



DEADMAN'S TOME

FEATURES

The Red Fog

The Forbidden Town

The Worm God

And More...

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DEADMAN'S TOME

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Introduction

While July was the month for Deadman's Tome to celebrate its third year of churning out unrelenting horror, August is the month where we deliver a lot of content to our fans. Not only do we have an issue stuffed with eight terrifying stories written by authors that are determined to test your sanity, we proudly present *The Best of the Tome*, an anthology that looks back at the horrors we released during our three years of running, and it couldn't have been possible without the awesome fans and friends that sent in their favorite picks.

While releasing a massive, nostalgic anthology in addition to a full sized issue might be enough to please the fans, there is something even more amazing waiting for you this month. We are pleased to present *Zombie Hunter*, a new webisode series where killing zombies isn't just for survival, it's for sport! Starring Nathan Greene--a self-acclaimed, certified from birth, and professional zombie hunter—the series follows him as he explores infested locations, follows-up on leads, and exploits devices designed to guarantee survival during the epidemic. International Playboy model Cheryl Stell guest stars in the second episode: *Zombie Spray*. The first two episodes of *Zombie Hunter* are now live at Youtube and Blip.tv.

This edition starts off with a fast piece that not only delves deep into archaic rituals of forbidden magic, it also provides enjoyable satire. After the smoke of the exhausted fires in *The Fire Baby* by Michael Albani begin to clear, you'll be treated to a completely unethical but interesting experimentation where people's fears are analyzed and scrutinized in the name of science in *The Difference between Fear and a Panic Attack* by Olabode Olakanmi. Next, a man tries to foolishly escape his past failures and wrong doings in *Mo(u)rning Flight* by Michael Albani. If the horror and suspense of the unknown fascinates you, then check out the *Red Fog* by Brodie Michale.

Of course, all the other stories offer something of their own, something unique to this variety pack of horror. I hope you take the time to enjoy.

Mr. Deadman

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THE FIRE BABY

Michael Albani

Birth

The forlorn mother put the twelfth candle in place. The basement was dark. The fetid smell of decomposing flesh hung heavy in the air. "This has to work," she whispered. "This just has to work."

The mother's name was Bethany, and she was preparing to perform a ritual she discovered on a necromancy website. She followed the website's directions perfectly. Failure was not an option.

On her basement floor she drew a chalk circle inscribed with the image of a soaring raven. Along the circumference of this magick mandala she placed twelve candles. Eleven candles were white. The twelfth candle was red, made of wax crimsonly colored with her blood. Baby Bridget, her beloved daughter, rested in the circle's center. She was silent. She was lifeless.

Bethany was not usually the type to believe in magick. But this was her daughter. She had to try something. The website claimed the spell was genuine, translated from ancient hieroglyphs written by fallen angels. She was just desperate enough to believe that.

Bethany lit the candles one by one around the divination circle. The red candle was the last to be lit. She clasped her hands over it, closed her eyes, and spoke the website's incantation.

"Azrael, almighty Angel of Death," she cried. "Release this innocent child from your grasp. I give to you an offering of fire. Now rekindle the fire in this child's heart. Come, Azrael! Accept my tribute and let this child live again!"

Bethany opened her eyes. The basement was silent. Nothing happened. She was ready to collapse in anguish, when suddenly she felt something. An eerie wind entered the sealed basement and began to blow the candles' flames toward Baby Bridget.

"This is it," Bethany said tearfully. "It's working!" The flames entered Baby Bridget's mouth, leaving the basement in total darkness. Baby Bridget opened her eyes and started to cry.

Bethany joyously arose and rushed to the circle's center to embrace her reanimated daughter. As she moved forward, though, she began to sweat. The basement grew hotter and hotter. Suddenly, Baby Bridget erupted into flames. She screamed and screamed and the flames grew higher and higher. Bethany stumbled backward and was caught in the blaze. The fire grew stronger with each of the baby's tortured wails.

The fire consumed the basement and eventually the whole house. It was only after everything was reduced to ash that the cries ceased and the fire died down. Bethany had hoped to bring her only daughter back to the world of the living, but she brought forth a demon instead.

Death

The aged priest put the twelfth bowl in place. The basement was bright, but shadows surrounded him like dark sentinels. The smell of smoldering flesh hung heavy in the air.

The priest's name was Father Robert, and he was preparing to exorcise a fire demon from the basement of the Morris family's five-year-old home. He was meticulous. Given what this demon was capable of, failure was not an option.

On the basement floor he drew a chalk circle inscribed with a dodecagram. Along the circumference of this purification circle he placed twelve bowls. Eleven bowls were white. The twelfth bowl was red.

He filled the bowls one by one with holy water from a silver decanter. The red bowl was the last to be filled. He clasped his hands over it, closed his eyes, and prayed.

As Father Robert recited his prayer, he began to sweat. The temperature in the basement began to drastically increase. Then, fire spewed forth from the center of the purification circle. The light and heat were tremendous, but Father Robert stayed strong and remained in place.

From within the incredible inferno the fire demon appeared. It looked like a skinless human infant, a pulsating mass of charred muscle and tissue. With its daemonic red eyes it scanned the basement. It stared down at the purification circle, then directly at Father Robert. "Who are you and what do you think you're doing?" it asked in a shrill, otherworldly voice.

Father Robert was astonished by the creature's ability to speak, but he kept his composure and responded. "My name is Father Robert. I am here to bring an end to the suffering you have caused and free the soul of the girl you devoured."

"Girl?" said the demon, feigning innocence. "What girl?"

"You know full well! The little Morris girl! The innocent child that lived in this house who you burned alive!"

The fiery creature chortled. "Oh, I remember now! But you can't blame me for what happened to her. She's the one who sought me out. After her family moved into this house, she heard me crying and came to 'comfort' me. She threw me scraps of wood to eat and squirted lighter fluid on me to drink. She made my flames grow bigger and stronger.

"Do you know how much that hurt? Can you imagine how much pain she put me in? I roasted her body and ate her soul! She tasted just like my dear, sweet mother."

"Devilish creature," Father Robert said calmly in reply, "I can see you are in a great deal of pain. However, that gives you no right to make others suffer. I am a servant of God, so I will send you back to the fires from which you were spawned."

Father Robert continued reciting his prayer. At first, nothing happened. The demon chortled, mocking the holy man. Then, the holy water in the bowls rose into the air.

The holy water rushed into the demon's mouth. It gurgled. It gasped for air. Finally, its flames were extinguished and it crumbled into a pile of ash. The fire demon was destroyed. Father Robert hoped that this would mean the little Morris girl could rest in peace.

The Difference between Fear and a Panic Attack

Olabode Olakanmi

We differ little from the drawings and stories on prehistoric stone, the greatest disparity being our place of origin. Visits from wherefrom never completely stop. Some of us come to live, others come to die and most come to study.

#

None of the scientists are masters of the local environment, yet they can bend light and shadow and space to do much of what is needed. Objectivity, as well as the specimen's subjectivity, is recorded from all angles. Earth is the vivarium, Water's Nest, MA is a small cage therein, and the humans that walk its streets are lab rats.

#

It is time for another test method. There have been many experiments before and there shall be more in the future. Results are neither positive nor negative--all is merely data. Would she choose biological nativism or methodological empiricism? The maze and cheese are set.

#

PHASE I BEGIN:

A control is selected and with unmatched ability her medication is molecularly transmogrified into useless synthetic triangles. Her bloodstream is also cleansed. Twelve hours before start point she is mechanically instructed during sleep to take her footstool upstairs, away from its usual station in the living room. In the morning she wakes, bathes, eats, takes medication and leaves for school.

#

PHASE II BEGIN:

Lorna Goines finds herself in pre-calculus, barely looking at the forms of what she shall hopefully come to know as derivatives. Presently, she is more preoccupied with letting her vision haze at the golden beehive of hair before her. Sun shines through the windows, adding to the domineering heat of the room. Old fans, boisterous with the shakes of high speed, hang from the segmented ceiling and whip the warm air, fluttering papers and hair.

She feels something deftly touch the lobe of her right ear. Immediately, she flusters and turns to investigate. The brown haired girl sitting posterior, Dolly, is a serious student; her eyes never leave the blackboard. Dolly's pencil never leaves the paper as it takes notes in fat strokes of cursive, creating one intimidating sentence. Lorna turns her head towards the blackboard and quickly rubs the ear, almost wishing not to touch it herself. This reaction initiates an old memory.

Lorna had her ears pierced at the local mall when she was three years old. The oafish employee of Pro Nails was a newbie. Gripping a gray piercing tool in her hand the woman stabbed into the young girl's cartilage four times each before creating an adequate puncture. The little girl bled profusely and the gruesome incident registered enough to be embedded as her first memory. Lorna Goines hates when anyone touches her ears.

Right now she is trying to quell the anger that always follows this physical violation. The emotion makes her feel warmer, minuscule drops of sweat bead on her brow. Dolly wouldn't do that, she thinks to herself. Dolly doesn't do

anything, except read and take notes. But the boy behind Dolly and the one sitting catty-corner to her desk are goons. Josh and Wayne are dull, sorta-delinquents who do stupid things when bored in class. The two slouch low and chuckle in response to the other's whispers. Lorna listens, but the fans garble any details.

"XXXX XXX XXXXX XX XXXX XXXXX Lor-na XXXX XXXX XXXXXXXX..." She thinks she hears her name. It was them, why else would they be talking about me? Her temperament goes from moderately neutral to acidic affect. She starts to boil, to seethe with indignant tremors. Vulgarities, threats, no--promises, waffle in her head. Lorna wants to spring from her seat with a twirl and castigate the two until both rip off their ears in apology. But she is generally a quiet girl for certain hyperactive aspects of her biology require preventative measures. Normally, she would focus on her breathing and attempt to calm down, but she hears: "...XXXXX XlorXX XXXX XXXXXXXX..."

As she stands the attack begins hard and fast with an awkward clench of the ventricles and escape of breath. It is intense and she excuses herself to the bathroom, barely noticing the goons giggling at her departure.

The windowless hallway is dim and cool compared to the classroom. The painted walls are ornamented with lockers, exuberant school symbols and garrulous mantras, trophies, artwork and group photos of students in various clubs and activities. Her passage t-bones a perpendicular hallway twenty feet ahead which frames the restroom door. Her usual stall is clean and in the corner, by the frosted windows that open to gaze upon the rarefied tree line behind the school's property. This is her usual area of respite during school-located attacks. A calming place used to slow her heart and lungs, to hasten the sweat sliming her pores, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

She approaches the crossway with tired legs, steadying herself by concentrating on the lonely sound of her footsteps on the waxed floor. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. Forward and forward, foot-by-foot, Lorna closes the gap until she pushes forward a palm to open the door. Her sweaty skin makes contact with the old, painted metal and is hit with an awesome wave of dread and déjà vu. This is something reminiscent, yet foreign to the high school memories forged over the last three years.

#

Washington Elementary. A patch of ash colored linoleum five feet by three feet united the main hallway with the cafeteria and was bordered by the collective brown tiles found throughout the school. Despite its quaint simplicity, Lorna and her friends played a game that eventually evolved from fun to survival.

This was the inquisitive time of Zoobooks, Nature Magazine and National Geographic. Young Lorna's affinity for "Shark Week" and the "Jaws" filmography inspired her group of friends to pretend a hungry shark lived within the marked ground. At the beginning it was all pleasure, an engaging danger zone to spice up the monotony of lined procedurals to lunch, gym, the library, recess, music and typing.

The puerile leap across was an easy one that, for most, didn't require a running start. Accidentally land in the rectangle and the shark within would feast on your bones. But no one really believed.

Then something changed in the latter half of primary school. Lorna watched a nature documentary on Killer whales for a school assignment. She had seen one of the oversized dolphins up close at a Sea World the summer before and was curious to observe behavior in the wild. She watched them kill Great Whites with sneak attacks from below. Eat Polar bears, fish and seals. This wasn't very bothersome because school taught that all animals, including humans, needed to eat and defend. It was the after meal revelry that chilled her.

Hunger satiated, the Killer whales began to fling seals with their flukes. The animals flew through the air with the poise of rag dolls and slammed into the water by the receiver who quickly returned the living balls. She could almost feel the air whistling by her, the impact of the cold water. Though they eventually let the frightened seals go, even nudging the survivors back onto the beach with unexpected gentleness, Lorna was forever changed by the sea animals' display of sadism. They had clearly enjoyed their game. They smiled toothy grins in her dreams.

She received a gold star for her report, but the new information dampened the victory. She had been taught to expect such cruelty from humans because of war and greed, but not from animals and the thought beckoned a new world of even worse dangers than she had ever imagined. What goes through the mind of a hunter? How vicious can an animal be? She started to nervously jump over the rectangle, adding height with each leap. Thinking of all the brutal things an animal could do besides eat.

The rest of this experimental group soon entered the next stage. Passing by walls plastered with construction paper and world flags, en route to some unremembered feeding, activity, or lesson they all sensed the rectangle's threat was truth. Ashen, flat, speckled just like before. But what their eyes could not see their pituitary and amygdala were willed to descry.

Accordingly, the children were inculcated by creeping cold sweats, rough dry tongues, tightening throats, crushing hearts and pulses, emotional malaise and, most importantly, abject terror. A primal fear known only by those who have been stalked, hunted.

They all began to cross the zone with renewed enthusiasm. None casually leapt across the horizontal harbinger. Instead, limbs reached and muscles stretched and faces strained as kids pushed through the air at full speed, often overextending their point of landing so not even their shadows would land in the rectangle. If that happened the kid was finished. The shark within would jump up, chomp down, descend and do anything it wished.

Symptoms sequestered at school began to surface at home, sometimes nullifying the children's ability to walk on the floor. They jumped from furniture to furniture, threw pillows on the floor like floatation devices or, unless carried, would refuse to leave raised surfaces.

Worried parents queried Elijah Watson, the school nurse and special education instructor. The man, cautious to label the kids with a mental disorder,

decided to see their fear first hand. He started off with Lorna and one Saturday morning, when the school was relaxed and empty, had her standing before the ominous patch.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“A little scared,” was her reply. She nervously shifted her weight from side to side.

“Do you ever get scared like this anywhere else?”

“At home, sometimes, I don’t want to touch the floor.”

“Where in the house?” he asked.

“The living room, the kitchen, my room. One time, the backyard, but it was raining outside and I wouldn’t have gone out there anyways”.

“Why not?”

“My mom and dad said that playing in the rain will get me sick.”

“It’s good you listen to your parents. I’m sure they’ve been saying that there’s nothing to be scared of. Have you seen anything scary come out the floor?”

A sigh. “No.”

“Then why are you scared, Lorna?” asked Nurse Watson. “There isn’t anything here.” The quivering girl could tell the man was telling the truth, her eyes saw that much, but she responded honestly.

“Even though I can’t see it, I can feel it down there. It’s hungry and angry.” The nurse gave her small hand a tight squeeze.

“You’re a very smart girl. You know sharks live in the water, right? Not on land and not in the ground.” Lorna nodded her head, squeezed back. “You shouldn’t be afraid of things that aren’t there. That’s just confusion playing a trick on you. Understand? There’s nothing here that wants to hurt you.” He squeezed her hand again.

Lorna denied the first request to step forward. The same went for the second and third.

“When you’re afraid of the ground, does it feel the same as if a mean dog was chasing you?” Lorna’s face wrinkled with intense thought. She answered in the affirmative.

“Then I want you to try something for me. When you see something scary I want you to immediately go to a grown up. Keeping yourself safe is very important. One can’t learn that early enough, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Good. When there’s nothing scary around, but you still feel frightened I want you to be strong and go tell a grown up what’s wrong. However, I don’t want you to yell, I want you to walk as calmly as possible to a parent, teacher or responsible adult. You might be really scared, but you’ll be fine. You know why? Because nothing is there, ok?” The girl’s sight tracked between the adult and the patch. Nurse Watson had said his words with confidence, but Lorna found them to be confusing, redundant and ultimately unsatisfying.

“You won’t have to do it alone. How about we both step inside and see what happens?”

The shrieks carried throughout the school, alerted her parents all the way in the head office. They followed the calls to find the nurse red faced, struggling to

move the small girl a few inches. Every child in this experimental group responded the same way.

Though they would move on from elementary school the disease was never dispelled. The attacks would reappear from time to time, lighter, less cumbersome and never again with such an ostensibly malicious focal point.

#

Lorna withdraws her hand from the door and pulls a folded baggie containing pills out of a pocket. Xanax, much like one of the prescription pills at home and at the nurse's office, save one difference. These round white pills were not extended release and thus offered their therapeutic benefits with much needed expediency. She pours the medicine into a cupped palm, fires them into her mouth and forces them down before they can stick to her throat. She feels steady far too quickly, knows this calming sensation is all in her head. The world is no longer against her. Everything is as it should be.

"Hey. What've you got there? No outside meds allowed on school property," issues a voice to her left. The muted attack returns to its previous intensity as her stomach proceeds to drop and tighten. Her head turns to identify Mr. Bailey pushing a broom with a wide, green head towards her. He has worked at the school for almost three years cleaning messes and repairing the broken. But the middle-aged man has been, for the most part, ignored, until today.

"Are you poppin' pills?" he asks, continuing to move closer. She just stands there shaking, struggling for a response. "Shhh," he says, closing the gap, "You look high as hell, young woman." Lorna remains as stationary as possible, feels her equilibrium sway in all directions, trembles and respiration the only signs of movement as they gaze into each other's

eyes.....Blink. "I'm so sorry, Miss." His eyes flare with understanding then sympathy. "Are you having an attack?" Lorna nods or shakes a positive response. His hand rises and slowly passes by her head, gently pushing the door open and presenting the facilities within. "Go on, then." Her eyes roll to the right and preliminary protocols cause a change in her plan. She tries to move her legs. One leg, heavy as iron, scrapes forward and leaves her exhausted. The other leg likewise falls short of the verge. This is ridiculous. I'm just too tired to walk in. She remains still, a sweat slick palm against the doorframe for support.

"Changed your mind? That's ok," and he eases the door shut. Mr. Bailey backs up a step, shifting the broom against the wall, giving her room to breathe. "The nurse's office would be the best spot for ya. They really know how to help you guys over there. You want to go see the nurse?"

No, I just want sit down, but she whispers, "Yes," anyways. She will not subject herself to collapsing in front of the bathroom when second lunch is about to end. She begins an awkward clockwise shuffle. Her legs feel less drained and heavy than before.

"Miss, do you need some help?" he asks with both arms aligned to support her shoulders, if need be. And through the physical and emotional malaise she mentally thanks this thoughtful man and his kindness, but, at this time, cannot

bear his typically innocuous touch or the anxious look she suspects is measuring and doubting her agency.

The front office comes within sight, cradled by natural light spilling in from the sudden abundance of large windows and glass doors framed by metal.

“We’re almost there, Miss,” says Mr. Bailey, talking more to himself than her. “You’ll be fine in a moment and it’ll be like this never happened. Back to thinking about prom, graduation next year, and all that good stuff. I know something of what you’re going through. My nephew is a junior at East High. He has attacks, too, just like half the students that go there.”

They walk into the glow and she is surprised by how warm it feels on her shivering skin. Lorna walks by an open glass door inscribed with “FRONT OFFICE”. Within is a fair sized room with parallel desks occupied by a lady briskly typing and another reading. A radio on low volume airs a news story on the largest medical grants of the year.

The lady on the left looks up from her computer; paperwork is strewn about her desk. “Lorna, another attack?” She rounds the desk and gestures to a chair by the entry door. Lorna pours into the seat, avoids the hesitant touch of Mrs. Rosedale.

“I saw her by the bathroom taking her meds. They don’t seem to be doing her much good.”

Mrs. Rosedale furrows her brow, returns her look to the poor girl. With a mute exhale the elder lady stoops down with her hands resting on thighs, casually supporting her upper body, looking Lorna directly in the eyes. The woman’s shoulders are tensed like a warrior going into battle. They reveal someone accustomed to a foe she can only abate, not defeat. This is not cursory, though it has become routine.

“Honey, look at me. Look at me. Nurse Ross is busy with another panic attack victim.” A hip level railing separates the offices from the secretarial area. The left corridor leads to the nurse’s office. Lorna has spent many hours in the past recuperating there. “If you want to wait, the ambulance will be here soon. Or do you want to go home for the day? Don’t feel pressured either way. The choice is yours.”

Lorna mouths the word “HOME” and the woman uprights and straightens her black skirt. She rounds her desk and raises a dark microphone to lips that faintly twitch in creased corners. The flat button is depressed.

“Henry Goines to the front office. Henry Goines to the front office.” The button is let go and the P.A. silences with a grinding crackle. “Mr. Bailey?”

“Yes, Mrs. Rosedale?” comes a reply from the doorway.

“Could you please retrieve Lorna’s bag from, uh,” she quickly glances at a sheet on the left of her desk, “Mrs. Teck’s classroom.”

The door closes a few inches before pausing. “Does she need anything from her locker?”

“If she does her brother will assist her.” The door closes and Mrs. Rosedale walks to the left corner of the room where a five-gallon water cooler stands. The secretary fills a floral print paper cup with water, spins on one heel and walks straight back to Lorna, cup on palm to avoid spillage. Lorna accepts with a

shaking hand. She is at first unsure of her grip and the condensation slick wall of the cup slides down her fingers. However, Mrs. Rosedale is still and patient and her palm raised hand remains level until the cup rises and loses contact with her skin.

Lorna's ears pick up snippets of a several million dollar grant used to fund research as to why people who smile more are healthier than those who do not. She feels too tired to dwell on the egregious experiment. During her next appointment she promises to ask her doctor what research is being done on her illness. Is animal testing involved? She loathes cruelty to animals but realizes the benefits, to humans, of such experimentation. So she bypasses morality and focuses on logistics. Do animals get panic attacks? And if not, can a scientist make an animal have an attack? Would the researcher be able to tell the difference in a being that can't communicate on their level? Lost in thought, her eyes rise and briefly grace the direct sight of Ms. Sharp before the woman's piercing, teddy bear eyes obfuscate behind slowly rising papers clutched in a small hand.

Sharp is new to the school and unknown to many of the student body, as are all the temporary occupants of the regularly cycling assistant secretary position. Eagle eyed women, who, if not at their desks, could be witnessed drifting through the hallways, staring with solemn interest at school photographs.

The large framed lady with medium length hair and bright sundress is unimposing; nonetheless her truncated stare throws Lorna off, makes the girl feel paranoid. Not just because she was being observed, although the thought of anyone staring at her in this state makes her quiver. Sharp's glare was not filled with the distinct unease of anticipation or concern for her well-being. Instead, they bore the cold fixture of prescience.

Lorna hears the door to her side open and Mr. Bailey halts his entrance, supporting the open door with a bent elbow. He nods to Mrs. Rosedale who gestures back and returns to her work after a brief check on the sick girl in their midst. Held in an extended hand, the backpack hovers before her for several seconds until Mr. Bailey preemptively sets it gently next to the chair. She nods her thanks and he offers her a small wave with a large hand, mouthing, "No problem," as he retreats into the hall with the door closing behind him.

Almost immediately the door once again withdraws from its closed position. A man and woman enter the room, swiftly nodding to the two faces. They stiffly and speedily walk past the posted rail to the nurse's office. Both carry black bags containing standard E.M.T. equipment. Their radios chatter in code and static. Mrs. Rosedale rises and follows a few steps behind.

The door opens for the final time and her brother expectantly holds out an arm. He asks if she is ok, like he normally does. She replies in the affirmative, like she normally does, even though that is never the case. He then slings her backpack onto his shoulder.

"Thank you, Mrs. Rosedale," Lorna calls.

"Go home and rest. We'll see you tomorrow," shouts the habitual reply.

Lorna denies Henry's support, feels the need to prove her self-worth. Her temper flashes. In a moment of indignation towards her reoccurring

indisposition, she steels her legs and stands and is out the door with brother in tow. She turns right and wobbles a bit. The word EXIT flickers above the egress in grainy L.E.D. red.

