.

One night, two months later, while I was sleeping, a surge of creativity hit me like a Mack truck running over a toddler and I hopped out of bed and wrote the most divine poem I'd ever written in my life. It was the culmination of all my trials and tribulations over the years, being locked in the closet, my mentor dying in the car crash, my best friend being shot in an alley, the love Jasmine and I made, and the emptiness I felt in my heart despite it all.

I called it The Deadman's Gift.

I ran into Jasmine again years later after I'd done an interview, the editors from Deadman's Tales called me and asked if I could guest star on their podcast and that they'd pay me for my time. I

said yes. I went to Times Square and saw Jasmine in a Starbucks on West Fifty-Third Street and went in to say hi. When she saw me, she shot up and ran over and we hugged.

"Oh my god, Rudy! How are you?" She asked.

I told her I was well and asked her the same, she told me her father just got promoted to management and that her mother had finally retired after twenty years as a pharmacy manager and is starting her own bakery. She also told me that she had a full-time position with *Associated Press* and couldn't be happier.

I smiled and hugged her again.

She asked if we could catch up again at a place called A Night in Paradise, a new restaurant that just opened that's been getting good reviews.

I said yes.

A Night in Paradise was classy yet authentic, a Vietnamese restaurant that had wooden tables and benches—with cushions—and bright, sparkling chandeliers. Jasmine and I were lucky enough to get our own table in the corner. We sat down and ordered, she had miso soup and I had a vegetable soup and we called it a meal. Jasmine asked me if I'd been taking care of myself because I looked awful, and I did look awful. I'd been suffering depression for the last two and a half years but managed to keep a smile and upbeat attitude when Jasmine was around. After she graduated, it had come full force and I hadn't been able to pull myself out of it. I had bad dreams about Stan and Stella dying in my arms, my hands caked with their blood and their last words being 'you killed me, your poetry killed me!' I'd wake up in a scorching sweat that quickly grew cold and my hands trembled, and tears flowed down my cheeks. My heart would ache, and I'd spend the rest of the night holding my knees and crying into them until the sun came up.

I told her I was doing the best I could, taking it one day at a time.

She asked me if I still published poetry and I told her I hadn't been in a poetic mood lately. She asked me what was the matter and I told her I didn't want to talk about it. Jasmine gave me that look she always gave when she wanted to know something, it was a look that drew your attention and held it there until her will was done, a look you couldn't turn away from if you tried. It had curiosity, fierceness, motherly passion, and force. Yes, something about that look she gave was forceful. After thirty seconds of this look, I relented and told her about my depression and how I was having a horrible go of dealing with it. She asked had I gone to the doctor and I told her how useless that would be, that I didn't trust myself with prescription pills and that I didn't have a doctor. She said she was taking the day off from work tomorrow and taking me to a doctor whether I liked it or not. I tried to tell her I had no medical records and didn't have any type of insurance, but she waved it away and promptly ended the discussion—if one could call it that.

That night, when I got home, I felt light-headed. I didn't drink any alcohol—that was certain—yet, I felt drunkenness come over me. My legs wobbled, my vision blurred, the sound of my heartbeat pounded between my ears and a hollow, raspy, whisper permeated throughout my apartment. I tried to make it to my chair but fell after taking the first step. The sound got louder and louder, the whisper became more pronounced. My legs numbed and my heart pounded like a caged savage, it became hard to breathe and I started wheezing. I crawled pitifully to my computer desk chair and pulled myself up, my heart practically punching my insides like a heavyweight boxer. I felt like I was being strangled or hung, gasping and reaching

for air—my hands grabbing frantically at the nothingness that filled my apartment. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I fought for consciousness, life, and survival. The will to live and the force of self-preservation along with adrenaline kept me conscious for another minute before my body gave in and I faded out completely, the last sound I heard was my cell-phone ringing.

It was Jasmine. I was certain of that.

I woke up on the floor the next morning with the sun's rays in my face. My eyes closed to the light and I moved out the way before opening them again. I felt something sticky at the back of my head and put a hand there to touch it. I brought it in front of me and saw it was blood. My blood. I looked on the floor and saw a big puddle of it. I didn't remember what happened the night before, it was only the day I decided to end this pitiful existence I remembered what happened. I got up and went to the bathroom to see if I had a first-aid kit. An exercise in futility, of course, I didn't have a first-aid kit. I looked in the mirror and saw I had deep red, almost burgundy, spots from the neck down. They looked like blood clots but worse, they were spreading. My body weakened and my legs nearly gave out from under me. When I glanced down to make sure they were still there, I saw the that red spots nearly covered the surface of both legs. I'm dying, I thought.

I took one more shallow breath before I fainted again.

I woke up in a hospital bed, the room was white and the tiles on the floor were gray. I saw Jasmine sleeping in the visitor's chair by the door, her head rested on her right hand. I looked at my arms and the dark red spots were gone as if they'd never been there. Whether they were a hallucination I would never know. I pulled off the covers and looked at my legs and it was

the same. They were gone. I touched the back of my head and felt nothing but gauze bandaging. The nurse came in and asked how I felt, and I told her I felt fine. She shook her head and told me I was anything but and asked if I wanted to know the test results. I looked at her questioningly and asked how I got here in the first place, she said Jasmine found me sprawled out on my bathroom floor and called the ambulance. The nurse also said Jasmine discovered a puddle of blood not too far from the door which indicated I had fainted more than once.

I nodded and asked what the results were.

She said I had a stroke and that was what caused me to faint, however, she said I also had stage four lung cancer, that it was progressing faster than most cancers she'd seen and that I only had about three—maybe four—months to live.

I told her I needed time to think and to come back.

She left the room.

I thought as to how I got the disease and it came to me immediately, like lightning when it strikes an antenna. It must have happened while I was floating around for five years, working restaurants and selling drugs, doing construction work with no mask, living near power plants and other places off the freeways that emitted fossil fuels, air pollutants, and other chemicals. That was probably how I came across lung cancer which didn't surprise me, to be honest. I also thought as to what caused those spots on my body and where they went, suddenly. It was then Jasmine woke up, looked at me, then got up and walked toward me. She said she called me and when I didn't answer the first time, she assumed I was sleeping and when I didn't answer the second time, she knew something was wrong and rushed over. When I didn't answer the door, she rushed up to see if the landlord was there and he happened to be coming

down the stairs while she was on the way up. She asked him would he open the door because she thought something was wrong and he agreed and opened it for her, and that was when they saw the blood and me sprawled out on the bathroom floor.

I nodded and thanked Jasmine for getting me here and that the doctors said I should be fine. I told her that I would be out the hospital inside a week and that I'd let her know. I also asked her not to come to visit, that I'd be fine and that we would catch up again and keep in touch. Jasmine smiled and hugged me fiercely. She smelled like lavender.

Just like Stella and that staff member.

A week later, in the night, I pulled the tubes off my arms and chest and got my clothes then snuck out of the hospital. I didn't call Jasmine.

My body worked just fine.

Two months later, I was in my apartment reading all the poetry I'd written over the years. Jasmine called every so often to check if I was alright and I told her I was, that she didn't need to put her life on hold for me. She said she didn't mind looking after me and I thanked her for her concern. Our conversations became shorter and shorter as I stayed the same and she changed with each passing day, meeting new people and spending time with family and friends. I was happy for her and I took being alone graciously. I was used to it. I was just going over The Deadman's Gift when I started feeling weak and a sharp pain arose in my left lung and I couldn't breathe. I fell from my chair but had the foresight not to fall on my head like last time and arouse suspicion. I made wheezing sounds, but the pain cut them off harshly. My body convulsed and fought for breath but to no avail, I began beating my chest like a gorilla, pounding and pounding and pounding until my lungs and airways opened

and I was able to take in a large breath of air. My body filled and my chest expanded like a balloon and deflated when I exhaled.

I lay there for two hours thinking about nothing.

The third month was when I'd had enough. Jasmine seldom called me and that was fine, the last conversation we had she was telling me about her boyfriend, Jason, and how they were getting along well together. I told her I was happy for her and that I wished her the best. She asked how I was, and I told her everything was well on my end. She asked why I didn't come to the house and visit anymore, and I told her I'd been traveling—a huge lie. I was in my bed one night, sleeping soundly when both of my lungs closed on me and I couldn't breathe. At first, I thought it was just the dream and when I woke up, I realized it was real and started beating my chest, punching and punching and punching which became pounding and pounding and pounding until they opened, and that large gust of air entered them again. My vision was hazy and blurred, the sound of my heartbeat thumped between my ears, a low, raspy, wheezing came from my throat with each breath. This was followed with thoughts of being locked in the closet, Stella dying in the car crash, and Stan being shot and robbed and left to die on his way home from dropping me off. Cancer had taken my mind off the depression for a while—for two months, in fact. It was then that I had the thought, the thought that would end it all for me. The pain, the depression, the grief and sorrow, and the dying.

It was then I decided.

I stand at the edge of the Empire State Building, the rain still pouring on my black hoodie and khaki cargo pants. The clouds in the sky remain a deep purplish black and flashes and cracks of thunder and lightning illuminate the dark skies. I look down

upon the city for the last time and watch the cars and lights dance in the night. My fingers are nearly frostbitten and have been numb for some time now, my legs are still warm and ready to go when I am—the will to live and force of self-preservation having long left me. I feel calmer and more relaxed than I've ever been in my life, my lungs are working as if they were healthy and the sound of my heartbeat is nothing but a hollow, functional thump. My mind empties itself of all thoughts as if it wants to leave it all behind, but there's nothing to leave behind. Not for me, anyway. I'm just an orphan who happened to write poetry that killed everyone I came to care about and would eventually kill me, in the end. I inch closer to the edge until my heels are all that's left to keep me in the world of the living. I close my eyes and relax my body, releasing the last vestiges of tension that hold me to this world.

The Deadman's Gift
By: Rudy Sarabelli
My parents died and I was born,
I grew up in a world that is ripped
and torn; left without guidance I was
not forewarned that what I was inhabiting
was a world burning in the heat of the Devil's
scorn.
Locked in a closet of eternal darkness,
My heart becomes steel but doesn't harden.
Worthlessness tears it apart and leaves me
for dead, horror making its home in my
soul, leaving room for dread.
The faith of a writer restored my hope,
brought stability to the rocking boat.

Just when I began to envision the forming
of a better path, the life of the writer ends
in a sudden crash.
Years of drifting in the merciless void,
inheriting diseases that would see me be
destroyed; I met a man that had a plan
and lifted me from purgatory with empathetic
and civilized hands. He provided me with work,
tools to survive. And the thanks he gets for
helping one in need? His life snatched from
him in petty crime.
Grief, pain, and sorrow were all I knew
until she came into my life, her gentle touch
subdued it and we made love into that good
night. My life haunted me while yours gave
you the world, I a depressed and disease-
ridden creature, you the beautiful princess
and daddy's little girl.
My life started with a Deadman's kiss,
I lost everything and my heart went adrift;
I leave this world knowing I will not be missed,
nothing remains except The Deadman's Gift.

2

Author Interview w/ Cailynn Brawffe

1. **Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do outside of writing? What is a day in the life like for you?**

I'm a South African horror author writing under the pen name Cailynn Brawffe, and I specialise in stories where the quiet things are the most frightening — grief, inheritance, memory, the ghosts we create ourselves. Outside of writing, I live a fairly cosy (and mildly demented) domestic life. I have three cats who are convinced they are criminal masterminds and attempt food-related psychological warfare daily.

When I'm not writing, I'm usually researching strange bits of folklore, watching old horror films, drinking unreasonable amounts of tea, or browsing second-hand bookshops like they're temples.

A typical day for me is a mix of teaching English online, writing whenever the story starts tugging on my sleeve, trying to convince my plants to survive, and attempting to keep the cats from staging a coup. Quiet life on the outside — gothic

brain palace on the inside.

2. **What inspired your first novel? What was the thing that got you into writing in the first place?**

My first published novella, *Madness in Bloom*, was born from a strange moment of irony around Mother's Day. Everywhere I looked were soft pastel cards and sentimental messages — and I remember thinking, *"Where are the stories for the daughters who don't feel safe going home?"*

The novella explores the dynamic between covert narcissistic mothers and their daughters, and how society often romanticises motherhood to the point that harm becomes invisible. Even when daughters escape, they often carry the echoes of manipulation, guilt, and identity-loss. In that sense, the story became both horror and social commentary — the haunting isn't just supernatural, it's emotional and inherited.

As for what got me into writing: I've always been drawn to the quiet, unsettling corners of life. I grew up fascinated by what people *don't* say. Horror became the perfect language for those silences.

3. **How do you come up with characters? Are they spontaneous or meticulously planned?**

A bit of both — like alchemy.

Characters usually arrive with a voice or a wound first. I'll suddenly think, *"What kind of person would do this? What are they running from?"* and the seed is planted. The initial spark is spontaneous — but the history, the emotional architecture, the way they move through the world — that part I build deliberately.

I outline backstory, motivations, and internal conflict... and then, inevitably, halfway through drafting, a character will revolt and say:

"Actually, no. That's not who I am at all."

When that happens, I listen. Characters reveal themselves in the writing. And sometimes the most truthful version of them is the one that defies the plan.

It's chaotic. It's frustrating. It's magic.

4. **What are some of your favourite genres to read? Are there any books you'd recommend to first time readers or people looking for something new?**

I gravitate toward horror, psychological thrillers, and literary fiction with a dark or uncanny edge. I love stories that sit between genres — the ones that make you feel slightly off-balance, like something is *just* a little wrong beneath the surface.

For readers new to thrillers, I always suggest starting with Agatha Christie for structure and suspense, and Gillian Flynn for psychological depth and emotional brutality. Both write women who are complex, sharp, and often deeply unsettling — which I adore.

As for personal favourites:

Perfume by Patrick Süskind — a gorgeously grotesque dive into obsession.

Dead Writers in Rehab by Paul B. Davies — surreal, darkly funny, deeply human.

Sweetpea by C.J. Skuse — a serial killer narrative that somehow manages to be witty, horrifying, and painfully relatable.

If a book can make me laugh, cringe, and stare into the middle distance questioning humanity, I'm probably in love with it.

5. **What's the most difficult thing about being a writer?**

Aside from the classic *"I finally solve a plot problem at 3am when I am nowhere near a notebook"* phenomenon?

Honestly — the loneliness of it.

Writing is deeply internal. You spend so much time in your

own head, building worlds no one else can see yet. And if you're introverted (guilty), finding a writing community can feel nearly impossible. When you're just starting out, it's easy to feel like you're shouting your stories into a void.

I've learned that even horror writers — who can conjure monsters and ghosts without blinking — still need support. I wouldn't have made it this far without my small circle of friends and my husband, who cheer me on even when I'm mumbling about plot arcs and haunted appliances.

Writing is lonely. But it doesn't have to be solitary.

6. **What is your process to completing a novel from outline to final product?**

My writing process always begins in chaos — usually with a single image, emotion, or "what if" that refuses to leave me alone. From there, I start building shape around the feeling. I'll sketch out a loose outline or character arc, knowing full well that both will shift once I begin writing. I also have a wonderful friend, Daniel, who endures all of my "Wait — but what if—?!" messages at odd hours.

Once I have a direction, I move into drafting. The first draft is where I allow myself to be messy. I write scenes out of order, follow instincts, and let the characters surprise me — and they *do.* I inevitably discover plot holes mid-sentence, but I try not to panic. The first draft is where I learn what the story *actually* is.

After that, I step back. I send the manuscript to my editor because, by then, I'm far too close to the material to see it clearly. Their feedback helps me refine the structure, pacing, and thematic focus.

Then come the rewrites — this is where the real craft happens. I tighten language, deepen character motivations, sharpen the

horror, and ask myself the hard questions:

Is this moment emotionally honest?

Is the fear earned, not forced?

Does the haunting linger when the page is closed?

By the final pass, the chaos has become something deliberate — shaped, sharpened, and alive.

7. **What's the most unhinged thing you've written in your novel? Don't worry, we don't judge here.**

There are *options*, which probably says a lot about me.

Popcorn was written from pure, simmering rage — a workplace horror where the "employee appreciation" popcorn literally brainwashes staff into becoming docile, smiling corporate puppets. People who've worked in toxic offices tend to read it and go, "...yeah, that tracks."

But the most unhinged thing I've written is definitely in *The Girl Who Knew The Medicine*. My favourite scenes involve the bullies gradually losing their grip on reality and vomiting up bloody, thorn-filled hairballs — a very visceral metaphor for guilt and cruelty rotting someone from the inside out. It's grotesque. It's cathartic. And I stand by every gory detail.

8. **What's one thing about being a writer that absolutely drives you up the wall?**

It's when I tell someone I'm a writer, and they respond with, "Oh, that's a cute little hobby!"

Writing *is* a craft — one that takes discipline, time, revision, and emotional vulnerability. Many creative pursuits get dismissed this way, and it can be disheartening. For me, writing isn't something I do on the side — it's something I am constantly nurturing, learning from, and showing up for.

So when someone implies it's something I'll "grow out of," I have to take a very deep, very calm breath... and remind myself

that they simply don't understand what it means to build worlds from scratch.

No haunting necessary — just a quiet promise to keep proving the art is real.

9. **What does being a successful writer look like for you? What type of life do you want to live as a writer?**

My definition of success has changed over time. When I was younger, success looked like fame, bestseller lists, and maybe a dramatic interview on Oprah while wearing an unnecessarily dramatic cape.

There was also a phase where I imagined myself ruling a shadowy publishing empire from a throne made of leather-bound books. (Which... honestly... still has a certain appeal.)

But now? Success looks quieter.

A small home surrounded by trees.

My husband, my cats, and a life built around storytelling.

Waking up, making tea, and writing books that linger under people's skin long after they've finished them.

Success, to me, is simply being able to live gently — while writing the kind of horror that *unsettles, resonates, and stays*.

10. **Describe your writing journey. If you had to write a story centered around it, do you think you could pull it off?**

My writing journey has been full of ups and downs — and yes, monsters and tricksters, too. I've never been someone who enjoys writing directly about myself, but if I had to tell it as a story, I think I'd tell it like a dark fairy tale.

Once upon a time, there was a girl who loved stories. She was raised among monsters who looked like ordinary people, and she grew up bruised, twisted, and carrying scars no one could see. She almost stopped telling her stories. She almost let the silence swallow her.

And then she met a rogue warlock — someone who didn't rescue her, but reminded her that even the mangled, hurting parts of herself were still hers, and still powerful. So she began writing again. And again. And again.

Each story made her braver.

Each page stitched one wound closed.

Until eventually, she was ready to share her stories with the world.

Could I pull off writing that as a book?

Yes, maybe — but only because I survived it first.

Follow and Connect with Cailynn Brawffe

About

Cailynn Brawffe is a South African-born writer who has always had a penchant for the dark and disturbing. She strives to create a unique blend of horror, thriller, and fantasy fiction that's a rollercoaster ride through the depths of the human psyche.

Drawing inspiration from literary giants like Gillian Flynn, Agatha Christie, and Joyce Carol Oates, Cailynn's writing often delves into the darkest corners of human nature, leaving readers on the edge of their seats and sleepless for days. Her psychological thrillers are not for the faint of heart, but for those brave enough to venture into the shadows, they offer a gripping and unforgettable experience.

When she's not busy scaring the living daylights out of her readers, Cailynn can be found reading, knitting, gardening, and drawing. She finds that these activities help to keep her grounded after spending hours in the company of her dark and twisted characters.

With a wicked sense of humour and a passion for crafting spine-tingling tales, Cailynn Brawffe is a force to be reckoned with in the world of horror and thriller fiction.

Ready to dive into the dark? Check out Cailynn's short stories on Wattpad for a taste of her chilling tales. Don't miss out on exclusive content, updates, and more—sign up for her newsletter today and be the first to know when new nightmares are unleashed!

Social Media

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/cailynnbrawffe/

Threads: https://www.threads.com/@cailynnbrawffe?xmt=AQF0DLRfNdwAdj7MVXC1FvG3EAmM_olAblvgMfHOyIT9cHc

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61556101439498

Wattpad: https://www.wattpad.com/user/Cailynn_Brawffe_

Website: https://www.cailynnbrawffeauthor.com/

TikTok: https://www.tiktok.com/@cailynnbrawffe?_r=1&_t=ZS-91IzNMH1k3D

3

Little Maggie Has No Face (Jack Brennan)

LITTLE MAGGIE HAS NO FACE

LITTLE MAGGIE HAS NO FACE

I BET SHE COMES FROM OUTER SPACE

That clever little sing-song rhyme sprang from Brian Berkowitz, a first grade boy with the heart of a poet and all the compassion of a Dochow prison guard. His trade was harsh words and irritating rhymes that spread through schoolyards like cholera. Of all his rhymes that one was the most popular among the first graders, despite the best efforts of the teachers to quarantine it. It was no use though, it caught on like wildfire. Lots of grown ups are under the insane delusion that children are innocent. Those people must have had all the memories of what it's really like being a kid erased when they turned eighteen. They think of childhood only as some fairytale dream land, with pink eared bunny rabbits and rivers of freshly squeezed lemonade. They remember toasting marshmallows and catching fireflies during summer, or the building of snowmen and opening of presents on those sweet,

splendid Christmas mornings. But they don't remember the bruises, the bloody noses, the gut coiling fear... or the *dread*. To be a child is to be in a world that simply was not made with you in mind, and to be at the mercy of other similarly helpless but not so friendly creatures. Perhaps they are innocent, in their own way, but that doesn't mean they can't also be every bit as predatory and vicious as a school of needle-toothed piranhas.

The victim of Brian Berkowitz' little nugget of poetic genius was one Maggie Fitzgerald, and rest assured she did *indeed* have a face.

After all, how could you not have a face? She wasn't blind so she must have had eyes. She could eat and drink and speak... and *sing*. God, could she sing. So she obviously must have had a mouth. She could smell, and hear, so she was the owner of a nose and a pair of working ears.

Maggie did indeed have a face.

It's just nobody for the life of them knew *what* that face looked like. Nobody. Not her classmates, not her teachers, friends, family, not even her own parents had any inkling to what Maggie looked like. Not the people who saw her every day, not the people who knew her the whole of her life nor the people who knew her for the entirety of *their* own life.

I'm getting ahead of myself though. I need to start at the beginning.

Magnolia Carol Fitzgerald was born November eleventh, 1982. By all accounts a perfectly normal newborn girl. Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald, nor the doctors, noticed yet. They still beamed with joy. She and her mother were discharged from the hospital two days later, swaddled in pink clothes like a tiny chrysalis. Madeline and Ted Fitzgerald were as proud and as happy as any new parents would be. Ted was a mini-mall tycoon, and

Madeline, a secretary, enjoying a generous maternity leave. She intended to take full advantage of it by bonding with her new bundle of joy day in and out. It was her dream to have a precious little girl since she herself was a little girl. It was when Maggie was one week old did Madeline first discover something was wrong with her daughter.

Madeline was preparing supper. Pot roast simmering to perfection in the crockpot. She was talking with her own mother, the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder as she frosted the chocolate cake for dessert, and bragged about her blessed, precious little angel sleeping peacefully in the nursery upstairs. While they were talking, Maggie's grandmother urged Madeline to tell her what her granddaughter looked like. Madeline was all too happy to oblige. All of her friends had been having babies left and right, and now it was finally her time to shine. Now she would be the one who would brag about how cute and beautiful *her* baby was, and she was about to do just that. But she couldn't, because she couldn't recall what her baby looked like.

She abandoned the cake half frosted and dashed upstairs to the nursery. The walls were painted with blue elephants and smiling, dot-eyed giraffes. Madeline looked at her daughter sleeping like a rock in her onesie. She felt her heart melt again, as if she were looking at her baby's scrunched up little face for the very first time. How could she forget what her little girl looked like?

She headed back down stairs, back to her mother still waiting on the phone. She was about to describe her gorgeous daughter in great detail now.

But she couldn't.

She scrambled back up to the nursery, turned on the lights, and Maggie woke up and started wailing. Madeline held her baby

and tried soothing her, all the while keeping her eyes locked on her face. She studied every part of her, tried memorizing every detail. After a half hour she managed to get her to go back to sleep. She left her in the cradle, and the instant she looked away, she had no earthly idea what her child looked like.

When Ted returned home late for work he found his wife on the verge of a mental breakdown. He was terrified that this was some delayed postpartum depression. When he tried consoling his wife and she told him what happened he then worried maybe it was even worse than postpartum. A stroke? But when he looked at the sleeping face of the girl he fathered and named himself, he found that he did not know, *could not know*, what she looked like.

This was the peculiarity of Maggie Fitzgerald.

Looking at her you would never know anything was strange about her. She came across as an ordinary child. But the moment you focus on the details of her; the color of her hair, her eyes, her height, if she had freckles or not, then suddenly you go blank. Even looking *straight* at her. You could be holding her in your arms and not be able to say if she were black or white. She was a living illusion. Something that made less and less sense the more you thought about it. It's quite difficult to understand unless you experience her first hand. If I had to come up with a metaphor—How did that one George Carlin bit go?

"Have you ever looked at your watch and then you don't know what time it is? And you have to look again...and you still don't know the time! So you look a third time and somebody says 'what time is it?' and you say '*I don't know*.'"

That was what it was like to focus on the appearance of little Maggie.

It was quite unsettling to most people.

Ted and Madeline spent a pretty penny on pediatricians, psychologists, therapists, specialists (don't know what kind of specialists, I don't think they did either. Just "specialists") and even consulted religious authorities, mediums, spirit photographers and what could only be described as U.F.O. truth enthusiasts who surmised she might be a flying saucer baby. Everything turned up dead ends.

Maggie's peculiarity stretched even farther than the human mind. Maggie's parents purchased a Polaroid Sun 600 just to take pictures of their angel. Top of the line, the best polaroid camera on the market at the time. They took many pictures of newborn Maggie with it, and when they had them developed they all came back distorted. Not even cameras were immune from Maggie's curse. In any picture that was taken of her she was just an amorphous blur. A smudge in the shot, vaguely girl shaped but void of details. When the Fitzgeralds purchased a new film recorder they found similar results. It captured her voice, her laughs, but not her body. The image deteriorated into frenzied static whenever she was in the frame. There was no way to *really* see Maggie.

She was like a ghost.

#

Because Maggie was normal in every other way she started kindergarten the same as all the other children. They considered homeschooling her, but that was impractical, and in a rare instance of agreement both parents thought Maggie did not need to be further differentiated. Madeline and Ted's marriage was getting choppy by this point. Maggie was not to blame, but she was the cause. Poor Madeline was having a catastrophic time trying to bond with her baby girl. How could you bond with a child you can't remember the face of? Madeline could

not picture her blessed precious while she was away from her. Maggie remained a vague idea in her head; more like a concept than flesh and blood. Madeline felt she still didn't have the perfect little girl she had always dreamed of.

They divorced quietly while Maggie was still sucking on her thumb. Only five years old and her nuclear family was dashed to pieces. Those family photos you see that come in picture frames, the ones with the generic families having generic fun? That would not be Maggie's lot in life. Soon enough in less than a year Madeline remarried. His name was Gregory Smith, a CPA who didn't make quite as much as Ted, but made up for it in sheer veneration. The man *worshipped* Madeline, along with the ground she walked on. She was pregnant within three months of their marriage.

That was another reason the last marriage melted down. Madeline wanted a whole litter of kids, but with Maggie being the anomaly that she was, not only did that take up too much of her time to have another, but she could no longer trust Ted's seed. Who's to say they won't go and have another... well, she didn't say what, but I could infer from that guilty look.

Freak...

And so, just days after Maggie's sixth birthday party (nobody came), her younger half sister was born. They named her Margarette Smith. Margarette Smith. Madeline was relieved that this one was perfectly normal. The perfect little girl she always wanted. But now where did that leave Maggie?

#

The children were put off by Maggie right away. Children have a special sense for things that are odd. They did not yet have the vocabulary to articulate what exactly was off about Maggie, but they felt she was alien nonetheless. Children almost always

see things for what they are, and in the worst possible way. The grown ups had different yet equally harmful behavior. They were warned well in advance by the Fitzgeralds (Or Fitzgerald and Smiths by this point) of Maggie's peculiarity. They felt they were obligated to tell anyone who would be responsible for Maggie, mostly to avoid any potential problems or logistics to come about, but also just the common decency to warn them that trying to picture their child's face could quick-fry your brain if you put too much effort in it.

Did you know human brains are designed specifically to seek out faces? If you didn't then it shouldn't be a surprise. Haven't you ever seen a stain or a mark on wallpaper that just popped out at you as a face? Eyes, mouth and sometimes a nose. We see faces even when there aren't any. We also remember faces more clearly than any other thing. I once read about a girl who would remember her things by drawing faces on them. That made it less likely for her to lose or forget them. This left Maggie (whose face could not be registered) in a very hard spot.

Without a face that could be remembered Maggie was often forgotten. She was forgotten in the classroom. The teacher would never call on her, no matter how enthusiastically desperate she was to be called on. Like trying to hail a cab in Times Square on New Year's Eve. When the kids would pick teams for P.E. she would be the last one selected, if at all. During recess she was missed when it was time to line up; she just slipped the teachers mind. That left Maggie with a lot of free play by herself on the playground until she was eventually noticed by another member of faculty. She usually played by herself anyway, and after all, it only happened once, or twice...maybe thrice. And it goes without saying, but picture day was always a catastrophe...

There was one especially savage instance her mother re-

counted to me. Maggie was playing with a group of kids in the neighborhood, or more accurately she was co-existing in the same space as them as they were playing. Hovering around and trying to unlock the secret code that would allow her to join in. God, what an outsider she was...

The kids decided to play hide and go seek. Maggie gleefully joined in and in her bright red galoshes she raced to find the perfect hiding place. She could climb like a monkey, or so her mother said, and struggled her way up a tall elm tree, hugging the trunk near the top and settling in to be found and congratulated on her ingenuitive hiding place.

None of the children bothered looking for her.

She stayed up in that elm tree long after the children had stopped playing and went home to their respective suppers. Hours and hours, just waiting to be found. I can only imagine how she felt. How long did it take for her to consider that she wasn't being looked for? How long did it take for her to come to terms with that? That she had been forgotten again. And then, I imagine, that she continued to stay in that tree, clinging to the bark for no other reason than coming down would mean accepting that fact. It must have felt like being in limbo, or being an orphan. Maybe those two feelings are the same. But for whatever reason, she stayed in the tree even after the street lights came on.

Inevitably her folks went looking for her when she didn't come in. They wouldn't say but I suspect it took them longer to realize she was late then they would like to admit. They went up and down the streets calling for her, but Maggie stayed quiet. Her father found her in the tree and got her to come down. He scooped her up from off a low branch and she immediately broke into tears. Maggie sobbed into his chest all the way home. I

interviewed them both separately, yet they both said that that night was the worst of all. Before the *incident* that is. We'll get to that soon enough.

#

By the time Maggie entered first grade she had had enough. She was realizing just how much of an outsider her condition had made her. She was tired of going unnoticed by everyone in her classroom, tired of being forgotten, tired of being left behind. She had been getting plenty of that at home with Margarette taking the spotlight, and with a younger brother on the way to boot, drawing away more of Madeline and her step father's attention. Maggie had decided to *do something* about it.

People could not remember her face. She knew that much. And it extended to the rest of her appearance as well; height, weight, hair color, skin color etc. However, did that apply to what she was wearing? Could people remember and recognize her for her wardrobe and apparel? Whether or not she knew about the scientific method, she was deploying it by testing her hypothesis.

Because her mother and stepfather had become more and more preoccupied with her younger sibling, Maggie had become accustomed to preparing herself for school. That included waking herself, brushing teeth, readying hair, even breakfast. Madeline was still packing her lunch of course (she did that much at least), but other than that, Maggie learned self reliance in a way most children shouldn't have to. Not through the gentle guidance of custodians, but through absent-minded neglect. This also meant that she had free reign to dress anyway she pleased.

How to describe her choice of apparel? It looked like a costume devised by an alien who had only Punky Brewster as their sole

representative of the human animal. It looked like a tornado blew through a goodwill. A patch work, D.I.Y. costume store bargain bin, helter skelter, miss match of every style that came together into an outfit that was as colorful and cuckoo as jellybean rain showers.

Plaid, paisley, polka-dots, stripes, checkers, cross hatched and cruelly Frankensteined together in a rag doll skirt. Her grandmother's sewing lessons paid off. Her shirt was the most integral part of the ensemble. It was a white t-shirt which she had smeared, dripped and dribbled with all manner of paints she took from her mother's art room. Jackson Pollock would be proud. It was surrounded by a cardigan sweater that looked like it was cut from the carpet of an arcade. Along her chest looked like orange pom poms glued haphazardly making her look like a party favor. Rainbow striped socks and mismatched shoes. Around her neck, a yellow ascot loosely tied, and to top off her outfit as well as her head, an avocado-green bow with raspberry-red polka dots. Gaudy, gauche, and grandiose. If Maggie set out to stand out then that's exactly what happened.

At first the children were bewildered. The teacher, Mrs. Womble, noticed, scanned to see if there were any specific dress code violations, and found nothing. However I think she could tell that there was a growing tension that was soon to blossom into an active disruption. As the class of first graders muttered and snickered to themselves, Maggie, who had noticed eyes were on her felt very proud. Very pleased with herself. But the children still whispered to each other, like spies transmitting treacherous information. Quiet taunts circulated through the class of twenty-two kids. They were planning an attack. I think even Maggie could feel it coming. It was a change in the air, like a thunderstorm charging up from the south.

During recess, they sprang their attack on her.

They crowded her like paparazzi while she was sitting on a swing set, and started out by asking such innocent questions.

"Where did you get that skirt?"

"What are you supposed to be?"

"Did your mom dress you?"

"I like your pants."

"Did you make that skirt yourself?"

"What kind of shirt is that?"

"What are you supposed to be?"

What are you supposed to be? That last comment stuck with me for all these years. What is she supposed to be? She's Maggie. That's not what she's *supposed to be*. It's simply what she was.

Hiding beneath the surface were the barely submerged undertones of mockery and malice. At first Maggie tried to be flattered. This is what she wanted. She wanted to be noticed. But it seemed her wish was granted by an evil Djinn. The children, testing the waters, went further.

"It looks like it came from the trash," said none other than Brian Berkowitz, resident bully of the first grade. His comment got a few giggles out of the other first graders. That was more than enough motivation to go further. They smelled blood in the water, and Brian was just beginning to cut his teeth.

"Nah, actually, it looks like the trash threw up on you. All over you." Maggie deflated. More chuckles from the group. It nursed his ego. He needed to top it. Brian would have made a perfect subject for the Stanford Prison Experiment. "Do your parents get your clothes from the same place they got you? The garbage?"

The whole pack snickered like a feral bunch of hyenas. Not the giddy, sing-song laughter of children. A cruel *snicker*. It wasn't

that clever, but children are easily impressed. They all wanted to come up with their own clever comments. Brian got the ball rolling, but the other children ran with it. Poking, prodding, unfiltered, merciless comments. Maggie, poor Maggie, looked like a wilting flower. She stared at the ground and dug into the mulch and woodchips under the swingset with her boot. I think at that moment she wished she was invisible again. To just disappear.

Adults tell children all the time, "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names will never hurt you." What a brilliant pile of horseshit that is.

I was there, you see. I heard the vile awful things those kids were saying to her; the things they were *calling her*. I saw the expression on her face, a face I cannot ever remember yet the expression is burned into me as if pressed on the back of my eyelids in burning print. Look at that expression, that miserable, lip trembling, heart shattering look of sadness painted on her face and tell me that she wasn't hurting. Tell me that those tears she shed weren't from pain. Tell me that that moment did not stay with her long after the recess bell rang, long after the school bus brought her home, long after her bedtime, long after everyone else forgot what happened on that playground that day.

Tell me that that didn't hurt her, and y'know what? If you do I'll give you a few harsh words of my own, and on top of that I'll throw in a few broken bones. On the house. So then you can really see which one of those hurts more. But I'll save you the trouble right now and tell you: *It hurts just as much*. The only difference is that broken bones can heal seamlessly, but the scars left by cruel words are not so easily mended. Those take a lifetime to heal, if at all. And poor Maggie didn't have a

lifetime.

After that, Maggie was remembered. Oh yes, she was remembered. She had drawn attention to herself in the worst way possible. Instead of subconsciously writing her off because of her abnormality, the children of Mrs. Womble's first grade class were now aware of it. They noticed her difference. That her appearance could not be retained in any capacity. That no physical feature of her body could even be identified even while directly observing her. This peculiarity opened a new and exciting avenue to be explored in the field of bullying.

At first they made games out of her. They stared and spied at her, seeing which of them, if any, could make out what she looked like. None of them could, naturally, but it was a fascinating effect to ponder, even by adult standards. And it still didn't stop them from coming up with fake answers.

"I bet she's really covered with warts and big red pimples.'

"Big bucked teeth, like a beaver."

"Maybe she's got green skin, and a big long witch's nose, like an old carrot."

"She probably looks like a rat, with big buck teeth like you said. She already plays in garbage."

"Or she's an alien from outer space, and it's her way of staying hidden. Huh? Are you an alien?"

This is when Brian came out with his first big hit if you couldn't piece it together. I can still hear it in his nasally voice. *"Little Maggie has no face. Little Maggie has no face. I bet she comes from outer space."*

How I wish I could bludgeon that little shit...

Elementary School teachers are a lot like God. Seemingly wise and larger than life, but impotent in most things, and ultimately uncaring. Mrs. Womble was both unwilling and unable to crack

down on most of the bullying. All Maggie could do was lay down and take it, and pray they didn't claw out anything vital. On numerous occasions, I'm sure they did. Her parents were very descriptive on how hard the latter semester of first grade was for her. They noticed that much at least.

The Smiths had yet another child. Another girl, named Melody. Another M name, was she trying to make a brand? Yet another sponge to divert away much needed attention from Maggie. Ted was trying to be active, but he was becoming more and more busy with his expanding business ventures. That and he had a girlfriend. Some twenty something year old thing. He loved beautiful girls, and loved hiring them. And he just couldn't help falling in love with them too. How else did you think he met Madeline?

Her name was Vallorie, and loved Ted dearly (or at least his money) but wasn't the most fond of children. That meant Ted had to be a father at a distance. He sent Maggie very expensive gifts. She got a Super Nintendo before anyone else in the neighborhood. And enough Barbie playsets to create a scale model of Malibu. Generous of him, but luxurious gifts does not a fatherhood make. That's something he told me himself, all of these years later with tears in his eyes. I've found that it's hard hearing a child cry, but hearing a grown man, a man in the twilight years of his life sob? That's truly the saddest thing to hear.

The gifts also furthered the wedge between her and her half siblings. Despite growing up around her, they still detected Maggie's strange properties. They sensed something off about her, and stayed distant. Their father was by no means abusive, but he never tried to be a step-father. He saw her more as another child that happened to live with them. Amicable, but

not tender. Madeline was similarly distant, more concerned with her other children. Her true brood. None of them were freaks.

Their children picked up on this, and treated the elder half sister accordingly. She wasn't one of them. Not a part of their family. A lingering fragment of some other strange family maybe, but not a member of their clan. And of course when they noticed that she was getting so many more expensive toys than they were jealousy took root. For more information on why that is, consult Cain and Abel.

Maggie had withdrawn now, this time voluntarily. She no longer bothered raising her hand and praying to be called on. She no longer tried to wriggle her way into the games and groups of others only for her to be a cursory part of the game but not in the game. She was quiet now. She remained in the back of the class and doodled; making something worthwhile in the blank space of the paper.

The thing she drew most of all were faces. Not just the simple two dots and an ellipse smiley face that anyone can draw—faces of all sorts and varieties. Smiley faces, frowny faces, angry faces, scared faces, laughing faces, crying faces, smug, grinning faces, ugly faces, cute faces, beautiful faces, girls faces, boys faces, kid faces, grown-up faces, thin faces, wide faces, fat faces. Faces, faces, faces, faces, *faces.* Stamped all throughout her notebooks, and scratch paper and the back of her worksheets. A collage menagerie of a million imagined faces.

That's what she wanted.

That's what she needed.

A face.

A face that could be recognized, and known by. A face that could be remembered, and remembered fondly. Something that

could be cherished and adored. An honest to God face.

In a childishly wise spur of human ingenuity and dream like-creativity Maggie made a face for herself. Using a black sharpie she drew a face of her own design on the back of a Great Value paper plate. She punched holes at opposite rims of the thing with her step fathers home office hole puncher, and weaved thick, brown, cotton strings through them to make it into a mask. She used a blue magic marker for her eyes. She wanted blue eyes, like her mother's I suppose. The most stunning blue eyes.

This is something that all the people whom I have spoken to in regards to Maggie never consider. Not her parents, not her siblings, not her step father, not her teachers, not her classmates, not anyone thought about this simple, miserable fact about Maggie's immutable and mysterious peculiarity: *That it even worked on her*. She could no more identify any feature about her physical appearance than anyone else.

When she looked in the mirror, what did she see?

Nothing she could ever know, or recognize. Not even *she* knew what she looked like, even though surely she must have wanted to. A blind person will never know what they look like, but they won't know what anyone else looks like either. To Maggie though, she could see just fine—she saw everyone else as they were. She could see them, know them, remember them. They had appearances that could be held onto, faces that could be remembered. She was the only one who was blank. Most outsiders have a certain secret identity, one they hide from the world in order to protect it. Though they may hide it outwardly, inwardly they embrace it, celebrate it, rejoice in it. But Maggie was an outsider who didn't even have that. She was an outsider to herself. A stranger. She did not know who she was, yet wanted

so badly to.