Her seat reclines, eyes close, senses focus on the motion of the car. It is soothing. Through the tires, through the shocks, upholstery and skin, the rocks, hollows, bumps and debris of the road become apparent in fine detail. The sun sharpens as it pierces the windshield; she sees and feels warm pink. She tells herself everything is separate from her, nothing wants to harm her. Lorna finds her body believing what her thoughts are saying. Everything has its place and the world does not revolve around her body, or her fears. Heartbeat begins to slow, her shoulders ease, and inhalation slows.

“Lorna, I’m gonna sound like a jerk, but you couldn’t have picked a better time to get sick.”

Her brother’s voice breaks the spell and all positives narrow. “I was getting royally reamed by my chem. test. Thanks to you, I’ve got another day to study. How’re you feelin’?” He puts a dry hand on her forehead, a habit born of the flu laden winters at the Goines home where he would help his ailing mother tend to his father and siblings.

Click, and the key looped around her neck with green string opens the golden lock. Consequently, the front door retreats by two inches, an action reserved for the frigid vise of winter when the porous wood contracts by some millimeters. Neither youth recognizes the anomaly and Henry reaches over his sister’s shoulder, the sleeve of his short sleeve shirt almost grazing the naked lobe of Lorna’s right ear and palms the door open.

The key plops into a bowl containing other keys, phone chargers, change and pens atop the small, dark shelf on the entryway’s left. Parallel, and higher on the right wall are six brass hooks on a polished, horizontal piece of wood where Henry hangs her backpack next to their mother’s coat. Lorna slides off one candy painted Osiris shoe, then the other. She kicks them under the coats, in between her father’s rubber boots and her little sister’s soccer cleats.

Her feet sweat, sticking to the wood floor like suction cups. They peel free with a step forward only to stick again right of the bottom rung of an acutely sloping staircase. She looks up, asking herself where she should lay down. Her legs buckle and Henry, who is still behind, grabs her by the shoulders.

“Steady there, woman. You’re really out of it today,” he exclaims with the slightest hint of snark. “Upstairs or downstairs?” Lungs hitch, sweat pours, thighs cramp, consciousness fades.

“Couch,” is the lethargic reply. Henry guides his sister further into the rectangular living room. Past the stairs bordering the oval opening to a middling dining room and continuing by the wall adjoining the eating entry to the baby fenced quarters of their Border Collie, Bam. Henry stops halfway through, in front of the main sofa.

He eases her onto her back with one hand, places circular pillows under her head with the other. Fading fast, the world becomes shadowy and time distends. In dimming slow motion Henry takes lumbering steps into the dining room.

“Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten your apple juice,” he calls. His voice is deeper than normal; it carries further, even echoes. Outside, the birds squawk madly or peck with a tenacious rhythm that stabs her temples. The cries of cicadas cover the house like a sonic sheet.

“I have returned.” Feebly, she watches him reenter. He throws his backpack indifferently onto the aged settee lined next to her resting place. “You want some now?”

She shakes no. “Ok,” he makes to shove the bottle in her face, avoids her at the last moment. The bottle is placed into a round recess in the sofa’s arm.

“Swish. I’m going to let Bam outside to do his thing then I’m headed to my next class. Is my baby sis going to be fine all by her lonesome?” Her eyes tick close some more. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

She hears the dog’s repeated cry for the first time since their entrance. Before the precursor bark fades into nonexistence the next issues forth, bouncing off the walls as if unable to escape. Henry approaches the animal. Its docked tail wags in delight. He unlatches the barrier and Bam jets into the living room, appearing from behind Lorna in the form of a bushy blur. He merrily bounces off the front door with a light thud and retraces his steps to the sofa. She allows her right arm to flop down, a fleshy greeting hanging above the cool floor. Two pats on the head sap her remaining strength and Bam satisfactorily retreats to the front door.

Once again Henry is by her side, nonchalantly taking a swig of her juice. “Don’t need to tell you this, but better safe than sorry. Phone’s here behind you, so’s the remote. I’ll be back after practice, so I probably won’t be home before Mom, but before Dad.”

“I’m not a little kid,” she mutters.

“Love ya.” Bark. “Coming, Bam,” he says while walking to the dog. He grasps the thick leash dragging from the collar.

He opens the door and all aspects of the day flood in: ubiquitous light, cacophonous sound, fluid atmosphere, and inherent aromas. The door shuts, cutting everything off. Her eyes tick down a final time and all is dark. She is one in and of herself, the outside world is dead to her and she finally finds a modicum of peace. She sleeps.

#

PHASE III BEGIN:

She wakes. The experience is immediate, vivid and nostalgic, unlike the slow, staggered stirring that usually precedes her consciousness. From soporific depths she emerges somewhere new.

Paralyzing fear shoots from her brain and billows through glands and ducts, veins and arteries, nerve cells, flowing along with hormones and electrical impulses. The intense disquietude is a reminder of her youth, a time when direct danger was continuously felt and inured. An exigent vestige that makes her feel small, under threat. It makes her want to run, but she cannot. A tingling sensation replaces movement when she tries to stretch her legs. Fear makes her want to leap forward, fly through the air so her limbs never touch the ground, ascribing to her the crystal clear notion that UP is safety and DOWN is doom.

Lorna has never woken up in a panic. The inception of sleep mended all wounds, physical and psychic. For years, physicians with medication and psychotherapy alongside yoga instructors with meditation have taught her to pay attention to her emotions. They could always be understood even when they could not be controlled.

For example, even though her body would treat the ire of each equally, a suddenly hyperactive heart at work caused by the venom of unfriendly customers did not mean she was picking up on the vibes of homicidal individuals. That was simply a case of mean spirited elitists who cared more about the quality of rock lobster than their fellow human being's self respect. And despite how low she felt after her encounter, she knew there was not any physical danger from the focus of her attack. The origin of each bout of panic dictated her course of action. Fight, flight or rest.

Inside her chest is a growing ache; the lungs remain in pause while she is in reflexive thought. Where is the focus of this panic attack? The activity created by her ear has passed--the cartilage is numb and at the back of her mind. Her vision changes from the rosy color of membranes to yellow-white of a bumpy stucco ceiling. She does a quick sweep of her mind.

Hastily crossing a busy intersection, climbing down the too tall tree in the backyard, getting chased by a crazed, giant rat through a dank alleyway downtown, and lying down on the couch all register with similar specificity. There is real, immediate danger nearby. She feels it like the palpable hum of a muted television. Lorna begins to trust the feeling. She is not alone.

Will creeps from her head to her right arm and fingers, which limply hang off the cushion's edge. She concentrates very hard. They begin to twitch as the extremity slowly draws inward. She sits up with a start and her head feels light, almost swaying, as if sitting in a boat rocked by constant waves.

She senses foreignness, things, familiar as they are, occlude her actual location. There is silence, an odious sterility to her environment that cannot be denied. The doorway remains before her, shoes clutter the floor. The glow of an upstairs light washes over the staircase. She looks to her right, surveys nothing more than the coffee table, entertainment center, leafy plants and family photos situated against the living room wall.

She rotates her neck to look portside. Follows the line of her left shoulder to two tall wood shelves, one for books the other for knick-knacks and antiquated youth items. They bookend the rectangular window with ruffled blinds pulled to the sides. Beyond the glass is her neighborhood under a dense pall. Faintly, the glow of street lamps and other light sources can be perceived. They wax and wane in the wanton manner of stars. Nothing else is visible, not even her yard. Above the window hangs a circular analog clock pointing to 7 and 18.

Where is everyone? They should all be home by now. However, she sees no bags, hears no footsteps, smells no food.

Now she remembers the dog, or rather she attunes to the lack of barks and scrambling legs. Lorna twists her torso further to the left, hopes to catch a glimpse of Bam sleeping or engrossed with a worn but sturdy chew toy. A large

willow lamp on a small square idling beside the couch fills most of her sight. She turns a bit more and finds Bam's space empty.

Something else starts to bother Lorna. She realizes the two interior light sources have obliterated the irregular shadows that would usually cascade across the room. Everything has a blanched over jaundiced color. Dad must've changed the light bulbs. Her hand extends, searching for the cordless phone and remote which are gone. Maybe Henry's back? He could've taken Bam for a walk. The missing phone makes her nervous, but the missing remote is comforting. Attempt to calm herself: Why would a thief take the remote, but not the T.V.? What's going on?

She returns to her initial upright position. In her core she feels an unsteady bob akin to languid waves against a pond's shore. Her fear grows with such frenzy that Lorna almost bites her tongue. Things may not be as they seem, but old habits die- hard. She needs sanctuary, release, something to steady her head and allow for strategy.

Then, like a light piercing the fog, an option manifests itself, informed by the fern leaves' color. Her failsafe: The green stool. She considers the level of agitation required to make her forget her Balm of Gilead, discovered years ago during a near collapse in a local consignment store.

She had been reaching into a blue rubber tub filled with interesting smelling toys. Suddenly, she could not breathe and instantly felt faint. Legs gave way and she dropped onto her backside, which landed on the brand new surface of wooden stool on the other side of the aisle. It was no more than a foot high and coated in green paint. She wound her arms around her knees. Instantly, there was a difference. Her breathing became natural. Her eyes stopped leaking and her attack dissipated. After a few minutes, she stood up and was in sensational peace. Lorna picked it up, stared at the light scintillating off the polished grain. It made her feel safe, happy. Small hands held it up for her mom to see. Price=\$2.99. Money well spent.

For years the seat was normally situated right behind the coffee table, due to the propinquity of the front door and television. If the medication and therapy wasn't working, if she couldn't take the world anymore, she would find home, get the stool, sit with her knees against her chest and inactivate unwanted biological stressors with somnambulist concentration that could last minutes to hours. This appeared infrequently enough that her doctors expressed minimal concern, but when the failsafe was needed it felt like the difference between life and death.

Lorna mentally curses at herself, visualizes the walk through the living room, up the stairs, passing by three bedrooms, a bathroom and six family portraits before taking a right onto the jade carpet of her bedroom. Here her failsafe staidly waits at the foot of her bed.

Could I be wrong? Is this just a very bad panic attack?

This moment of doubt, the hinge this current experiment depends upon is met. Years of experience and training vie for dominance. She thinks and she feels.

All hope of allowing time or sleep to abscise her symptoms absconds, leaving her with the terrifying realization that she will go upstairs, lock her door, call her

parents and plant herself onto the seat and pull her knees to her breast, wrapping them in her arms. She will squeeze her eyes vise tight, blotting the volatile chaos into the spongy wood, leaving her in the bliss of sweet nothingness.

The contemplation ends and she resumes--Breathe 1, 2, breathe 1, 2.

Motor signals travel down the nerves of her leg, causing itchiness within the muscles of her right thigh and calf. The appendage hops inch by inch towards the couch edge and she leans starboard for a better view of the floor. A silhouette of her head creases the wood; it briefly has a warped appearance that supposedly recedes into the vast conference of her imagination. The shadow is partnered with the stiff shade of a band ending in five toes. Each second feels like an eternity and her leg remains locked, unwilling to lower, shaking, anticipating ever so slightly.

Thoughts and feelings clumsily coalesce again, shaking her nerves. She can suffer where she lays or she can chance the unknown, her fear, and find relief and safety.

Required muscles and ligaments of the leg relax or contract and knee flexion begins. The lower limb falls and the moment consumes her focus in slow motion, allowing observations on the weight of her leg, the curious feel of steam on sole and shaven calf, or that her little toe is the same length as the ring toe. The foot collides with the floor, bounces once before coming to rest with heel in contact, toes pointing upward.

Lorna's eyes observe the foot resting on the floor. Conversely, she minimally perceives warmth, liquid, snaky bodies of steam licking her calf, a growing pinprick at the ankle. Worst of all is the continual sense of descent, calling forth a mind-bending epiphany that beckons to her inner self, deep within, one that has no need for symbols, constructs or perception algorisms. Simply, plainly, it sees, knows.

A memory is recollected: A summer trip with her family to Lake Ramie last July. She had enjoyed some alone time at the edge of an old pier. Her legs floated in the brownish water. Today is analogous: A feeling of soft solidity undermined by liquid constitution. Ever so briefly, she witnesses her foot laxly undulate against the floorboards.

With a flit her leg rejoins the body. The same gnawing precedent continues her flight from the couch's edge. She rolls until her face smothers into the plush backrest. From behind there are muffled sounds: A crash of water, droplets rapping on cloth, wood and metal, and lastly, a sapient plop. The air is brackish and increasingly warm. Her world imperceptibly sways before stabilizing.

The notion of a voracious gape makes her slowly fulfill her rotation. Round complete, back pressed against the rest, she peers at the room through laced fingers.

Everything appears like it should; nothing looks wet, though her point of view does not accommodate the floor. Sweaty digits part so she can prop herself with the left elbow. The floor around the television and wall seems fine, no visible disturbances to the furniture or anything else. Lorna finds herself inching towards the precipice, hobbling on the shaky joint.

Like one struggling against a mound of acclivity, she pivots her torso forward. Her heart thuds in perfect correlation with the now frantic tick-tock of the second hand. More and more adrenaline expands her senses. She sees the cushion design, smooth and interweaved, newly dotted with dark spots the size of coins. A ginger touch indicates their warm wetness.

Amazingly, by the couch's edge, from between two planks arises a lone bubble. It has the multihued skin of soap and floats higher and higher, disappearing into the ceiling. Following the ascension causes Lorna to tip back her head and shoulders. At the same time she flings herself backwards to the other end of the sofa, sparing her from a massive black and white form rocketing out of the floor with crashing fluid accompaniment.

She is given the perfect profile. Its skin is sleek and strong, knots of muscles flex bizarrely in the throat and fins. In elementary school, Lorna's shark phase came after her dinosaur phase, which was after her dog phase. One curious fact never left her head--a shark's skin is smooth when rubbed in one direction, rough, like sandpaper, if handled in the other. As more and more of the beast materializes from the ground, she is too mesmerized to be afraid and contemplates reaching out, allowing its coal and alabaster colored body to glide against her fingers, to know for sure.

Under closer scrutiny the wonder is replaced by familiar dread. The aquatic has the color scheme and size of a Killer whale, but has the body type of a Great White shark. The dark great white unswervingly soars upward. Its torso is wide and bulges with flesh. The dorsal and pectoral fins are long, hard, determined. She tries to look at the head, however her vision becomes watery, the eyes sting; the nose fills with a smell. A cupped stroke of her hands improves things, leaves the sensation of moisture on her palms although there is none to be seen. When her eyesight adjusts she is more disturbed and confused than before.

In extraordinary fashion the top half of the fish continues progressing through the ceiling/floor of her parents' den without ill effect to either. And though the head and gills are upstairs, plenty of the fish--stiff fins, hulking torso--is below with her, and most of the tail still to appear. Television says the full length of an adult Killer whale can approach thirty feet, easily dwarfing the ten-foot height of the living room. So, she is given some relief when significant tapering along the body indicates the bound's denouement.

Finally free of the floor the creature's massive four-point caudal fin whooshes mightily by her head. Lorna imagines her captor landing upstairs on its stomach, panting heavily, or not at all. Patiently waiting for someone, her mother, father, brother, sister to open the door for pens or paper or the phone.

Only a stretch of tail is visible and when she cautiously begins to consider being optimistic, that the shark whale will just keep flying into the ether, the end comes to a halt. The tail shudders and lifts up like a closing attic door, disappearing overhead.

A pause. Above, near the stairs, she sees dark pectoral stalactites forming. A patch of yellow-white becomes inlaid with black as the torso and head decline with the grace of a hinge joint.

Its large snout threatens to impact the front door, yet the body continues vertically positioning itself without collision. When the angle becomes severe her extirpator charily swings back in an arc ending over the coffee table. The hungry hanging frame oscillates ever so slightly, like a pendulum, before stiffening.

One black eye meets two brown. Eagerness is all she can see. From the spasmodic jaw to the heaving chest, which appears to have no immediate need for water despite bone-dry gill slits. Saliva drips from the mouth, beads on keen teeth. Lorna looks and knows this shark, this thing hanging from the ceiling, is intelligent enough to end her right now, even on the unanticipated safety of the couch. However, its brainpower is to her advantage for it knows how the game is played. Above the floor is up, the floor and everything beneath is down. UP is safe, DOWN is danger and she is up and safe, for now.

The swollen basihyal works fervently within the mouth; a twisting bulge that knots itself, slams into teeth and palate, snaps in her direction. When the organ draws into the gullet the body falls. Keeping with the antecedent, nothing is disturbed. Ghoulish in manner and ghostly in action the fish flows through the table and floor.

An extended ripple follows its departure. Wet spots bloom on the cushions and her capris. The window is still filled with gloom; no signs of life can be seen or heard. Lorna looks around a room she has known all her life. Wonders what is real and what is not.

Gears are turning more rapidly than before. Rationalizing tells her to lie down, try to sleep until someone returns. No one is coming. Her heart knows this for sure and thuds like a pounding gavel so the message is felt. Rocking occurs again, she wonders if the shark can tip over her dinghy. No, decides something inside her. That would be against the rules. The dorsal fin crests the floorboards near Bam's area and submerges after an impatient figure eight.

Her head feels light, which she attributes to the invisible waves. With each inhale air finds her lungs in decreasing amounts, makes her panic more. Despite the danger, sticking to her plan is the easiest course of action. She knows she cannot save herself without a clear head.

Lorna forces herself to gulp air hard. The sound is ugly and ragged. When ready, she rises into a crouched position. Her left hand grips the backrest; her right hand clutches a pillow. The plan is simple and has only one stab at success. The pillow will hopefully distract enough for her to reach the staircase, which is hopefully tangible. From there she will get to her room, call for help, scoop up her stool, place it on her bed, sit and calm down and wait for release.

A quick prayer ends and the pillow flies towards the fin's last location. One of her feet pushes off the malleable cushion, which contorts from the force. This, combined with the vertiginous motion of the couch, pitches her forward. Her second step onto the firmer armrest straightens her flight. Without hesitation she strides onto the stiff settee, pumps her arms, reaches the far armrest in two paces and propels into the air.

When reaching the leap's apex there is a clap. Out of the corner of her eye she sees the salient shark. The rakish rogue flies closer, jaws thrown back with the elasticity of a snake. Gibbous gums with giant teeth jut forward like

determined feelers. Judging from the illusionary and rapid growth of the approaching head she knows the shark will be on her before she lands on the stairs. Somehow, she twists her body mid-air into a crooked L hoping to kick the fish in the snout, or even better, a glistening black eye. Both feet strike nothing except dead air. Something unseen, coarse and flexible tickles both her ankles. The young woman shrieks, her legs forced to snap into the hard and soft maw.

A snatchy cross made from Lorna's forearms presses against her face and shields most of the image. Intermittent seconds of clearance reveal rising jaws crammed with teeth that go down, down, down into her flesh over and over again; refulgent bone, vibrant from within, so sharp and fast she feels no pain. Mesmerization ensues; her arms limply hang some feet over the wood floor. She stares deeper into the flashing enamel while bodily accelerants activate movement in each iris, widening her pupils, steeping her eyesight with acerbic clarity.

Innumerable glimmering points flank one another, separated by a green-black viscosity threatening to escape like sentient ooze. The same distortion becomes visible along the animal down to the length of tail protruding out the floor, where the submerged fin and stock preserve the inclined position of the gorging body. She feebly attempts to grab the snout only to have her hand slide into the nonexistent flesh. Some inches into the image she feels something jelly-like and cratered. Her wistful concentration returns to the flickering serrated edges. They are unmarred by the liters of blood that should be gushing through lacerated legs, stomach and now chest.

She feels something weighing her down. Lungs cannot fully expand. Neither deflation due to punctured lung, nor flooding internal cavity is the cause. Toes to breast feel encapsulated, much like being bound in a wet, shaggy carpet. The binder contracts to its own beat, squelching her face in the process. The unseen liquid tastes terrible and she reactively spits into the being's flashy mouth.

Abruptly, she feels unburdened and is jetting through the room headfirst. The human projectile penetrates the upper half of the front door, which proves to be an insubstantial pied lattice of light, leading into a cool, cavernous void. There is absolute silence, unalloyed except for her cackles, which are quickly dragged into the absorbent vacuum. It actually made the 'ptoo' sound, she laughs. Tears bubble from her eyes, producing a trail of tiny orbs. They begin to rise, as does she into something above.

Lorna wakes in a safe, familiar position. Arms peel off knees that lower her legs to the surface underneath. It feels soft, downy. Allowing a soft exhale her eyes open and do an once-over her room. Bold posters, plastic glow-in-the-dark stars, painted clouds and mirrors adorn the walls.

She is perched in a slump on her stool, the four legs indenting the blankets spread over the bed. This scene is familiar from ages 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 and now, taking place after attacks so powerful she remembers nothing of them. Muscles are fatigued, which is nothing new; however the facetious feeling amassing in sync with her awakening senses is a pleasant change from zombifying lethargy. The bedroom bifurcates between veneers of

accustomedness and benediction. For whatever the reason, she feels triumphant.

Itchiness licks the sole of her right foot. She hops off the bed onto the thin rug covering the wood space. She chafes the skin, gets it hot, grunts with pleasure. Faint sounds, voices mixed with the clink-clank of dishware, slide under the door and she leaves to find the source. The air in the hallway is pleasing and the jaunt takes her to the foot of the stairs where she tentatively lowers to the bottom. Cold wood feels wonderful against her foot.

Bam licks at her base. She returns the affection by rubbing him down. His fur is thick and reassuring. A few steps resolve before a spread of her favorite foods, drinks and dessert. Henry sets the table with cups and silverware. Her sister and father are seated and acknowledge her entrance.

“You’re finally up. How do you feel?” asks Mom, working her way out of a splattered apron, arms spread wide. Lorna plunges into her mother’s arms; the trace feeling of freefall appears and disappears.

“Pretty good for a change.”

“I can see the difference,” jokes her brother.

“Next time, honey, please call someone if you’re feeling that bad.” Lorna eases her bear hug.

“Sorry, Mom.”

Hopeful barks shoot from the living room. “Henry’s busy, could you please take Bam out.”

“Sure. No problem.”

She slides on her slippers, grabs the leash and dog, and exits into the warm night. Bam piddles in the manicured front lawn under the glow of a brisk moon and twinkling stars. Lorna briefly ponders the zoological possibilities of the universe. Bam pulls at the leash, she follows. Dinner is almost done, but she feels energetic enough for a quick round about the block. Maybe I’ll stop at Bisi’s and get the pre-calc homework. Dog and human begin to follow the sidewalk to the green house with a red scooter in the driveway.

Suddenly, something pings her ear. Heart thuds. Lorna reaches for the sensitive body part and whirls around. No one is there. Her reactive fingertips feel cold and wet: Rain. The sidewalk moistens dark gray. Droplets bounce off leaves. Not a swollen cloud in sight. A stiff wind makes the precipitate fall harder. Lorna assumes the actual storm is still closing in, moving steadily over the ocean towards her small town. Corroboration is inputted in the form of a clap of thunder then lightning strike to the east. I guess the homework will have to wait.

The pair retreat back to the house. She merely twists the knob and the door uncharacteristically retracts two inches. Recognizing the irregularity, the young woman is given little opportunity to comprehend its meaning for Bam pushes in and starts shaking water off his fur. The smell of food ameliorates any conscious apprehension. “Bam, you’re getting water everywhere.” Lorna enters and the door closes behind her.

The Slow Down

T.S. Hurt

Herbert Troy sat down on a small cot with a tray of food in his lap inside a tiny cell of the White County Jail. The sheriff's deputy, Tom O'Brien, stood outside the cell looking over the old man just after slipping the tray of liver and onions and a dried baked potato through the small opening underneath the door. Herbert looked down at the dinner and shook his head. "This looks like cafeteria food." The smell from the food lifted up into his nose as he set the tray of food back on the floor and slid it back to Deputy O'Brien. "Do you guys cook this stuff yourself?"

"It's leftovers from the high school cafeteria." Deputy O'Brien answered him with a small grin across his face while picking the tray up off of the floor.

It took Herbert Troy just two weeks to find out that Tillmoore High School's cafeteria served some of the worst food he had ever tasted in his life- liver and onions was one of the school's specialties. Herbert Troy was Tillmoore High School's ninth grade English teacher. He had taken the job twenty-seven years ago and enjoyed teaching immensely. Deputy O'Brien had discovered the literary works of popular authors from Paul Zindel to Edgar Allen Poe in Mr. Troy's English class, and could not help but feel somewhat sorry for the old man, and what strange predicament he was currently in. "Mr. Troy, you gotta eat something."

"Well then. Prepare something that does not smell like the back seat of your patrol car. You must clean those seats, Thomas, they are dreadful." Herbert answered him. "And stop using words such as 'gotta'. I thought I taught you better than that."

"You did sir." Deputy O'Brien shook his head; embarrassed from the correction he had received. "Mr. Troy?" O'Brien asked, while holding the tray of food up to his chest.

To Herbert Troy, he looked like what he had six years ago standing before his classmates, and reading from his textbook. Except now, the textbook was a tray of liver and onions and a dried baked potato. His worn *Toughskin* jeans and *Happy Days* T-shirt were now a deputy's uniform for the White County Police Department. "How unexpectedly the surface changes, yet the underneath remains the same." Herbert thought as he answered the deputy. "Yes."

"Tell me what happened. Why did you do what you did?"

"Well, deputy. If you will get rid of the ..." Herbert pointed at the tray O'Brien was still holding. "food, then I will."

Deputy Tom O'Brien exited the room momentarily, replacing the tray of food with a small folding chair. Sitting down just outside of Herbert's cell, he didn't make a sound. He just sat there, waiting for Mr. Troy to begin.

1.

It was the beginning of June that year- 1967. I remember it well for I had buried my wife the winter before. I feel I must begin my story at *this* time because it is the accidents and occurrences in my life during which that have made me the man that I am now. Principal Willburn, who from the years '58 through '72 was

principal at Tillmoore High School, had just informed me that my application for employment at Tillmoore had been accepted. A position at the school for a ninth grade English teacher had just opened and he and his Vice-Principal Thorne were both interested in having me come to their school and teach.

I had currently been living twenty miles north of White County, in the county of Gray. It had only been seven months after my wife had died, and I decided to go and teach at Tillmoore, hoping that the change would be of benefit to me. I believed that a change of location would do me good. After my wife's death, seven months earlier, I had decided to stay in the house that she and I had moved into soon after we married. It was in '47 that we were married. There were no neighbors around to keep me company for at least ten miles. A car would pass one every hour, if that. We had both loved the quiet of living away from town, but now I found that the same quiet that had calmed me when Joyce was alive was now disturbing to say the least. Joyce and I were best friends. I would not have wanted our relationship any other way than it had been. As I have said, it was quiet where we lived. There had been enough room for lovers to roam naked through the woods during the day and for those romantics to lie peacefully in a clearing at nighttime and gaze into the sky and count stars with each other. We truly had our Heaven with each other there, yet it was my Hell without her. I know now that no matter how much change that I would have allowed in my life during that time, that Hell would have remained.

Joyce had been an avid lover of nature. She enjoyed walks down the long winding road we lived on. There was so much for her to enjoy as far out into the country as we were. She walked during the morning after I would leave for my job at the Gray County Library, and she would meet me half way down our road on my return. She had told me that her walks, were a way of cleansing her soul, and that sometimes, she would drift off into her own "existence", leaving behind the world she lived in. One time, on my way back from the city, I had approached her in the car. She did not even know I had pulled up beside her until I had rolled down my window and called her name. We laughed about it later that night. I cried about it later that month.

It had been cold that November, and I had urged Joyce to not walk too far from our home. She simply kissed my lips and wrapped my scarf around my neck as she had to push me out the door for work. She told me she would be fine. At that, all I could do was believe her. I left for work, not thinking of the dread that was to come later that evening. It had just started to rain as I left the library. It was the kind of cold rain that makes a person sick if caught out in it for long. All I could think of was Joyce. I had hoped she had decided to stay inside today. I traveled down our road toward our home. I had gotten almost half way there when, out of the rain, I saw the bright headlights of a car coming straight for me. I had to swerve to miss it. I stopped my car, looking behind me as I did. I was furious at how someone could be driving so fast in weather like this and on such a curvy road. The rain had become worse. I could not make out the make or model of the car as it passed. Its license plate was a blur in my rear window.

As I turned back ahead of me, I could not believe what I saw in the light from my headlights. Joyce was lying on the side of the road about 50 feet ahead.

Blood was seeping from the corners of her mouth when I got to her. And as I got out of the car and ran to her side, she begged me to not move her. She told me her neck felt broken and she could not feel her arms or legs. She said that a car had struck her from behind only moments before I had arrived. I was confused at what I should do for her. I did not want to leave her, yet I knew that I had to call for help from the house. I could not move her. It would do more bad than good if I tried. I told her I would return. She spoke softly and told me to stay. Upon her last breath she told me to become a teacher, for it was what I had always wanted for myself, and that she believed in me. She died there in the rain, on our road, and in her own existence.

After her burial, I mourned for quite sometime. I missed her terribly, but I had decided that I would do as she had told me. I began to apply at schools here and about surrounding counties for the position of English teacher. Seven months later I received a call from Principal Wilburn informing me of the opening at Tillmoore.

I sold our home two months later and acquired a new one in White County. It was much smaller than I had been used to, yet it was spacious enough for single occupancy. I was pleased with it. I had hoped to find a house that was not as far away from town as mine and Joyce's was. This particular one was located in a nice middle-class area. It was in a quiet neighborhood with all of the accesses to the local stores no more than five minutes away. Although the drive was steep, and the end of it was a blind-spot for a curve in the road one house up from it, Tillmoore High School was no more than ten minutes away and by that I had decided that this house was a good choice.

It was the beginning of summer, and I took a part -time job at a hardware store to keep me busy. I got to know many of the townspeople at the city meetings held at the courthouse every month. I had introduced myself as the new ninth-grade English teacher at Tillmoore, and parents began rushing their sons and daughters, who would be entering the ninth grade that year, to the hardware store to meet me. The looks on their faces were not any of great expectations of joy or excitement. They were much more like, "I'm sure I will see enough of you when school starts." looks to me. I could not blame them. I remember running in the other direction if I saw any of my teachers during summer vacation. The summer flew by quickly. I was excited to start my new job. The pain of losing Joyce was still there, yet I knew she would be proud of my accomplishments. Thank you, my best friend, for believing in me.

My story is not one that is concerned with my new teaching position at Tillmoore, but I will say for the record that I enjoyed it from the first day on. I enjoyed it all except for the school cafeteria food. I packed my own lunches after the first two liver and onion Mondays. Much of the story, from this point on, will be about what drove me to do what I have done. I beg you to listen impartially, and put yourself in my position, for it is from this vantage point that will answer your question of "why".

2.

The road that I live on is much busier now than it had been in '67. Back then,

most everyone that traveled it obeyed the speed limit- 30 m.p.h. There is nowhere to turn around once in my drive, so in order to leave I must back out into the road. Well, if everyone obeyed the speed limit, backing out of my drive would not be a difficult task to perform. It is not 1967 anymore, and people do not obey the speed limit. This began when the road I live on was extended to reach into the next county. This meant people living in the southern part of Gray County could use my road as an alternative to using the hi-way. When this happened- I believe in '75- all Hell broke loose on my road. By this time, I had grown accustomed to the slow, easygoing ways of the town I lived in. The neighborhood was quiet and peaceful.

During the nights throughout the year, I would be awakened by the diesel engines of semi-trucks rolling their way from Gray County into White, and vice-versa. Not only were they loud, they were fast. I could not believe how fast the trucks would go through a neighborhood. I began making calls to the companies written on the sides of the trucks, to make my complaints. It did no good of course. The person on the other end of the phone who would tell me the manager of the company would have something done was no more than someone paid to say those things to get people like me who really use the 'How's my driving?' number the companies post on the backs of their trucks for just this purpose off their back. I know this because the trucks still sped down my road just as fast after my phone calls as they did before them.

Within the first couple of months, after the county extended my road into Gray County, there had been several car accidents as people such as myself backed out of their driveways needing to leave their homes and go somewhere. There were many times that I would be sitting inside my house, watching TV or reading a book that I would hear the squealing of tires, followed closely by the sound of metal crashing together in that unmistakably sickening sound of one car running into another. Concerned for each other, most of us in the neighborhood would run outside to check out what had happened. I got to know many of my neighbors that way. Ms. Paul, a lady who lived one house up from mine, told me it upset her that so many cars and trucks sped down our road and that she was glad that she no longer had to drive to go anywhere. Ms. Paul was 85 years old at the time and I guess at her age, not driving a car was a good thing for both her and anyone else on the road for that matter.

She smelt of coconut-scented sun-screen that she wore to protect her sensitive skin from the sun, yet every time I saw her she always had a lit cigarette between two of her tobacco stained fingers. Although she still had most of her senses about her, seeing someone that old made me sad. I got the same feeling when my mother would take me to see my great grandmother when I was young. I hoped I would never get that old. Every morning, when I would go to check my mail, I would see Ms. Paul sitting on her front porch in a chair, smoking a cigarette. Each time I passed by her she would wave at me with one of her skinny old arms. The loose skin underneath would shake vigorously back and forth like a clean white sheet hung from a close line blowing in a strong wind. She never failed to ask me if I wanted to come over and have a smoke with her, and no matter how many times I had told her before that I did not smoke, she would

ask just the same. Much of my summer vacations from teaching were spent sitting with her on her front porch, trying not to choke from the cigarette smoke, and listening to her tell me stories.

Ms. Paul's husband had died from a heart attack ten years ago. She did not say much more about him other than that. It was her son Gary that she could ramble on about for more than an hour at a time if given the chance. I believe I knew more about Gary than Gary had known about himself I am sure. Gary had died a month before her husband. She said he had been flying in from Florida on a small two-seater plane when a strong storm blew in from the Atlantic and caused the plane to crash somewhere between there and Georgia- she couldn't quite remember where.

Each night, just before the sun would disappear behind the Appalachians off in the distance, her front porch light would come on. I knew, by this, she was all right and that would put me at ease. Ms. Paul was alone in the world, different and misunderstood like a poem or a song a writer tosses away because he or she feels no one would want to hear anyway. No matter her age, Ms. Paul still had a place in this world just like anyone else, and in my world she was someone that helped me to understand that although I felt alone without Joyce, there would always be someone near who was able to understand that same loneliness.

When I wasn't sitting with Ms. Paul, I was busy doing yard work around my house. I prided myself on what good work I did with the lawn. It looked so green and inviting. If I hadn't been afraid one of my students would pass by, I would have loved to wallow around in it like Joyce and I had done so many times at our home in Gray County. The top of my yard was flat but sloped into a hill as it neared the road. I didn't like cutting the edge of the yard that was close to the road for fear of the speeding cars and trucks passing by. There were many times I had felt the wind from them as they passed. I would feel weak each time this happened. I tried to face them as I got closer- as close as I would get- to the edge of the lawn so I could see any coming- sometimes they could sneak up on you. There was only a slight curb about three inches high that differentiated the level of my lawn to the level of the road. Many times my mind would cause me to see a car or truck speeding around the curve and not being able to handle the turn, running up into my yard and throwing me up onto it's hood, I would bounce off of it's windshield and onto the road, it would then be upon me and crush me underneath it's tires. I would shiver at this.

I spent as less time close to the road and trimming the edges of my lawn as I had to. To beat it all, sometimes people would blow their horns at me as if to say, "Get out of the way, jerk. You're in the road." I knew, just as well, that I wasn't. One year during school, a student had told me that he and his father had passed my house in their car as I had been finishing up the last time cutting my lawn before winter. He said his father had to blow the horn at me because I had been too close to the road. I shook off the remark as one passed down from an overly possessive father with an "I own the road" attitude, and told the student to sit back down and finish reading the chapter in his textbook. Later that evening, I could do nothing but sit and boil about what the student had said. I had been too

close to the road? I don't think so. I did everything in my power to stay as far away from that road as possible and still be able to tend to the edges of my lawn. *How dare that man.* I thought to myself.

Outside, I could hear the engines of cars rev as they passed by on the road. I could not concentrate on my supper that night and pushed away from the dinner table early. I went outside. Ms. Paul's porch light was on. It was already dark. Leaves were falling to the ground from a large walnut tree in my front yard. I strolled across my lawn, kicking around fallen leaves as I did. I grew more and more upset as I walked on. I decided to turn around and go back inside. There was a chill in the air, and I had left my jacket inside. Once there, I decided to turn in for the night.

During my sleep, I was awakened by a loud crash. Immediately, I put on my robe and looked outside. It took me some time because I could not find one of my house shoes. I looked at the clock on the nightstand beside my bed. It was 12:38 A.M. By the time I got to the front door I could hear the voices of two men outside. Their voices were raised and one of the men was angry with the other. I opened my front door and looked over at Ms. Paul's porch. There she was. Standing in a robe and nightcap smoking a cigarette. She called out to me. "Herbert, go check on Hank and Ruth. Will you?"

Hank Gordon was a short, gruff looking man with a crew-cut. He had been a Marine and at the age of 62, he still looked it. Hank was a good person inside once you got past the tough brass that had begun to chip away as the civilian years went by. His wife, Ruth was at the edge of their drive holding him back- his fists were drawn and tight. A tall, slender man, apparently frightened, was standing behind the door of his car trying to apologize to him, but Hank wouldn't have any of it. Neighbors from across the road had come out of their houses to see if everyone was all right.

"You son of a bitch! Didn't you see me turning?" Hank grumbled.

"Sir, I'm sorry." The other man said behind the protection of his car door.

"You will be. Ruth, get out of the way!" Hank ordered.

Ruth saw me on my porch and yelled up to me. "Herbert, call the police." I did. Minutes later they arrived. The police had to handcuff Hank until he promised he would not go after the man in the other car.

Hank spat from behind the police officers. "That bastard could have killed me *and my wife!*"

After all of the commotion had died down, the correct information was exchanged between Ruth and the man who had ran into them as Hank had slowed down to make the turn into their driveway. The man had to have his car towed away from too much damage to the radiator.

Ms. Paul called from her porch to the police officers. "You let Hank go! He ain't hurt nobody."

I turned toward Ms. Paul. "Ms. Paul. Go back inside. Hank is all right."

"You tell 'em Hank!" She yelled as she flipped her cigarette over her porch railing and went back inside her house.

The police offered the man a ride home after letting Hank go. The man got into one of the patrol cars and it pulled away. The others followed.

Hank's wife, Ruth, was a sweet lady. She took Ms. Paul to the grocery store every week just to get Ms. Paul out of the house. Each Christmas, Ruth would bring Ms. Paul and I some baked cookies and eggnog she had prepared for her and Hank. She was just the opposite of her husband. Not to say that Hank was not a good man, and did not do good things but Ruth was soft spoken and had a gentle nature about her. That was how she was different from her husband. If she had a disagreement with someone, she would just smile and let it pass. Not 'ole Hank. He would let you know if he disagreed with you on *anything*.

Hank and I had been fishing plenty of times. Once, I made the mistake of trying to persuade him to use toughies instead of crickets since minnows were running that day. His response: "I never thought I 'd see the day that an English teacher would try to tell a Marine how to catch fish. If we weren't neighbors, I'd put *you* on the end of my hook and toss *you* in the water with the damn fish. You just sit there and use your minnows and I'll stick with my crickets." Hank moved down the bank from me the rest of the time we fished that day and didn't say much more. Needless to say, I didn't rub it in when my fish basket was full at the end of the day, and his was almost empty.

The rear end of Hank and Ruth's car was badly damaged, yet the car ran just fine. After pulling the car the rest of the way up their drive, Hank and Ruth went inside. I could tell Hank was still angry when I heard their front door slam shut. I looked down into the road from my porch and saw bits of glass and metal from the accident sparkling underneath the moonlight at the end of Hank and Ruth's driveway. I went inside and returned to the road with a broom and paper bag. I began sweeping up the glass when I heard the diesel engine of a truck coming down the road in the distance behind me. I could see the light of it's headlights flash against the 30 m.p.h. speed limit sign across the road in front of me as I stopped sweeping.

No sooner than I had stopped and stepped further into the Gordon's driveway to get out of the way. The truck passed by. It had to be going at least 45 m.p.h. The wind from it blew me backwards then almost pulled me with it as it passed. The bits of glass and metal that I had left in the road crunched and splintered underneath its tires. After the truck had passed, I saw that it had taken most of the debris with it. At that second, standing at the edge of the Gordon's driveway in my robe and house shoes, I had a premonition. At that time, I did not realize the events that the premonition would belong to, yet somehow, I sensed that sometime... I would.

3.

Four years passed before my premonition had begun it's formation into the present. The year was 1979. I was still teaching English at Tillmoore, although it was the middle of summer vacation. Something terrible happened to Ruth and Ms. Paul that summer. It was during July when it happened. I had been inside my house finishing off some dishes from lunch when I looked out through my kitchen window to see Ruth and Ms. Paul walking across my yard. Ms. Paul saw me and waved. She had gotten a bit slower since I had moved in next door to her, and she often needed help getting around now. Ruth noticed her waving but could not

wave herself for having to keep one hand on Ms. Paul's arm and the other arm around her waist. She looked up and smiled. By the time I got to my front door and stepped onto the porch, the two ladies had made it to Hank and Ruth's car in their driveway. "Going to the store?" I asked them as I dried my hands with a dishtowel and stepped out and onto the porch.

Ruth was helping Ms. Paul sit in the passenger seat. "Yes. Ms. Paul called me, said she was out of cigarettes."

I looked at Ms. Paul sitting in the car as Ruth closed the door. It had been the first time I had ever seen her without a cigarette between her fingers. Ms. Paul could have sent the *Marlboro Man* trotting off into the sunset with a pink slip in his pocket. Eighty-nine and still smoking, a true poster-child for tobacco companies everywhere.

The thought of seeing Ms. Paul on a billboard somewhere wearing a cowboy hat and chaps, smoking a cigarette made me laugh. Ruth had said Hank was inside sleeping if I wanted him for anything as she got in her car and buckled herself in behind the steering wheel.

I waved goodbye to them. Ms. Paul stared straight ahead of her as they backed down the driveway with the same queer smile on her face as she had had since she began slowing down. I was not able to tell if Ms. Paul was smiling because she was happy or if just maybe the skin on her face had drawn as tight around her head as it was going to. I started to go back inside my house, and as I pulled the front door closed behind me, it happened. I did not hear the approaching car speeding it's way down the road before it was too late. Glass and metal flew everywhere as I turned to see a yellow sports car smash into the passenger side of Ruth and Hank's car. Both Ruth and Ms. Paul were hidden behind a jig-sawed surface of glass. The rear end of the sports car rose off of the ground as it hit the car in front of it. The driver of the sports car came crashing through its windshield and into the passenger side window of Ruth and Hank's car. There had been no sounds of screeching tires, or loud engine to warn Ruth of the on coming danger.

Just as quick as it had happened, the crash had ended. The force of the sports car had lodged its front end well into the passenger side of the other, and sent them both sliding twenty feet further down the road. As soon as I was able to close my mouth and swallow, a rush of panic surged through me as I ran toward the heaps of mangled automobiles in the middle of the road. I called out Hank's name as loud as I could over and over until I finally reached the cars. Ruth was hanging out of the driver's side window. Her left arm had been torn from her body and laid in the road within a motley mixture of blood and glass. She was dead by the look of things, certainly dead. All three of them were. I almost collapsed. I looked through the front of the car and could see Ms. Paul was stretched out from the front seat to the back. Her head had been snapped backwards and her body had been twisted into the shape of an L. The driver of the sports car was sprawled out across her in what looked perverted under the circumstances. His head had come off during the whole mess and had landed on the hood of his own car. Ms. Paul's leg twitched as I heard someone running up behind me. It was Hank.

It took Hank almost as long to handle Ruth's death as it had taken me to be able to handle Joyce's. Both of Hank and Ruth's sons had come to stay with him. Both were in the military and could only stay until after the funeral. At the funeral, Hank broke down into tears. He looked weak and beaten by his sadness, but he was still an ex-Marine. Hank was tough and would survive. After Hank's sons had left, he turned to me for comfort. We spent a lot of time together the rest of that summer. We had quite a bit in common since Ruth's death- more than I thought I would ever have with him. For a long time he would talk of nothing but "that damned road" we both lived on. He talked of how he would give anything if there could be just one way that he could get revenge for his wife's death. In joking, I tried to lighten the mood by telling him that I had thought many times of how I could, once and for all, put an end to people speeding down the road and that I thought I had finally come up with the perfect solution.

All I had been able to think of since seeing poor Ruth's arms laying amid all of that blood and glass was, four years ago, when the semi-truck that had almost hit me as I had started to clean up the metal and glass at the edge of Hank and Ruth's driveway was how the truck's tires had picked most of the flotsam up out of the road and took it with it. I thought about the possibility of laying objects- sharp objects- out in the middle of the road, and how things just might slow down around the old neighborhood. Hank loved my idea. Since Ruth's death, he had lost almost all of what little bit of self-control he had ever had to begin with. He was ready to get even with those "speed demon bastards" that put our lives in danger on our road. My idea of laying sharp objects out in the middle of the road had only been passed along in one of the many light-hearted conversations I had recently had with him.

I had not been serious with my proposal. I had only wanted Hank to realize that I sympathized with him, and that I was on his side concerning the matter. I didn't know that he would stand up from his lawn chair, look down at me as I sat in mine, and with a glass of cold, sweet tea rose above his head declare me a "genius". He looked like a sad version of Patrick Henry standing in my front yard with his arm raised in the air. "*Give me liberty or give me death.*" I began to think to myself when I saw him standing above me. However, *Give me a break*, was what I had ended up thinking. I don't remember if I had said that out loud or not, but by the way Hank threw his glass of tea down on the lawn and then grabbed me by both of my shoulders, I somehow knew by the crazed look in his eyes that *whatever* I had said, he had taken it very serious.

It was August 1st, and two weeks before the first day of the new school year. I had to get busy setting up my classroom for my new students so I set the alarm on my clock radio for 9:00 A.M. I woke up earlier than I had expected that morning to the pounding of Hank's meat hooks on my back door. The sun hadn't even come up yet. I looked outside through a curtain on my back door. Hank was wearing a dark shirt and ball cap pushed down low, just above his eyes. I unlocked the door and opened it.

"Come on out. Hurry." Hank said in an excited whisper. I could tell he wanted to grab hold of me but his arms were full. He was carrying a cardboard box.

"Hank, I'm not even dressed." I said, yawning.

"We gotta hurry while it's still dark. Nobody's up yet, just come outside." Hank licked the spit from around the corners of his mouth.

I walked outside and followed him in my boxer shorts and undershirt. He wouldn't let me go get my house shoes. "What do you have in the box, buddy?" I asked him.

I had to trot at a fast pace just to keep up with him. Tiny rocks in the driveway stabbed at the sensitive bottoms of my feet. "Hold on, I'll show you." He answered. He looked back and forth from left to right as we walked down my driveway and stopped at the edge of the road. I started to ask him again. He turned to look at me.

"Shh!" He spat.

It was quiet. Nothing was stirring- except for old Hank and me.

He walked out into the road and dumped the contents of the box at his feet.

There were four small boards. Each board was about a foot and a half long and almost an inch thick. They all had long nails sticking out of them. The nails had been inserted from both sides so when they landed in the road, they made an iron clinking sound. There were so many nails in each of the boards I couldn't begin to count them all.