Could you imagine? Never knowing what was in the mirror staring back at you.

Me neither...

But now she had a face. A home-made one. A face not of bones and flesh but of thick paper, string and marker ink. Maggie was complete now, she made herself whole. Like the ugly duckling that grew into a swan, like the caterpillar who transformed into the butterfly, Maggie's metamorphosis was complete. She was a newly made, whole little girl. Sugar and spice and all things nice on two legs. Cookie cutter perfect and ready to make her debut.

She entered the classroom, both hands clutching the straps of her purple backpack. The class was quiet at first. Just staring. Observing. Waiting to see what someone else would do. Maggie must have been holding her breath underneath that paper plate. She did cut small slits in it so she could see, but not well enough. Maggie moved slowly and purposely, touching desks, chairs or parts of the wall where she could steady herself towards her assigned desk.

Mrs. Womble noticed and told her she couldn't wear a mask in class. She got up and went to remove it, and she almost did, but Maggie *shrieked* the second she tried to take off her make-believe face. Not just a temper tantrum—the kind of shrill scream a child lets out when they're in real, dire pain. Mrs. Womble trying to remove her mask was like trying to tear off her real flesh. It was so visceral that Mrs. Womble relented, and decided to "let it slide for now." The bell rang class started as normal. Everyone waited to see if this would turn out like when Maggie put on those silly clothes.

Recess came around. Maggie simply sat on the bench as she

had done countless recesses before. The children looked and stared sometimes, but they mostly kept to their own games. Either they had gotten bored with Maggie or developed a twinge of mercy for her.

Every child left her be—except one.

Brian Berkowitz.

He was looking to relive the glory of his former mocking. He liked the attention—he thrived off of it. He didn't laugh, didn't taunt, didn't sneer or deride. No clever insults. Brian simply walked up to Maggie by himself, mitts in his pockets, and then suddenly, quickly, aggressively, maliciously, grabbed her paper plate mask by the rim and tore it off of her, breaking the string and crumpling it to ruin in the process. Maggie barely had time to attempt to stop him.

Brian was smiling—*fucking smiling.* Looking around waiting for other kids to congratulate him, praise him. Like he just won a game. A contest in who could be horrible first. But nobody was smiling with him. Behind him, Maggie was crumpled on the sand, covering her face. There was a whimper that rose into an uncomfortable sobbing. In that moment, Brian saw what true pain looked like, and recognized himself as the cause of it.

"My face..." she whimpered, so softly. "You ruined my face..." she sniffled and swallowed, as if she was actually truly deformed by his assault. In a way she was. That thing, while paper, *was* her face. And Brian ruined it for her, because he wanted to—because he thought it would be fun. But most of all, just because he *could*.

"I just wanted a face—like you..."

In that instant he felt such a burning and dire regret he wished he could take it back. Uncrumple her home made-face, mend its string, unsay the words. But he couldn't. He wanted to help,

or give comfort, but out of fear of causing more pain he dropped Maggie's crumpled face and left—like a coward.

There was some good to come from all this. During art class, the only time of the school day when the children were free to pursue what they liked, a few of the students showed sympathy for what Brian did to her. By this point, most of the kids in Mrs. Wombles' class had been the victim of Brian's unkind words, and now they could sympathize with Maggie. They actually tried to help her make a new face.

It started with just one, then two, and then in a flash half the class were all drawing on paper plates trying to make a new mask for Maggie. Some were quite good, others not so much. The only one excluded from the fun was Brain, doodling in the corner of the class trying to forget what he did. Now it was his turn to wish to feel invisible.

They all buzzed around her, like bees around a queen, each one asking if she liked the faces they drew for her. Eventually she settled on one designed by Josh Sharp. I can remember how happy she sounded when she saw it, and how proud Josh was that she picked his. Like a knight who won the favor of the princess. He was the quiet, artistic kid of the class. I wanted to interview him for this, but I discovered that he got hit by a drunk driver in 2001. He was seventeen years old.

The art teacher punched holes in it for them, and they tied a string through it as a strap. Maggie dawned her new face and now the whole class felt proud and together. They felt the joy of someone else's pleasure, maybe for the first time. Brian couldn't help but feel bitter over it, but that would pass in time. She really was like a princess in a fairy tale, or Humpty Dumpty if all the king's horses and all the king's men were successful in putting him back together. This was the high point for Maggie

I believe. A soaring and grand one, but ultimately ephemeral. It must have felt sweet though.

Now it's time to tell you how Maggie's story comes to a close. Forgive me, I never intended to be cruel to you, my dear readers.

#

There was a Piggly Wiggly down the street from Maggie's neighborhood. It closed down sometime in the 70s, smothered to death by Sam Walton. The derelict building was left to stand like the ancient temple to some forgotten, porcine deity. Its parking lot was now a cracked, sun-bleached moonscape. The lettering of the logo was removed and in its place faded after-images like ghosts. The porky pig-esque logo of Piggly himself remained mostly intact. Chubby rounded cheeks, semi-circle snout, and big eyes with massively dilated pupils. He remained permanently fixed above, surveying the dusty parking lot he once ruled over like an Ozymandias from a time long ago. To the ego of a child, something which existed before your birth is ancient. That old Piggly Wiggly grocery may as well have been the pyramids of Giza.

The children simply called it, "The Lot."

The Lot made a nice place to test out bicycles, skateboards, roller blades, scooters, and other such unconventional modes of childhood transportation. A safe haven to play street hockey without the bothersomeness of automobiles. In other words, it was a scraped knee and elbow factory. Many fond memories were forged there, in the golden twilight of summer's long past. Those were times of friendship and joy, then un-savored and now mourned.

Maggie spent time there too. It was a shared experience for all the kids within its radius of influence. Communal stomping ground, binding in its sanctuary. That's where she played, or

rather, she hovered.

She hovered close by to play groups hoping to slip in. She never had much luck. In games of tag she was never it, but also never pursued. That was until Brian ripped apart her first mask. Apart from actually bringing her into the fold of the class, I think the mask itself may have actually helped. The face was what people focused on. It was what confused them, frustrated them, and eluded them. The mask made a barrier that shielded them. You could at least remember and recognize the child-like, cartoon face that she wore. So in the summer of 1991 Maggie finally got to play. *Really play.*

I wonder if the play she finally got to enjoy on that old parking lot was what she wanted. Were those memories as sweet to her as my own memories are to me? Or were they only bitter sweet. After so much loneliness and pain, did it finally soothe her? Or did it make her realize that not even that was enough to make her content? To make her whole. I asked a few of the kids she played with about her. They're all grown up now and I could see the faint ghosts of the children they used to be in their faces. Everything from managers, to doctors, to forklift operators to waitresses at greasy spoons. They all remembered Maggie in one way or another. Some took a little prodding, but they all got there. They recalled her as being sweet, shy, and more than a little odd, but nothing much more. Most of them didn't even remember her peculiarity, they thought her mask wearing was just a "quirk." They admitted they only played with her out of a sense of pity and obligation.

Maybe that's why she did it.

Well, I've been putting it off long enough. I try not to make it a habit to tease my audience. Far be it from me to keep you all in terminal suspense. But these things are difficult to recall.

They're even harder to put into words on a page. Like trying to pour lake Eerie into a teacup. I'm stalling now I know. Here's what happened.

It was June first, 1991. Another Golden age of summer vacation had come. Maggie left her house just after lunch wearing a yellow dress, red rain boots, and the mask of her face. She left the driveway atop of her bicycle, a Christmas present from her dear father, too busy grabbing ass in the love nest he was making with Valorie to be present for the holidays.

Maggie told her mother before she was going to the Lot to play with some other kids in the neighborhood. Madeline, while washing dishes, told her firmly that she had to be back before the streetlights came on. Madeline hated the mask Maggie wore. At least when she wasn't wearing it she could pass as an ordinary girl to outsiders. But that mask said to the world "my daughter isn't normal, she has problems, probably the mother's fault."

Maggie said to her mother, behind her paper plate face: "Yes, Mom. Seeya." and left on her red bike.

That was the last time Madeline saw her daughter.

She did make it to the Lot. There were other children there. They played for some time. That same, by the numbers, unspirited play she had been having for a few months. Playing was a lot like making love, your heart had to be in it. Malaise crept over all of them. And as the sun crawled up to the zenith of the sky and drove the concrete beneath their tennis shoes to sizzle like a stovetop, the kids left to go back to their homes for shade, popsicles, lemonade and T.V. They left one by one, then by pairs until little Maggie was left all by her lonesome. It would be Jason Biddy, a boy the same age as Maggie who lived down the street from her, who would be the last person to ever see Magnolia Fitzgerald.

The sun crept back down beneath the tree line. The bright sky dimmed like cooling metal. Venus twinkled in the western sky. The street lights came on. Maggie had not come home.

Madeline waited on the porch, tapping her foot, hands on her hips, readying to scold her the moment she saw her rolling down the street on her bicycle. She had never spanked Maggie, but after being more than fifteen whole minutes late she was certainly mulling over the idea.

After thirty minutes anger melted into anxiety. Dreadful ideas slithered into her mind from her belly, coiled, and nestled there. She stared at the corner where Maggie was due to appear, any second now, she thought.

She saw lights coming. It was Greg. He was home from work and still Maggie was nowhere to be seen. Greg left immediately to go find Maggie. Probably somewhere in the neighborhood, or more likely at that goddamn parking lot. He went up and down in his sedan, around and around, looking this way and that. Not a sign of Maggie. He went to the Lot. Desolate.

Eight o'clock came around. Not a trace.

Maggie was missing.

Let me illustrate for you just how bad this was.

Maggie was a special girl. One who, for one reason or another, be it science or magic, had an appearance which could not be retained in any capacity. Not by the human eye, not by photo, not by video, not by illustration.

What do you do when a girl like that disappears?

You can't give a description. What? Tell all the available officers, "be on the lookout for a girl you can't recall the appearance of,"? Put up missing posters of a blur? You couldn't even put her on a fucking milk carton. It was not like trying to find a needle in a haystack. It was trying to locate an invisible

needle in a stack of invisible needles. It was a monstrously hopeless problem, the full danger of which Maggie's parents and step father didn't consider until it was far too late.

All at once there was a massive search. Countless adults wielding flashlights combed through every twig of forested area, calling her name again and again. It seemed that the entire town was in on it, even my dad joined in to help, and I can't remember a day in my whole life when that man lifted a finger to help anyone. He did bitch about the inconvenience of it plenty enough though. I distinctly remember him saying: "I hope when they find this brat, her folks ring her neck out for me."

My father had such a tender heart, didn't he?

After seven agonizing days of looking there was nothing. No Maggie, no body, no body parts, not an article of clothing, not a scrap of her yellow dress, not one of her red boots, not a footprint, nothing. Well, one thing. A paper plate with a string woven through it. On it, a face drawn on. Left tangled in underbrush, seemingly discarded by its owner. It was the one Josh Sharp made for her. They found it three miles south of the Piggly Wiggly. That was the only thing people could hope to identify Maggie with. With that, things went from worse to hopeless. After forty-eight hours the chances of recovering any missing child plummet to practically infinitesimal odds. And Maggie, being the girl she was, without her mask/face was just gone. Dropped off the face of the world without a whisper.

Ted, Madeline, and Gregory didn't quit though. What parent would? She was still their child. Even if they weren't quite acting like parents when they needed to be. That's the thing about parents, they always come through for you...in the end—only in the end. Usually when it's too late. And not a moment before. Ted offered ten thousand dollars to anyone who could

find anything that would help locate his daughter. Two days after that, he raised it to fifty thousand. By the end of the month he was offering 100k.

I think he would have sold everything—*everything*—just for a clue to where his baby girl was. He would have sold an arm, a leg, an eye, his hair, his teeth, and a kidney, then spent the rest of his life in a cardboard box. Given up his soul. Anything.

Ted and Greg butted heads after this, more than normal. He was never completely comfortable with another man raising his child (even though he still allowed it), but he kept it amicable for both his ex-wife and his daughter. Not after this. Ted accused Greg of not being present, and letting this happen through his neglect. Greg might just have taken it, albeit through gritted teeth, until Ted started berating his wife as well. She was already broken over Maggie's disappearance and now this rich yuppie who was the least present in Maggie's life out of all of them was yelling at her for being neglectful? He lost it. They got into a screaming match while at the Smith house, things escalated and a fight broke out that Madeline had to break up by literally coming between them. Both of them said that the other threw the first punch.

Madeline fled to TV. She called on journalists and reporters and they came like locusts. She gushed about Maggie to them and begged the whole world to listen and try, just try, to find her baby. Her poor faceless baby, lost and alone in the world. She got in the papers a few times, and was in front of a reporter's camera once or twice, but interest decays quickly. It has a shorter shelf life than old milk.

About three months after Maggie's disappearance the story did eventually get picked up by a low-brow, tabloid TV program. Greg was upset with his wife for it. He felt they were bringing too

much attention to themselves, and now Madeline was gunning to get on a show filled with weirdos, baby mama drama, and the lunier specimens of the American species. Greg refused to be on the show, but Madeline managed to pressure Ted to be on. He was desperate for anything that could conceivably help find his daughter.

In September of 1991 Madeline and Ted appeared on the Jack Freely show. A square jawed, native born Oklahoman who was attracted to sensationalism like a fly to pig shit. A discount cousin of Jerry Springer and Maury Povich.

At the start of the segment Jack was sweet, somber, soft spoken. He introduced Madeline and Ted with a warmth and tenderness that was so authentic Jack could have won an Emmy for it. He let Madeline and Ted gush their hearts out for a few minutes while he simply listened and nodded in patient understanding. The kleenex box placed purposefully on the coffee table got its use.

Madeline had finished her spiel and blew her nose like a trumpet. Jack was still very thoughtful looking, and then, very gently, asked: "And haven't you got a photo of Maggie?"

Ted and Madeline's eyes widened. Madeline swallowed and said, almost trying to whisper despite having a mic taped to her shirt, "We told you about her...condition..."

Jack's brows furrowed. "Yes you told us about Maggie's 'Condition,'" he made air quotes with his fingers to the audience. "Should I tell the good people in my audience what you told me? That you don't have a single photo or video of your missing child, the one you say you love so much, because, according to you, your daughter can't be captured on film. Really?"

The live studio audience murmured to themselves. Ted and Madeline felt they were suddenly on trial. "We—we showed

you," said Madeline. "We showed you proof. We sent in photographs."

"Yes, you did. Let's look at the photos, shall we?"

A montage played on the big screen behind them. All the pictures they tried taking of Maggie over the years, plus all the family photos they took in which Maggie was simply incidental, mostly from after the divorce and the birth of her siblings. You could see them lined up, her younger sister and brother crystal clear and perfect, but Maggie was blurred out.

"Plenty of photos. A happy family. Why isn't Maggie in any of them?"

"She is!" Ted said. He was sweating heavily under the studio lights.

"And you, or your wife, or *both*, edited her image out, didn't you?"

"No, no, we didn't!" screamed Madeline.

"Sure you didn't. Your daughter is just some kind of mutant that destroys film with her appearance, right? Folks, we've heard an awful lot of kakamamey stories on my show but I think this may just take the cake. Next you'll be telling us that she wasn't human. Was she an alien baby too? Did she go back with her birth parents to outer space and that's why she disappeared? Please tell us. Just how delusional are you?"

"It's the truth!" Madeline pleaded.

"The truth, eh? What do you folks think?" he turned to his people, "Do you think it's the truth?"

"NOOOO," roared the audience.

Ted and Madeline looked like deers caught in headlights.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Jack, full of righteous indignation, "I think you made up that phoney story to cover for yourself. That you neglected Maggie, didn't you? She reminded

you of your failed marriage didn't she? And that's why you altered all of the photos after the fact. Because you wouldn't accept her as part of your family...right? *Right???"*

They were speechless.

Jack kept going. He was merciless.

"Never in my twenty years of working in television have I seen two parents so hellbent to cut their daughter, their own flesh and blood out of their lives. Going through and changing family photos, just to *cut her out.*"

From the belly of the audience came sounds of disgust.

"And on top of that, concoct some raving delusion to cover their own rears. And now, this daughter of yours, this *child* no older than nine years of age has gone missing. Without so much as a snapshot to give the authorities any kind of help tracking her down! How do you expect them to find your daughter without them knowing what she looks like? She barely has a chance to be found now, and all because *you erased her*!"

The audience clapped and cheered as Freely tore Madeline and Ted to pieces, live on cable television. After twenty more minutes of ripping into them they both looked catatonic. As if they couldn't believe what was happening. Like they were in a dream and now looked from side to side waiting to wake up from it. By the end of the segment I think they half believed the garbage that Freely was spewing out. His talent for concocting high and mighty moral declarations was on par with a preacher. What helped was, I think at least partially, what Jack said was true to a degree. And Ted and Madeline *knew it.*

After their appearance on the Jack Freely show, both Ted and Madeline retreated from the public eye. They still looked for Maggie of course, but what else was there to do? She was gone. Period. Ted's 100,000 dollar reward remains uncollected to this

day (although he admitted to me that he never had the hundred grand to begin with).

Her case went cold, and was by and large forgotten by those not close to it—just like Maggie herself. But I never forgot. I think it's time I admit my own guilt in all of this. I've been misleading you good people long enough, and now I'm due to tell you what role exactly I played in Maggie's story.

Remember that little piss stain Brian Berkawitz? The snot with the big mouth that came up with that god-awful rhyme—ripped up her first mask and made her bawl. Well...that little piss stain was me.

The more observant of you could have probably worked that out by now. You were probably the types to get gold stars on your worksheets in grade school. Most of you know me by my pen name, Ray Gilman. A combination picked out of the phonebook. But the more dedicated of my readership who know of my birth name knew from the start. Sorry to spoil it for you, but I was never one for twists to begin with. At least I put my talent for wordsmithing to better use since first grade.

Consider this story, partly, my confession.

Now, I could sit here at my vintage Olympia model typewriter, my ass planted firmly in my reasonably comfortable chair and dribble out some trite, sob-story designed to pluck at your heart strings. Some violin jerking, pathetic, pity party in print to take some of the blame off of myself like a politician in hot water. I could tell you that my dad used my ear for an ashtray, or that my mom was popping oxycodone pills like m&ms, or that my older sister used me as her own personal punching bag, but those wouldn't be anything resembling excuses. They would just be reasons.

The fact of the matter is, I was just a little shit. A bully. Plain

and simple.

Maybe that's why I used a pen name when I started writing my books. I didn't want to be associated with the little monster from the first grade. I never liked my name to begin with. *Brian Berkowitz.* It's a name that tastes like bile saying it, and I got bullied for it plenty. People used to call me "Brain." And by people I mean meat-loaf handed little brutes that are responsible for the staggering number of dental implants in my mouth today.

Oh, that's right. Despite being a bully myself, don't think for a moment that that saved me from the social darwinism of the public schooling system. I was still at the bottom end of the food chain. Just not the very bottom. I'm glad for it too. I deserved it all, and then some. But you won't ever hear from me, "It made me the man I am today," that's horseshit too. People become great *despite* terrible things, not because of them. If Maggie were still around today... Well, I doubt she would ever want to thank me for what I did to her.

She could be, y'know. They never found a body, or any trace of a body. More than likely she was found by someone (a hunter probably), maybe years after the fact, and taken as a Jane Doe. Her anomalous ability probably wouldn't be detected, or if it was, just ignored. Probably buried in a mass grave somewhere. But that need not be the case. What if she never died? What if she just... left? What if Maggie, very displeased with her life, got up, opened the door to it, took a bow, and exited? Closing the door behind her. Never to be seen again.

If Elvis Pressley and John F. Kennedy could all still be around and kicking like the tabloids always say, why can't Maggie Fitzgerald get a shot? Maybe she went somewhere new. Got a new identity. A new name. Started fresh. Lived, grew, matured.

Maybe she has kids of her own by now. Maybe that's just a delusion—but it keeps me sane.

I still wonder what she looks like. Maybe that's why I still find myself coming back to her in my head. I can't even picture the face of the person I want to apologize to. Always behind a curtain of magic, never to be seen. She's an idea... a concept. I still wake up in cold sweats, stare up at the ceiling and replay those moments over in my head. Just a string of silly, stupid words, and I would carve out my own heart if I could go back and unsay them. Maybe then poor Maggie wouldn't have vanished. Left because the world was no place for a being like her.

I never went to her funeral, by the way.

She was declared dead when I was in High School. I had the opportunity to come. I thought about going. But when it came down to it, I didn't have the guts. Add that on top of the mound of regrets piled up for me. Going to that funeral would have been facing up to what I did. I didn't have the nerve to look her parents in the eyes.