Hank held onto the box as he turned and grabbed my arm. "Come on!" He said. Hank was giggling as he pulled me over to his yard and threw me onto my stomach. He lay down next to me and told me to stay low. The ground was wet and I didn't like how the moisture from the grass was beginning to soak into my shirt and against my chest. It was cold.

From off in the distance, I could hear an approaching vehicle. I could see its headlights reflecting off of the speed limit sign at the end of my drive across the road. Hank was still giggling. "Stay down and watch this." He found time to say before the car came speeding around the curve.

Just then- POW- it sounded as though all of the car's tires had blown at the same time as the car ran across the boards with the nails in them. Hank let out a cheer as the car skidded sideways. As the car slowed, I could hear the boards smacking against the pavement each time one would come back around to it. I could not help but laugh at the sight myself.

"Let's go." Hank pulled me up off of the ground. "Stay low."

We traveled around the back of his house and across his backyard to mine.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning- same time." He said as he hit the bottom of the empty cardboard box and took off back to his house. His laughter sounded childish and crazy.

Before I could lock the door behind me, a knock on my front door caught my attention. I went to it and looked through the peephole. It was a young man about twenty-five at the most. He was scratching his head and looking over his shoulder at the road. I opened the door.

"Sorry to bother you mister. I just had an accident with my car. Can I use your phone?"

I almost started laughing right out in front of the kid, but somehow kept my composure. "Sure." I said as I faked a yawn. "Come on in."

Hank and I played our pranks almost every morning for the next week. Each

morning he came over with more boards full of nails. By the third day we had wrecked a total of seven cars and three semi-trucks. The cars and trucks were simply going too fast to avoid the boards lying, inconspicuously, in the middle of the road. After each time the tow truck would pull the wrecked vehicle away, we would go right back down to the road and dump more nail riddled boards out into it. I had not had so much fun since Joyce had been alive. Hank seemed to be enjoying himself as well. The madness that had overtaken Hank had also infected me. I started helping him make the traps and had neglected my responsibilities of getting my classroom ready for the new school year. I still had another week. I would get it done I had thought.

It seemed we had a never-ending supply of cars and trucks to wreck although we kept up with our escapade every morning. Both Hank and I knew that the main objective of stopping people from speeding down our road could and would never be accomplished. No matter how many vehicles we wrecked, there would be more. The sad fact was that our road would more than likely be just as dangerous tomorrow as it was today.

On the morning before the first day of school, Hank had come over with an especially wide-eyed look. His right arm was empty but I could tell he was holding something behind his back with his left. "Where are the boards?" I asked him.

"Forget the boards. I got something better." He said.

Hank took his left arm from around his back. He was holding a rifle.

"What?" I asked him. I had to make sure I had just seen him holding what I thought I had.

"Take it. You get first shot!"

"At what?"

"Those goddamn speed demon's tires." Hank was gritting his teeth. "Screw the boards, man. We gotta prove we're not pussies." He shoved the gun into my sweating palms. "You can't back out now soldier, you gotta be gung-ho with the program!"

Hank not only looked but also sounded more like a marine now than he ever had.

"I...I..." I muttered but couldn't come out with what I wanted to say.

"Suck it up, son." He ordered. "Do it for Joyce."

I could just stare.

"Haven't you thought about it before now? How you'd like to kill the person who ran over your poor wife?"

"Hank. This..." I tried to reason with what he had said but his words were hanging over me like dark angry clouds.

"We both know you'll never find the person who struck her down, but it's not so much as the person, Herb." Hank started to shake and my hands started to grip the rifle tighter. "It's the damn disregard for the safety of others that killed her. It was the reckless abuse of power that these assholes feel every time they sit behind the wheel of their cars. I know about that kind of power, I felt it in the war behind my gun."

Hank's words ignited a feeling of anger I had thought I had smothered out

inside me long ago.

“What I want you to do is show ’em how that power can backfire on ’em.” He finished.

My left ear twitched as the sound of an engine came barreling out of the quiet night. I ran around to the front of my house, keeping low, and down to the end of my drive. I had lost track of Hank, as what happened next seemed to displace every sense of the present somewhere inside some nonexistent portal that had closed off that world from mine. I got into position and was ready to pull the trigger as soon as I saw the car’s headlights coming around the curve. I had aimed for the tires, but I fired too soon and off of my mark. The cars headlights must have blinded me, and the bullet blew through the windshield. Everything after that seemed to slow to a sickening halt.

4.

“The other officer told me the lady driving the car is dead, Thomas.”

“Yeah, Mr. Troy, she is.”

“What about Hank?”

“He’ll be alright. He’s just bruised up from jumping out of the way when the lady lost control of her car and ran up in his yard.”

“I’ll never understand why a person would go that fast down a neighborhood road like mine anyway.”

“She was a single mother on her way to the hospital. She was expecting and going into labor.”

5.

In a ninth grade English classroom on the second floor of Tillmoore High School, twenty-eight students sat in a sparsely decorated classroom waiting for their teacher.

MO(U)RNING FLIGHT

Michael Albani

“Hey,” someone whispered to me in a faint, cherub-like tone, “you awake, mister?”

I ignored the question and kept my eyes closed. I struggled to get comfortable in the stiff, metal airport chair while listening to the sultry Southern lyrics of Lynyrd Skynyrd belting from my headphones. Ronnie Van Zant sang, “Angel of darkness is upon you, stuck a needle in your arm.”

“Mister?” the same voice cooed again, this time a bit louder.

I continued to ignore it. Ronnie’s voice was far more important to me. He bellowed, “So take another toke, another blow for your nose, one more drink, fool, would drown you.”

“Mister!” This time the voice was much louder and I could feel that whoever the voice belonged too was also delivering a few swift pokes to my forearm.

I reluctantly forced my eyes open, wiping the morning crust out of my tear ducts with my right hand. Standing to my left was the source of the questioning, a

blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy who was probably no older than six or seven. "What do you need, kid?" I asked.

With a Cheshire smile, he began to interrogate me. "Why you goin' to Florida, mister? Huh? Are you goin' to Disney World? My mommy and daddy are takin' me to Disney World and it's gonna be really fun. We're goin' to the Magic Kingdom and Blizzard Beach and..."

I cut the boy off. "Look, kid. It's seven in the morning. I'm really tired and I'm really not in the mood for talking right now. Why don't you scram? Go back to your mommy and daddy. Maybe they'll talk to you."

The boy's grin turned into a grimace. "You're mean!" he screamed, running away from my side. I felt a bit guilty after castigating him. I'm not quite sure why though. I've never liked kids. Why? Probably because I understand that kids are not really the innocent little angels that Hallmark commercials make them out to be. The truth is that kids are mean. They're cruel. They're sadistic little conformity police who patrol parks and playgrounds and beat down anyone who doesn't fit their status quo. I know this because I was a kid once, a kid who didn't fit the status quo. I went to a public elementary school and I was an exceptional student. That's not some smug over-exaggeration either, that's just a fact. My grades were perfect, I always did my homework, and all my teachers loved me. I was above average. That was different. Kids did not like that.

You know, whenever there is a movie or television show about talking animals, they always portray the cute and fluffy creatures as kids. That is not accurate at all. Kids are really like wolves. They're bloodthirsty. They hunt in packs. Once they have a scent for their prey, they don't stop chasing it until they rip it apart. I have pictures of a young me with bruises and torn clothing to prove that point.

It could not have been that kid that made me guilty. More likely, it was just the situation I was in that brought on the felling of shame. It was a Friday morning. I was sitting in Detroit Metro Airport preparing to board a plane to Miami. All of this was a consequence of a devious ruse that I had personally orchestrated.

Alright, perhaps I should be a little more specific when use the phrase "devious ruse". It was the spring of my senior year of high school and I desperately wanted to have a real Spring Break. I asked my parents if I could go with my friends to somewhere sunny, somewhere far away from the dreary backdrop of suburban Metro Detroit. But time and time again they turned down my requests, saying that it would be too dangerous or someone could force me to get drunk or something like that. Now, I know that the only reason my parents reacted this way is because they love me so much, but sometimes they just don't realize how constricting they can be. I knew if I was ever going to have the Spring Break of my dreams, I would have to be deceptive.

I saved up enough money to covertly purchase a round-trip ticket to Miami. I knew that I could spend an entire week with some friends there, no questions asked. Then, a few weeks before my flight, I told my parents that I was going on a mission trip with my church youth group. It was a horrible lie, I know, but it was very effective. I even volunteered a friend from my youth group to drive me to the

airport to give the lie more credibility. My parents were fine with this since my plane left on a Friday and they both had to work.

I was nervous about this plan at first. A million things could have gone wrong. However, once my friend dropped me off at the airport and I made it all the way through the security checkpoint and to my gate, all the nervousness left my body. Unfortunately, that basin in my body that had been filled with anxiety was now occupied with guilt. I had managed to successfully fool my parents, though, and I decided that all that was really left to do was relax until my plane to Paradise was ready to leave.

#

I continued to fuss in my torturous chair. My flight had been delayed because of what some flight attendant on a loudspeaker called a “change of equipment”. I’d never actually flown before, but I had listened to enough stand-up comedians to know what that term was a euphemism for: broken plane. Truthfully, I expected as much from an airline and I had my iPod ready for just such an occasion. I had closed my eyes again and was about to drift into a light nap when I heard a grainy voice ask, “Excuse me, do you mind if I have a seat?”

I opened my eyes to see who was addressing me but the sunlight emanating from the windows was blindingly strong. At first, it looked like a shining white phantasm was standing before me. As my eyes adjusted to the light though, I could see that it was just an old man. He was wearing a white suit with a shirt, tie, shoes, and hair all of the same hue. He also clutched an ivory cane in his right hand. I stared at him and then looked to my right to the sight of an empty chair.

“Not at all,” I told him.

“Well thank you very much,” he replied with a smile. His voice was gravelly; it sounded like someone had sandpapered his throat. There was something creepy about his smile too. I could not put my finger on it exactly, but it just looked very ominous, like it had been carved on with a razorblade.

As the old man slowly maneuvered his way to the chair I began to examine him a bit more closely. He had a sort of grandfatherly quality to him that I could see in the rows of trenches on his face and the thick blood pipelines protruding out of his hands. I would say that he reminded me of my own grandfather, but there were a few unusual things about him. The first thing was his smell. This was by no means a normal old person smell. It was more like the smell of rancid meat mixed with road kill or some other mixture of decaying animals. The second thing I noted was a jet black mourning band affixed to his left arm.

“So, have you ever flown before, my boy?” the old man asked.

I was a bit taken aback by his friendly banter. “No, sir,” I responded, “This is my first time.”

“Well, I don’t think you have anything to worry about, my boy. Flying is, after all, the safest way to travel.”

“I’ve heard that.” There was an awkward silence for a moment. I wanted to just close my eyes and listen to some more Skynyrd until boarding, but the old man continued to stare at me. He looked as though he was starving for my conversation. Meanwhile, I stared at the mourning band on his arm. I’m not sure

why the sight of it filled me with such apprehension. Maybe it was that the blackness of the band so starkly contrasted with everything else about the old man. Realizing that he might find my staring rude, though, I quickly tried to restart our dialogue. "So, how about that weather? Perfect flying weather, right?"

The old man did not seem very happy about this comment. "Bah! Boring is what it is. If you ask me, clear, sunny skies are just plain uninteresting. I'm really hoping that we hit some storms while we're in the air."

I thought that response was a bit strange. "Storms?"

He flashed me a sinister smile. "Yes. Storms. Booms of thunder. Flashes of lightning that stretch across the sky like skeleton hands." He stretched his own arm out to demonstrate what the sight would look like.

I let out a small chuckle. "Wouldn't those conditions be a little dangerous to fly in?"

"The danger is what makes it so much fun." He let out a slight sigh and then, with a coy demeanor, he asked me, "So, when you woke up this morning did you think it would be your last day on Earth?"

#

"What?" I asked him, a bit perplexed by this sudden question.

He repeated himself saying a bit more annoyed this time, "When you woke up this morning did you think it would be your last day on Earth?" I was speechless. I kept thinking about this question but I simply could not think up a response. The old man then continued to speak, "What I mean is, any day could be our last, even today. Think about it for a moment. It is true that flying is the safest way to travel, but we could always hit a patch of stormy weather that could throw us into oblivion. And, of course, technology is not perfect. For all we know the plane could malfunction while it's in the air."

"I guess so," I said quietly, almost under my breath. I could not think of anything else to say.

"I'm sorry. Maybe I'm being a bit too morbid around someone so young. I mean, it's not like you've got any bad karma that would weigh the plane down. No. I bet a good boy like you probably hasn't even lied to his parents before."

As soon as he said that, my heart sunk. Sweat permeated on my brow and a lump formed in my throat. I managed to squeak out, "Can you excuse me for a moment?" Then, I got out of my seat and darted to the nearest restroom where I turned on a sink and splashed some cool water in my face. I looked at my reflection in the dirty mirror. How? How could he have known? I knew there was something strange about that man. I knew it. I could feel it in my bones while he was next to me. It was like he was the source of some spiritual pressure crushing down on me. Was it possible that he was more than a man? Could he have been something sent by God to punish me for lying? If that was the case, what was my punishment going to be? That old man talked about death with such joy. Was He taunting me?

I began to take slow, deep breaths to calm myself down. Then, I started to think logically and I realized that my guilt was causing me to severely overreact. After all, there was no way there could be anything supernatural about that man. He was probably just some old creep with a fetish for the grave. It all made sense

in my head. Even with all my reasoning, though, I could still not shake the suspicion that something was truly otherworldly about the old man.

As these thoughts raced through my head, a voice came over the airport loudspeaker that said my plane was ready to board. I walked out of the bathroom and pulled my cell phone out of my pocket. There was still time. I could come clean to my parents. They could pick me up and I'd get in trouble, but at least I wouldn't be on a plane with that old man. I dialed the first six digits of my father's work number, but as I was about to press the seventh, my logic pulled out the victor in my mind's internal struggle. This was my one chance to have a great Spring Break and I wasn't about to let some superstitious nonsense or some creepy old man ruin that. So, I closed my phone and went back to the gate.

#

When I arrived back at the gate the old man was gone, probably already on the plane. I made my way onto the plane hoping that that would be the last I'd see of him. I got to my seat quicker than the person who would be sitting next to me. I had the window seat. Surrounding me were the stereotypical airline passengers that no person wants to be sitting next to. In front of me was a man so humongous and bloated that he nearly took up two seats. Next to him was someone I saw earlier in the terminal getting drunk at one of the many bars. I could not see his face, but the way he moaned and wobbled around in his seat made me suspect he was still thoroughly inebriated. Behind me was a young couple and of course they had a screaming baby with them. The only person missing from this horrendous hodgepodge was a woman with too much bad perfume and I sincerely hoped that that would not be the person taking the seat next to me.

After a few moments, my seat neighbor arrived and he was accompanied by a bad smell. But it was not perfume. It was the smell of rancid meat mixed with road kill that was far too familiar to me. I looked up to the sight of the old man from the terminal who was eyeing me with a gaze I would suspect a boa constrictor would give a feeder mouse. He asked me again, "Excuse me, do you mind if I have a seat there?"

#

After about thirty minutes into the flight, the old man drifted off into a sound slumber. Unfortunately, I was unable to enjoy the luxury of sleep. How could I with the thought of some potential supernatural superpower sitting right next to me? Still, my logical side kept telling me that this was just a normal old man albeit a little sick in the mind. I decided to take some time to look at the old man more closely to prove to myself that he was human. His white hair was slicked back without any gel, a feat that can only be achieved after years of training. I was surprised by the fact that even though his face was covered in wrinkles, he had no liver spots or other age marks. I looked at his open mouth, which emitted what smelled like toxic fumes, and noticed that his teeth were perfectly white. Then again, they could have been dentures.

I moved my eyes down the old man's left arm, past the roadblock of the telltale mourning band, and to his hands. Much like his face, these hands were not the same hands characteristic of old people. True, they had thick veins that

swirled around like garden snakes, but there were again no age spots. I also noticed that his nails were perfectly manicured. The tips were rounded off, they were buffed, and the cuticle beds were well tended too. Within his hands was the ivory can, perhaps made from a tusk of an elephant that served as a steed for Hannibal. But again, closer inspection revealed something that I had not seen before. On top of the cane was a silver handle molded into a perfect sphere. There was more to it though, I knew it. I gently moved my hand over and rotated the cane to reveal the design of gruesome, cracked skull adorning the top.

“Pretty nice, isn’t it?” the old man suddenly said. Surprised, I immediately raised my head and became transfixed within his serpentine gaze.

“Ye...yeah,” I stammered. “It’s really nice.”

The old man seemed pleased with my fear. “My cane’s not the only thing you’ve been admiring. Right?”

“What?”

“Back at the terminal, I saw you very intently staring at this band around my arm.” He pointed to the single piece of black fabric on his body. “Do you know why I’m wearing it?”

“Be...Because you’re in mourning?”

“Very good. Now tell me, who do you think I’m in mourning for?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh come now,” the old man taunted, “Guess!”

“I don’t know.”

“Alright, I’ll tell you. The answer is: everyone.” Just then, the plane began to shake. People shrieked almost in tandem. They dropped their drinks and their Sky Mall catalogues. The baby behind me started to cry out a deathly screech. As chaos ensued with the cabin, the old man started singing, “There’s no earthly way of knowing, which direction we are going.”

I recognized the song that he was singing and immediately connected it with terrible things to come. People continued to scream. The baby continued to cry. The old man continued to sing, “Is the grisly reaper mowing? Yes! The danger must be growing.” The world I knew was falling apart around me.

Then, as utter madness was engulfing the plane, I heard a faint noise. I began to focus my hearing and noticed it was coming from the drunk in front of me. He was whispering a Hail Mary to himself. I knew there was nothing I could do to stop what was going on in the aircraft, so I decided to join him. I prayed to God and asked forgiveness of my sins and everything unrighteous that I have ever done and I especially prayed that He would forgive me for the lie I told my parents. Once I finished my prayer, the shaking of the plane stopped.

For a moment, the cabin was silent except for the baby whose mother was trying to soothe it back into its slumber. A loud ping sound came across the loudspeaker and the captain started to speak, “Folks, this is your captain speaking. We apologize for the disturbance but we ran into some unexpected turbulence. Everything is alright now and it should be smooth sailing from here on out until we reach our destination. Thank you very much for flying with us and have a nice day.”

“Well that was enjoyable,” the old man said, snickering with a sinister grin across his face. I was silent for the remainder of the flight and I could barely walk when I disembarked at Miami International Airport. Who exactly was that old man? Had I really looked Death in the face? Or was he truly just some ancient sadist who liked screwing around with young people for his own amusement? There were too many question and I was frankly too scared to think about them all at one time. All I could say for certain was that I had reached my Paradise, but I was wishing that I never left the ground.

THE RED FOG

Brodie Michale

Sharla, a twenty pound black Doberman was wandering the dark, quiet hillside, near her owner’s farm, when suddenly she spotted a mysterious, red mist drifting out of a nearby creek bed.

The mystified Doberman had roamed that land for twelve and a half years, and she had never seen anything like it. There usually was a heavy fog on cloudy, moist nights like this one, but never of that strange, red color.

She began barking, while running towards the red smog. It seemed to be pulling her into it.

“Sharla, come here, girl!” Fred Wycliff hollered from the front doorstep of his nearby ranch house. “I hope that damn dog hasn’t run into them woods again. Sharla!”

It was then Fred noticed the red mist rising gradually out of the creek bed, not more than thirty yards away from his farm. He could hear Sharla’s barks coming from inside it.

“What the hell is that?” Fred asked out loud, while finding himself making his way towards the red smoke, as if he were in a hypnotic state of some kind.

Fred realized the red fog seemed to be growing further and further out of the creek. It made no sound and moved in a slow, peculiar manner.

Soon, he could no longer hear Sharla’s barks wailing from inside the red glowing gloom.

When Fred proceeded into the surrounding redness, he could not feel, smell, or hear anything unusual. Nothing was happening.

Suddenly, he started choking in uncontrolled horror, when he felt the entire inside of his body fill up with smoke. It felt as if his insides had suddenly caught on fire. He could not breathe.

As he continued to gasp for fresh air, Fred felt both of his eyes explode into flames. He then passed out.

Once Fred woke up, he did not know who or where he was. All he knew was that he had an urge to kill. He did not care who he killed. Fred would kill anybody.

Soon, Fred came sauntering leisurely out of the red fog; his eyes gleaming bright red.

He began making his way up towards his house, where his wife, Margaret slept soundly in their bed.

Margaret was suddenly awakened when she heard the front door loudly slam shut. She then heard the noisy, wet footsteps of her husband making his way into the living room.

“Fred, what are ya doin’?” she called out to her strident husband. “When are ya comin’ to bed?”

Fred did not answer her. Instead, she heard him opening the closet in the living room.

Margaret was about to climb out of bed, and find out what her silent husband was up to, when suddenly she could hear his soaking wet mountain boots slopping moistly down the hallway. He soon came proceeding into the bedroom.

Suddenly, Margaret froze in stricken horror, unable to let out a single word.

Fred glared back at her, with his eyes blazing bright red. He aimed his loaded rifle straight at her terror filled face.

“Fred, what are ya doin’?” Margaret choked out in trembling trepidation. Tears started flowing down from her frightened, astonished eyes.

“Hello, honey,” Fred replied in a ghastly whisper; his mouth forming into a wicked grin. He then pulled the trigger.

Blood splattered across the blankets, as a loud bullet fired into the middle of Margaret’s forehead, shattering through her brain and skull.

Margaret lied dead on her bed, with blood still gushing out of the giant hole in the middle of her forehead. Her petrified eyes remained open, as if she could still see her husband’s red gleaming eyes gazing at her in morbid excitement.

When he was done glancing over his wife’s mutilated body, Fred made his way back outside.

He began to amble his way back into the red fog, where he continued to look for his dog Sharla.

Julie Townsend had become worried about her sister Margaret and her husband Fred. She had tried calling their house many times over the past couple days, but no one would ever answer the phone.

Both Fred and Margaret never seemed to leave the house that much. They hardly ever went on any trips. And when they did, Margaret usually called Julie to let her know they were leaving.

On the third day, when Julie had still not heard from them, she decided to drive up to their farm.

When she arrived at their small ranch house, she found the front door standing wide open. Fred’s truck was still in the driveway.

After she pulled up beside Fred’s black, beaten up Ford Truck, she turned her car off, and then made her way up to the open front door.

“Hello?” she called out, meticulously stepping into the mute home.

There was no reply.

“Margaret? Fred?” she hollered. “Are ya guys home?”

She kept waiting for Sharla, Fred and Margaret’s Doberman, to come greet her at the door, barking her enormously loud bark.

The only thing Julie could hear was the unusual silence of the unperturbed house.

Everything looked fine in their home. There was no broken furniture or any damaged objects lying around on the floor. One thing she thought was strange, though, was the front hallway closet standing all the way open.

Why was the front door and the hallway closet open? Did Fred and Margaret not care to close them?

When she walked into the hallway, Julie then noticed the muddy, wet footprints of what looked to be made by mountain boots on the wooden floor.

“Hello?” she yelled louder, beginning to slowly promenade down the wooden floor.

As she soon came entering Fred and Margaret’s bedroom, Julie felt her heart sink low in her chest.

There lying on the bed was her sister Margaret, with a giant, blood smeared bullet hole in the middle of her forehead. Her fear filled eyes were gazing up at the ceiling, and her mouth hung slightly open. Blood covered her white nightgown, and the blankets and sheets of the gruesome bed.

Julie had to immediately to take her eyes away, as she instantly became sick. While crying her way through the hallway, she ran into the kitchen to call the police.

The terrifying image of the gigantic bullet hole in her sister’s forehead would still not leave her disturbed mind.

Once the police and paramedics arrived, Margaret’s corpse was put into an ambulance, and taken to a morgue.

Julie could not stand being there any longer. She left in tears, as an officer drove her home.

When police officials investigated the house, the only evidence they had were the muddy footprints of the mountain boots in the hallway leading into Fred and Margaret’s bedroom. They knew the bullet that had been shot through Margaret’s forehead had come from a Springfield rifle, an early twentieth century bolt-action firearm.

When a friend of Fred’s told the police Fred had a pair of mountain boots he usually wore around the farm, they had reason to believe he was the main suspect, even though he was nowhere to be found. His dog Sharla was also nowhere to be found.

Fred and Margaret’s families could not believe the fact that Fred had actually murdered Margaret. They both loved each other very much, and had been married for over fifty-two years.

That night, Detective Tom Ramsey drove along a darkened dirt road, twelve miles from Fred and Margaret Wycliff’s farm.

Detective Ramsey had been assigned the Wycliff case. He was to find clues leading to Fred Wycliff's whereabouts.

Tom Ramsey had been a detective in Amber, Oklahoma, for fifteen years. He loved his job and had solved many murder cases throughout the state of Oklahoma. This was the first case he was working on in his own hometown.

He was tired, as he drove his way home that night.

Throughout the entire day, he had spent his time talking with the family and friends of Fred and Margaret Wycliff. He learned their whereabouts the night Margaret was murdered.

Knowing they had evidence leading to Fred's mountain boots and Springfield rifle, Tom kept wondering what was Fred's motivation to kill his own wife, who he had been married to for over fifty-two years. Something did not seem to add up.

All of a sudden, Tom instantly slowed his car down, when suddenly he spotted the red-eyed animal strolling along the outside of the woods, near the dirt road.

Soon, Tom came pulling his car over to the left hand side of the road, still unable to believe what he was seeing.

It was not quite dark, yet. The sun was still almost tipping down into the horizon, so Tom could somewhat view the red-eyed beast. He realized it was a tall, black canine.

It was then the astonished detective remembered the Wycliff's black Doberman was also still missing.

After Tom turned his car off, he grabbed his gun from the glove compartment, and quickly climbed out of his car.

The huge dog with red eyes was still making its way along the edges of the woods. Every once and awhile, it would lower its head to the ground, hoping to pick up a scent of some nearby creature.

"Hey!" Tom blared shrilly at the sinister looking dog.

Suddenly, the Doberman turned its red gleaming gaze towards Tom, who tried hard not to shiver while holding onto his firearm.

The scared detective had to convince himself what he was seeing was real. The six foot Doberman had red glowing eyes not from this world.

It's fuckin' possessed! Tom thought in frightened shock. That's why Fred Wycliff killed his wife! He's also possessed!

While barking in frenzied madness, the raging beast began darting towards Tom and his car in fast, godlike speed.

With his hands slightly trembling, Tom raised his pistol in both hands, aiming for a clear shot at the approaching demon dog.

When he found a careful, steady shot, he pulled the trigger.

The rushing Doberman gave out a final whimper, as it collided onto the wet grass, with blood trailing down its long, wounded chest.

Tom decided not to make his way towards the bloody creature, and find out if it was dead. He would wait until others arrived.

The fearful detective could still feel himself shaking. He desperately needed a cigarette.

After he called the police on his cell phone, Tom waited in his car and smoked a cigarette, while waiting for backup to arrive.

Once they arrived, Tom admitted to seeing the dog's eyes glowing red. He knew he sounded like a fool, but he wanted to be honest about what he saw.

Tom had never been a believer in ghosts or the supernatural. It was really difficult for him to explain what he had observed that night. The other deputies did not criticize him, or give him a hard time. They knew Tom was a very honest and dedicated detective.

When the animal control person examined the deceased Doberman, he found no redness in its eyes.

Tom had no idea what he had seen in that animal. He knew it was not his imagination. His mind never played tricks on him. What he saw could never be explained.

When he arrived home later that night, Tom found his wife Aerial in the kitchen, cooking a pot of beef stew for him.

"Honey, you don't have to be up this late cooking for me," he said tiredly, while giving her a kiss on the lips.

"It's alright. I want to hear how your day went."

Tom gave out an exhausted, groaning yawn.

"Long day?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied. "Long and very strange. Something very frightening and unusual happened tonight."

"What happened?" she said, standing by the stove, and tenderly stirring around the pot of beef stew. "Has Fred Wycliff been found yet?"

"No," Tom responded, grabbing a beer out of the refrigerator, and then sitting down at the kitchen table. "I've been talking to friends and relatives all day. They have no idea where that man could've gone off to. I'll tell ya this man has disappeared off the face of this earth."

"Wow," Aerial muttered curiously.

"But the strange part about what happened tonight is I was driving home along Route forty-nine, when suddenly I see this tall, black creature and Aerial, I'm dead serious when I say this, its eyes were glowing bright red!" Tom nearly shouted, leaning over with both elbows on the table.

Aerial looked at him with a spooked, startled glance on her face.

"And I'm pretty sure it was the Wycliff's Doberman that's been missing."

Aerial was still peering at her husband in dumbfounded shock. She could still not believe what she was hearing.

"This thing's eyes, it,-" Tom shuddered, shaking his head. "I had never seen anything like it."

"Are ya serious, Tom, or are ya just trying to scare me?" whined Aerial.

"Aerial, I am the most serious I've ever been. And you know me, I don't believe in ghosts or any of that nonsense!"

Aerial was silent, as she continued to listen to her truthful husband tell his story.

“So when I parked along the side of the road and got out of my car, I hollered at the dog.”

Aerial gazed up at him in worried trepidation.

“It began runnin’ towards me like a bat out of hell. I had to put it down.”

“Jesus,” Aerial said, shaking her head in quivering apprehension.

“If I had not shot that thing dead, it would have torn me to pieces.”

Tom was quiet, as he sat staring off at a corner in the kitchen. In his mind, he was seeing the lofty, ferocious Doberman charging towards him, with its red gleaming eyes squinting at him in morbid anger.

“So what do ya think it was?” Aerial asked him.

“I don’t know,” Tom replied quietly. “Do you believe in possession?”

Aerial was wordless for a moment. “I don’t know, Tom. There have been many cases with people who are said to be possessed. I have never heard of anyone having red glowing eyes, but who knows?”

“Yeah,” said Tom, finishing his beer.

When they were both done eating platefuls of beef stew, Aerial cleaned their dishes, while Tom made his way into their bedroom to get ready for bed.

Before he went to bed, Tom silently peeked into his little boy’s room to see if he was still awake.

A smile crept upon his face, when he saw his ten year old Charlie sleeping peacefully in his bed.

That was the best part of Tom’s job.

After coming home from a stressful day of investigating murders, and encountering danger, Tom loved to just come home and be with his wife and son. It made it seem like all of his troubles and worries throughout the day had never happened.

When Tom climbed into bed, he immediately fell into a deep, restful sleep.

Brett and Jill were both making out in Brett’s car. They were parked in a parking lot next to a wooded area outside of Amber, Oklahoma on Route 77.

They both went to the same high school, and had been going out with each other for over four months.

Lately, they had been coming back to that parking lot for some late night make-out sessions.

It was a deserted area, surrounded by woods and fields. Every once and awhile, a car might pass by on the main road behind them. No one would ever notice them making out, though, since it was such a darkened area.

They were both wildly kissing each other, when suddenly Jill noticed the red fog forming its way through the blackened woods.

“Look,” she said to Brett, gawking at the mysterious, red gloom.

Brett turned his attention towards the woods, where his amazed eyes came upon the peculiar, glowing redness.

“What the hell is that?” he wondered out loud.

“Uh, I have no idea,” Jill murmured in quavering apprehension.

When Brett came opening his car door, they could hear no sound coming from the slow moving haze.

The fog's smoke like formation drifted leisurely across the dark, wooded area, with its bizarre redness swallowing the surrounding trees. It made its way towards Brett's car in a slow, meticulous manner.

Brett and Jill could not take their eyes off it. It seemed to put them in a trance.

Brett started climbing out of the car, gazing at the mystifying mist in hypnotized wonder.

"Brett, what are ya doin'? Get back in the car," Jill said, still peering at the unfurling fog.

"I have to see what it is," Brett said.

He suddenly closed his car door and started proceeding towards the radiating redness.

"Brett, stop! Get back here!" Jill hollered.

She realized she could not move. It was as if an invisible force was holding her back from getting out of the car, and preventing her boyfriend from entering the red gloom.

Brett continued to be stupefied into the enormous cloud of redness. He felt somehow pleased staring into the absorbing smog. It felt as if he needed to be inside it.

When he came entering the fog, Brett's transfixed pleasure was soon diminished by fiery smoke filling his nose and mouth. He then felt as if he was suffocating, as his alarmed eyes started burning a painful sensation.

Since his throat felt like it was on fire, Brett could not scream for Jill.

Jill was becoming very scared. She kept calling for Brett, but he would not answer her. He had somehow fully disappeared off into the red, cloudy mist.

Jill did not know what to do, as she sat there shivering in uncontrolled fear. She wondered if she should call the police.

If anything, she did not want to step one foot into the massive, red fog, which was emerging closer towards the car in a gradual, snail-like pace.

All of a sudden, she soon saw Brett's tall, scrawny figure come trotting quickly out of the bright, smoky redness.

It was then she noticed both of his eyes illuminating a bright red color.

"Oh my god!" Jill gasped, immediately locking the car doors.

Brett made his way anxiously towards his car, with his sinister, red gleaming eyes gazing at Jill in morbid fixation.

Jill could not stop trembling, as she watched her evil possessed boyfriend come shattering his driver's side window with one fist. He then stuck his hand in through the shattered window to unlock the door.

"No!" Jill shrieked. She quickly unlocked her car door and was about to escape out the passenger's side, when suddenly she felt Brett's hot, sweaty hand come snatching onto her right shoulder.

"Where ya goin,' girl? Ya can't run from me!" Brett snarled at her in ferocious excitement.

Jill screamed in loud terror, as Brett yanked her back into the vehicle.

With his red, fiery eyes glaring at her in perverse madness, he wrapped his moist hands around her neck and began to strangle her.

Jill was not able to move, while she struggled with him on top of her. It felt like there was more than just one body on top of her. She felt like she was being held down by many unseen hands.

Brett was somehow a lot stronger. He had a force Jill knew was not human. Jill knew Brett played basketball and was really strong, but he was not this powerful.

No matter how hard she punched and scratched him, Brett remained unhurt and merciless.

Anyone driving by on the road behind them would not be able to see them, since they were both lying down in the front seat, and it was much too dark for anyone to see in through the back windshield.

Brett's red blazing eyes were the last thing Jill saw before she was strangled to death.

When he was done squeezing the life out of his suffocated girlfriend, Brett climbed backwards out of his car.

A lonesome driver driving by on Route 77 spotted his red-eyed figure go scurrying back into the red fog.

Colby and Mitchell were headed to their friend's house late that night, when they came upon the red fog.

They were walking through Grandford Park, when suddenly they noticed the glowing redness drifting out of the darkened woods.

"What is that?" Colby wondered out loud.

Mitchell did not answer him, as he stood staring in dumbfounded shock at the red, slow moving gloom moving slowly out from the dark, wooded area.

The two boys were spellbinder by the fog's bright, radiating gleam. It almost looked magnificent and neat. They both felt an urge to make their way closer to it. Their eyes squinted at the strange vapor, as if they had just found one of the greatest wonders of the world.

"Let's check it out," Mitchell muttered, beginning to move slowly but surely towards the mesmerizing fog.

Colby began to follow him.

Soon, Mitchell came stopping in front of the red mass of smoke like fog. He then turned and smiled curiously at Colby.

The two inquisitive boys could not hear or smell anything from the glimmering cloud. It was just like any other fog, except for its color. They did not feel unsafe or like they were in danger being right near the mysterious gloom.

Mitchell cautiously stuck his hand into the smoggy vapor. His hand came upon nothing, but empty air.

When he felt completely safe with the odd smog, Mitchell stepped leisurely into the surrounding redness.

Without hesitating, Colby jumped into the cloud of redness with his amused friend.

"This is so weird," Mitchell said, as he started to move around the red clouded area.

The two boys felt like they were in a world of bright redness, while they tried to find each other through the engulfing, red beaming woods.

"Mitchell, where are you?" Colby laughed, searching his way through a sea of red.

"I'm over here!" Mitchell yelled from further away.

Suddenly, both boys ended their search for each other, when an excruciating burning sensation erupted from inside their stomachs.

They both began gasping for air, as they felt a fire light up inside them. It started to rise all the way up into their chests and throats, where it felt like it was going to burst out of their flaming eye sockets.

Soon, the burning sensation suddenly ended. The two boys felt different. They felt no more pain, but they had a sudden urge to kill.

When they finally found each other through the never ending redness, they both proceeded out of the red fog.

With their red, fiery eyes blazing up the dark, quiet park, Colby and Mitchell eagerly made their way across the street to a nearby church.

They were both desperate to kill everyone and to destroy everything.

The next day, Jill Thomas was found strangled in her boyfriend's car. Brett Shuster was nowhere to be found.

Colby Meyers and Mitchell Hawkins were also reported missing.

Grandford Chapel, the small church across the street from Grandford Park, had been broken into and severely vandalized.

Employees of the church had arrived at the chapel early that morning to find all the glass windows completely shattered.

When they walked inside, they were devastated to find items smashed across the floor. The church office had been broken into and harmfully destroyed as well. In the three different office rooms, computers had been toppled onto the floor, their screens completely bashed in. Desks had been shoved over. Office supplies were sprawled about.

In the chapel, satanic drawings were drawn across the walls on each side of the church. A statue of Jesus on the cross had been torn down from the back wall, and lied broken in front of the altar.

What disturbed the employees the most was when they discovered a dead, mangled cat placed on the podium near the altar.

Its eyes had been ripped out of its sockets, along with its tongue that was missing from its blood filled mouth. There were deep stab wounds all over its bloody, gray furred body.

The workers and members of Grandford Chapel had no clue of who could have done such a horrible thing.

Later that night, there were many reports all over Amber of people sighting a red fog throughout the area. There were then ridiculous calls made to the police of people with actual red glowing eyes breaking into homes and assaulting residents.

Police officials figured the red eyes had something to do with the red fog. They just could not believe it.

Detective Tom Ramsey had been home that night with his wife and son, when he received a call from a fellow officer, who told him he needed to hurry to the Wycliff farm. He stated that most of the red fog seemed to be coming from that area out of a nearby creek. Many red-eyed figures had been spotted wandering the countryside in that territory.

Tom was scared and nervous, as he drove to the Wycliff farm. He was the most scared for his family, who he was leaving behind.

As he drove out into the country, he came passing fire blazing houses and vandalized stores. There were many police cars, ambulances, and fire trucks lined up on each street.

On the radio, he listened to a news reporter stating for everyone to stay indoors and to not leave their homes.

Tom immediately sped up when he spotted three red-eyed kids tossing flame filled bottles at cars.

He found more red-eyed figures scurrying around the fields and woods, while he sped his way along the darkened highway.

Tom was now terrified.

When he finally arrived at the Wycliff's farm, Tom could not believe his eyes. when he came upon the red glowing fog. It was spreading throughout the area. He was extremely careful driving through it, while he made his way up the dirt road to the Wycliff's farm.

When he safely made it to the front of the Wycliff's house, Tom met up with four officers, who had arrived there before him.

"Tom, how are you doing? Are you okay?" Sheriff Lacey asked him.

Tom nodded. "It was pretty ridiculous driving here, but I'm okay."

"That's good," said Sheriff Lacey. "We believe the fog is coming from down there in that creek bed," he related, pointing down at the nearby creek, where the mysterious fog was making its way in the southeast direction. It had now formed a mile long stretch across the open land.

"Jesus," Tom muttered in disbelieved shock.

Tom almost felt a tingling excitement in his stomach, as he glared at the mesmerizing, red colored gloom. He suddenly had an urge to go wander through the red tunnel of mystifying smoke, but he then remembered about the Wycliff's dog, and the crazy, red-eyed people he had seen driving there. There was no way in hell he wanted to end up like them.

Tom thought about his wife and son, and could not believe how much he wanted to be with them right then.

"We've seen many red-eyed figures coming and going from down in there," said Sheriff Lacey. "Now that you're here, we thought we'd go down, and see if we can get a word from any of them, and see what these bastards want."

Tom nodded. "Okay, let's go," Tom replied, with his astonished eyes still hooked on the red radiating smog.

“Alright, gentlemen, let’s go down there!” Sheriff Lacey hollered for his fellow officers to start leading the way.

Tom began to follow the four officers down towards the red filled creek.

All of a sudden, Tom nearly felt jumped out of his skin, when one of the officers yelled for them to stop. He then quickly pulled out his gun.

The officer, who had yelled for them to hold their position, pointed at the two, red-eyed persons hurrying towards them from the nearing, red gleaming creek bed.

The startled officers ordered the red-eyed man and woman to stop where they were, but they both did not obey, as they continued to run towards them, with their red, fiery eyes seeming to glow brighter.

“Fire!” Sheriff Lacey commanded loudly.

Tom and the four officers started shooting at the two, evil possessed humans, that were easily taken down by the bombarding bullets.

They were soon unrelieved when suddenly ten more red-eyed psychopaths came charging them from out of the glowing redness.

There were too many of them to handle without cover. They had to take cover inside the Wycliff’s house.

“Let’s get inside the house! Come on!” shouted Sheriff Lacey, beginning to lead them back up the hill.

More devilish people with red eyes came sprinting out of the red fog, as they chased Tom and the four police officers up the hill.

When they made it inside the Wycliff’s home, Tom made sure to lock the front door behind them. The other officers each found a window they took aim out of at the oncoming, red-eyed figures.

As they started blasting away at the demonic lunatics, the apprehensive officers were mortified to see more dark, red glowing figures hurrying their way up from the creek bed. It was like there were more and more of them each time they shot down a bunch of them. They would not stop coming.

“We might have to call for backup!” bellowed Sheriff Lacey.

Although, the officers had brought extra firearms incase they ran out of bullets.

Suddenly, the screaming maniacs came pounding on the front door. Some of the others were running around to the back of the house.

Tom and the four officers tried saving as much of their ammo as they could, firing mainly at the ones who were closer to the house.

All of a sudden, a couple of the officers turned their attention behind them, when two, younger looking men came rushing into the living room, with their red eyes gleaming brightly in the house’s perturbed darkness.

The two, startled officers immediately assaulted them with bullets.

Soon, a huge mob of snarling, red-eyed people came bursting through the front door, gnarling in ravenous insanity.

Tom and the others turned away from the windows, and began shooting at the loud, malicious attackers.

Before a middle aged woman could even touch one of the officers, he instantly blasted her in the eye, before she tumbled over with a giant gunshot hole left in her gaping, blood gushing eye socket.

Tom gave out a horrified moan, when suddenly many hands started pulling him back out of the open window. He was devastated with himself for standing that close to it.

Before the grueling, ferocious crazies could force him all the way out of the window, two of the nearby officers swiftly hauled the petrified detective back into the room. They then struck the defeated maniacs with a thunderstorm of bullets.

Tom could still feel his heart pounding away in his chest, as he lied on the floor, trying to catch his breath and stop from trembling. He was too out of breath to thank the two officers, who had saved his life.

Sheriff Lacey was wrestling with a strong, burly man, who had crept up behind him, and was trying to grab his gun away from him.

Lacey gave out a painful wail, as the mad, heavyweight man sank his teeth into his neck, attempting to rip off some of his skin.

With a hard elbow to the gut, the blood gushing sheriff yanked himself away from the large, lethal man, while bringing his gun up to his throat. He then pulled the trigger.

Blood spurted out of the man's gruesome gunshot wound, as he collapsed onto the wooden floor, with blood trailing down his entire muscular body.

While holding onto the bleeding bite mark on the side of his neck, Sheriff Lacey moved back up to the living room windows, where the other officers were finishing off the last remaining figures.

Tom was still laying on the cold floor, trying to recover from almost being dragged out the window. He felt a little calmer when one of the officers said there were no more of them outside.

When he picked himself up from off the floor, he peered outside, to find dead, blood covered people sprawled out all along the grassy hill and near the creek. There were no red glows coming from any of their open, deceased eyes. The red fog was still glimmering weakly in the silent creek bed.

Tom and the other officers felt tears begin to form in their tired, saddened eyes. These had all been innocent people, who had somehow become possessed by this ungodly fog they still had no idea what it was or where it came from. It could not stay here.

All of a sudden, the five, alarmed men froze in astonished trepidation, as the ground started to shake beneath their feet, with a giant rumbling vibrating across the land.

"What the hell is that?" Lacey shuddered in awaiting fear.

His fellow officers stood gazing down at the red fog, where they could see an enormous, red figure begin to stand up in the creek.

Loud pounds of earth quavering footsteps started causing the wooden floor to quaver wildly beneath their feet. A tremendous, creature like roar then erupted across the land.

Tom and the four officers glared in jaw dropping horror at the forty foot monster stomping its way up the hill towards the house.

The red skinned beast had the head of a bull, but the muscular, strong built body of a humanlike giant. It had the largest and sharpest looking horns protruding from each side of its red, gigantic head. Its red, fire filled eyes squinted back at the four, petrified officers in raging fury.

The ground shook like a mad earthquake, as the raging beast began thundering its way towards the house.

“Shoot it!” Sheriff Lacey suddenly shrieked at his frightened, transfixed officers.

The courageous officers obeyed their sheriff, as they started firing away at the oncoming monster.

The clamoring beast gave out a monstrous wail, when it was hit by many bright, speeding bullets. It kept coming towards them, though, as if the destructive bullets were nothing to it.

The unhurt, bull like creature gave out another beastly roar, when it came bringing its huge, powerful fist down through the roof of the small ranch house.

The five men were lucky enough to leap out of the way, before the toppling roof could cave in on them.

They instantly had to dodge out of the way again, when the beast brought its two hundred pound fist down through the crumbling roof, hoping to smash all of them to the hard, wooden floor.

While screaming in loud, terrified fear, they began shooting up at the enormous, uproarious demon, aiming mainly at its red, fire flickering eyes.

Suddenly, the blinded monster raised its hammering fist high up in the air once again, and then angrily brought it down in clamorous might.

This time Sheriff Lacey and one of his fellow officers were not fast enough. They were brutally trampled under the beast’s murderous fist.

All of their body parts and limbs were broken, as they lied flat and helpless on the floor, completely paralyzed and soon dead.

Tom and the two other remaining officers squealed in furious devastation, while letting out all their bullets on the morbid, creature like giant. It was blinded even more, as it started losing its balance, with blood spilling out of its wounded, punctured eyes.

The defeated, bull like demon moaned in loud agony, when its red, fiery eyes suddenly exploded into flames. It was still groaning in lifeless misery, as it stormed off towards the creek, where it collapsed into the red fogged water.

Tom and the two officers watched in stricken shock, listening to the beast’s wailing cries begin to disappear, along with the fog’s fading redness.

The three of them could not believe their eyes, when they noticed all of the red fog across the land start to swiftly drift its way towards the creek, where it seemed to vanish into the water.

When there was no more red fog to be seen, Tom and the two officers could no longer hear the conquered beast’s morbid cry.

The night was silent, as they could feel a shiver scurry down their spines from the stillness of the dark, calm land.

The three of them could not stop from shivering, when they went outside for one of the officers to call for backup.

As days went by, the giant, bull like demon or the red fog was never seen again.

Nearly over two hundred people in Amber had died that night on October 5, 2009.

Even though no one ever found out what the red fog was or where it came from, researchers explained to the public that the land near the Wycliff's farm had once been an area used for satanic ceremonies, and was said to be cursed once by an evil witch.

Things soon turned back to normal in Amber, after the red fog was gone and no one ever saw it again.

The Wycliff's farm was torn to the ground, and became empty land. After what happened, no one ever wanted to own the property.

The Grandford Chapel was cleaned and fixed up, and would soon be opened again for the public. It was never again vandalized.