They didn't even know what I did.

They still don't know. They just thought I was some classmate turned author looking to make a story about their daughter. Either once again, Madeline and Ted didn't take the interest in their daughter's life that they should have, or Maggie never had a bad word to say about me. I prefer to think the latter, for more reasons than you may think. I believe Ted and Madeline would believe the former. They surely feel more guilt than I. That's their cross to bear I suppose, but still very heart breaking. When I came to them they didn't just look old and grey, but worn out. They looked exhausted. They not only obliged me by telling me about Maggie, but they seemed relieved. They wanted so much to unload everything out onto another. To shout to the whole

world that they loved their daughter and still love her in her absence. I am happy to have given them that much at least.

If I had the chance to see her again, just one more time...words fail me. I can't quite describe the true depths of my regret. I would apologize to her like a sinner on Judgement Day. I would beg her for forgiveness, and be content if she denied it to me. I would walk across a sea of jagged rocks barefoot for her to understand how truly sorry I am. Or just to see her smile. A smile from a mouth I won't remember.

I used to live in New York. That's where all the big publishers were. But I had to move. There were too many people. Oceans worth of people. An ocean's worth of faces. Any one of them could be Maggies, and I would never know it if they were. She could have walked by me on the street, shoulder to shoulder, and I would never know. I couldn't handle that. That uncertainty. I can't imagine how her parents must feel. Now I live in—well, I won't tell you that. But suffice it to say that it's remote, scarcely populated and out of the way. Maybe I was destined to be a hermit.

If any of you reading this ever want to look for Magnolia Fitzgerald then all you must do is this:

Find the most beautiful girl in the world.

That's her.

Follow and Connect with Jack Brennan

About

Jack Brennan is a Sci-fi/Fantasy writer that has been published in *Deathwish Poetry Magazine* where he also assists as a copy editor.

Social Media

Instagram: @jack_brennan_writer

4

Author Spotlight w/ Heather Fox

Who is Heather Fox?

My name is Heather Fox, and I'm an author from New York. Lost Heart of Erythia is my debut novel, a story that's been five years in the making and holds a big piece of my heart. I share my home with five cats who think they run the place, a weenie dog who's small but full of personality (he's convinced he's the boss), and my husband, whom I married in July 2025.

Writing has always been more than just a hobby for me. It's a comfort, a way to breathe through the hard days and make sense of the world around me. When I'm not writing, I love creating digital art or soaking in the cozy magic of fall, my favorite season that I truly wish could last all year long.

Mini-Interview w/ Heather Fox

1. **Give us an example of a life experience that inspired your writing.**

So, for a long time I was dealing with really heavy depression. The kind that sits on your chest and makes everything feel too loud and too quiet at the same time. I never knew how to say what I was feeling, not out loud anyway. Then one day, a close friend casually told me I should try writing. Just to escape for a bit. Just to give myself a world that didn't hurt. So I tried and it was the first thing that actually made me feel okay. Writing became this safe place where I could finally breathe.

2. What's one thing people wouldn't know about you until you told them?

Honestly people are always surprised when I tell them I'm actually really sensitive. I come off put-together or calm, but in reality I feel everything way too deeply. Books, music, people, moments. I carry things longer than I should, but I think that's why I love writing. It gives all those feelings somewhere to go. I cry during every single movie and book I read.

3. What's your biggest accomplishment in your writing career?

Hmm... I'd say actually letting people read my work. That might sound small, but it took everything in me to share stories I kept hidden for so long. Hitting "publish" or sending a chapter to someone felt like handing them a piece of my heart. So yeah, finally letting my words be seen is the accomplishment I'm proudest of. My book isn't doing so well with engagement at the moment but it makes me proud to have it in my hands.

4. If you could go anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

There's this place I haven't found yet. A huge secluded waterfall somewhere deep in the middle of nowhere. I don't know where it is, but I feel like I'll know it when I see it. I want to sit there with nothing but the sound of water and the feeling

of being small in a really comforting way.

5. How do you relax when life gets overwhelming?

When everything starts to pile up, I pretty much retreat into my little comfort bubble. I have five cats and a weenie dog who all act like tiny emotional support creatures, whether I asked for it or not. I make myself an iced coffee, put something mindless or cozy on Netflix, and just let myself exist for a bit. Nothing fancy, nothing deep. Just me, my animals, my drink, and a few quiet hours to reset.

Interested in Heather Fox?

Social Media

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/fox.n.ink?igsh=bDZ0cTFzdjI5MDB2&utm_source=qr

Amazon Author Page: https://a.co/d/3KLfgQY

5

The Human Garden (Jill Nelson)

Marie Rales eagerly tapped the screen on her phone to get a closer look at the map.

ETA forty-nine minutes?

FUUUUCK.

Knowing damn well she was going to accept the pick-up on the Uber Eats app, Marie groaned. She needed all the money she could to pay her rent that was due next week.

This specific pick-up included delivery notes and already seemed to come with a headache kind of customer:

DELIVERY NOTES FROM CUSTOMER:

BRING FOOD THROUGH GATE AND SET ON THE ROUND TABLE ON THE BACK DECK. BEWARE OF DOG.

Accepting her destination, Marie drove to the McDonald's, then the forty-nine minute drive to bring the brown bag of food. ***Hope they know the french fries I smell inside of their bag will be cold by the time I get there***, she thought, turning up the volume on my stereo.

Pulling up to the address on her app, Marie continued driving down the long, dirt driveway. After a few seconds, she finally

saw a small, red house come into view at the end of the drive. Parking behind an older, white Tacoma truck, Marie swung her legs out of her car.

Retrieving her phone out, she re-read the delivery instructions on her phone once again. Looking around the house, there was no fence in the back yard, nor a visible gate that she could see.

Further behind the house, Marie could see the back deck described in the notes, but in front of the walkway to the steps leading to the upper deck was a small garden full of tall, red gardening pots.

Two things about this seemed odd to Marie:

1. Why is there a garden blocking the stairs to where I was told to leave the food?

AND

2. Where was the dog that was mentioned?

Marie approached the black, garden gate that was as tall as her shoulders. The gate had a sharp, ancient-looking, design around it, coming to a point. The gate latch was rusty, and Marie had to set the food down to get the latch to budge.

Once she got the rusty latch to open, she closed the gate behind her. Marie slowly walked past all of the tall garden pots. Each one of the five pots was red porcelain and filled with dirt up to the brim.

No flowers.

No herbs.

No vegetables.

Just dirt.

Chills trickled down Marie's body like droplets of icy sweat, causing her to walk faster through the small, creepy garden to get to the stairs. Looking closer at the fence, there was no

second exit on this side of the gate to open. You couldn't get through to the stairs unless you jumped over the tall fence.

Well this is fucking weird, Marie thought to herself. Quickly leaning closer to the edge of the pointed black garden gate, she dropped the brown bag onto the bottom step through the gate.

Good enough.

Marie jumped up at the sound of the gate closing behind her. She turned around to see a man standing with his back to her inside the garden. The fenced-in garden was nowhere near large enough for two people, plus the five garden pots inside.

Marie stared at the back of the man. As he slowly turned around, she saw he was wearing black work overalls with brown rubber boots, and a black knit cap on top of his head. If

she had to guess the man's age, she'd assume in the 40-year-old range. His face looked a little weathered, and his expression seemed blank. The man finally parted his lips to say something.

"Thank you." His voice was deep, but quiet when he said it. Marie eagerly nodded once at him and took to steps to the right to go around him. The man did not move out of her way. Marie pushed past him, knocking over one of the red garden pots. Dirt dumped out of the pot as Marie quickly walked through the small garden. A little louder this time, the man asked her a question.

"Do you like my garden, Marie?" he asked. The man grabbed her upper arm, stopping her from getting back to the gate.

How does he know my name? Oh, right, the app tells the customer. SHIT, I cursed myself for picking up a second job.

"I built it myself," the man told her. Marie glanced down at her arm, pulling away from his grip.

"Sure, it's nice," Marie said.

Okay! Time to get the fuck out of here!

She reached over the gate to unlatch the rusty lock, but there was a pad lock over it that wasn't there before.

"You don't like it, do you?" the man asked. Marie jiggled the gate, hearing the lock clink against the latch. "No, I do. I just have another order to deliver. Could you unlock this gate, please?" Marie asked him. He gave her a confused look in return.

"Oh, no. You're not leaving, Marie. I've got one over there waiting for you," he told her, pointing to the back deck. There stood another red, porcelain garden pot that matched the other five inside the garden.

Marie anxiously pressed her back against the black gate as the man took another step closer to her. Peering down at the man's side, Marie noticed a tool belt possessing one terrifying tool dangling down from it.

A saw.

Her eyes scanned down in horror to his brown, rubber boots moving closer to her with each step.

Next, she looked to the left of the man's boots where the dirt had spilled across the ground. Emerging out of the spilled soil Marie saw the human hand poking through the dirt. The fingers on the hand were pale and drained of their color, partially buried beneath the dirt.

Marie screamed out the same time the man lunged forward at her, enclosing his hands around her throat. He squeezed tighter until she stopped. Marie's hands flailed around trying to break his grip for the last of her breath.

Finally releasing his grip on her, Marie's dead body fell limp to the ground. He turned around, pulling the key to unlock the padlock he'd placed on the latch.

Walking slowly around the outside of his garden, Miller Tills

climbed the steps to retrieve the red porcelain garden pot and carry it back down to the garden.

Miller bent over to replace the fallen garden pot. Scooping the dirt back inside of it with his rough hands, Miller replaced the human hand to pop up and out of the dirt in the red garden pot.

Dragging Marie's body across the dirt closer to the empty pot, Miller spread some more soil into it. He pulled out her cell phone from her pocket and held the screen up to Marie's face to unlock the screen.

Clicking on the familiar Uber Eats app as Miller had done many times before, (five to be exact) he clicked the **ORDER**

DELIVERED button and dropped the phone into the overalls pocket.

After deciding which part of her was the most beautiful, Miller removed the saw from his toolbelt and began to cut off each of Marie's ten toes. Next, he planted all of them neatly inside the red porcelain pot. Like they were seeds he'd chosen to bloom next in the human garden.

THE END

Follow and Connect with Jill Nelson

About

I'm Jill, mom, wife, pet lover, and recently published murder mystery author. I am a very low-key person. I stay at home with my toddler and write when she's asleep. I love reading other thriller/mystery books and doing yoga at home 2-3 times a day when I'm not playing with my daughter. Every morning we begin our day getting an energy tea, do our daily errands, and sometimes go to the library for story-time. Been happily married to my husband for going on 5 years now. We are truly meant for each other. We like to have date nights with each

other, sometimes that's just us staying up and playing Rummy together after the toddler is asleep or staying overnight with my brother.

Social Media
http://www.authorjilldaniellenelson.com/
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Threads: character_slayer
Facebook: Murder Mysteries With Jill
YouTube: character_slayer

6

Author Interview w/ Alex Tucker

1. **Tell us a bit about yourself. What sort of things do you enjoy doing outside of writing?**

Obviously, I love to read, even when it has nothing to do with research or finding inspiration for my current WIP. Horror is my favorite, but I also enjoy great literary writers like Ruth Ozeki, Isabel Allende, and Toni Morrison (whose work borders on horror in many cases).

When I step completely outside the world of books, I enjoy going for a run, hiking in the woods, or traveling to a new city or country. Travel is definitely an addiction of mine. I had a unique opportunity a few years ago to travel internationally for work, and during that time I spent time in over fifty countries. Now I hope to focus more on travelling to new places in the US.

2. What is your most recent book about?

Afraid to Feel is a slow-burn horror novella that plunges into emotional paralysis and the cost of silence. Told through the worn-out perspective of Cory Gardner, a tired father and

withdrawn husband, the story reveals what happens when a man raised to suppress every emotion finally opens the floodgates.

In therapy, Cory reveals a belief that his world is artificial, that perhaps he lives inside a simulation. This fractured view of reality leaves him detached from his wife, his children, and from life itself.

In order to save his marriage, Cory must dredge up his darkest memories, which bleed into the present. His childhood secrets do more than haunt. They infect.

3. If there was someone famous that you would recommend to read your book, who would it be?

I would love more than anything than for Stephen Graham Jones to critique my book. For starters, he was a major influence in my decision to become a writer. I knew I wanted to write a book for many years, and even though I was a big fan of horror, I never imagined I could create anything worthy of the genre. That completely changed when I read *The Only Good Indians*. Obviously, I didn't think I could write something as scary or brilliant as that novel, but it really expanded my mind as to what horror could look like. I felt inspired and started keeping a list of ideas. A couple of years later, I started my first novel.

Also, SGJ is continually studying horror as the art that it is. He looks for new ways to construct a story or

old tropes he can meld into a tale with a powerful impact on the modern world. Of all the author's I've read, his afterwords or acknowledgements sections are top class. He often invests several pages explaining what the journey was like, how and where he did his research, what surprised him along the way, and what other works influenced him. I look forward to reading these every time.

4. Do you have a favorite spot you like to sit and write?

When the weather permits it, I love to sit on the back deck and write. I think having some outside air, smells, and sounds wake me up a little more versus staying inside. When it's too hot, cold, or loud outdoors, I enjoy writing in my office, especially when one of my cats decides to stop by and curl up in my lap. Also, when I'm feeling uninspired or my writing is sluggish, I'll go to coffee shop. It's not my go-to option, but sometimes the change in scenery can make all the difference.

I'm also a believer in writing wherever you are. I've drafted a number of short stories or segments of books on airplanes, in airports, on trains, or even in hotel lobbies. There are obviously places where your writing will flow the best. But no place should keep you from writing at all.

5. Did you experience any form of writer's block while working on this piece? If so, what tips do you have for other authors that are struggling with writer's block?

I did have a unique experience with this book, but it wasn't traditional writer's block. The idea had bounced around my brain for a few months before I saw an open call for short stories with a theme that was somewhat similar. I thought it was perfect, so I flew through a first draft, resulting in 8,000 words in just three days. The only problem was that it met the maximum word count exactly, and I didn't feel it was quite wrapped up. Hoping for the best, I submitted it as it was. When it got rejected, I wasn't that surprised, and honestly, maybe even a little relieved. I saw an opportunity to turn it into the story it was supposed to be. That "short story" became the second part in a three-part novella.

I thought I'd share this because, while it wasn't a case of writer's block, I did put up other walls for myself. I tried to

force my story into a mold that wasn't right for it, and then I submitted something that was subpar at best. I learned two things from this experience. First, you can't expect your story to be something it's not. Just bring it to life, and it'll be what it was supposed to be. Second, nothing you write is ever a waste. Either your rejected piece just needs a little more love and nourishment, or, worst case, you got a little more practice out of it. Even mediocre writing is better than having written nothing.

6. What time of day is most productive for you to write?

When I first wake up in the morning, I'm usually not in the mood to write. I tend to spend my first two to four hours reading, and then I jump into whatever story or book I'm working on. That means I generally do most of my writing from mid-morning until the late afternoon. Of

course, if I have a tight deadline, I might write from 6am to 6pm.

7. When you are writing, what are you typically listening to in the background? Silence? Favorite playlist? Podcast?

I prefer silence, or at least a reasonable amount of it. I find my best ideas flow when there's nothing else to impede them. I can handle a bit of music and don't mind the background noise at a café or airport, but podcasts are better for my downtime, especially if the topic is relevant to my current WIP.

8. Is there a particular scene or part in your book that you are incredibly proud of?

I'm really pleased with the way my book wraps up. Part 1 of the book relies on character development, which means expecting a bit of patience from the readers. Part 2 jumps into the scary stuff, the trauma that turned the main character into who he is. Finally, Part 3 takes all of that and compiles it into

a neat package, with what I believe to be a great moral for the story. Without spoiling too much, the final lesson of the book is essentially: Hey guys, it's ok to feel. Hiding from your emotions only gives them more power.

Follow and Connect with Alex Tucker

About

Alex Tucker is an HWA writer from the Appalachian Mountains of Virginia. His novella *Afraid to Feel* recently debuted through Alien Buddha Press, and a second novella will be published by Baynam Books in 2026. Alex's short fiction has been featured in *Occupying Bodies* from Black Hare Press, *Carols for the Dead* from Desiree Horton, and Creepy Podcast's daily Patreon. Others will be included in upcoming works by Graveside Press, Inky Bones Press, Burial Books, and SGNL Magazine. He is also a blog contributor for Burial Books. Prior to becoming a full-time author, Alex worked as an engineer in various locations around the globe. He currently lives in Japan with his wife and their two cats, returning to the US in 2026.

Social Media

Linktree: https://linktr.ee/alextuckerwrites?utm_source=linktree_profile_share&ltsid=a426e723-d82c-46bf-bb61-e38156553d32

7

Haunted (Seth Bleuer)

I trudge up the long gravel driveway, rocks crunching softly under my feet. Silhouetted against the clear night sky sits the old farmhouse. A million stars light the cloudless night. Such a far cry from the city, where you're lucky to see a single star against the light pollution and neon signs. I pause and listen.

I haven't slept in three, no, four days. Ninety-six hours. At night, I close my eyes and see her. She tells me things, shows me things, but in the daylight I can't remember anymore. My eyes are so dry they feel like they will crack open and bleed with every blink. The edges of reality feel blurred. I know I need to come back here, but why? I can't remember. To help her. Save her? No. She's already gone. To avenge her, bring her killers to justice?

The night is alive with the sounds of nocturnal creatures going about their business in the woods behind me and to my right. Leaves whisper and tree branches groan, making the forest seem like one gigantic living creature. To my left, the overgrown fields rustle in the gentle summer breeze. An old, rusted tractor stands like a fallen sentry in the field, a long dead

metallic monster lurking in the darkness.

I look toward the farmhouse. The windows are black, the house cold, dark and uninviting. The silence is chilling. A stark contrast to the living forest behind me. Goosebumps prickle up on my arms and legs as the hair stands up on neck. I shouldn't have come back to this godforsaken place. I never should've come here in the first place.

Last Saturday night I came here on a dare and stayed the night. Everyone knows about the haunted farmhouse. My two roommates bet me a hundred bucks each, I wouldn't last an hour in the house. Easy money.

I first heard the stories when I was in the fourth grade. No one can agree on what happened or who the ghost is or what it wants. There are many versions of the tale.

During the witch hunts of the mid-1600s, accusations of witchcraft were aimed at a pair of sisters living on the farm after their parents died under mysterious circumstances. An angry mob from the nearby town came and threw them into the lake that sits on the property. One sister floated, the other sat on the bottom, smiling at her persecutors. They drug her up from the bottom of the lake, built a bonfire and burned her at the stake. She laughed as the inferno engulfed her.

Another version goes that a brother and sister murdered their family on the farm. After their crime, the brother drowned his sister in the pond and then burned himself alive. The entire family is now said to haunt the place.

Just a bunch of childish ghost stories. Then l I saw her. My memory from that night is a blur. An incomprehensible whisper. But her face. Her face is seared into my mind. I can't forget it or get it out of my head. Beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

Sometimes memories and thoughts flutter through my mind,

but I don't recognize them. I grab at them, and they disappear, like grasping a handful of ether. I'm left with the whispers of a memory. Pain, shame and guilt. Despair. I shake my head to shake them away, but they refuse to be dislodged.

I stand frozen with indecision. My brain wills my legs to move forward, but my feet seem to have their own plan, standing firmly in place. My knees tremble slightly. I watch the cold dark house, it watches me back. A shooting star streaks across the sky, pulling my gaze upward. "Wish upon a star," I mumble softly under my breath. I wish I wasn't here, I think with a grim smile.

I set down the heavy gas can I carried through the woods, my sore and tired arm grateful to be relieved of its burden, and pull a flask from my pocket. Slowly unscrewing the lid, I stare back at the house again and take a good long drink of cheap whiskey. I don't remember why I brought a can full of gasoline.

A warmth radiates up from my belly. Anger replaces fear. My knees stop shaking and the fire in my belly radiates false courage through my limbs. "It wasn't my fault!" I yell at the empty house. Silence from within the cold, black windows fuels my anger.

I throw the flask against the porch and snatch up the gas can in a violent tug. I trudge with an angry confidence toward the house. My teeth grind, my mouth clenched so tightly my jaw aches. I march so hard the gas sloshes from the can down my pants and soaks my shoe. I let out a primal yell of uncontrolled rage at this soggy footed gas soaked inconvenience.

I violently empty the gas can onto the porch and the old wood siding on the front of the house, splashing more onto my clothes. I've decided. This goddamn place has haunted me for too long. I walk back down the stairs, take a cigarette from my pack and

light it. I take a few long drags from it until the ember is burning an angry red that matches how I feel.

Looking up at the window, I see her face staring back at me. Her big chocolate brown eyes lock onto mine, pleading, begging. Her hair is dripping wet, a piece of seaweed tangled into her long brown curls. As she watches me, her plump Cupid's bow lips turn down into a frown. The smell of pond water blows across the summer breeze, assaulting my nostrils. My heart fills with dread, shame for what I've done.

"This isn't real," I scream. "You... you're... this isn't real. You're dead." My words fade into a sob as I sink to my knees. The thin tether to reality broken, my sleep deprived mind shatters. The cigarette falls from my sobbing mouth and hits my gas-soaked shoe. I feel the heat against my leg as the flames follow the trail of gas that had spilled onto my pants and shirt. I panic. The flames spread. At the first register of pain from my dull, numbed nerves, my mind snaps into focus. These aren't my memories, and they aren't my thoughts. The pain and stench of burning flesh and hair are unbearable. I panic and flail around. My eye catches her watching me from the window. Her frown replaced by a smile on her beautiful face.

"It wasn't me," I yell. "I didn't hurt you. I came to help you."

"I know," I hear her voice in my head.

"What do you want from me?" I scream.

"I want to watch you burn," she snarls. Her laughter fills my mind. I roll on the ground in anguish, choking as the smoke fills my lungs. Then merciful blackness.

****

I open my eyes slowly and take in the surrounding room. My mind lags. Every thought heavy, groggy and slow. "Where am I?" I croak. My voice is raspy and painful. A dull pain radiates

from my legs. A nurse turns to me and smiles. "Welcome back," she says. "Let me go get the doctor."

"Wait," I call after her weakly, trying to raise my arm. It catches short with a clink of metal on metal. She's already gone. "What the hell?" I mutter, looking at the handcuff cuffing me to the hospital bed. The memory comes back to me fragmented and disjointed, but enough to send a shiver down my spine.

The door opens and in walks a police officer. "Why were you trying to burn down the old Johanne's farmhouse?" he asks.

"Ummm, what?"

"You're being charged with attempted arson, son. I asked why. Why did you try to burn it down?" He places his hand on my shin and squeezes. Red hot pain bursts through my brain. I try to cry out, but his hand is over my mouth. His face is so close to mine I can smell he hasn't brushed his teeth in days. He whispers, "I've been there since the investigation started."

He takes a step back, hand still over my mouth, and holds a finger to his lips. There is a wildness in his eyes. One that I know too well. He removes his hand, and I open my mouth to speak. He slaps me so hard I see stars and before I even cry out from the pain, his hand wraps around my throat. "What part of shhhh didn't you understand?" He asks through gritted teeth. "Be quiet." I nod slowly. Tears well up in my eyes. He steps back and looks at me.

My leg throbs and pain radiates through me. Tears stream down my cheeks. The officer smiles as he pulls a flask out of his back pocket, *my* flask. He unscrews the cap slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. He leans in close. "Drink?" He asks. I smell gasoline and turn my head away. He laughs as he empties its contents onto me and steps back, pulling *my* pack of smokes and lighter from his pocket. Too late, he sees *his* gun in my hand.

Swiped while he was leaning over me.

He lights the Zippo lighter, the flame dancing menacingly, then snaps it shut. He repeats the gesture over and over, his wild eyes never leaving mine. My hand shakes as much from fear as from fatigue. My legs throbs in memory of the pain of the flames. He lunges. I squeeze the trigger. Someone down the hall screams.

****

My mind feels fuzzy. Dampened by medication. I watch a small beetle work its way across the room. An epic journey. "Tell me everything." The man says. Looking up, I notice him for the first time.

"Where did you come from?" I ask. I tell him about the beetle, but when I look it's gone.

"Tell me about the night at the farmhouse," he clarifies.

I tell the story slowly from the beginning. It feels fragmented and disconnected. I feel like two broken coffee mugs glued back together incorrectly and without all the pieces. When I finish my story, I look down at the two empty styrofoam coffee cups and ashtray full of cigarette butts I don't remember smoking. He nods his head emphatically and smiles a big, cheap smile. "Great! Going the insanity angle. That's what I was shooting for. Can you tell the story just like that again? No. Better yet, tell it different each time. Yes. Perfect. I have everything I need here. I just need to head to the farmhouse for some pictures."

"Don't go to that house!" I scream. Spittle flies from my mouth and lands on his neat blue tie.

"Nice touch," he whispers and winks with a grin as two guards enter the room and grab me. With that, he shuts off his recorder, packs his briefcase, and is gone in a flash. I can't remember his name. They take me back to a room with padded walls. I'm

handed a cup with pills in it. I swallow them dry and close my eyes, but sleep doesn't come for me. She does.

About Seth Bleuer

Seth Bleuer is an author, writer and veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He currently lives near Seattle by way of the Midwest. Seth likes short walks on the beach, dogs and food... but he doesn't like dog food.

8

Author Interview w/ Ron Corley

1. What is your favorite genre to read for fun?

Social Science and History - 2 of my favorite books are Frantz Fanon "Black Skin, White Mask" and Howard Zinn "A People's History of the United States"

2. Is there an author who might have inspired you to write for the genre you currently write in?

Yes - Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. They are poets from The Harlem Renaissance and I adored them as a young adult. Cullen's *Incident and Yet do I Marvel*, and Hughes' *I, Too* and *Mother to Son* were critical to my understanding of the width and depth of social topics that I was living through in Irmo South Carolina. They also explored the range of class that one can write within to express their points in the most sophisticated of ways.

3. Which comes first in your writing process: Draft #1 OR Cover?

Draft #1 - I'm a rough draft writer, but a cover thinker... meaning, the cover is the thing that I obsess over enough to get to the point that I want to tell the story. But that typically

happens subconsciously. It is the inspiration but not the first thing that I aim to perfect. I hope that's not too confusing!

4. What things tend to interfere with getting work done for you? (Examples include: Other people? Time? Money?)

Money for sure right now...with my podcast at least. Production costs and unstable job security (which I write about) creates bottlenecks of risk when trying to maintain a schedule. If that were off of the table, I would say experiences and reflecting on the growth and change that I'm enduring in real-time. That emotional clarity is my poetic voice and that often comes with reflection, which requires the passage of time and endurance of experiences.

5. When is the most productive time of day for you to write? Early riser? Afternoon Delight? Or Night owl?

It's less a time of day and more an obsession with the premise, like I was discussing earlier...I was obsessed with the idea of hurricane winds blowing in the sails of slave ships, pushing them to the shores of the Americas. At the same time, I was obsessed with the Atlantic as a graveyard and ironically, how my favorite vacation would include the Atlantic. Those ideas then created poems like *Ivory Coast* and *Atlantic Voodoo.* The obsession with the details create the story. Sometimes I can clearly see that story during the day...other times it's dark out.

6. How many query/submission letters have you written and sent off?

Not many - less than 10 so far, but I plan to do more over the next 5 years. Most of the submission criteria that I've seen is for unpublished work, so I'm assuming that I'll need to create more works! Most currently is published or scheduled to be published. I should also look into published submission sites!

7. What is typically playing over your stereo when you

drive or have headphones on? Silence? Music? Podcast? Audiobook?

Podcast, for sure! I love to consume content that feeds me. So political podcasts, historical podcasts, social podcasts are all in my top 10 lists. Some music and audiobooks too, but I have a limit of audiobook time per month and tend to run through that fairly quickly.

8. How do you handle criticism or negative reviews?

I measure it - If it's coming from a respectable source, then I instantly accept it and hope that I will remember it in my next attempts. If the source is less reputable, especially within my genre and sub-genre, I tend to pay it less attention.

9. How do you find you best handle road rage? Are you more of the passive aggressive driver? Or the Match your Energy type? Or are you the driver ignoring them cutting you off as you sing loudly to yourself?

Hahaha, I hate inconsiderate drivers. I assume the care and thought one puts into driving and following driving rules (specifically using turn signals) is indicative of the type of person we are. To me driving is one of the most trustful acts we perform within society and in order for it to go well for everyone, we all must adhere to the rules.

That said, I cuss inside of my car like the world is ending, then move on. I think my daughters are picking up on this too...not good, lol!!

Follow and Connect with Ron Corley

About

Ron Colrey, II is a father, poet, podcast host, Employment Law Education advocate and tech/geology enthusiast who grew up in Winston-Salem NC. His parents are Southern Baptist and Catholic traditionalists, which influences many (if not all) of his work on race, religion, society and social norms. They divorced when he was young, which had a huge impression on his views on family, which he writes about in relation to his own 2 daughters. Aside from writing as a passion, he advocates on his podcast (*TheAwayGames_Podcast*) for employees to better understand their rights and the proper procedures that lead to positive employee outcomes in litigious employment situations.

At present, he's released 3 books (*Adolescence: The Plot of my Escape, Maturation: The Predition of a Smiling Atheist, and Regressions: Suicidal Ideations*) in a poetry collection (*Rafiki's Rough Drafts: Round Peg, Square Hole*) available on Amazon Kindle. He is working on his second trilogy (*Diogenes' Legacy*) which focuses solely on his family and the characters in it that drive his social understanding. This collection and reflection was greatly influenced by his sister's suicide and trials as a black lesbian in the South.

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9

Pretty Isn't Pretty Enough (Jessica Daniliuk)

Gwen spent most of her time looking into the mirror. Every night, she'd push her cheeks back and run her fingers along her jaw, hoping if she rubbed hard enough, it would get sharper. She pinched her ear lobes between two fingers, wishing she'd wake up the next morning with pierced ears. She just wanted to be like the other girls in eighth grade, but when she asked Mama about piercing her ears, she said, "Why would you want cheap metal in your ears?"

Eventually, she'd move from her ears to her mouth, down to her shoulders, ending at her stomach. She didn't like how it jutted out over her pants, or if she wore something high-waisted, the band would leave a red mark. Mama said that was a part of growing up, a lot of little girls have a "bit of a stomach," but Gwen never noticed that at school. Mandy Jefferson would wear tops that cut off halfway down her torso, but they never showed her "bit of a stomach." She was like a board, and boys seemed to like that. Even though she found an issue with most parts of her, Gwen did like her legs. She had long legs, longer

than a lot of girls in her grade, which made her look older, and she liked that.

Winter was approaching, meaning Gwen could start wearing her thick sweaters and favorite sweatshirt that said "Silly Goose" on it. On Monday, Mama came to wake her up for school and said it was going to be chilly, so she'd have to layer up. Gwen smiled and jumped out of bed. She ran to her closet and pushed her T-shirts to the side. She grabbed her sweatshirt and shimmied into it. The neckline was worn, but the rest of it fit Gwen like a glove.

It was long enough to not be cropped and also perfectly hid the bottom of her stomach. Gwen looked into the mirror on her vanity for a moment before running downstairs and catching the bus. She gave Mama a quick kiss and ran out the door just in time. The bus doors creaked open, and Gwen got on, rushing towards the back but not deep enough where she'd be next to Billy Foley's friends, and they'd make a comment. She sat down and rustled through her backpack to find her headphones. She put them on and was immediately at ease, letting the sound of a TV show she'd seen a hundred times drown out her peers.

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After history, Gwen had gym class. It was the last period of the day, but it somehow felt like the longest. Starting this year, the school made a rule that all middle schoolers have to change before gym class: something about sweat rashes and body odor. When the rule first came into effect, Gwen panicked. She worked around it the first few times, going to the nurse with various "headaches" and "food poisoning spells," but eventually, the gym teachers caught on.

That Monday, Gwen ran into the locker room, hoping to find a stall, but they were all taken. She saw some girls changing out

in the open, but she chalked that up to insanity. Even though they debunked her last scheme, the gym teachers weren't particularly perceptive. If she waited for the opportune moment and was quiet enough, she'd be able to exit the gym and spend the entire period in the second-floor bathroom. She could get in trouble, and Mama could get mad, but at least she wouldn't have to change.

Gwen grabbed her bag and started slipping out of the locker room. She had one hand on the way out when she suddenly felt a tap on her shoulder. Mrs. Jackson was standing, her arms crossed, shaking her head. She pointed back at the locker room, and with no choice, Gwen followed the trail. She walked back in, head hung in shame, and, seeing that the stalls were still occupied, looked for an area away from everyone else.

She found a small section in the corner that was surrounded by lockers. At this angle, no one would be able to see her unless they walked closer, and in that case, she'd hear the footsteps. This was still a nightmare, but at least it was sort of manageable. Gwen slid one arm out of her sweatshirt sleeve and was about to remove the other when she heard a familiar voice. Abigail Henry was in the section of lockers closer to the door and began talking about Gwen. She must not have seen Gwen, or maybe she did, Abigail was known to be cruel at times. Gwen pushed her arm back into her sweatshirt and got closer to the voice.

Abigail's best friend, Mariah, continued, "I heard she went to the nurse like ten times because she's allergic to exercising."

Gwen couldn't see their faces, but she could hear Abigail's laugh. A sort of chuckle that came out of her nose and was infused with pure condescension.

"Yeah, I think that's pretty obvious, Mar."

The other girls joined in, each presenting a uniquely cruel

cackle. Gwen sat on the bench, pulling her knees up to her chest, hoping to get as small as possible and disappear. Every part of her body: her broad shoulders, unpierced ears, and clown feet all tensed up and didn't move even when Mrs. Jackson told everyone to start warm-ups. Gwen heard footsteps approaching but closed her eyes, believing that if she didn't engage, the mean girls would just walk away.

"Come on, Gwen, you have to get out there." Gwen opened her eyes to see Mrs. Jackson looking both annoyed and full of pity.

Mrs. Jackson left, and all of Gwen's feelings were replaced by the dread of Mama finding out she failed gym class. She jumped up and began taking off her sweatshirt when she heard a shuffle in the locker room. She peeked over and saw Abigail alone, tying her shoe. Even in the unkind locker room lighting, Abigail looked beautiful. Gwen was always jealous of her beautiful blonde hair. Gwen always wanted hair like that, but Mama refused to let her dye it.

The light dragged strawberry highlights to the surface, and even though Abigail's hair was tied up, there was still a slight curl. Gwen didn't find it fair how someone so ugly on the inside could have the curly blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes that Billy Foley liked. If Gwen had hair like that, Billy would like her too; she was kinder and better at math than Abigail Henry, she just had disgusting brown hair.

As her mind betrayed her, Gwen stepped closer to Abigail. The closer she got, the more the scent of rose touched her nose, it must have been coming from Abigail. Mama never let Gwen wear perfume; she said it was for older women, but Abigail was thirteen, too. Gwen took another step. Abigail finished tying her shoe and stood up, eventually turning to Gwen.

"Can I help you?"

Gwen said nothing, she just stood where she was.

"Okay, weirdo, can you get out of my way, some of us like gym class."

A warm feeling moved from Gwen's chest to her hand. In a swift moment, she walked to her bag, grabbed her scissors, and took a step towards Abigail. She paused for a moment, the sound of Abigail's cackle refusing to leave her mind. Gwen walked next to Abigail, grabbed her ponytail, and cut a chunk out of it. She didn't deserve to have beautiful, long blonde hair. Abigail screamed, and Gwen shoved the hair into her sweatshirt pocket.

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They drove home in complete silence. Gwen had seen Mama mad a few times, but when she heard Gwen was suspended for the next week, her face went as red as her garden tomatoes. Gwen shoved her hand in her pocket, separating the strands of Abigail's hair. Mama, Mrs. Jackson, and the principal all told her she should feel bad, but Gwen didn't. The tension left her body the moment the scissors cut through the hair. Mama pulled into the driveway and sighed before getting out of the car. Gwen didn't follow Mama inside but instead ran to the backyard. She knew she had to get rid of the hair, but throwing it away felt wrong.

Gwen walked into the garden, stepping past the cucumbers and basil. She went to the small patch of dirt where the spinach plant once was. This year, the plant became rotten the second it grew, so Mama got rid of it and never put anything else there, afraid it would be ruined, too. This was the perfect spot for Gwen's prize. She began to claw at the dirt with her nails, eventually scooping piles out when the hole was big enough.

She grabbed the clump of hair from her pocket and watched as the sunlight ran through each strand. She shoved it into the hole in the ground and pushed the dirt back over it, making the blonde slightly brown. She took a nearby stick and shoved it in the middle of the "grave" so she would remember exactly where she put it. Gwen rubbed her dirty hands off on her pants and headed back inside.

That night, Mama kept up with the silent treatment. Gwen liked it better when she was yelling at her because then, at least, they were talking. After a quiet dinner, Gwen went up to her room. Usually, she'd go scroll through Instagram, and practice makeup looks she saw on there, but her mom took her laptop and phone. All Gwen could do was look into the mirror until her features stopped looking like hers and were just what they were: thin lips, a large nose, muddy eyes, and bushy eyebrows. Gwen fell asleep early that night, hoping Mama would be less mad in the morning and she'd have someone to talk to during her suspension.

***

Gwen woke up the next morning to the chorus of "Vienna" by Billy Joel. Mama only listened to music when she cleaned, and she only cleaned when she was stressed. After the look Mama gave her yesterday, Gwen was not surprised that she needed a little relief. Since Mama was cleaning the rest of the house, Gwen thought it'd only be fair for her to clean her bathroom. A gesture like this might make Mama happy and talkative again. Gwen stumbled out of bed and shuffled over to the bathroom, her eyes half closed. She turned the light on and crouched down to get the cleaning supplies. As she reached the bottom cabinet, something felt off.

She stood up slowly, and even though it was her typical

routine, something inside screamed louder for her to look in the mirror. She opened her eyes and was met by a version of her she'd only seen in her dreams. Beautiful blonde locks flowed down to her shoulders. Gwen spun around and took the image in from all angles. The overhead lights perfectly highlighted the reddish hues in her hair, and the front pieces framed what she used to think was a long face but now looked normal. Gwen ran her fingers through the familiar hairdo because it looked exactly like Abigail's. She closed her eyes tight and pried them open, hoping that a miracle occurred and she wasn't actually asleep.

She walked back into her room and threw her sweatshirt over her pajamas, making sure the hood covered her hair so Mama wouldn't be mad. She shoved her feet into her sneakers and ran down the stairs toward the backyard. Gwen slowed down for a moment as she saw her mom dancing along to Prince while she cleaned the windows in the kitchen. Gwen crept around the scene and closed the door behind her, making sure it didn't slam. She went through the tomatoes and looked for the grave marker. She found the stick and began scooping. She clawed through the dirt until the hole became the biggest it ever was. There was no hair. Gwen's new do didn't just look like Abigail's; it was her's.

A smile spread across Gwen's face, and her cheeks got hot. This was one of those things she secretly prayed about when Mama wasn't listening, and even though she was a believer, she never truly expected this outcome.

Gwen began tiptoeing back into the house until she realized Mama moved on to the living room. She quickly grabbed the biggest knife in the block and shoved it into her pocket; it barely fit but still worked. The bus came to a wailing stop outside.

Gwen ran to the coat rack and took her bookbag. Making up to Mama would have to wait, Gwen had to go to school.

The bus driver nodded to Gwen as she got on. A few classmates had a shocked expression; they must have heard about what happened the day before. Gwen contemplated going back home, but as her hand tightened around the knife's handle, she decided to sit in the back of the bus. She sat down and pulled off her hood, the blonde curls tumbling down. Frankie Mackson whispered something to Tommy Park, but Gwen couldn't make most words. All she heard was "crazy."

Gwen stood up before the bus came to a complete stop, ensuring she was the first one off. Abigail was sitting on a bench in front of the school, her hair barely coming down past her ears. Tears were tumbling down her cheeks, and she was being comforted by Mariah Jones, Clarissa Addams, and Mandy Jefferson, other beautiful and popular girls in the grade, the ones Gwen suspected were laughing alongside Abigail yesterday.

The bell rang, and all of the girls started walking towards the front entrance, except for Clarissa Addams. She yelled something Gwen couldn't hear, but it allowed her to slip away while everyone else walked to class. Gwen followed Clarissa around the building towards the back, where students were not allowed. Clarissa looked around, nervous, before walking down a staircase. Gwen snuck around and stood behind a tree.

She knew she couldn't be seen, and she had a great view of Clarissa kissing Kyle Decker. Gwen didn't know much about Clarissa, but she did once hear a couple of boys talking about how Clarissa had already kissed 100 boys and was a really good kisser. Gwen hadn't even kissed one boy; she couldn't imagine kissing 100. She didn't know what made for a "good kiss," but

Kyle Decker seemed to agree with the other boys.

Kyle quickly checked his phone and, realizing the time, started running up the stairs. Clarissa didn't immediately join him. Instead, she pulled a compact out of her large purse and started applying lipstick. Gwen thought it looked beautiful; Mama never let her use lipstick, she thought it sent the wrong message. Clarissa continued applying, turning her back to the staircase. Gwen gripped the knife in her pocket and walked closer to Clarissa.

Maybe now, boys would want to kiss her, too.