Detective Tom Ramsey retired from being a detective, and found a job he worked selling farm equipment, where he had more time to spend with his wife and son.

There are some nights, Tom still wakes up from appalling dreams of the Wycliff's black Doberman running towards him in a black, deserted field, with its red eyes blazing evilly. Or he will even wake up, sweating and trembling in frightened fear from a dreadful nightmare of the raging, bull creature trying to hammer him with its enormous fist in a vacant, dark house.

What scared Tom the most were the nights he would be driving home late from work on a lonesome, dark road, hoping he would never again come across the red fog.

THE FORBIDDEN TOWN

Brodie Michales

When we come across a certain place or town, we often wonder about the things that had once happened there. Were they good things that had happened, or were they bad things? There is always a feeling of history haunting these places. In a house, we might visualize the events that had once taken place there. Maybe they are still taking place today, and we just can't see them. Some events or situations from the past might have been so powerful and traumatic, that an energy or force may cause them to reiterate throughout time.

There's a small town near Springfield, Missouri, called Green Meadows. It's a little farming town, full of large pastures and heavy wooded areas.

At one time, many farmers and landowners had lived in the small, quiet town, but as years passed, more and more residents of the dying community began to drift elsewhere.

It was because of the town's disputable reputation, many townspeople left Green Meadows.

Today, Green Meadows is said to be a forbidden town, and by law, no one is to trespass through there.

Much of the trouble began in the early nineties, when many notorious gangs had roamed into Green Meadows, causing it to become a town full of murder and corruption.

There is a junkyard, where certain gangs would have brutal fights with each other. Twelve men had either been stabbed or shot to death in that junkyard. Police had later kept a close eye on that area, making sure no one ever again trespassed through that yard.

Not far from the junkyard, there is a small motel, where many gruesome shootouts had taken place. It was also known to be an infamous place of drug smuggling and prostitution.

A lot of kids now say the motel is haunted.

Late at night, teenagers would dare each other to wander into one of the rooms of the supposedly haunted motel.

Most of the doors are either broken or unlocked for trespassers to enter into the rooms. Nearly every window to each room is shattered. There are still bed mattresses in some of the rooms. They are either torn or completely covered in mold or insects. Graphic, obscene graffiti is written all over the walls of the extirpated rooms. Roaches and mice nest on the trashy floors of cigarette butts and used condoms.

One night, a twelve year old boy was brave enough to enter one of the motel rooms.

Once he entered the darkened room, he nearly died from shock, when his flashlight came upon the dead, mutilated girl lying on the blood covered bed. Her throat had been slashed open, and her entire, blackened body was severely beaten and bruised, along with two, giant gunshot wounds on both sides of her stomach.

What scared the boy the most was her bloodshot eyes were still open. They were entirely blood red.

The petrified boy ran back outside to his friends. They followed him, as he ran past them, sobbing in quivering fright.

The twelve year old boy and his two friends never again went back to that old motel.

Besides farms, there were other buildings and factories in Green Meadows. Most of them were food processing businesses and clothing manufacturers. Now they are just old warehouses.

Early in the year of 96, police had to close a slaughterhouse, when someone found out they were actually storing human meat in their facility. Nearly all of the employees had to go to jail.

Another interesting incident happened in the early eighties.

A man by the name of John Schwimer shot and killed two men trespassing on his property outside of Green Meadows. He only had to serve twelve years in prison, since the two men had been trespassing.

A lot of people say Green Meadows is a haunted town. The town has many old houses, that people have died in, and where tragic, horrendous events have occurred.

There's an abandoned church, where some said they have seen strange, white lights glowing there late at night.

Others have seen the mysterious glows glimmering in the woods, or around a nearby railroad track.

No one has been able to find out what the peculiar, white lights could be.

Green Meadows is a deserted town, where no one lives now. If anyone did still live there, you would not want to know who or what.

Green Meadows is a place, where old folks and parents fear for their children to wander in to. It is a place, that is mostly spoken of around a campfire on a dark, moonless night.

The desolate, ghost town has since been isolated and dead, only disturbed a few times by the ones who dare to step foot onto its territory. Some either become ill, or get a spine tingling feeling, when roaming the town's unholy land.

Green Meadows holds an undying evilness, that will forever lurk there throughout time.

If you come across the town of Green Meadows, either immediately turn around or drive away.

Green Meadows was meant to be forbidden.

Molly and Megan knew they had been hiking too far away from home, when they reached a giant creek bed, leading into the nearby town of Green Meadows.

"Shouldn't we be heading home now?" Megan asked her older sister, Molly.

"I just want to walk along this creek for a bit," said Molly.

"Alright," groaned Megan. "It's your fault, though, if we get in trouble."

"Fine," Molly replied.

The two girls continued to walk along the wet, rocky surface, next to the fast moving stream.

Neither of the girls knew how long the stream flowed through Missouri.

Molly was feeling adventurous, and was wanting to find out, but Megan was growing more worried, and hoped they would not get into trouble with their parents.

The sun was beginning to set in the horizon, and the thought of night soon arriving chilled Megan to the bone.

As the two girls strolled further and further, along the long lasting creek, they began to notice how quiet it had become.

They could no longer hear birds chirping, or the wind stirring the branches of the nearby trees. The sounds of the rushing water had even calmed. It then felt like they were being watched.

"Molly, let's head back. I don't like it here," Megan shuddered.

"Just a little further, then I promise you we'll head back," Molly promised. She was starting to grow a little uneasy herself. Something did not feel right here.

When they soon came winding around a creek bend, Molly noticed a cave up ahead.

“We’ll head back, when we reach that cave, okay?” she told her little sister, pointing at the small rock formation, where there was a little opening in the front of it.

“What if there’s bats?” Megan quivered.

“We’re not going to go inside it,” said Molly. “Just once we reach that area, we’ll turn around.”

Megan was walking carefully across the piles of large, darkish colored rocks, trying to keep up with her older sister, when suddenly her nervous eyes came upon the dark figure standing beside a tree close by.

It was a tall, dark haired man, who looked to be around her father’s age, which was in the mid forties. His face was smeared in dried blood, and he was holding an enormous, blood smeared hook. He was wearing a long, black jacket, and wore black, torn clothes beneath it; a black shirt and pants, that looked like they had been ripped by his deadly hook numerous times.

“Molly,” Megan began to cry, as she stopped walking, and kept peering at the dark, dangerous looking stranger.

“What?” said Molly, turning around to find her terrified, little sister staring in wide-eyed horror at the dark, blood smeared man.

Molly felt her heart sink low in her chest, and her stomach become extremely nauseous.

The tall, brutal looking man said nothing, as he continued to gawk at them, without an expression on his blood dried face.

The two, frightened girls both knew that was not his blood, that had been splattered onto his cheeks and around his mouth.

“Run!” Molly finally stammered to her younger sister.

Megan instantly took off running back the way they had come from, with Molly following right behind her. They could both hear the perilous intruder coming after them.

Molly could hear her sister bawling in scared trepidation.

When she turned her head around, she gave out a loud, fright filled cry, to find the sinister, black coated man attempting to catch up with them. He had his razor sharp hook held out in front of him.

It was then Molly knew she should have listened to her little sister. They should have immediately turned back, when she said they were wandering too far away from home.

Both Molly and Megan cried in trembling fear, as they tried to run as fast as they could over the bundling rocks.

The day was darkening and night was beginning to fall, so it was hard for them to see where they were going.

They both could not believe this was happening. This was something out of a horrible nightmare.

When they had finally reached the area of woods, leading to their house, Molly and Megan raced speedily into the woods. They could still hear the psychotic stranger trailing behind them, by his heavy panting. He was desperate to catch up to them.

Molly nearly felt her pounding heart burst out of her chest, when she could suddenly hear the loud swooshes of the man's lethal hook slicing through the air. He was almost right behind her, determined to sink its razor sharp, pointed end into her back.

"Help!" Molly shrieked in piercing, bloodcurdling terror, even though she knew they were in the middle of the woods, and no one was around to hear their cries.

As they sprinted further through the woods, the two, overwhelmed sisters soon realized they had outran the pursuing psychopath.

When they glanced behind them, they found him nowhere in sight. They both stopped running and cried in each other's arms, while trying to catch their breaths.

Knowing they did not want to wait one more second in the darkened, unsettling woods, Molly and Megan both ran all the way home without stopping.

They felt as if they could still hear the murderous man with the hook still ensuing them, as they ran faster through the nebulous woods they were so anxious to escape.

Night was soon fully upon them, when they finally made it home. They cried and cried in their parents' arms, as they tried to explain to them the hooked maniac chasing them at the creek.

Their mother and father became overwhelmingly filled with horror and anger at their two daughters for wandering off into the woods at that time of night. As they hugged and kissed them, they were both extremely glad they were okay.

Molly and Megan's parents immediately called the police to notify them about the dangerous, hook man, who might still be prowling the area.

The Glendale Police Department had actually been looking for a suspected kidnapper.

Two kids, a fourteen year old boy and a twelve year old girl, had recently been reported missing in the town of Glendale. The two kids had no connection or relation with each other, but they had both been last seen playing in the woods near Green Meadows, which was where Molly and Megan had unknowingly wandered off into.

A farmer had recently found a dead, mutilated dog outside his farm. He claimed it looked like it had been gutted with a large hook.

One night, a thirteen year old girl had been getting undressed in her bedroom, when she suddenly noticed a man wearing a long, black coat watching her from outside her bedroom window. His expressionless face was smudged with dry blood. She screamed and ran half nakedly out of her room.

When she ran screaming to her parents there was a man standing outside her window, her father hurriedly rushed into her room.

He found no one standing out in the quiet, serene night.

Will and Cooper were cousins, but were also really good friends, who enjoyed hanging out together.

Both of their families had just arrived at their grandparents' lake house in the town of Glendale, Missouri. They usually visited there during the summer to go boating and water tubing.

While both of the cousins' parents and the rest of their large family were settling down, and relaxing at the lake house, Will and Cooper decided to take a stroll through the woods.

They roamed further and further through the long, outstretched wilderness of trees and bushes, careless of how much distance they had traveled from their grandparents' lake house.

They both did not know they had now crossed over into Green Meadows.

When they found themselves rambling out of the woods, the two, inquisitive boys came upon a giant hill, leading down to an abandoned, old warehouse.

"Check it out," said Will.

"Whoa, what is that place?" asked Cooper, his eyes still casting upon the elderly, prodigious building.

"I don't know," Will replied. "You want to go look inside it, though?" he questioned him.

"Sure, do you?" Cooper responded in excitement.

Will nodded.

The two, exuberant boys both began making their way down the steep, grassy hill, towards the vacant, soundless structure.

They realized the building was in pretty bad shape. It had shattered glass windows all along its vast sides and extended roof. It had a gray metal structure, that looked scraped and unclean.

The ruined, shambled building looked like an old airplane hangar, that had been deserted and unkempt for over a hundred years.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, Will and Cooper moved quickly towards the front door of the building.

The large, burdensome door gave out a loud, bone chilling creak, when Will came pulling it open, reminding them both of a haunted house from a scary movie.

They both made their way cautiously into the massive, spacey room, where they came upon an old, broken conveyor belt in the middle of the wide, concrete floor.

"This place must've been a factory or something," said Will, leading Cooper further into the enormous room, full of rust and mold.

The entire place carried the heavy scent of dirt and residue.

They both suddenly jumped, as something suddenly came swooping down at them from the high ceiling. It was a large, black crow, that had must have flown inside from one of the shattered windows.

The noisy crow squawked at the two trespassers in annoyed disturbance, while swiftly soaring up out of one of the open windows on the ceiling.

Will and Cooper walked further into the building, where they came upon a set of corroded, metal stairs leading up to a lengthy walkway.

"Should we try going up there?" said Will.

"Okay," Cooper softly replied.

Will was the first to lead Cooper up the quavering, precipitous stairs. They held onto to the metal railing beside them, while clambering their way up to the awaiting walkway.

When they reached the straight, bridge like walkway, Will was very meticulous on walking across it.

Soon discovering it was sturdy enough for both of them, the two boys made their way across the safe walkway. They then reached the end of the bridge, where the ending passageway split off into the left and right directions. There were two rooms located on their right, and one big room located on their left, which looked at one time might have been the main office room.

Will wandered aimlessly into the first room, once carefully opening its wooden, feeble door, and gradually stepping inside. Cooper followed in after him.

There was nothing in the empty, bare room. Only a glassless window revealing the surrounding woods engulfed around the open area were what caught the eyes of Will and Cooper.

When they were done observing the boring view through the open window, Will led Cooper into the next room, where they suddenly gave out startled, petrified screams of disgust.

There lying on the cemented floor was the nude, decaying corpse of the missing boy.

Flies and gnats swarmed around his bloody, scar marked flesh. There were severe stab wounds along his legs and thighs. It looked like a sharp, pointy object had been cut deeply into the meaty parts of his unclothed body. Moist blood was splattered almost all over the entire floor, and around the slaughtered victim.

Unable to examine the mangled boy any longer, Will and Cooper shot out of the room. They were still screaming, as they came racing across the walkway, and down the steep stairs.

Just when they had made it down the stairway, and were about to run towards the front entrance, they stopped dead in their tracks.

The two, traumatized boys could not believe their astonished eyes, as they were about to approach a tall, dark haired man leisurely stepping in through the open front door. He wore a long, black coat and held a razor sharp hook to the left side of him. The leftover markings of dried blood nearly covered his entire mouth, and some on his unwashed face.

While tears of sickened fear began to spill down the frightened boys' faces, the tall, sinister man peered at them, with no expression on his bloodied, untrustworthy face. It was as if he was not surprised to see them there.

Without speaking a word to the unusual stranger, Will and Cooper dashed towards the back of the warehouse, where they thankfully found a back door.

The menacing stranger was still coming after them, when they went fleeing out of the perturbing building.

The two boys rushed as fast as their legs could carry them, as they sprinted along the side of the old, windowless factory.

When they reached the gigantic, down sloped hill, they turned to find the hook man coming at them, with his enormous, deadly sharp hook gripped highly in front of him. He was hell-bent on not letting them get away.

Will and Cooper managed to carry themselves up the tedious, grassy hill. They were both still running, when they made it to the top.

Even though, they did not see or hear the horrendous stranger still chasing after them, the two, fearful boys ran all the way to their grandparents' lake house, without stopping to catch their breaths.

They both wanted to get as far away as possible from that nightmarish warehouse and its grotesque, evil dweller.

Will and Cooper were in big trouble, when they finally made it back to their grandparents' lake house.

Their parents and grandparents were angry with them for being gone too long. Before they had gone on their hike, their stern grandfather had warned them not to wander too far from the lake house.

When both of their families noticed their scared, crying faces, Will and Cooper told them about being chased by the man with a hook. They also told them about the revolting corpse of the young boy they found in the old warehouse.

The boys' families knew they were not making this stuff up, by their crying, fright filled expressions.

The boys' grandfather immediately called the police to report in the dead body of the missing boy.

Once the police had found the old building in Green Meadows, they had soon discovered the gruesome remains of fourteen year old, Randy Peterson.

Not only were there critical stab wounds over the boy's massacred body, paramedics also found bite marks made by human, appearing around his neck and arms. Chunks of skin and tissue were missing from the enormous, bloody gashes all over his gnawed flesh.

Someone had actually been feeding on the young teenager.

Twelve year old, Heather Johnson, was still missing.

Police were still on the lookout for a black coated man, with a hook and a blood smeared face.

From the helpful information given to them by Will and Cooper, they now knew where the hook man's lair was.

The day was sweltering hot, as Officer Jeff Lansky and Officer Mike Pelson were keeping watch over the old warehouse in Green Meadows.

Each day, two police officers from the Glendale Police Department were assigned to keep a lookout over the abandoned building.

Others officers were still patrolling the woods throughout Green Meadows and Glendale, trying to find the unknown, hook man.

The two officers were both circling the outside of the building, when suddenly Officer Lansky spotted a dark haired man, wearing a long, black coat, making his

way down the vertiginous, grassy hill. He then noticed the large, glistening hook held in the intruder's left hand.

"Mike! Mike, come here! I see him!" Officer Lansky hollered at his partner, who had just begun walking around the back side of the building. "Freeze! Hold it right there!" he then shouted at the hook man.

Soon, Officer Pelson came bolting around the back, left hand corner of the gigantic warehouse, with his gun held out in front of him.

The hook man had been caught off guard, when Officer Lansky had yelled at him to freeze.

When he saw the two, armed officers hurrying towards him, he was quickly unhesitant to turn around, and hastily start making his way back up the troublesome hill.

"Freeze!" Officer Lansky warned him a second time.

The two officers started taking off after the fleeing victim, as they scurried up the hill as fast as they could.

Officer Lansky and Pelson were both overwhelmed with excitement and worry. They had found the notorious killer of Green Meadows. Now they just had to catch him. They could not let him get away.

The hook man was an older man, maybe in his late forties. Hopefully, he was not as fast of a runner as they were.

Once they had made it up the long hill, the two, unexhausted officers could see the hook man's black coated figure escaping through the surrounding woods. They both began to storm after him, with their firearms held out in front of them.

The two officers pursued the extricating, hook man through the endless woods for almost half an hour. They made sure to keep their focused eyes on the dark clothing of his black coat and pants, knowing they could not lose sight of him.

Later, when the woods had finally departed, they came upon a row of miniature houses, leading into Glendale.

The hook man came leaping over metal fences, through peoples' backyards, hoping it would slow down the two, pursuing officers.

A middle aged woman sunbathing in her backyard, nearly had a heart attack, when her astonished eyes came upon the infamous, hook man jumping her gate, and then speeding through her yard. Her heart nearly felt like it had been lodged up into her throat, when the hook man hauntingly glanced back at her, with no expression on his blood dried face.

The petrified woman's heart was still pounding madly in her chest, when suddenly two, armed officers came jumping her fence, ignoring her, as they continued chasing after their convicted felon.

As the startled woman watched them dash through her neighbors' backyards, she could not control herself from shivering in uncontrolled disbelief.

The hook man had almost been attacked by someone's dog, when a giant, gray pit bull uncovered him trespassing through its territory.

Right when he was climbing over into the next yard, the fierce canine had snatched its bladelike teeth into his right ankle, causing him to fall forward over

the fence, with the ferocious animal's lethal teeth still tearing into the back of his black shoe.

The maddened pit bull finally let go, once the hook man was fully in the next yard.

He quickly picked himself up, and rapidly moved fast towards the oncoming gate.

When crossing through the vicious pit bull's yard, Officer Pelson had to pistol whip the animal, in order to keep it from tackling him to the ground.

Before the enraged creature could come back at them, the two, swift officers made a quick getaway.

When they were jumping the fence over into the next yard, Officer Lansky gave out a loud, excruciating squeal, when he felt the pit bull's pointy, bladelike teeth come slicing into the calve of his right leg.

He had never before felt so much pain. It felt like a numerous amount of pocketknives being punctured into his leg.

With a hard, forceful swing of his right fist, he madly punched the assaulting dog in its malicious, slobbering face.

His right calve muscle was bleeding horribly, when he tumbled over the fence, and landed on his back, in the next yard. He was still grimacing in agonizing torment.

"Are you okay?" Officer Pelson asked him, dragging him away from the metal fence, where the savage pit bull was throwing itself up against it, barking in shrill, monstrous rage.

"Yeah," Officer Lansky muttered in scowling excruciation, even though he was not okay. He did not want to end their chase. From how long they had been chasing the hook man, they could not let him get away.

Officer Pelson began to follow his injured comrade, who was limping crucially, as he tried running the best he could.

Officer Lansky sighed in harsh torture, as he ran on his lacerated leg. Every step he took, it felt like he was being stabbed repeatedly in the back of his blood gushing leg.

The two, bustling officers could still see the hook man escaping through peoples' yards, as they continued to leap over fences, and scurry behind rows of different houses.

When they approached the end of the small neighborhood, they were soon once again enclosed by woods.

The two, worn out officers wondered what this man's plan was. Were they going to keep chasing him throughout the entire day? Where was he planning to escape to? Where was he leading them?

They went after the relentless suspect for almost fifteen minutes, when suddenly they saw him stop.

As they drew closer to him, they noticed he had arrived at a high cliff, that descended down into whatever abyss the cautious, hook man could view.

The two officers were still hustling towards the stalled convict, as he slowly started backing up towards the edge of the attenuated cliff.

“Get down on the ground, and put your hands over your head!” Officer Lansky hollered at the quiet, nervous man.

When they were both about thirty feet away from him, the courageous, risk taking man did not even give out a single whimper, as he suddenly turned and leaped off the edge of the cliff.

Officer Lansky and Officer Pelson immediately charged up to the edge of the cliff, to find the man’s long, black coat nearly blowing off him, while he dropped limitless into a rushing river.

Before he hit the heavily submerging waters, the large, shiny hook was the last thing the two officers saw of the infamous, hook man.

As Officer Lansky and Officer Pelson stood there, gazing down into the noisy, progressing river, they strangely could find no sight of the hook man’s dark figure being carried downstream.

As days went by, the absent, hook man was never seen in the river, or the towns of Glendale and Green Meadows.

It was not until a group of four college kids canoeing on the Niangua River in Webster County, that the hook man’s repellant corpse was discovered.

One of the girls in the canoe was gently rowing her paddle through the calm water, when suddenly it came stroking across the dead, hook man’s floating body.

She gave out a bloodcurdling scream, as her friends turned to find her staring in wide-eyed terror at the hook man’s, mangled head, where his hook was jutting out the back of his head’s enlarged, bloody hole.

When the police were soon notified, they came to bring the slaughtered convict out of the river, where the four, college kids had found him. They then hauled his body away in an ambulance, where they later buried him in an unmarked grave.

What was oddly peculiar about the hook man was no one knew who he was. No one found out his name, or where he lived. There was no one, who ever came forward, to tell the police they had been related to this infamous killer.

What everyone in Glendale thought was the weirdest part was how this unknown assailant was killed.

His deadly hook had been sliced nearly all the way through the back of his head, rupturing his tonsils and his entire mouth.

Investigators and doctors wondered how this man could of killed himself in such a miraculous, pain filled way.

There was no evidence of someone else’s fingerprints on his murderous hook.

The hook man’s frightening, gruesome death would forever remain a mystery.

When the hook’s man body was found, floating down the Niangua River, everyone in Glendale felt safe and happy for their families.

Even though he was gone, parents still often worried about where their kids were at night. Some did not want them wandering anywhere near Green Meadows.

Twelve year, Heather Johnson's body had recently been found, severely beaten and gutted in the woods of Green Meadows. Police knew it had been the nasty work of who everyone was now calling, the Hook Man.

Eerily, her death was similar to the Hook Man's.

A giant, gaping hole had been discovered in the back of her head, as if the Hook Man had punctured his hook through her mouth, like fishers would often do with a fish, and then he must have dragged her through the woods, with her still attached to it.

The ghastly, morbid thought caused detectives to quiver in sickened anger.

Molly and Megan, along with Will and Cooper, all had been drastically lucky.

Some of Green Meadows still stands today.

When venturing through the old, ghost town, many have felt its haunting, spine-tingling history. They always sense a feeling of dread come over them, or an uncomfortable sickness, that tells them they should not stay here. Evil still lurks in this haunted town.

If you enter Green Meadows, watch out for the old, abandoned church, where you might find white lights glowing inside there late at night, or the dirty, dark motel, where a young, dead girl may still be lying on a bed, pooled in blood. And if anything, do not enter the enormous, old warehouse. A very sinister and malicious man had once hid out in this hidden place, feeding on young kids, and gutting them with a hook. His wicked presence may still torment the building's verboten premises.

If anything, please turn back and head the other way.

No one should ever roam through Green Meadows.