She put a hand on Clarissa's shoulder and spun her around. Clarissa seemed scared for a moment, her brows furrowing until she realized it was Gwen touching her. The corners of her mouth started to turn up in a way that mesmerized Gwen. In a moment, Gwen brandished the knife, pulled down Clarissa's top lip, and sliced. A piercing screech leaped from Clarissa, and she threw her hands up to her mouth. Blood ran from the open wound down her chin. Panicked, Clarissa tried to climb up the wall since Gwen was blocking her only exit. She continued screaming, which dragged Gwen back to reality. If Mama found out, she would be so mad. Gwen turned Clarissa back around and pinned her up against the wall with her knee. Clarissa flayed and tried to escape, but Gwen had five inches on her, which proved to be crucial.

Gwen grabbed Clarissa's bottom lip and elbowed away Clarissa's slapping hands. The knife lost some of its bite, forcing Gwen to saw away at the bottom lip. Clarissa's tears began to mix with the blood, staining Gwen's sleeve. Gwen paused for a moment, staring as the concoction spread down her arm. Once again, her cheeks got hot. She raised the knife and quickly slid it across Clarissa's neck. After a minute of gurgling

and grasping, Clarissa lay lifeless on the ground. Gwen looked through Clarissa's bag and found the lipstick: "rendezvous," fitting. Gwen put everything in her bookbag and walked up the stairs, leaving the best kisser on the concrete.

Although the administration took her punishment seriously, Gwen knew it would not be hard to sneak into the school. The man at the front desk: Tony was either watching baseball highlights on his phone or stealing snacks from the teacher's lounge. Sometimes, when Gwen would skip gym class and go to the nurse, she'd exit the building and take a stroll outside to clear her head. Tony only saw her leave one time, and when he did, he pretended he didn't. Now, Gwen opened the door a crack to ensure no one from the principal's office would find her. She bent down slightly, running past Tony while he yelled at the Cubs for their lack of intelligence.

She went into the bathroom and hid in the farthest stall from the entrance. She opened her bag and looked at the lipstick, admiring the pink shade, a color she never thought she'd wear before. Gwen continued looking at the label, the blood on her hands making it extra slick. Her fingers gave way, causing the lipstick to fall onto the ground and roll out of the stall. As it made its way towards the sink, someone else entered the bathroom. A pair of high-heeled black boots stood outside of Gwen's stall, and the person reached down to pick up the lipstick.

"Riss, I know that's you. No one else wears this ridiculous shade. What are you doing in there? Come out."

Gwen knew the boots belonged to Mandy Jackson. She had a low, melodic voice and was always calling Clarissa "Riss." Gwen debated her next action when Mandy started pulling on the door that Gwen forgot to lock. The door swung open, revealing Gwen holding a bag, looking like she had just been found with the

body.

"Gwen? I thought you were suspended."

Mandy was wearing another crop top and high-waisted jeans. Gwen hadn't worn jeans since the fifth grade; she never found a way to feel comfortable in them. But when Mandy wore jeans, she looked grown up and had enough confidence to seem like she was. Gwen watched as Mandy's eyes went from Gwen's face down to her blood-soaked sleeves. Mandy's eyes widened, and her mouth started to drop. She took one step towards the door, one that would lead to people finding Clarissa and Gwen getting in trouble.

Gwen left her own body and was suddenly watching another person make her decisions, protecting her. This person grabbed the knife, dug it into Mandy, and dragged it across her stomach in between where her shirt ended and pants began. The line on her stomach started growing, the rich maroon color spreading across her torso.

Unlike Clarissa, Mandy didn't immediately start screaming; it could have been due to stress, it could have also been the fact that after slicing her stomach open, the person also cut her throat; they didn't want her yelling for help. Mandy grabbed at her neck, trying to keep the pieces of her skin together. As more blood poured out of her stomach and pulled her small intestine with it, Mandy attempted a scream and weakly pawed at her belly button. She tried shoveling everything back in, but her arms gave up, eventually retreating to her sides while she slunk to the tile.

Mandy's head started falling backward, the wound gaining even more surface area. Gwen returned to her body just in time to stop her shoes from soaking up too much blood. She stepped out of the puddle and grabbed a bunch of paper towels

from the dispenser. She threw them onto the floor next to Mandy, stepped on them, and got slightly closer. She reached further into Mandy's stomach and pulled out more of her small intestine. Gwen held onto the handle of the knife while she whipped it behind her, hoping some of the blood would fly off, making it easier to cut into Mandy's guts. She took a piece of the small intestine; maybe now Gwen would be able to wear crop tops. She put the piece into her backpack and shoved the knife back into her pocket, pleasantly surprised by how little blood was on her this time.

Gwen backed out of the bathroom just in time for the bell to ring. Her palms got sweaty as she looked for an escape plan. There was an empty classroom next to the bathroom, the perfect place to hide out for a moment. Gwen opened the door, surprised when a voice greeted her.

"You're supposed to be on house arrest, psycho." Mariah Jones looked up from her test tubes and beakers. It was getting too convenient.

"Mariah? What are you doing here?" Gwen reached into her pocket and gripped the knife.

"I'm making up a lab. I'm also allowed to be here. I didn't cut someone's hair like an obsessed creep." She smirked and went back to her work, unaware just how deep her words cut. Gwen wanted to show her just how deep.

Gwen walked towards the table, and Mariah took a step back. "Wait, did you get your hair done exactly like Abby's? Oh god, that's pathetic."

One summer, Mariah came back to school with a smaller nose. Gwen never thought it was too big before; she liked the fact that Mariah's nose resembled hers, but when Mariah changed it, Gwen thought maybe she should change her's too.

The right corner of Gwen's mouth rose. "You have a great nose."

Mariah's eyebrow raised, and Gwen noticed her reaching for her phone; that couldn't happen. Gwen ran around the table towards Mariah. Mariah caught on quickly and started running for the door, but Gwen was too fast. She pulled Mariah backward and threw her onto the floor. With Mariah on the floor, Gwen got on top of her and pinned her down with her knees and an arm. She got Mariah to squirm less but couldn't completely stop her; Mariah was definitely the strongest of her friends.

Gwen took her free arm, grabbed the knife, and pressed it against Mariah's nose. Mariah started screaming, but the sound was being drowned out by the noise of their peers. Gwen took the other arm off of Mariah, using just her knees to pin her down. She placed one hand on top of the other and pressed. The knife was halfway through Mariah's nose when Mariah passed out. Gwen was shocked by how hard cartilage truly was. A flood of fluids gushed from the hole in Mariah's face. Gwen got off of her, put the nose in her bag, and got lost in the crowd.

The final bell was about to ring, signifying the end of the day. Gwen found herself back in the locker room, looking for the girl with beautiful blue eyes. Not only was Abigail the last one on the gym floor, but she was always the last one out. She had to make sure her hair looked perfect and would even change into an entirely new outfit. Gwen stood behind her, the knife out and to her side. Gwen always wanted blue eyes. Abigail had the iciest blue eyes; she even had nice teeth and thin eyebrows.

Gwen had a plan; it was just a matter of what exactly she wanted.

Connect with Jessica Daniliuk

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10

Author Interview w/ Eduardo J. Aleman

1. Tell us a bit about yourself. What sort of things do you enjoy doing outside of writing?

Travelling with my family is probably what I enjoy most. We love discovering places that combine culture, great food, and plenty of adventure — and we try to go somewhere meaningful at least once a year. Most recently we explored Copenhagen, which turned out to be a perfect setting to experience the magical world of Hans Christian Andersen, stroll through Tivoli Gardens, try Nordic specialties, and — of course — visit the home of LEGO. The year before, we were in Asia exploring Hong Kong, Vietnam, and Thailand. Every trip brings something unexpected, and those experiences often find their way into my writing in one way or another.

2. What is your most recent book about?

Hopping for Happiness is a practical self-help book that actually feels doable — which was the whole point. It started from a very personal place. As a father of two wonderful children, I found myself constantly asking whether the decisions I was making for them were the right ones. I was focused on all the

right things: quality education, learning languages, healthy habits, exercise, good sleep. But the ultimate goal — happiness — felt impossible to measure. How would I know if I was doing it right? How could I make sure my decisions were leading somewhere meaningful?

The honest answer is: I can't guarantee it. But I realized I needed a compass — a framework that could help me navigate those decisions with intention, and adjust course when something wasn't working. That's what the book offers: a structured, thoughtful approach to decision-making in the pursuit of a happier life, grounded in my years as a strategy consultant in Latin America and tested in the most demanding environment I know — parenthood.

3. If there was someone famous that you would recommend to read your book, who would it be?

Jorge Luis Borges was a formative influence for me growing up. I encountered his work during high school, and it completely changed how I thought about storytelling — about surrealism, about layering meaning into language. After reading his anthology, I started exploring Dalí, and my ambition became to transmit those same feelings through words rather than images. Those early prose-poems eventually became the foundation for my fantasy novella, The Thousandfold Tide.

But there's a funny story behind that book: I showed my poems to my ten-year-old daughter, and she told me she didn't understand them. That moment was the spark. Rather than simplify the poems, I channelled the emotions and imagery behind them into a world she — and readers everywhere — could actually enter and experience. So in a way, she was the first editorial voice that shaped the book. I'd love to know what Borges would make of that process — turning surrealist poetry

into an accessible YA fantasy.

4. Do you have a favourite spot you like to sit and write?

It's less about a place and more about a particular state of mind — that threshold between wakefulness and sleep, when the mind is loose enough to wander but still present enough to catch something. Surrealist painters chased their oneiric visions and tried to fix them onto canvas; I try to do something similar with language.

That said, inspiration doesn't always wait for the right moment. Sometimes a specific song or a sudden memory will trigger something, and when that happens, I reach for whatever is closest — a piece of paper, a notes app on my phone. The important thing is not to let it slip.

5. Did you experience any form of writer's block while working on this piece? If so, what tips do you have for other authors that are struggling with writer's block?

For The Thousandfold Tide, not really. It emerged organically from revisiting and reconnecting with my old poems — there was already an emotional engine running.

Hopping for Happiness was a different story. It took ages, because it started as a deeply personal quest without a clear ending in sight. I knew the decision-making framework I wanted to share — the one I had developed during my years as a strategy consultant in Latin America — but translating it into something readers could truly internalize proved to be harder than expected. At a certain point I realized that words alone weren't enough. I needed to build something people could interact with.

So I learned vibe coding and developed an app called Happier Decisions, designed to complement the book and let readers actually play with the framework rather than just read about

it. In a way, the writer's block became a product. My advice to other authors: if you're stuck, ask yourself whether the format is the problem. Sometimes the idea needs a different vessel.

6. What time of day is most productive for you to write?

The late evening, once the house is quiet — usually from around 10 PM to midnight. There's something about that particular silence that opens things up. I try to set a hard stop at midnight, and if I haven't finished a thought, I make sure to leave as many notes as possible so I can pick it back up the following day without losing the thread.

7. When you are writing, what are you typically listening to in the background? Silence? Favourite playlist? Podcast?

Music, always. I was a teenager in the nineties, so my taste is a bit of a time capsule — grunge, alternative, hard rock — but I also love jazz and bossa nova, which pull in a completely different emotional direction. Over time I've built a playlist I call Hidden Gems: a collection of songs I love that don't always get the attention they deserve.

A few favourites from it: Summertime by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, Fly Me to the Moon as interpreted by Sinatra and Jobim, but also 4th of July by Soundgarden and Vasoline by Stone Temple Pilots. It's an eclectic mix, but the emotional range of it maps closely to the different moods I write in.

8. Is there a particular scene or part in your book that you are incredibly proud of?

In The Thousandfold Tide, I'm particularly drawn to a literary technique I think of as "numeración infinita" — a kind of infinite enumeration, where you over-describe a feeling, an image, or a scene, layering detail upon detail in order to transport the reader completely into the emotional space you had in mind when you wrote it.

If I had to choose one passage I'm proud of, this would be in the top ten: "The water was still. Too still. And somewhere beneath it, something older than memory turned again — patient, inexorable, already certain she would come. She always did."

There's something in the rhythm of those sentences — the compression, the inevitability — that I feel captures the spirit of the whole book.

Follow and Connect with Eduardo J. Aleman

About

Eduardo J. Aleman writes practical self-help tools for 2 a.m. decisions (Hopping for Happiness with its Happier Decisions companion app) and lyrical YA fantasy that lingers like ocean mist (The Thousandfold Tide). Where self development meets fantasy.

Devoted family man who cherishes every moment spent with his loving wife and their two children. An avid traveler, he thrives on exploring new destinations, where he indulges his passion for grunge and jazz music, often discovering hidden gems in local scenes. His adventures are incomplete without a culinary quest, as he roams the world in search of delicious, authentic foods that tell stories of their origins. Whether hiking through European Alps, savoring street eats in Asia, or jamming to grunge classics or jazz beats on a road trip, Eduardo's life is a vibrant blend of professional excellence and personal joy.

He holds an MBA, an MSc in Economics and Finance, and a background as a Production Engineer, Eduardo has further sharpened his expertise with executive education from the

Wharton School. Speaking fluent Spanish, German, and English (plus decent Portuguese). A true global native, he handles any cultural context like a seasoned diplomat, drawing on life in Venezuela, the US, England, Germany, Singapore and Switzerland.

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11

Prey (Melissa Dennison, UK)

The smell of freshly baked pizza wafts on the warm summer air. Dance music is oozing from nightclubs.

I feel uneasy alone at night. I walk confidently, briskly, like a prey animal advertising their fitness. My footsteps are deafening as I walk across the plaza. Reaching the pedestrian crossing, my hands shake as I press the button.

All around, people are pouring out of clubs and bars, laughing and stumbling into taxis. I recollect a back seat; I am in my black dress. My friend is giving the driver my address. I am waving as the taxi drives off.

Did I get home? When I try to remember all I see is void. My heart is beating fast; I can't catch a breath. Calm down, I tell myself, remember what the doctor told you. I feel for the rubber band on my wrist. But it's not there. How did I lose it? When? I am anxious and confused. It's then I notice that I am still wearing the black dress.

The right side of my neck begins to itch. Must be the heat. I get rashes all the time. Allergies. I automatically scratch and feel two raised lumps. Strange. I don't remember them being

there before. They feel sore and angry.

I could murder a drink right now. Flashback: I see a face. *His face*. At the bar, he smiles as he sits down next to me. I can tell my friends are jealous. When he looks at me it's like there is no-one else in the room.

I don't remember much after that.

I snap out of my reverie as I notice a group of men ahead of me, talking and laughing. They smell of beer, cheap aftershave, sweat and something else...something sweet...i struggle to identify this. Then it dawns on me, it's blood. My pace picks up speed, every sense is heightening. I am licking my lips, salivating with anticipation. I am the hunter not the hunted.

Follow and Connect With Melissa Dennison

About

Melissa Dennison is a writer of flash fiction, short stories and shorter poems, namely haiku. Her stories are shaped by her interest in the natural world, conservation, folk lore, mythology and fairy tales.

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12

Author Interview w/ Nana Hoshiko

1. **Tell me about yourself. What do you like to do outside of writing. What is a day in the life like for you?**

- My name is Nana Hoshiko, and I'm a writer and artist. Outside of writing, I love spending time with my family and pets. I'm a huge cat lover and care for a colony of feral cats—they're my babies, and I always make sure they have a safe place with me. I'm naturally very creative, even outside of writing.
- I love collecting little treasures from nature, practicing Oshibana, making jewelry, and preserving moths and butterflies after their life cycle. I also enjoy going to shoegaze concerts, reading manga, and reading in general.
- Some of my biggest inspirations are Ellen Hopkins, Ai Yazawa, and Satoshi Kon. Most days for me are a mix of writing, creating art, caring for animals, and finding inspiration in everyday life.

2. What inspired your first novel? What was the thing that got you into writing in the first place?

- I've been writing for as long as I can remember—long before my frontal lobe fully developed . I was a kid with a huge imagination, and my family always noticed signs of creativity in me from a very young age.
- My first serious project was my comic Star Ring, which ran from 2017–2020. The inspiration behind it was honestly a mix of boredom, imagination, and a strong desire to create something of my own. I'm incredibly thankful for it, because without Star Ring, I probably wouldn't still be creating today.
- I really started taking my work seriously after entering Star Ring into the International Medibang Contest. Even though we didn't win, the comic reached around 19k views, and it was such an exciting experience. I'll always be grateful for spaces that give indie creators a chance to be seen.

3. How do you come up with characters? Are they spontaneous or meticulously planned?

- I'd say my characters begin with observation first, and then become meticulously planned over time. For me, character creation goes far beyond personality templates or Enneagram types..it's about observing real behavior, body language, emotions, and the way people interact with the world around them.
- I take those observations and place them into the world I've created, then explore them through scenes and dialogue with other characters until they naturally find their place

in the story. Every character I write has a purpose, even the smaller ones.

4. What are some of your favorite genres to read? Are there any books you'd recommend to first time readers or people looking for something new?

- My favorite genre to read is psychological thriller, without a doubt. I love stories that explore the human mind and emotions in a really intense way. I'm also a huge fan of Ellen Hopkins...I mention her constantly. Her raw storytelling and free verse writing style have always inspired me.
- For anyone looking for something new, I'd definitely recommend checking out Ellen Hopkins, especially if you enjoy emotional, honest storytelling. I also love creators like Ai Yazawa and Satoshi Kon for the way they tell deeply human and visually memorable stories.

5. What's the most difficult thing about being a writer?

- One of the most difficult things about being a writer is getting past the mindset that you have to start perfectly at chapter one. Sometimes the best ideas come from scenes in the middle or even the ending first. Dialogue can also be challenging, along with the constant pressure to keep creating new ideas.
- I've found that my stories become much stronger when I know the ending before the beginning. Once I understand where the characters are ultimately going, it becomes easier to build the emotional journey that leads them there.

6. What is your process to completing a novel from outline to final product?

- My process changes with every project, so I don't really have one strict formula. Usually, I start with characters and emotional themes first, then build the story around them until everything naturally falls into place.

7. What's the most unhinged thing you've written in your novel? Don't worry, we don't judge here.

- To pinpoint one specific scene as "unhinged" would probably take too long. I tend to explore themes that many people are uncomfortable with, and most of my work tells raw, emotional stories centered around subjects people don't always openly discuss. I write about addiction, mental health, identity, grief, obsession, things that exist quietly in people's lives but are often hidden away.
- Not because these topics are inherently terrible, but because they can make people uncomfortable. That discomfort is human, and I think there's beauty in confronting it honestly. I've never been interested in writing polished versions of humanity. I want my stories to feel real, intimate, and sometimes unsettling in the way real emotions are.

8. What's one thing about being a writer that absolutely drives you up the wall?

- Honestly, self-doubt. I think a lot of writers, myself included, quietly battle the feeling that what they're creating will never fully match the vision in their head.

9. What does being a successful writer look like for you? What type of life do you want to live as a writer?

- Success to me is having readers truly indulge in my work and understand it on a deeper level. Before every book, I always ask myself a question inspired by Abbie Emmons: What is the truth I want to scream from the rooftops? Once I find that truth, the story becomes meaningful to me.
- I think if that truth reaches even one reader, if they feel seen, understood, or emotionally connected through my work, then I've succeeded as a writer. That kind of connection is what would make this life worth living for me.

10. Describe your writing journey. If you had to write a story centered around it, do you think you could pull it off?

- Let's just say my genre of choice would easily match the story of my life. My writing journey has been emotional, unpredictable, and deeply personal, which is probably why I'm so drawn to psychological and raw storytelling in the first place.
- I think I could pull it off, honestly. Writing has always been the way I process the world around me. A lot of the emotions, themes, and questions in my work come from real experiences, just transformed through fiction.

Follow and Connect with Natalie Maroukis

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13

A Winter's Wrath (David O'Mahony)

Five graves on the hillside.

That was all that was left of them. A wife, two sons, two daughters. Hopes and dreams covered in soil and stone, the promise of lives barely started snuffed out by malice and fear.

Five graves on the hillside.

They hadn't even allowed Oscar to bury them on the top of the hill, where they could watch over the town for eternity, or on the east side where they could have the sun on their faces. No, they lay near the base in the damp southwest, not even looking directly at sunset.

Five graves on the hillside.

Oscar had dug them himself through tears and hate beneath the eyes of his tormentors. The village depended on hot springs to keep life going in the dead of winter, and to maintain the sweat lodges on the hill brought to them by Irish slaves two generations before that helped them through illness and cold alike.

The springs were his only helper now; the heat had kept the soil pliable enough to work with even as the rest of the hillside

was caked with ice and snow. The seven elders, clad in red robes trimmed with green and inlaid with tiny silver bells that jingled as they walked, had surrounded him as he laboured to break through the cold, hard ground. It was a bright day beneath the blazing star that had erupted three nights before and was as bright in day as darkness. It was a glorious day, and yet Matthew felt nothing glorious about this. The elders had called it justice. Matthew, who had been Ongar in his childhood before his bath at the hands of the Jesus-man, saw nothing just about what they had done. What he had failed to prevent happening.

The Cross had come slowly, fjord by fjord and valley by valley. The first Christians had been brought as slaves from Ireland, strange, adze-headed creatures of ferocious will and ability to speak florid poetry. They spoke of a God of the desert, a triple God who could love as deeply as Freya and scourge as powerfully as Odin. They could not be broken, the grandfathers told Matthew's generation as children. They could not be broken.

They had died out, in time. Accepted death as if it were a thing of nothing, braver in the face of the axe and raiders than many a thrall. So did they lay the seeds of the present day, of a slow and peaceful conversion where the old temples were washed clean and adorned with stone crosses, where the old gods were driven from their safe places in the hearts of the people and exiled to the rough ground, broken soil, blackest caves.

Five graves on the hillside.

That was all that remained of those who held wholly to the old ways. Matthew dropped his head to his chest and let a tear fall as he mouthed a prayer for their souls.

He wasn't praying for them, though. Not really. He was praying for himself and all those on the council in Altfjord who

had heard the word of the itinerant preacher Klaus.

He had burnt out his own eyes so as not to be polluted by visions of the temporal world. His nine deer-clad acolytes followed him as he travelled across the snow-blasted country in a rough hewn sled, bringing hemp sacks of food and far-off luxuries like pepper to villages that would seldom see such things. With their attention caught by gifts, his chief disciple, the bruising hulk

Rudolf, whipped people into a frenzy as Klaus demanded the last pockets of the old ways be rooted out and burnt as an offering for his God from over the sea. A gift to mark the birth of God's son, to show his mastery over Yule and the disir, the goddesses and spirits worshipped by their ancestors who were still said to dwell in damp wooded places.

Kings would not have allowed it. But the kings of Norway had no power here. Altfjord, so far north and west, was rough land remote from any seat of power. Only God wanted it.

And so the seven elders and a gaggle of followers had dragged Oscar's family out of their turf home on the lakeside, and strung them up by the ankles, and whipped them, and crucified them when they prayed to Thor instead of Jesus. Even Matthew, a kind man who had seen Oscar's wife Dagmar heal the poor and rich alike with herbs and potions, had been swept up by the bloodlust, buoyed by the absolute self assurance of the group.

"Please, Ongar," she had said to him, knocked to her knees and left eye swelling with blood. "Please. We have done nothing wrong."

He had loved her since they were children. He still did, even after she had chosen Oscar, that preternaturally strong whippet of a man who like the shamans of old would disappear into the forest to worship the ancient gods with hunting and prayer.

"I'm sorry," Matthew whispered, kissing her on the cheek before nodding to two others to take her away. "It's for your own good. You'll be rewarded in the next life."

It was a righteous cause, they said. They were doing God's work, they said.

They kept saying that, as if by saying it over and over they could convince themselves that they were in the right.

It was only when they killed the baby that they had started to falter, despite the fire in Klaus's voice as he praised them for freeing a child of a lifetime of corruption.

They could have thrown the corpses in the clay pits two miles hence, with the lepers and the unclean. But to do such a thing to an infant seemed like an abomination to even Bodmar, the most zealous of them, the one who had first invited the corpulent white-beared Klaus to their wilderness. They paused, the mob dispersing and milling around unsure what to do next.

A man's cry tore the silence apart. Matthew had never heard a man scream like that. It sounded like his soul was dying.

Fourteen men it took to bring Oscar down. His axe cut through the first three like a scythe through wheat. The fourth died choking on his own blood from a single punch to the face. Two more were maimed beyond recognition before a blow to the head slowed Oscar but he was still a flurry of punches and kicks. "Spare him, spare his miserable life," bellowed Klaus. "God has a plan for this heathen creature." They swamped him then and won only with the cost of blood and broken bones.

Bodmar led the restrained man away. Oscar, so serious and grown up even while a child alongside Matthew and Dagmar, sobbed with more pain than any many should have to bear. Hesitantly, Matthew reached out to comfort his friend – and in truth he loved Oscar still as a brother – but a white-haired elderman,

Asger, slapped it away, glaring at the broad-shouldered younger man. "Stick to the task," he said through gritted teeth.

Love one another, that was Christ's commandment. Matthew's learning had been haphazard, but that lesson had stuck with him. Yet they had shown no love here, and Matthew fell behind the boisterous, triumphant gang of jailers as his heart sank at the thought that Christ would cast him into hell for his part in this corrupt praise of his birth.

Five graves on the hillside.

They made Oscar dig them. Said it was a last penance. He spat at Bodmar's feet. "I need nothing from your God," he hissed as the snow began to float down gently. Down and down it drifted as he dug five shallow pits. Tenderly, he raised the soil and stones into five little barrows for five innocent souls.

With the last rays of sunlight, he fell to his knees and closed his eyes, enjoying one final moment of peace.

He didn't resist as Asger, village chief in all but name, looped the rope around his neck, and he said nothing as they dragged him half a mile down the slippery broken path toward the village. Klaus's acolytes had gone on ahead. It was not an impressive place. Set on a lakeside but within sight of the sea, it was a disjointed huddle of wood, stone, and turf huts clustered around a low-slung building that functioned as part guest house, part communal hall. They had decided years ago to do away with having a chief, trusting instead in a council of seven drawn from the people.

Life revolved around a crude semi-circle of packed gravel and cobbles in front of the hall. In the centre of this marketplace, where in happier days fish, meat, and the other trappings of daily life changed hands, stood a rude pyre made of a fallen oak trunk and piles of broken planks of wild cherry. They lashed

him to it, jeering and leering in their stinking furs and shredded trousers as they leapt about barefoot even in the frigid cold.

"Come, come brothers and sisters," bellowed Klaus from his sled. "Watch how God makes the heathen pure. Watch how God sets the sinner free."

The villagers, creeping out of their huts to join those who had come in from the broad countryside, gathered in a huddled mass, a congregation before an altar of horror. They had seen executions before. Beheadings, enforced gorging on mistletoe, a bloody eagle. But always for crimes, true crimes. Murder, rape, sedition. Never had the crime been to be a father, a husband, a follower of traditions older than the desert God who had supplanted them. The devout basked in a demonstration of their militant faith. The rest, dispassionate believers for the most part, wondered if some day the mob would come for them.

Oscar didn't flinch when the acolytes poured whale fat on the timber and threw the first torch onto it. He didn't cry out as the flames licked his legs, red and green sparks rising around him and flying into the darkening sky. He just stared at them, the laughing disciples of pain as they rang their bells and sang in praise of their Lord. He stared at them until the flames grew high enough to blot him out. The acolytes cheered as one. The villagers remained silent, hands covering their mouths.

One by one they melted away as the skies rumbled, Thor welcoming his last follower to Valhalla perhaps. The snow was coming down in sheets now, great gobbets of ice that hissed and spat as it hit the dampening fires, beating them down until all that was left was a charred lumpen mess.

"Look at how merciful God is," yelled Klaus, "look how the rust of sin is burnt away in honour of our saviour's birth!" Then he gestured imperiously for his followers to bring him indoors.

Even prophets liked their modest comforts from time to time.

That night, in the dark and smokey hall, they feasted. Even the lukewarm among them thawed and pretended, at least for a time, that Oscar's immolation was just something from a dark story. So they turned to food and drink and song to chase the memory away. Slabs of fresh beef from cattle slaughtered that morning to avoid feeding them through winter; roasted turnips and onions flavoured with wild garlic; fish and nettle soup; great hunks of bread broken roughly in callused hands; bowls of berries long frozen in the snow; flagons of mead spiced until sweet and aromatic with juniper. There would be several nights of this revelry, and while it would stretch their winter stores it was a time of celebration that usually kept the village's morale up as it faced through the hardest part of the season. The visitors laughed and sang but the merriment felt forced. Five of the village elders sat close to the fires, picking at their plates without tasting anything. The other two, Sigurd and Ivar, were on either side of Klaus, laughing uproariously like braying donkeys.

"We did what had to be done," said Asger eventually. He had travelled widely in his youth, raiding and trading across Europe before settling in the quiet north. He could speak and read three languages. Had he lived in sunnier climes he would have been considered a philosopher. "All he had to do was put on a mask and go to church with the rest of us. But a real pagan can never be reasoned with." He swigged from a wooden tankard, savouring the mead on his tongue.

"Did we try, though?" asked Matthew eventually, eyes burning from smoke and regret. "Did we really try?"

Asger scoffed and the others nodded their heads one after the other in mimicry. "You're too soft, Matthew," Bodmar said,

laughing. "The meek will inherit the earth, true enough, but it's not time to be meek just yet. Now is the time for hard men."

"Men don't kill women and children," spat Matthew. "Not real men."

Bodmar leaped to his feet, teeth bared and face wrinkled with rage. "You fucking coward!"

Matthew rose slowly, lips tight and grim. "Come on, then," he said softly. "Show me what a real man is like."

Bodmar scrabbled at his belt, looking for a dagger that was hanging on a peg in his home. Matthew leapt over the embers, fists clenched. Asger, Ragnar, and Aebbe the Saxon jumped to hold them apart. "Enough, Bodmar, enough," they said through gritted teeth as they strained against Matthew's great strength. Bodmar was big, but Matthew was bigger.

He could smell the honey on Bodmar's breath, the garlic on his sweat. He could have taken him down with one punch, and in his youth wouldn't have hesitated. But he was a father now and he had sworn oaths to be a good upstanding Christian, and that stayed his hand.

"I didn't see you try to stop anyone, you fucking hypocrite," said Bodmar, spitting in Matthew's face.

The door crashed open, a chill wind whipping through the hall as a white-faced child of about seven bundled in red and blue collapsed in.

"I think that's your lad," Ragnar said, tapping Matthew on the arm. Barely able to tear his glare away from the simmering Bodmar, Matthew turned slowly to see his son Peter stagger toward him, barely able to hold his head up. He scooped the child up a second before he fell. His eyes were wide and he was shivering despite his heavy clothing. "Papa. Papa," he whispered.

"What is it son?"

"There's something outside."

"What? Speak up, lad."

The room had fallen silent and a concerned group was clustering around the two of them. Could it be a fever? A new plague? Why was the child so clammy and cold? The whispers ran around the room like lightning even as Matthew waved away their concerns. "Come on, Peter," he said, leaning in close.

"It's outside, papa. In the fire."

Matthew and Ragnar exchanged a startled look as Matthew's wife Alva rushed in to take the child. "Get him home," said Matthew as he pulled his robe tighter and grabbed the nearest torch to go back into the cold.

It was pitch black apart from the flickering light of a few torches barely holding their own against the sting of the winter breeze. They crunched through the snow, following the boy's footprints, which were already filling in with fresh snow. He had been running, judging by the length of the strides, and running hard.

They moved slowly, Matthew and Ragnar in the front and half a dozen hangers on some ten feet behind. Matthew's breath chilled instantly on his moustache and he wished he'd retrieved a knife, or a club, or something that he could just hold as a weapon. His heart hammered and he had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, the sort of feeling where you know, you just *know*, that something very wrong has happened.

The tiny footprints merged suddenly into a frantic mess of a pit. "He fell here," said Ragnar. "Did somebody push him?"

"There are no other footprints," said Matthew, peering into the gloom before holding his hand up abruptly. "Wait," he whispered. "What's that?"

Slowly, ever so slowly, he raised the torch up to try and throw back the dark.

The remains of the pyre had already been partially covered by snow drifts. The smell of cherry wood and fire caught in the back of his nose and throat. Fire and... something else.

He lifted the torch a fraction higher. And something in the dark *moved*.

A chaotic screech tore his innard apart and he clapped hands to his head as it felt close to bursting from the pressure. A black thing rose from the pyre, an entity of pure night that rippled like smoke in the torchlight and glared at him with fire-gold eyes. A cold wash of terror came over him as he felt all his greatest fears laid bare before them. The thing swept at him, ragged and enraged, a creature from the depths of nightmares fiercer than anything the gods and heroes of old had ever fought. It blasted him to the ground and his robe ignited. Rolling in the snow to put out the flames he could do nothing as it caught Ragnar in the face with a wisp of smoke and the flesh bubbled and roiled and melted from his bones in streaks as if clawed by human fingers.

The entity screeched again, and the acolytes scattered shrieking. Matthew dived to catch Ragnar as his knees gave way from the pain and when he looked up the thing had gone, melted into a night sky as black as it was.

"What is happening, what is happening?" slurred Klaus, his wild white beard stained with berry juice and breadcrumbs.

"Attacked, the men were attacked," said one of the villagers.

"Attacked? By who?"

"A black cloud."

"Has your brain gone soft, child?"

"He speaks true," said Matthew, his ears ringing and chest

howling in pain from his burnt clothes. Gooseflesh was rising all over him; as the frenzy of what happened faded he realised he was shirtless. "A cloud full of hate and fire. It's destroyed Ragnar," and he pointed at the barely breathing fallen man. "It was like a son of Muspelheim."

Klaus choked back a bitter laugh. "Pagan superstition. I thought better of you than to talk of devils of old."

"And yet it reached out and touched me, touched Ragnar, and I felt it. I've never felt God. But that... that thing I did feel. It was pure hate."

"Blasphemy. Where has it gone, then, this cloud? Blown away in the wind?"

"I don't know, I don't know," Matthew said, teeth beginning to chatter and head spinning. "Don't know, don't know, don't–"

And then night fell for him everywhere, and he remembered nothing until he woke three days later in his own bed, his hands and chest coated with a grey green paste of herbs. Alva forced him to sit slightly, enough that he didn't choke when she touched the cup to his lips. It was all he could do to not grab it from her hands and pour it down his throat in one. But he was too weak, and the pain washed over him like a stormy wave on the deep sea, and he blacked out again for a few moments.

"Ragnar," he said suddenly as his eyes popped open. "Ragnar."

"Ragnar is alive," said Alva in clipped tones. "They have taken him south to the monastery. But it is a long journey and he is very weak." She laughed bitterly. "If there had been somebody closer who was skilled in healing and generous in their care, perhaps he would survive."

"Dag–" And he fell silent at the bitter memory of what he had

been a part of. "Peter," he blurted. "Where is Peter?"

"Oh, you remember your son now? And the first word from you is that bastard Ragnar?" She blew air through pursed lips. "Your son is well. Or as well as can be expected."

"He is unhurt?"

"Yes. Frightened. He cries in his sleep."

"He was lucky it missed him."

Alva arched an eyebrow and bit the inside of her lip. "It looked at him, he says. Stared right at him. And then it said his *name*."

Matthew boosted himself up with his elbow. "His name?"

"Yes. It spoke with Oscar's voice, he says."

"What did it say?"

Alva pulled at her braid while staring into the wall. "It said: 'Behold, I am coming, and my reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done'. Do you know what that means?"

Matthew swallowed hard. "Those words. I know them." He gestured to a sideboard with his chin. "The book, bring me the book."

Shaking her head wearily Alva retrieved the little rough-bound thing. It had been put together by one of Klaus' more learned disciples who came through from time to time to teach some of the villagers to read. The book was full of psalms and parables and angry things. Battered from travel and use, there was one gathering of leaves that stood out. It was a book of prophecy, the Revelation of John. It told of judgement and damnation, punishment and reward. Matthew knew the stories but had only learned to read some of them. He flicked over the pages, his finger hovering over the tiny, cramped script as he hunted for the words he knew he had heard before.

"Here," he said at last, tapping the page and sweating from

the effort of searching for it. "Here it is."

"You know these scratchings mean nothing to me," said Alva, glancing at it and pushing it away. "Klaus and the others like him, they do not want women to learn their meanings."

Matthew furrowed a brow at how right she was and at the effort of recalling the explanation of the words he had been given. "It, uh, it is a promise by Jesus. He will return to give everyone what they deserve. The good... and the bad."

Alva threw her head back and laughed. "Gifts for good deeds. Well this is a very happy *Cristesmæsse*." Her mother had been brought from England. "Christmas," that's what they called this time of year there, though Matthew had never taken to the word. Alva kept laughing as she got up to check on Peter, fretting in his corner, and Matthew sank back on his rush pillow in stunned silence. How could a pagan know the words of Jesus better than a Christian? Was he being cursed by having his own faith turned against him? The thoughts swirled and gnawed at him until he drifted off into a fretful, dreamless sleep long after Alva and Peter had drifted off near the hearth.

*****

A hammering on the door woke all three of them with a start. Alva unlatched it to find a sweating Aebbe breathing clouds of steam in the dawn light. They exchanged a few short words in the Saxon tongue, both of them among the few descendants of English captives who still spoke it. Aebbe looked toward Matthew, who was slowly lifting his legs out of bed. Alva sighed and nodded.

Crossing the room the hook a hand under Matthew's arm, she helped until he could support himself against the doorframe. He was milk white but his hands felt more pliable today. "What's happened?"

"You need to come. The rest of the elders have already gathered."

Matthew gestured weakly for Alva to help him haul a heavy coat on. He was somehow still wearing his trousers from the other night. "But what's happened?"

Aebbe shook his head. "You'll see. You need to see."

Matthew and Alva always kept some shovels or poles outside the door to clear snow or mud, and one became his walking stick now. Aebbe hovered, half-expecting Matthew to fall with the slightest obstacle but the wounded man gritted his teeth and pushed on. His house was set back into some trees on a plot of farm land not far from the water. It usually took only a few brisk paces to travel from his door to his favourite fishing spot, but it might as well have been on the other side of the world. Breathing hard and sweating uncontrollably despite an unforgivable thirst, he pulled himself forward one brutal step at a time until the lake came into view.

Five of the elders were at the shoreline, talking in hushed tones. About twenty feet from shore was a small outcrop. The children just called it the Rock, and it was their landmark for swimming races in summer. Matthew had courted Alva on swims out there in the days after it became obvious Dagmar's heart was set on Oscar. He had enjoyed sitting out there, pretending the rest of the world couldn't get to them.

Now, impaled on a stump of hard black rock that hadn't been there when they'd murdered Oscar, was the corpse of a man.

His body arched and broken right through the spine and stomach, face coated with frozen blood, Bodmar hung there with flecks of frost on his robes and hair, head thrown back and eyes staring vacantly at the sky. Chunks of ice floated in the water, as if they had been melted and broken just a short time

ago.

"Mother of Christ," whispered Matthew as the others made way to let him through. "What is this?"

"Vengeance," said Asger, hands clasped in front of him while he looked across to the far side of the lake. "We thought were doing the right thing, the just thing by cleansing the old ways. But I fear God is angry with us."

"No," said Matthew, the old stories of his youth running wild in his mind. "Perhaps God was never here."

"Don't say that near Klaus," snapped Sigurd.

"Well you have his ear, brown-noser," said Rollo, Bodmar's brother, his voice hoarse and eyes red with tears. He was not one of the elders but often joined them in their work.

"Do you want to end up like Oscar and his family?" asked Sigurd.

Ivar shushed them all and held a hand up, gesturing with a thumb to the path behind him. Rustling through the leaves were Klaus and three of his acolytes, one of them leading the old man safely over fallen branches and half-hidden stones. Rudolf was at his ear, quietly describing everything. The old man was shaking his head in exasperation. "Who else knows about this," he called out, his voice subdued.

"None that we know of," said Asger. "I saw it myself first. The rest of the village has been indoors so far, but we won't have much longer."

"Where did that black rock come from?" asked Ivar. "It looks like it's shot out of the ground itself."

"Not the priority. We need a boat, Ivar, you and Aebbe hop to it and get that little one over there." Asger waved a hand at a rickety little thing that was typically shared by some of the children and younger adolescents to fetch each other from the

Rock.

"I don't think it'll hold much weight," said Ivar.

"No time. Go, before anybody else is up or the water freezes over again."

Ivar and Aebbe, both fine, robust men close to six feet in height, pushed the thing out and winced at the cold while they waded out. The lake got very deep close to the Rock and it was no time of year for a swim. Watching them labour into the boat and row gingerly out, Matthew wondered just what sort of curse they had brought upon themselves. His throat dried and his breath caught as a little voice in his mind told him not even God would protect them from this. *I will give to each person according to what they have done*.

The boat crashed up on a flat part of the Rock, the only place it could land and avoid drifting away. Ivar hobbled out and held it in place while Aebbe followed. The Rock was wide enough that perhaps half a dozen grown men could lie on it. They picked their way over the crags, watching for patches of ice.

The black stump was about chest height, with about a foot of ragged stone impaled through the corpse. Aebbe, always the more pious though far from ordained, made the sign of the cross over the body and mouthed a scrap of prayer. It sounded like an apology, Matthew thought.

The two men looked at one another for a moment, Ivar gesturing for Aebbe to push from beneath while he lifted from above. Aebbe shrugged and Ivar braced himself on a bit of rock slightly higher than the rest. "One, two, three," he said and they tried to hoist the body off.