Artsy Farsi, or What Went Down in Little Persia

Elliott Fuxon

Amid the zapping of moths that buzz lazily into the dull red and yellow neon of Exxon and Shell, we've a private audience tonight. The chosen redoubt is well-isolated. Somewhere up in the Hollywood Hills, and immersed in a godless world, our monstrous host has nevertheless prayed ardently for our safe arrival. Long an admirer of mine – so I have been informed by a rather too cheery fellow from among our cowboy-abductors – I have been sought out. Against my will, mind you, but these well-paid, if dim-witted, rogues were quite prepared to kill me had I refused. We were waylaid en route to another engagement, with proper neo-Dickensian fanfare, I must say – my young protégé and I traveling alone at midnight in our horseless German carriage – and what else could we do but convivially agree to audience with the beast. It was that or death, and mine is certainly not a death to be had at the hands of hirelings. It is the *master* of the house whom I seek. A skilled hand, yes, for torture tableaux almost never frighten me.

But we shall get to those soon enough.

As for my suddenly too delicate companion, *she* is scared. Her celebrity-induced common-man-a-phobia rushes all at once to the fore, and trembling and bleating like a phantom-stalked movie star, my tender lamb stands too gently at the mercy of a much-lashed, if morbidly fattened, wolf. With only myself as protector? Well, her anxiety is quite understandable. For though a prolific murderer myself, I am yet a coward in these *mano a mano*, these *homo ad hominem* encounters, and there is not a man alive who has ever accused me of a fair fight. My fatal organ of choice is the back, and more than once have I paced off for dual and turned about quickly after 'One!' I am really an incredible shot at pointblank range.

And now I find myself captured. By a one, I am sure, who likely wishes to match wits with me. There is no side to which to flee here in this dungeon to which we ourselves have been blindly escorted, and my current recourses are either to the ever-present madness of my profession, or to the dubious hospitality of my host. I unhinge ever so slightly, as does the door to our damp and dark little cell –

“Pahlavi, Jamie Lynn, the Master will see you now.”

Pahlavi and Jamie Lynn, and no one should have known those names but us. Despite what went down in Paris, to the rest of the daytime television-watching world we are the twice-dead 'Princess Dye' and That-Fat-Saudi-Prick-Bastard-Ruining-Her-Life. A man well-informed it seems, our host, and I do despise entanglements with men such as myself. So few of us left, and must we destroy each other?

Aye, I grow naïve in my philosophical discomfort, and already there is a bond between us. I have to admit, I like the monster sight unseen, and we, myself and the aging girl, newly wed yet again and unblindfolded, are led down a musty stone corridor overhung with carpets on the walls rather than on the floor. Along either side are the very dressing rooms of Hell itself. Scorched into a wood carved of the last of the cedars of ancient Lebanon are the names of Dante's own remiss. Those more evil than Hell even. Khalil, da Graca, Chiriboga, Yusgiantoro, Nozari, al-Shahristani, al-Olaim, Ghanem, Ajurnogabra, al-Attiya, Naimi, al-Hamli, Ramirez. The place stinks of oil, sweat, and shit, and we are led past a bolted iron door that gives me pause.

For from not too far behind that door emerge screams the likes of which I can recall having been elicited only once before. A time when steadfast priests turned black on all sides, and I once again smell that peculiarly pungent roasting flesh of the faithful. Flesh rolled and turned on spits hammered home from anus to mouth, and I do not know which smells worse, burning blood or melting fat. I have walked this planet for centuries now, long enough to know that ever since 1099 the human meat, too, can be made *halla*. And krist, what won't sheikhs eat?

As it is, our very footsteps are muted by that mercifully unseen frenzy from behind the door. I fear, however, my ill-equipped companion shall faint straightway from the smell. I hold her steady, and once more she is too confident that I shall perform some miracle to facilitate our emergence from this ghastly prison. Alas, doom impended is a decree as well, and fate can only be cajoled.

Luckily, I am the most patient man in the world. And should sacrifice be necessary, why, I've a partner weaker and less skilled than I. Words of devotion must be tested at times, and too often those times never come. Untried love is too easy, and for she who pledges her undying love to me? Well, let's just say that proving that love has proved unnerving for most. But we shall soon see how *this* one performs –

BOOM. A massive steel door opens suddenly to our right. It slides up with a thunderous crash, and we are straightway shoved into a blackness like pitch. SPLCH, we are spattered at once with oily grue from an unknown source. BOOM BOOM, the door slams shut twice as loudly, and the girl screams. She is immediately manhandled away from me.

We have been thrust into a rank and living darkness, and I stand alone. There are smells about, meant to terrify the uninitiated. But for a blood sommelier such as myself? Hell, *I* am not the Princess here –

“*Shut up! Shut up!*” A monstrous and impatient roar from somewhere to my front, and that infuriates me. I lunge forward manfully – ‘*Kill the little bitch if you like, but don't you dare command me!*’ – I seek to strangle in my sudden rage, and my hands close purposefully about a throat. But it is a throat too slender, and I am not so stupid in my unholy passions. I squeeze that life but a fraction and shout back –

“I shall not unwittingly kill this calf shouldst thou not show thyself this very moment!”

I revert to the antique dialect of our kind, and in a moment more the girl will choke on her own life –

“*Very good!*” There is a hollow clap of overly fleshy hands, and with it there is light. Light indeed, and there are the tiny flames of gargantuan candles tended to by remarkably malformed slaves seemingly inbred for just that purpose. At once the Princess swoons.

Aye, sure it is a dungeon here. But what a dungeon at that. A royal escutcheon, a ghastly victim to heinously royal whim, and such triflingly gaudy places of horror are all too often created by wealthy but tasteless despots of the flesh. Self-proclaimed bearers of God's and the Devil's standards both, and those poor old gentleman-bastards can only weep at what their names now inspire. A poetry, an epitaph really, so far beyond their birth as to render them obsolete. Should they dare to grace their worshipers with their presence these days, another victim or two only shall be claimed. An inglorious end will it be for the eldest monsters of all, and the sad thing is that evil has only just begun. As for me? I couldn't care less. The room in which we now find ourselves is *round*. It is also *big*. A great vat. A great barrel, even. And that is the most banal description sufferable. Otherwise, I fear I shall horrify my too patient readers to the point of swoon.

Unfortunately, however, the story must proceed in these overly demanding days, and I urge those composed of more fragile frame to skip these next few lengthy paragraphs. The story fitfully resumes thereafter...

But for those who fancy their bellies composed of sterner stuff, there remains now the unintended evil of merely *portraying* that evil. Let the task fall to him already bespoiled with the rot of centuries, and I begin:

This is not a traditionally, if poorly, cobbled path upon which we tread, as my gentle mind had at first proposed upon our entering the room. No, no. In fact, there is neither stone nor brick at all. Rather there are skulls. Hundreds of skulls. Human skulls, and yea, the viewer's gaze is directed floorward by the sheer whiteness of it. A dazzling array of mismatched and calcified cobblestones, like I should imagine the more envied paved driveways of Hell's own nouveau riche, and while there is no arguing this is a morbid sight, it is not nearly the horror of it.

For upon more detailed inspection, as demanded by the thinking man, one can discern movement. Yet, there is none. A mystery, and the eye is tricked into studying more carefully...One's eyes now adjusted to the dim firelight, and in a blink or two more one can see *other* eyes! Yea, for within the thousand or so skulls that compose the architecture of the much lavished-upon floor, there are nearly two thousand eyes, all unblinking, all *alive*! Rendered faceless by the torturer's blades and whatnot, they have been granted not a bit of emotion more than a permanently cemented grimace about forever tortured orbs. The effect is that much more horrifying.

Pressed together by sheer numbers and mortar, the prisoners are packed as if for eternity. A smattering of broken skulls, shattered teeth here and there, and the occasional empty or bleeding socket, and I spy an old and hooded slave in the corner, on hands and knees, polishing the grotesquely human tiles to a high white sheen, a squeaky gloss. Only the slightest murmurs of agony and fury escape those permanently sealed mouths, and it is a ghastly and unmelodic chant. Even I stumble at the sight and sound, and everywhere I stagger I unwittingly squash another face beneath my riding boots.

But this is not the whole of it by any means.

No, no. Even more creatively rendered are the walls. Of flesh only are these, a patterned latticework of hapless limbs and torsoes, all expertly woven by some terrifying genie of immense proportions. If not quite as at once hideous as the floor, only closer observation is necessary. For the walls are *breathing*. Twisted and broken components of the room, these unfortunate creatures are, like their floorboard compatriots, somehow kept alive. Only, and mercifully, fewer faces are visible here, and all utterances are sickeningly muffled.

Spinning about the room, confirming my observations, I see, too, the walls have been pricked and prodded, burned and scalded, bruised and beaten; a broken bone or two jut forth from flesh in gruesome mockery of altar sconce. A madman's graffiti perhaps, but horrific enough to encourage my wanton gaze upward –

And O poor eyes of mine, would that I should never again trouble you so, and hear this, O ye reader of horrors more profound than Hell itself. For the ceiling of this madhouse is of a design so despicable as to make the other five walls suitable for a child's bedroom. Yea, this jewel upon the dungeon's crown is itself a massive torture device. A trap, in a way, prepared on a hair-trigger, but not yet sprung. Composed solely of women of severely gravid condition, they are made

to hang precariously, knit together only by limb, forcing their fattened bellies *achingly* floorward. At least a hundred of them, I'd say, all naked, and some kind of *stitch-work* is painfully evident from below their navels, double stitches that run from their insides out. Pregnant in the extreme, I am informed by a gleeful whisper that all are in their tenth month at least. And more, that all have been tightly seamed in order to prevent premature evacuation of their little treasures.

Alas, beyond the ceiling, and presumably into the floors of the apartments above, lies another, more refined, layer of horror for these most sorrowful and pathetic beings. As if they themselves, despite the unheard of misery into which they have already found themselves unwittingly thrust, are meant for even greater, never before reached heights of human suffering. As if right now they are merely the key ingredients, held at the ready, for some diabolically delicious recipe. For it appears to me, by this woefully wicked candlelight, that these *ladies* – I am informed that they had all been rigorously selected for abduction according to their noblest of 'Old California' pedigrees – are each nothing more than a vital component of some single and vast invention of the now spectacularly evil lord of this manor. An invention which, though perhaps the most horrific contraption ever devised, needs, I think, be mentioned in full – if nowhere else, then in an unbearable poem such as this, my wayward account of the evening.

Aye, the master's masterwork, if you will, and this is a thing that consists of a hundred daggers exactly, all sharp as those of dear Brutus himself, all poised permanently upon the navels of those unlucky ladies. Already twisting in the agonies of unsatisfied childbirth – and Lord knows with whose seed they have been impregnated – their days are made all the more bothersome by constant pricking. Aye, and it is this blood what in fact had bespattered my companion and I only minutes before. A fiendish cocktail of both the fetal and the maternal, and this is merely the paint on the machine. A most formidable *deus ex machina*, sure, and all these daggers are coordinated by a tangled and intricate system of wires, ropes, and pulleys. And – my eyes now roving madly – it is enough for the poor things to understand that these cords all come together and are bound fast to one ceremoniously thickened rope that dangles lazily from ceiling to floor at the side of our master's throne. With a single pull, he informs me, a hundred heretofore pregnant bellies will open at once, presaging a literal storm of human fruit and gore. A pleasure in which he has not yet indulged, the master makes it abundantly apparent that he is itching *unbearably* to try it. An artist by nature, he proudly announces he has invented the thing himself. Disgusted, I am nevertheless impressed by the sheer engineering of the apparatus. Indeed, I marvel, and the smell of the place grows more and more foul. No system of plumbing that I can discern, and my not unfair deduction is that these hapless creatures all are left to wallow in their own expenditures. Any cry of pain from above is greeted by a more or less hard twitching of the rope, and these protests are quickly and efficiently silenced.

To those of the master's victims not yet rendered comatose by madness I am perhaps seen as a potential liberator. But the idea is laughable. This is only a room, after all, and these unlucky souls are no more than its constituent parts.

They are nothing more to me than would be bricks or nails or paint, and it is the throne upon which our lord sits so well that now attracts my gaze. For the seat of power here is not of gold, but of gold-plated flesh. The throne is composed of two parts: The first is an enormous giant of a slave, masked and naked and plated with a beaten golden armor that seems welded specifically to the massive form of his body. He himself is stabilized below, but barely so, by a trembling and hooded, and recently castrated, boy – he merely painted or dyed gold – whose hands are nailed to the calcified floor, and whose knees are held there by some kind of glue. Rather an unstable affair, though I'm sure with reason, and a male member of incredible proportion forms the well of that chair. Our host – our hero, that is – has seated himself to the extreme thereupon, and clothed only in a mercilessly short robe, it is no secret he is a fat, fat man. Securely reclined, fastened, so to speak, he plays with his rope, and his is a face made invisible among the sweat-shined and wavelike rolls of flab that buttress his pork-like jowls. Arab? Texan? Jew? Persian? South American? I cannot tell here in the land where all are olive-skinned. Tiny eyes and tiny teeth are all that show through. There is no discernable nose, nor is there any hair to be seen on that pink and purple scalp of his. Indeed there are certain faces one hates immediately upon sight. This is one of those faces. With a wrathful smile the demigod slobbers and picks at what must be his remarkably tiny nasal cavity. His bum stuffed to brimming he nevertheless farts and howls delightedly at my complete and fascinated attention.

“Oh yes! 'Tis a beautiful thing Hofmeister has done, eh?!”

Texan it is then, and I nod and am aware that at one time there had been other torture devices as well in this room. There are gruesome indentations chiseled deeply where these machines must have been firmly anchored. For mine and for my companion's benefit were they painfully removed? Undoubtedly, and there are designs at work here. I smile. I can be the most cautious man in the world, and the beast has a bit of respect for my reputation. This has all been preview, sure, but further horrors are not yet imminent – ‘Shh there, Princess,’ I cradle the fallen girl from the fetid floor and avoid the eyes of those still evidently in the midst of their tortures. One soul at a time, and what else can one man do? Too much of this, and I, too, shall snap –

“For heaven's sake, no, my boy! Thou art a powerful one! Thou art powerful by craft, by cunning! Thou hast what the Old Greeks called ‘meitis’, the birthright of fair Odysseus himself, and 'tis a rare gift indeed! Hofmeister admires greatly the resourceful mind! 'Tis most often a receptacle of brilliant horror! Hofmeister hath made room here in his study in the hopes that we may talk, you and him!”

I find myself too absent-mindedly following the arc of that blubberous arm as that tiny hole of a mouth barks, and I am reminded of this place as if slapped. Immune to it only a second ago, I find – to my own horror – that I shall suddenly weep for it. Oh, and that will surely be the end of me –

“No, my child! Thou wouldst disappoint Hofmeister too soon with thy thoughts! Humor a poor old man at least a moment, Hofmeister begs thee! He

hath no children in this world, and these witless puppies offer him no intelligent companionship whatsoever!”

He kicks the boy beneath him, really only a slender wisp of a creature, almost maiden-like, and the boy yelps. The master teeters –

“*Why, you little bitch!...*”

And the ensuing invectives, a bizarre mish-mash of Farsi, Hebrew, Texan, Arabic, Bengali, Spanish, German, and English, unwritable even for me, proceed for well on ten minutes, and the beast hops up and down brutally, at once embuggering himself like a lunatic upon his man and crushing the narrow spine of the poor innocent below. I keep my place, standing, and I watch dispassionately. This is, after all, light punishment when compared to that of the others –

“*See?!*” when he tires, though remarkably windful for an animal his size – “*’Tis poor, the substitutes Hofmeister must endure in this hellhole! Hofmeister desires naught but a soul of quality, that reason may give proper vent to ungodly passion! You, better than any other, understand! Do you not?!*”

Yes, I nod. In fact I do understand. I request a chair.

“*Of course!*”

Another hollow clap, and two more slaves, both enrobed young men, both obviously of preferred status, emerge from a door carved into the bodies of the wall behind the throne. Screams unmuffled at the working hinges, and I start as they lead in a young girl. None of these three is masked or hooded, but the charmless little thing most distressed is collared and leashed and no match whatever for her handlers. The two slaves lead her toward me, and my own Princess snores gently and fitfully at my breast. Naught but a child, this new girl trembles fearfully at the skeletal and spectral faces that greet her. She shivers at the blood dripping like rain from the ceiling, and I notice she does not look up. She has obviously been here before. Of her own peculiarly preferred status, I suppose, still I fear the poor thing is about to faint away.

And she does. At my feet, and she is prodded with a cattle prod. With a scream as delicate as her anorectic figure she re-awakens to her nightmare, and with a savage whisper in her ears it is made plain to her that there is to be no respite. Another prod, another scream, and as if trained for just such a thing, she assumes the same position as the boy beneath the throne. Their charge thus situated and sobbing, the two young wards reveal themselves to me suddenly and fully. There is certainly more than enough to hang my hat on, and I am meant to choose between them, I think. Although it would indeed be mannerly of me, I politely decline.

“*Of course, my son! Thine, Hofmeister supposes, is the age-old fetish of filth! Only the female for thee, eh?! ’Tis little account for taste, sure, and hell, boy, even Hofmeister shies away from that fair sewage! Yea, ’tis a brave lad to do it, my son, and ’tis the female thou shalt have!*”

He makes to clap yet again, and I raise my hand and interrupt –

“No, Father,” I address him so, “’tis neither front nor back; ’tis neither male nor female whom I desire. My fetish is indeed most unusual of all these days. For ’tis naught but *chastity* I crave. Like a priest even, for to my mind, there is no greater pleasure than to deny that beastly whore, Nature. Aye, to deny the Mother her most innate desires, her *demands*, in fact. Yea, Father, my pleasure is to deny women and men both, and ’tis a joy confirmed only by the spare but meaningful leave I grant my own hands. I shall let no other touch me.”

“*Here, here!*” The monster roars his approval with another flatulent outburst, and he demands drinks. At once another slave appears from behind the throne. He carries a silver tray with two fluted glasses. One is bubbly and seems to contain champagne; the other bubbles in its own way but contains a frothy white fluid. I take the champagne, mildly surprised at the show of manners – “*Hath thee no shock, my son! Hofmeister is at once a civilized man! Shouldst thou prefer a snifter of brandy, ’tis thine!*”

“No, no, Father. This is most acceptable. Thank you.” I sit on the sobbing girl’s backside in a further attempt to be mannerly. The girl does not resist, and I stare into the glass, wary of concoctions. I smell it, and I dare not drink it –

“A-ha! Another test passed, and bravo, lad! Here Hofmeister plays the conspiring harlot, the conniving Circe, and thou alone, like thy Greek forbear, refuse the fatal ambrosia! Bravo! Bravo! A brandy for the lad! A clean brandy! The drink of mortal men!”

At once a new glass is served, a right and proper snifter, and the champagne is brought to the master. He sniffs it, and he licks the glass – in what can only be a nauseating attempt at seductiveness – before tossing its contents to the floor. A faint hiss, a wisp of smoke, and strangled cries from far, far away. Wherever the liquid touches, neat black holes are bored as if drilled through the white surface. An increase in a suffering beyond suffering, and am I now somehow responsible? I am sure to avoid the madly struggling, lidless eyes –

“Drink with poor Hofmeister now! Hath thee no fear, lad! Thou art his child of wit, and take care! For damn it all, Hofmeister hath begun to like thee near to *passion!* Yea, drink with Hofmeister, boy, that he see thee even more lovely! Aye, and do *not* disappoint him!”

This last bit hissed like a crocodile, and what can I do? I drink with the pig, and we forge our bond between men. I am made evil henchman by it, and suddenly surrounded by my handiwork, I shall vomit –

“Yea, my child, thine is indeed a most interesting way! Yes, yes, such the rogue thou hast created for thyself lo, these thousands of years, and do not feign surprise at the things Hofmeister knows, my son! He hath kept himself quite well informed of thy career! More than once, in fact, ’twas an invisible hand what rescued thee from a spot! And these, the hands of thy master, were those very appendages unseen but by thee! Yes, yes, thou hast been most sloppy at times! But so utterly boyishly so, and still after all these centuries, and Hofmeister hath fallen in love with thee a thousand times over!

“Now, come hither, boy, and reciprocate that love! Reciprocate that love with a beastly ardor to make that crippled child there whom thou wouldst call ‘wife’ die of jealousy!”

With that the beast lifts what little remains of his robe and reveals a crazy little stubby thing, wider than it is long. A genuine monstrosity, and were I even to consent, what exactly would he have me do with that thing? –

“No worries, lad! Hofmeister wields this ugly remnant of a forgotten manhood like a champion swordsman! As for thee?! Why, thou shalt merely do what it is comes naturally! ’Tis a dance, is all Hofmeister begs, and he shall lead thee like a husband! Come! Come, to him, Princess!”

He claps. An order meant for me, and my own Princess stirs –
“*What’s this?! The wench doth awaken too soon?!*”

With his fury rising, that bizarre little appendage of his swells, not upward, but outward like a sponge, and I fear there is soon to be an all-out lubric rage with which to deal here. A beast enflamed, and I hold the nodding girl out before him.

“Here, Father, the one of whom they speak. My protégé, she is, and she, too, bears the soul of those who travel wicked. I believe ’twould please thee much to grant her thine audience. I swear, I shall personally assuage that aching pestilence between thy legs if thou allow’st the girl to perform. Exceptional an entertainer is she, and Salomé herself could not seduce better!

“My son, thou art not a stupid young man! Thou wouldst understand well how dearly it is Hofmeister must have thee! And so it is with suspect eloquence that thou hast procured thy wicked little child time! And so it is granted forthwith that the wicked little insect perform her wicked little plague-dance! But upon condition that thou submit thyself, and of thine own free will, to ease this, Hofmeister’s most profound agitation! Come hither now, boy! ’Tis thy mouth Hofmeister finds himself most desiring about this amply scarified flesh of his!”

“No, Father,” one must sometimes be brave, “my mouth is yet virgin, and the venue is not as yet proper. Nay, ’tis no such thing ye shall have till it is that *thou* shouldst please *me*. My lord sits in dire need of patience. Am I not thine honored guest? Am I not thy favorite? Do not think, Father, to treat me like this witless cast about which you surround yourself.”

“Enough, little Giton! Thy words be well-spoken and well-taken! But Hofmeister warns thee, boy! Be wary of to whom thou art speaking! Aye, be wary of this house as if the entire thing be snare! A thousand souls perish here each day, mind ye, and Hofmeister hath contract with the Devil himself to assure they perish a thousand times over – and a thousand times more horribly at that – upon their blasted, heathen deaths!”

Both our seats whimper at this, and they are immediately prodded –

“’Tis an extraordinary being thou see’st before thee, boy! And granted Hofmeister’s favor, thine may as well be an extraordinary life! Childless till now, he doth however seek son! But ’tis sure in this he seeks a like mind! And

'twill be thy very soul Hofmeister now consents to study! But he must warn thee as well, child, not a one hath lived who hath seen this place! Not a one hath rested peacefully upon sacrifice to his pleasure! Be careful, boy! But please Hofmeister, and thy reward will be unbelievable!"

He is a liar, and I am familiar with the tactic. I rouse the Princess as a slave begins to work on that horrid little manhood between his master's legs. The girl awakens and weeps into me, that the master not see.

"I cannot," she protests to my chest. "I cannot, my love. I cannot. I shall die if I open my eyes. Please, love, take me from this place. This is a horrible place. I do not wish to see anymore. I do not wish to die here. Please, my love, these sounds alone shall make me mad –

"God help thee, child, should Hofmeister give it up before thou wouldst croon!"

Meant for me? For the Princess? For some slave or other? I do not know. But I am of sufficient wisdom to see that the path here must be that of virtue, and more, that of virtue tempered by selfishness. So criminal is this monster, and he is absolutely before me. Remarkably weighted, his is by no means an empty shell. There is a tremendously obese soul in there, and sanctity is my sole escape – At once I see a critical difference: this beast is bound to this world. Sensual to the extreme, he is defeatable for it. And we shall see if I, too, can love a vanquished foe –

"My God!"