The stump collapsed into dust and Bodmar's body crashed onto the Rock, the bones cracking loudly. Ivar slipped and fell into the water with a surprised yelp, missing Aebbe's hand by

inches. The dust formed a cloud that screeched and boiled with rage until it formed the shape of a gargantuan man floating above the water, two ragged dragon's wings beating slowly behind him. The burning amber eyes marked them all one by one. As they fell on Matthew the sky darkened and rippled and he was propelled up and out into a world of shadow. His head, why did it hurt so much? Why was the world off kilter? As if looking through a glass darkly, he found himself hanging upside down on a gibbet of obsidian. Was that his house? It was on fire.

The screams, the screams...

Two fiery shapes, one larger than the other, staggered out of the blaze and collapsed in front of the gibbet. Their faces melted and distorted and remade themselves and melted again.

"Alva! Peter!"

They couldn't hear him. But the vast goat-legged demon standing over him could, and looked at him through the cloud with a savage ragged-tooth grin and burning amber eyes. It threw its head back and laughed as it made the first cut.

Hot red blood gushed out as the ebony claw sliced across his stomach. Not enough to gut him, not yet. Just enough to make him hurt and keep him to watch his wife and son burn and burn again.

"Death is no release," said the demon in Oscar's voice, sparks from the blaze catching on his horns. "Death is living in a moment forever." It delicately carved along Matthew's jawline, etching a line all the way around his face as his victim screamed. "You cannot hide, Matthew. I can see your true face."

And with a gentle flick of its wrist it peeled the skin right off Matthew's skull.

With a gasp he woke up on the hard packed snow. The others were strewn around him, whimpering and crying out. Even

blind Klaus let out a wail of the purest despair. Matthew pulled himself upright just soon enough to see the black cloud vanish into the treeline.

"Christ above," shouted Aebbe, waving at them from the Rock and hauling Ivar out of the water with an arm well used to rescuing small children from themselves. Ivar's teeth were chattering and he hugged his body tightly in a futile attempt to keep out some of the cold. Aebbe guided him into the boat, looked to the group on the shore, then to the broken body on the stones, and scratched his forehead for a second. Pointing for Ivar to lie flat, he scooped up Bodmar's remains and laid them on top of the freezing man, causing him to cry out in horror.

"Relax," said Aebbe. "He's dead. He can't hurt you."

On the shore within seconds, Klaus's acolytes helped to lift the corpse out while Ivar struggled his own way out of the boat. "Get him inside," Asger said to Rollo, who was fretfully checking his crotch to make sure he was intact. "Use my cabin, I was awake all night so there should still be some fire burning. And you," he said pointing to Sigurd, "get the body back to your place, it's the closest."

Matthew's house was much closer, but they knew what he meant. Sigurd, the ascetic who would have been better suited to some remote monastery in Ireland, lived alone outside of the village in a house made mostly of sods that he'd erected himself. He had wandered in one day a score of years previous, friendless and exiled by parents who had forsaken him for being baptised and driven him from his home village some ten miles west. He had never married, so his house would be empty. All the other elders had somebody at home.

"It's a miracle that nobody is out yet," said Matthew.

"Thank heavens for small mercies," said Klaus. The fight

had gone out of him, and his shoulders sagged. He was like a different man from the one who had led a massacre of innocents less than a day before, and shuffled rather than strode as his disciples led him away. "I could no longer feel him," he was saying to Rudolf, "I could on longer feel God."

Asger beckoned to Matthew. "Are you well enough to walk?"

Leaning on his makeshift crutch, Matthew shrugged.

Asger twitched his jaw at the departing Klaus. "You're looking at a man who has never been beaten but now isn't sure he's on the right side."

"I don't get your meaning."

Asger smiled sadly. "What did you see when the creature looked at you?"

"My family on fire. A demon was flaying me. But none of us could die."

"I expect it showed us all our greatest fears."

"How is such a thing possible?"

"If you believe in God you believe in the devil, or devils of some kind. You have grown up in the faith. I imagine all you know of what came before are stories."

"I was in my sixth summer when they baptised me."

"We were a Christian country by then. But I remember when the old gods were almost everywhere." He pulled a sleeve up to show a faded tattoo of Thor's hammer. "When I was a child, my grandfather used to tell us that even the gods were new. That there was something beyond them, greater than them. For years I thought it was Jesus and God. But last night, after... *after*, I remembered a story he told us over the fire one winter solstice. I don't recall the words exactly, but he told us that men made monsters. Draugr, you have heard of them I'm sure."

"But don't they guard their barrows?"

"So they say. But grandfather had been south, down among the Germans, and told us about a different draugr. Nachzehrer they call it. The wrongful dead who rise from the grave to consume the living. The stories terrified me. And they have powers, see things, do things you could barely imagine. And then I found the Lord and put it all out of my head as pagan superstition."

He fell silent as they shuffled along the path. "Do you know what I saw?"

Matthew shook his head.

"I saw my family in Valhalla."

"Valhalla? You mean they were in hell?"

Asger shook his head slowly. "No. They were in paradise. I was the one in hell, without them."

"What?"

"'Spear of God', that's what my name means. It's what the priest gave me when I was baptised. But evidently it never really took to heart. We should not have done what we did."

"But you led us there, to Oscar's house."

Asger nodded as they walked. "But I let myself be led there, by some mangled idea that the greater the act the better it would be in the long run. And yet seeing that, that cloud, that ash creature, all my heart tells me now is that we should not have been so quick to throw out our old ways, our old traditions. Perhaps there is beauty even in the purest paganism." He tapped at his tattoo. "And having seen what I just saw, I can tell you that if Thor called me again I would answer."

The sky rumbled with claps of thunder and far in the distance was a flash of lightning despite the brilliant blue sky. Asger looked up in surprise, then laughed. "Do you hear what I hear? Do you see what I see? Thor is beating his hammer. Perhaps I

shall make it to Valhalla after all."

Klaus and his disciples were climbing the short steps to the hall ahead of them when a man cried out somewhere off to the right. "Help, help," he called. It was Sigurd. "Draugr!"

Without sparing a glance Asger, still fast despite his age, sprinted toward the turf cabin and as Matthew hobbled to keep up he heard the unmistakable sounds of fighting and blades being drawn.

He turned a corner only to be knocked to the ground by something heavy and wet. His hands turned slick and red as he picked himself up; it was a headless torso in a deerskin tunic. One of Klaus's boys.

"Matthew get out of here!" There was an air of panic in Asger's voice. "We can't hold it."

All of Klaus's disciples had joined the fight, a throng of muscle and power locked in ferocious combat with a snarling, death-blue creature. Aebbe and Ivar, the latter only half dressed, were arriving with heavy clubs but faltered at the sight of the thing.

It was Bodmar's body, but a bastardised monstrosity. The limbs were stretched and elongated. Its head and skull had contorted to a malevolent imitation of a man's. The revenant towered above the fighters, indifferent to blows that would have broken any mortal. Its hair was matted with blood and ash. Two amber eyes burned with undying hate as it held the crowd at bay with savage strikes that crushed bones and coated them all in blood and gore. Above its head it clutched a bloodied, quivering man. Sigurd. His skull had been caved in at one side and one of his legs torn asunder, yet somehow he still flapped at the draugr as if he could somehow resist it. A rumbling, throbbing laugh came from its black lips at the pathetic resistance, a laughter that only deepened in the seconds before it bit what was left of

Sigurd's face and tore the flesh right off.

Asger, pushing his way to the front, pulled a heavy dagger from under his quilted jacket and stabbed hard into the creature's chest, up through the ribs as he had done in countless battles before to fell an opponent.

It simply looked down, brushed the blade off with one hand, and smashed Sigurd's remains into the shocked older man. That same look of confusion and horror stayed on his face as it ripped his head clean off his neck and hurled it at Matthew's feet. The revenant pointed at him then, a sick imitation of a grin forming on its black lips.

The whole village was in an uproar now, the stupor of the previous night's feasting wearing off and men charging out of their homes to see the commotion. More came to try to and overcome the revenant but its muscles were as hard as rock and it towered like a mountain above them all as it tore them asunder, casting blood and bone in all directions as it battered its way toward the stricken Matthew. It mowed them down until nobody was left to face it. Klaus's disciples lay in a pile, mangled beyond recognition amid the villagers' corpses. Rollo had been dashed against a stone wall and his body remained pressed against it at an unnatural angle. Aebbe and Ivar had been run together until they were almost one horrific work of art. Some of the dead no longer had heads or faces, but of those that remained Matthew recognised them all from that black day at Oscar's house.

Faster than he thought possible, the revenant was before him, leaning down so the horrifying stench rolled off it in waves into his face. The black-lipped grin grew wider and more menacing. It spoke in a rasping blend of Bodmar's and Oscar's voices.

"It is your God's feast days, is it not?"

"Feasts...? Yes."

"And your God says to forgive, does he not?"

"Yes. Yes! Please, forgive me."

"I do not."

And with one final exultant screech he braced to tear Matthew in two.

"No!" A small, angry voice cut through the chaos. "Let papa alone!" Peter charged at the revenant, all ten of his years channelled into the stone in his hand as he brought it down onto the creature's leg.

It bounced off it without leaving a scratch. But Peter kicked and punched and flailed in desperation. "Peter, no, get out of here," yelled Matthew, coughing out gobbets of blood.

The revenant reached down and effortlessly hoisted the child up by his heavy coat. It raised him up to his eye level, peering at him as Peter lashed out at its face, his small hands not even creasing the flesh. "Leave him be, please, he's just a boy!"

The revenant grunted a laugh. "So was my Brandt. So was my Gunnar." There was a hint of sadness in that voice. "And Asta and Olga were just little girls." The rage in the amber eyes burned furiously for a moment and then, incredibly, began to fade. "Just children. Blameless."

The revenant set Peter down gently and began to smoke. A thick cloud of ash pumped out of its skin and it shrunk down and down until Bodmar's body lay broken on the ground and an undulating man-shaped cloud stood in its place. The amber eyes looked from Peter to Matthew and back again. "Our boys were friends."

Matthew, reaching out slowly to pull the now overwhelmed Peter close, nodded. "You and I were friends."

The Oscar shape laughed bitterly. "Like brothers. Fought like

brothers, loved like brothers, hated like brothers in the end."

"Please," said Matthew. "Please don't hurt my boy."

The cloud rippled and flowed, agitated for a moment before calming. "I would not punish the son for the sins of his father."

Oscar looked back toward the village, surveying the carnage and slaughter. "The old gods would have been proud of my success in battle."

Matthew nodded feebly.

"They came to me, that day in the forest. I felt them in my heart. My heart is gone now."

"I know," mouthed Matthew. "I know. I'm sorry."

"In the fire, at the end, I asked the gods to grant me revenge." The Oscar shape raised a flickering hand, exploring how it could change from human hand to eagle claw to demonic wolf's paw and back again. "I gave you all the reward you deserved. All of you are dead now, at my hand. All but you."

"Ragnar. Ragnar lives."

The Oscar thing shook an ash-cloud head slowly, a satisfied smile creeping over his lips. "No. He does not. And now there is only you. Once you pay your penance - that's the word you Christians use, yes? - once you pay your penance I can rest."

Matthew nodded gently and squeezed Peter tight. "Run home to your mother, son."

"No, papa."

Matthew squeezed his son's shoulder again. "Go on. It's alright." Somewhere in the distance he heard Alva calling for them both. "Go. Now lad, go on." Slowly, reluctantly, Peter nodded and slid away from his father, tiptoeing away until he broke into a run.

Matthew pulled himself fully upright. "Go on then. At least let me die on my feet."

The Oscar shape tilted its head in a way Matthew found all too familiar. "No. I think perhaps you should live with your pain, remembering what you did. Perhaps you can use it to do some good. There are other forms of penance." It floated an arm up with one bony finger pointing up the path. "Let me show you yours."

Five graves on the hillside.

They had made Oscar dig them himself, a last punishment for a crime he had not committed. Five little barrows for five innocent souls. The Oscar cloud floated over the slope toward them, hovering by Dagmar's mound before forming into a solid obsidian man-shape. He crouched, extending a jet black hand onto the light dusting of snow, which bubbled and retreated from his touch. One by one he gave the little mounds his blessing.

Five graves on the hillside.

There was such peace there. They would never be frozen hard like the rest of the hillside. The springs would keep the dead warm until the end of time. Ten thousand souls would not be so lucky.

Oscar floated back to Dagmar's grave and rested a hand on the ground next to it. He tapped it gently three times, then traced an oval all around it. "Killing you all won't bring them back. I could destroy you all a thousand times and it wouldn't bring them back." He looked at Peter, slowly blending back into his old self as if he were absorbing the ash cloud into him. "Be good to your boy. And your wife." He looked up at the blazing star in the sky. "Now let me rest and go to Valhalla."

With one last act of will he extended his arm and let the last of his ash cloud form into a heavy black shovel. Thrusting it into the soil, he turned to face Matthew and Peter, then let himself all

backward into the shape he had drawn out for himself. Matthew lumbered himself toward the shovel and pried it free.

Five graves on the hillside. Soon to be six.

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About

David O'Mahony is a horror, dark fantasy, and contemporary fiction writer from Cork, Ireland. He has had more than 25 stories published across the globe, with his work appearing in the US, Canada, Australia, Belgium, India, and Thailand. He has written non-fiction at irishexaminer.com, where he is assistant editor, and his first collection, Shadows and Starlight: The Ties That Bind, is due out shortly.

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14

Author Interiew w/ Ryan Habermeyer)

1. **Tell us a bit about yourself. What sort of things do you enjoy doing outside of writing?**

I have a few assorted hobbies that I dabble in. I collect old photographs. I like playing the piano. Chopin, Rachmaninoff. I kind of live to travel. I grew up in California but then moved all across the country for school and work. Living in my sixth state now and have visited twenty-four others. Been to twenty-one countries and counting. I can't imagine life without travel. It's nice to see how strange yet familiar the rest of the world is. I love to cook too. Not a baker—that's my wife— but a cook. If I could do it all over again, and if I wasn't bit by the writing bug, I might have been a chef of some sort. Cooking is a lot like writing actually. The creative process behind combining flavors is not unlike crafting sentences. There's an instinct and a magic to it.

2. **What is your most recent book about?**

I had this idea many years ago about writing a modern-day *Don Quixote* story. I love Quixote. That book is as important

now as it was 500 years ago. Anyway... I'm a glutton for campy 1950s sci-fi movies, so many years ago I decided to fuse the Quixote motif with my own obsession and write a story about a boy with a cosmonaut helmet grafted onto his head—maybe it was a freak accident, maybe he was born that way, maybe he's a Russian spy, or maybe it's just a fishbowl he put there himself—who watches too many of these trashy B-movies and believes he is an alien. Then he builds a catapult in the middle of the desert trying to launch himself into outer space to reunite with the mothership. And that's pretty much the novel. Except that I wrote it in the form of 95 obituaries. So, every chapter is a brief obituary about someone in this small, Utah town who knows the cosmonaut boy and has an interaction with him. On the one hand, it's the story of this town and all the misfits, perverts, and prophets living there, and spliced into that is the story of the cosmonaut boy. Oh, and for good measure I put in about fifty vintage photographs to play with the fine line between facts and fiction, teasing the idea that the events of the book really happened. And that's the origins of *Necronauts*.

It's probably the oddest things I've ever written. But, then again, I only write weird stuff so hard to say.

3. **If there was someone famous that you would recommend to read your book, who would it be?**

My first thought here was Kafka or Nabokov, two of my favorite writers. But, there's also a section of the book where I talk about a Karl Marx reenactment pageant in Utah hosted by a local toilet paper factory, so maybe I'd want Marx to read it. Not that I'd care what he'd have to say about the book so much as I would enjoy seeing the look on his face when he read that part.

4. **Do you have a favorite spot you like to sit and write?**

I'm not a big believer in writing rituals, actually. I don't have a set time or place where I write, and I don't make rules for myself to write a certain amount of words each day or impose on myself writing time constraints. I do write daily— sometimes longhand, sometimes on the notes on my phone, sometimes on my laptop—but without rigid stipulations. But here's a fun story: I used to write in church all the time. I would go every Sunday with my yellow legal pad and write in the pew. I wrote most of my second collection of short stories that way. Sunday after Sunday, longhand. It was fantastic. The sermons were a kind of white noise in the background that functioned like a creative laxative.

5. **Did you experience any form of writer's block while working on this piece? If so, what tips do you have for other authors that are struggling with writer's block?**

Yes and no. I mean, *Necronauts* took me seventeen years to write. Was that due to writer's block? I wouldn't call it that. At least not in the sense that I was creatively paralyzed and couldn't get the story out. I couldn't get it *right*, and that's a different problem. Most of those years I was trying to figure out what the story was exactly and how best to tell it. Getting stuck is part of the writing process. Nobody

moves smoothly through creativity. The false starts, dead ends, brick walls, discarded pages, and labyrinths are just a natural part of being creative. I wrote four or five drafts of the book, hundreds of pages, and then abandoned it because I could feel it wasn't working the way I wanted it to. And then I would come back to it months, years later, and extract those parts which were effective and start up all over again. I think the problem some writers have is that they assume they're supposed to sit there and be stuck, or remove that difficult

moment, or maybe plow through to the end and say they'll fix it later. None of those strategies work for me. I abandon projects all the time. Sometimes when I get bored with them, other times when I can't figure out how to make something work. That's when I start something new. Then when I finish the new thing I'll go back to the old, stuck thing and it's like magic: I can see the problem from before but now I know how to write my way through it. And if I'm still stuck then I leave it abandoned until I rediscover it and know how to fix it. Which is to say, I'm a very, very slow writer who leaps from one project to the next finding my way through like a blindfolded nun in the Playboy mansion. I write in piecemeal. Vignettes, anecdotes, dialogues, compressed scenes. Then I go back and try to shape it so there's some continuity, some fluidity to the whole story. Of course, sometimes you don't need to let the work sit—you need to get up and move around. I love long walks. Wandering, meandering, getting lost. It works. Walk and talk to yourself about the writing. Vocalize it. When you say it out loud it becomes real, which means you hear all the bullshit; you can't lie to yourself when you say it out loud. Even in the dead of winter, take walks. It'll do wonders for your writing.

6. **What time of day is most productive for you to write?**

Like I was saying before, I don't really have prescribed writing rituals. I teach, have four kids, and am still trying to figure out this thing called life. My day-to-day feels like perpetual chaos, so, I write sporadically. That means thinking about stuff. Letting it stew in my mind and take shape. Jotting down notes. Writing a few paragraphs when I'm waiting for my daughter's piano lesson to be over. I used to be more disciplined and ritualistic. But life gets in the way. The important thing is to make time to do the work, however you can make it work. And

when you're doing the work, be present in it. My wife and kids know that look on my face and don't bother me when they see it.

7. **When you are writing, what are you typically listening to in the background? Silence? Favorite playlist? Podcast?**

Total silence. Always. I can't concentrate on the words in my head and getting them onto the page if I have music in the background. I'll get too distracted by the music. The music will overwhelm me. That said, I'll often listen to music before I start writing to capture a mood, an ambiance, a vibe. Music is like a primer for me. The fuel I need to tell a particular story. I can tell you some of the music that primed *Necronauts*: Led Zeppelin, "Kashmir." Beck, "Lost Cause." David Bowie, "Loving the Alien." Alela Diane, "Pieces of String Too Small to Use." The Smiths, "How Soon is Now?" Ricky Nelson, "Lonesome Town." Tom Waits, "Time." Steve Miller Band, "Serenade." And Spacemen 3, "Lord Can You Hear Me?"

8. **Is there a particular scene or part in your book that you are incredibly proud of?**

I try to take the advice of Gabriel Garcia Marquez that it is best to never re-read or talk about or even think of your work once it's finished and off to the press. Too much regret and angst in thinking about it that way. If I start thinking about the scenes, I'm going to want to rewrite all of them. But, I suppose what I'm most pleased with is finding a way to make the form work. I never thought I'd write a novel in the form of 95 obituaries, and while writing it I wavered between *this is pretty great* and *this is the dumbest thing ever what the hell am I doing?* so I'm pleased that I was able to stitch it together. It's not a perfectly polished book. It's fragmented and chaotic and botched, but I love the idea of an imperfectly perfect thing.

Like the Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetic where art embraces its inherent impurities and inevitable ruin; or how the Navajo weavers will deliberately stitch mistakes into their rug designs. I'd like to think of *Necronauts* on those terms. I'm happy it turned out a little ruined.

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About

Ryan Habermeyer is the author of the forthcoming novel *Necronauts* and the short story collections *Salt Folk* and *The Science of Lost Futures*. His award-winning stories and essays have appeared in Conjunctions, Boulevard, Alaska Quarterly Review, Copper Nickel, DIAGRAM, and others. A Fulbright scholar who has lived, taught and studied in Poland, Scotland, Spain and Mexico, he is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Salisbury University.

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