He is too near release, and in one surprisingly, and terrifyingly agile motion the monster tears the bidding slave from himself and bites down ferociously on the silent boy's neck. Live flesh is removed with a sickening SLURP, and time is now very short. I thrust the girl forward. Like a ventriloquist I force the dance, and song emerges from those sputtering lips instinctively. With audacity to rival the imperious sister of a Roman emperor, I carry the child right to the beast. All the while I myself create the dance haphazardly.

It is quite the arresting sight, as may well be imagined, for the Princess and I both are as yet decked out in our evening wear. Aye, the show is a gentleman's pleasure in Hell, and I take it right into the fat bastard's face. The girl is mortified. She screams lyrics thoughtlessly, as if they are wings that might fly her safely away, and she is now face to face with the horror. Hell's oiliest block of crude blubber sputtering lubriciously upon the Lord's most refined creation, and the now bloody beast himself lurches forward. His face touches her face, and I am pushed backward. But I hold my ground, and one arm about the Princess, I grab a considerable hunk of beastly flab – or what I *hope* is merely flab – and I squeeze the squamous stuff as if it were his throat –

The bastard tosses the girl aside, and it is he and I now. The Princess lies still, still singing, insane – He grabs me by the neck and makes to kiss me. Creature to creature, creation to creation, and through him what is it I should become? There are revelations even I do not seek, and I dodge that chubby, cancerous growth of a tongue that extends to me bulbously. The thing is like an even tinier version of that other thing, and I cannot help but laugh. I laugh, and

the monster before me suddenly himself erupts into a fit of powerful laughter that makes echo the very human walls of this prison.

No more kisses, and I withdraw stealthily. The bastard ripples like a body of water as he laughs, and I punch him suddenly and hard in the mouth. At once his slaves are upon me. But I have massacred before. With furious hands I slaughter once more, and I can heap corpses with the most ambitious of criminals. Lest be forgotten, the jaw-bones of a thousand asses lie littered at my feet, and a weakened monster presides. *I slay that bastard in the most indescribable way.* I slaughter him. I tear him to pieces, and there is a wild notion to yank that damned rope already –

“Please, my love, over here.”

Another crime undone at the hand of virtue, and it is I who is yanked back from the precipice. Legacies remain forever in the dungeons, and the two of us crawl through a slave door that has been left ajar. There is not a merciful thing in all the world to be done for those misfortunate souls left behind. Better to let them starve, and indeed there are horrible acts of charity. Aye, some sins must run their course, and I beg no forgiveness –

Krist, I lie. I beg all the forgiveness in the world –

We escape. Cover of night and all, and there isn't a hound or highwayman alive to match my cunning. Yea, I am a full-witted man, and Lord, this is a whole new species before Thee! Aye, before Thee, I *scream!* Before Thee, my laugh is the most hearty in the world! Before Thee, I need Thee more than ever, and Thou art just as reluctant as myself. Every man in the world eventually stops at me, and I give them pause. And do not confuse the decision with the process of arriving at that decision –

Oh, suddenly too kind am I, and just like that I have lost a million traveled miles in penalties. Through a stooped doorway, beyond which lies the well-forested road, I find myself unable to ignore a thousand pathetic cries for help.

“Jamie Lynn!”

At once disowned, the name is back, and the girl must respond regardless. I own her, and that is another story. What is important here is that there are two people in this world, and we are both of us perfect. Metaphysics is the science here, a mirror longing to be shattered, and I am a phallus made fist. Wielded by a feminine conscience, I strike with a might half-realized. Glass and bone erupt in my path, and there is ever blood before me in the dark. Deprived of sight, however, my other senses in fact grow more dulled. Jamie Lynn? She is like my dog –

“Jamie Lynn, stop! Thine is a man without honor, sure, and that has been readily apparent for years now. But there are souls here suffering, and I am confused for it.”

“O please, my love,” she pleads back, “this is a place of pure evil, and it pains me even to speak thy name here. Once were these souls, but they are not now. Victims they are, and 'tis not the place of the fugitive to disappaise fate. Let the suffered suffer, my dearest, and take comfort in their exceptional comfort upon repose.”

“No, no,” I am compelled to argue my point rather than to do it – “No, my dearest Jamie Lynn, thou dost not look upon me as there thou speak’st. Thou wouldst see by that nothing of the famished organs that bleat in these accursed ears till I am nigh on deaf with it. Such is the design before us, my dear, that a thousand souls at least lie at our gentle mercy, and at the mercy of no other. To run now would be tantamount to passing judgment, and my millions of vices aside, ’tis not a one alive or dead who can yet call me hypocrite. Murder is passion for me, and should I ever legitimize the practice then I am dead as the fulsome beast I just slaughtered. Aye, and his, too, was a murder born of passion. So you see, my child, there is an action yet to be taken, an onus to bear, if you will, and I see none in these ill-fated woods but us. ’Tis time enough for apathy in my latter years. It is *now*, however, that I shall perform a murder of *astounding* proportions. And thou art to be my accomplice. Do not betray me, child, or the horrible fate of all these about thee will seem like nothing.”

Like a ringmaster I sweep my arm wide, then grab the girl by the shoulders. No more words. A thousand souls, and already less than a thousand breaths among them. I run back. I shall play the executioner, but I shall not play the judge. A man of principles is a terrifying thing. Luckily, I am the only one –

Aye, and indeed it shall be the fire this time. But a sudden fog, as if by fate, enshrouds the eternally fuel-soaked mansion, as if the house be already dead. Here in the desert at last a single burst of lightning, and *poof*, my work is stolen from me. An enormous feat ingloriously purloined, and the Princess cries at the flames. I, on the other hand, am furious. Credit stolen for my work – for *my* work! – and though not yet a poet, I am still selfish. With a breath I charge back into the smoking abattoir. Flesh is roasting and spitting in the grease, and the starving man is hideously tempted. I bite my tongue only, however, for I, too, shall roast alive before not sinning.

Aye, and through the babble I make my way to the master’s mausoleum, that ghastly dungeon, and the ladies up top are weeping and squirming madly in unison at the black smoke. The situation is desperately ceremonious, and the master’s rope catches fire. Soon it, too, will disappear, and *no!* I leap for it, and the thing disintegrates in my hands. I jump for it, but it is useless. What’s left of the rope hangs as a corded little stump too high above my head. Thwarted once again, I kick viciously at the smoldering skulls at my feet.

Ludicrously smiling zombies, they crack and splinter like wood beneath my heavy boots. And more, I punch the mushy walls in frustration. Grunts and groans are amplified above the noise of fire, and I bite and scratch the flesh of those suffered more than any other. A pound of flesh, I exact the toll, and it is the fat ladies above who most irritate me with their loathsome singing. I jump futilely once more for the rope, and with my own eyeballs now smoking, I spy a staggering slave. ‘Lowe’, I spy the name carved into his forehead, and “Lowe!” I anoint him as a master would. He sputters toward me in confusion. “Stand still!” I grab him powerfully by the shoulders and bend him over. A child of Sodom, he is pliable within strong hands, and I make of him a fleshy ladder. I climb up on to his stout back, and the burnt tendrils of the rope are within reach. The women low like assembly-line cattle, and I make a final, fatal leap. The rope is mine! And I

plunge to the floor with it. My weight acts as prop, and I have to say, the machine works beautifully! Doubtlessly exactly as its CEO envisioned –

PLUNK, it is I who first hits the greasy floor, then PLOP PLOP PLOP PLOP PLOP, and so on. A simultaneous infanticide on a grand and moving scale, and I find myself being crushed by malformed fetuses spat forth from the most grievous labors of woman. THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP, I am battered, and one would never guess these falling things to have ever been of human mother. At once born they are dead, and these are all fat and greasy, noseless little monsters –

But wait...listen...Some cry still, and that is beastly. Some writhe as yet, and I stand tall, fully nourished. About me at least half the children hang in mid-air, their umbilici having remained somehow intact. A giant mobile, the horrid little fat and greasy things twist about in the winds of the flames. They spin a wayward course, as if unused to flying, and above them their mothers loll and expire at last. Restrained even from the meagerest throes of death, only their hideous faces contort. And these are priceless. Pleasure indeed as only the oil men can conceive –

Below me, the live ones crawl like slugs, trailing red and black slime, and it is *now* time for me to escape. I pile some of the fallen baby beasts ceremoniously atop their master – meant to be a thing like an epitaph, or perhaps more even, a thing like a proper burial before cremation, in the ‘Old Greek’ way. Aye, and I see that my stepladder lies still as well, himself having been overwhelmed by falling debris. I leave him well matted to the floor, and it strikes me that there are no more eyeballs to be seen. All have burst by now, I suppose, and blindness can indeed be a most heavenly provision –

I am on fire. Hell’s portent, and I myself cannot see very well – Staggering, falling, I am lost in the oven. The kiln, I should say, and I am *burning*. *I am the most alive man in the world, and I am burning!* I scream, and a familiar hand grabs mine. Huh? –

“This way. Hurry, my love.”

My love, and another, and my perfect world has returned once more. Ever the infernal victim, and my subtle seductions have saved me yet again. Zeus throws another shit-fit, and I alone emerge from Hades unscathed.

And if this last little encounter is any indication, the Devil himself resides at 501 Bel Air Road, Los Angeles, California.

Thou can’t indeed mapquest it.

As for me, it is time to rest, and you would not *believe* how well it is I sleep at night.

The Word God

Chris Kelso

Kholo forged westwards, ignoring the maddening squawk of the worm god. Having finally assembled a band of combatants and theologians to accompany him, Kholo was somewhat distressed to find himself journeying through the Amazonian heart of Anoka jungle - completely alone. Each party-member met

their own gruesome, untimely end within the first 40 miles of the quest. It was this knowledge which gave credence to his current apprehensions.

Takak - hunter of game/defiler of taken women - perished at the hands of his own trade, attempting to de-tusk an African elephant before being subsequently trampled to death.

Kgosi - village surgeon/ priest - had his eyes pecked out by a vulture whilst praying that Takak's mortal soul reach safe entry into paradise.

Abigail – murderer/thief/problem solver - was captured by native savages, communally raped and burned alive on a pyre.

Jehu - navigator/ map maker - fell fourteen feet into a trapping-pit lined with sharp, wooden spikes and inhaled his best smoking pipe in the process. This happened shortly after he and Takak killed a honey bear then ate its liver. Jehu complained of dizziness and nausea before a complete loss of muscular co-ordination saw him plunge to his death. Jehu's corpse was also stolen by native savages (and *again* communally raped).

The others came to similar demise until it was just book collector, Kholo Katanga, left cursing the most damnable luck. Anoka jungle attacked his senses with bright colour and strange sounds; though the dense undergrowth was thinning a little at least. Why Kholo had made it this far he did not know, but the worm was known for its cruel games.

The worm god was a gloomy kind of god. He wriggled around on the greyest rain cloud, watching civilisation below, despising every one of its inhabitants for reasons never revealed. The blood of men, women and children coursed through its ribboned, tube-like abdomen and every semester went about ejaculating a freight of eggs into the Anoka. Unforgiving and brutal, the worm god also had the unique benefit of invisibility (no-one ever claimed to've actually seen it before, though there were plenty of cave drawings).

Often town warriors would declare war on the worm. This was, of course, a foolish decision - the kind of decision typical among the strong of arm and weak of mind. The worm's attacks were random and seemingly motiveless. Kholo wanted to locate then destroy the larvae it birthed into the subterranean depths of Anoka. Only then could the city be free of its parasitic reign.

A peal of thunder overhead made Kholo shelter himself under a Bakke leaf he found wilting in the tropical savannah heat. He drank water from his flask and continued on through the haze of trees. The coming of night brought a nightmarish edge to proceedings. Deeper into the abyss, Kholo relied on instinct alone to see him through the midnight hours for the nocturnal animals of Anoka were silent and lethal. This contributed to its nickname – “Jungle of the Dead”. There was no air of progress here, only stagnant things that refused to grow or

evolve. Kholo kept moving, motivated by his desire to return a hero and banish once and for all the town hearsay that he spread his seed among taken women.

He tried to rest for a while beneath the gibbous moon's lunar light, extracting leeches from every corner of his body. He pulled a cluster of red berries from a branch and shoved them in his mouth. He couldn't remember which types of berry were safe to eat, but hunger ruled over reason. The next morning, Kholo speared some fish heading upstream and ate them on the bone.

It had been three days and Kholo began to doubt the larvae's existence entirely. Weighed down by his sack of supplies and the giant machete he carried at his side, Kholo was hours away from dropping dead in the middle of nowhere, dehydrated and utterly hopeless - until he came to a clearing. The absence of forest gave distinct path to a darkened temple ahead. Rejuvenated by this discovery, Kholo ambled forth.

Beneath his feet, Kholo felt a change in terrain. The insect infested lowland soil and coarse weeds began to smooth out. He sensed this was significant somehow. Kholo felt the presence of the unholy mutated grub festering nearby. He was so excited by this new success that he barely gave second thought to his empty water flask. Kholo was just a collector of rare books on forbidden subjects, not a natural adventurer. So he was perhaps entitled to let his guard down for the sake of a little pride.

The air grew increasingly humid the closer to the temple Kholo got - more so than in the tropical centre of Anoka. Vines climbed to the apex. He cut through a tapestry of vegetation all the while trying to maintain his optimism. Kholo was dry and thirsty, he couldn't deny this knowledge. He felt his eye lids scratch together when he blinked and his lips become cracked. On top of all this, Kholo felt his stomach grate which he began to assume were the effects of the berries he'd consumed a few nights earlier. Instinctively, he reached for the flask which he forgot was void of sustenance. The onset of complete exhaustion forced Kholo to rest a moment.

- Bastards son. He cursed.

The water in Anoka was supposedly undrinkable, polluted by the worm's amniotic fluid. So Kholo was already preparing himself for the possibility he may need to drink his own urine. Kholo heard trees falling in the distance.

He peered back into the labyrinthine webs of the jungle and felt a return to relief - *HE*, Kholo Katanga, had made it through the jungle of the dead unscathed! He had quashed the common belief people held that the jungles remorseless nature sought only to give rise to stronger, colder blooded forms of life.

Soon enough, lethargy overwhelmed his pride and Kholo dozed off atop a rock pile. His dreams were full of terrible images of the worm god and the clutch

of hideous children it would soon mother. He felt the dead energy of the worm's omnipresence. He felt its eye upon him, in sleep as well as wakefulness.

Kholo woke up drenched in his own sweat. He noticed the waning daylight and fretted. The poisoned berries finally made their way back out of his body, heaved onto the grass in a pool of bloody vomit. His feverish nightmares seemed almost real in this place, the delirium of Anoka's intense heat began to show cracks in Kholo's mind. He needed water.

Unlike Anoka, the dark temples structure seemed in constant flux. It beckoned him, whispered his name and promised him nourishment. Before Kholo had time to think rationally, his legs had already pulled his body from the rock pile and started carrying him into the black passageway. The moans of the ruin ceased to call his name, leaving lethal silence.

A patchwork of hanging fronds grazed over Kholo's bald scalp as he entered, but his brain was on auto-pilot. He was blissfully unaware of his environment as he passed through it. However, when tiny motes of light began to freckle the dark passageway, Kholo felt horror rise up in him once again. Lined along either side of the temple were sundered human heads impaled on large pikes.

- Bastards son... He heard himself whisper on reflex.

Kholo was beginning to see the darkened temple as a much more symbolic location – not just the Worm's womb or the larvae's nest, but a closed-city of malign monsters where simple men and women should never trespass.

Something wriggled and writhed in its own slime noisily. Most of the passageway remained submerged in a veil of shadow but the noises were vivid and Kholo had no desire for its source to be exposed. He'd read once that the substance the larvae secrete during gestation helped in both snaring prey and to lubricate its body to move quickly through narrow tunnels. The vague stench of moist stone filled his nostrils. Then they were full of a smell more foul - the quintessence of evil. A series of moss-grown catacombs faced Kholo.

The crescent moon shone brightly through the crumbling slabs of the temple ceiling as if alive with a new force. The speared heads were now illuminated, showing the most awful, agonised expressions in clear light. This could only be the work of the worm. Natives were brutal but even this wasn't their style. He clutched the hilt of his machete like grim death.

Kholo chose the middle tunnel but there was no logic or reason behind his decision. The mushy sounds drew closer further down the tunnel. Kholo wondered why he was even here. Something was pulling him deeper and deeper into the temples heart. He knew he ought to turn back but, against his better judgement, was compelled to venture lower into the larvae's lair. Even with the familiar drip of fountain water and the chance to quench his thirst, Kholo's morbid curiosity could not be pricked.

A tortured scream sounded that chilled him to the marrow. His step quickened in the face of this potential danger, again Kholo could not explain the reason why.

Light began to ebb through the darkness and Kholo's stride became more paced. He pushed his back against the stony corner and peered round. Kholo saw a group of bear breasted women standing diligently by a red tarp, clutching wooden bowls of glimmering slime. The women then began dipping their hands in, slapping themselves all over with it. Kholo was beguiled by their beauty. Women often had a distracting effect on him. The women's bosoms glistened while the yolks of their nipples puckered with retained milk. A native man was chanting and held a machete aloft - the spine of which was tipped with blood. Two natives wearing a long worm suit (one at the front, the other at the back) were then lacquered up with the bowls contents. The chanting stopped and the native holding the machete declared

The first stage of labour begins...

This prompted furious wriggling around from the men in suit until eventually they burst free and everyone screamed with joy. Kholo's reflection skittered across the glossy worm suit as he turned to leave.

STOP! He heard one of natives cry. Instinctively, Kholo started running back through the dark passageway. While most people feared and loathed the worm god, Kholo had read about races who worshipped it. Feet padded after him not far behind. He had no idea where he was going, blindly fingering his way along the stone walls and wild vegetation. The worm worshipers were still pursuing him. Kholo knew he'd gone full circle when the heads on pikes made their faces as he hurried past. To his relief, he could see the passageway exit. Behind him the sound of tracking feet seemed to stop. Kholo allowed a moment to rest and catch a clean breath before throwing himself from the temples passageway and into the moonlit jungle clearing.

Sweat seared down Kholo's face as he tried to process what he'd just seen. Anoka was alive with noise again. His body ached for water and the evident lack of any nearby was driving him insane. Kholo decided to continue on past the dark temple and into last stretch of Anoka.

By now, he knew he was as good as dead. Although he'd made it this far into the jungle, he could never make it back out the way he came. Kholo would push deeper into the core until the clearing ended and the ominous forest returned. Guided by celestial light, he was certain he knew which direction to take. But when Kholo turned to face the temple, it was gone. He searched frantically around him, but it had completely vanished. Kholo's dismay became enflamed further when he realised the clearing was now full of giant exotic trees and vines - much like that of Anoka. He was back in the overgrown jungle, with all its denseness and horror. The vegetation seemed greater now, somehow more congested. There was an evident progress here which was absent before. The music of the night was different too. Before, Kholo could've identified a small majority of the Anoka wildlife's grunts and growls, but now they were more varied, more obscure. Hideous beasts lurked beneath every shadow, no longer hiding places of mere insect or amphibian. Kholo was fenced in with these beasts

by the immense vines and weeds which swelled around him. He shook off a cramp that travelled down the course of his left arm.

Damn berries!

A sudden numbness filled Kholo's mouth. He tried to produce saliva but was unable. He tried to scream but the tongue was dead in its cave. Panicked by his loss of feeling, Kholo began sticking Bakke leaves into his mouth in the hope that the mild poison from their fleshy roots would help to return some glimmer of sensation. But the more Bakke he filled himself with, the more he seemed to be incapable of tasting it. Kholo was struck with as much regret as he was fear. He should never have eaten those berries. Now, they would be the death of him. Kholo wanted to come to Anoka to prove a point or die like a hero trying. Instead, he'd collapse – dead, forgotten, neck bloated from poison, with his tongue lolling out onto the undergrowth. There was no honour in that.

As Kholo fell to his knees, the sound of trickling water sparked life into him. He got to his feet, drool now dangling from his numbed lips. He parted a tall thicket of reeds and saw the murky jungle pond in all its glory. Kholo felt dizzy but ecstatic all at once. His only urge was to bathe and drink from the water and he was a slave to these urges. He stripped off and dipped his toe into the layer of green scum which sheeted the ponds surface. The rest of Kholo Katanga followed.

Thigh deep in the water, he waded forward until it became less shallow, at which point he immersed his head. The worm's amniotic fluid seemed harmless enough. Kholo could even admit to feeling its benefits as he lapped up handfuls into his mouth. While he couldn't taste the water, he nevertheless felt replenished by it. Eyes watched him with interest.

Kholo noticed ripples in the water where the spinal column of a croc weaved in and out. Every part of Anoka despised the smell of human males and sought to eliminate it from its pores in any way necessary.

Carefully, he got back out trying not to disturb the water surface. The crocodile seemed oblivious and didn't swim anywhere near him. When Kholo turned back the croc had resurfaced onto the mud bank on the opposite side of the lake. It sat on its hindquarters staring back at Kholo. He looked at its face, at its long mandible packed with razor sharp triangles, its smooth belly, and saw in its dead eyes – the presence of the worm god. Kholo suspected he would be struck down at any time, so moved further west.

The worm god was conspiring against Kholo, he knew it - the way he'd seen it manipulate Anoka to swallow intruders. Perhaps the worm's worshippers had the right idea. They appeared immune to its wrath. As Kholo considered this, the sun's orb grew fiery red and he felt its heat burn and peel the skin from his bare back. Rays shone down onto the Anoka, melting leaves to pulp and slowing down jungle predators in their tracks. Kholo felt every animal in the jungle watching him undercover. Just as it seemed the night would never leave Anoka,

the sun fires into brilliant, searing life with a vengeance. At least Kholo had been nourished which could keep him on his feet at least a little while longer.

The jungle went on forever, the vines and plants blossomed into huge, intimidating organisms and Kholo's hope began to die once more. He was hungry. He had to hunt down, catch and kill something. Back in his town the dominant males brought home the food so this was an entirely new challenge for Kholo to conquer. He'd read enough to have a vague idea what was required of him.

Kholo used his tribal initiative to fashion some rudimentary spears, shaving shreds of wood from tree bark and tying a sharpened stone to the tip with sinew. He used Bakke sap to poison the edge and he was ready.

Fumbling its way through the forest was an eight legged insect with a body fat from insatiable greed. Behind a shrub of leaves, Kholo stalked his prey. The hideous insect moved in such a way that suggested its skinny legs struggled to carry the sheer weight of its body. It didn't travel more than ten yards at a time without stopping to rest and gobble up more of the jungles defenceless basin dwelling critters. Kholo saw his moment and tossed the spear. To his obvious disappointment, it struck the large insect on the leg and broke apart. The insect moved through the leaves, blissfully unaware that something was hunting it. He had failed and night was preparing to fall heavy.

Kholo sat on the dirt and looked at the blistering sun and the awful lunar body of the moon lying dormant behind it. In a fit of madness, triggered by exhaustion and malnourishment, he began chewing at his own hand. The poisoned berries had made his flesh supple and his bones brittle so he had no trouble biting off and grinding large quantities of himself. Kholo felt no pain for his nerves were dead with poison and his mouth numb with the same reaction. The mental shock was muted by the onset of hallucination. Although Kholo had begun self-cannibalising his own body, to his drug saturated eyes, he believed he was making love to three of the nude females from the darkened temple. He kissed them hard on their mouths and cupped the global mounds of their breasts and slid his fingers between their thighs and smelled the fresh absence of human sex on their flesh and hair. Kholo felt his groin tingle with life and the sense of old habits returning. The worm grew fatter in his breechcloth. On the mud bank the croc watched with cruel relish. The worm god got him...

Independent Film Review: Mourning Wood

Jesse Dedman

I had the privilege of watching this curious little film a few months back, but never really had the time to sit down and honestly collect my thoughts about it.

Mourning Wood, from the case to the disc, to the end of the film, maintains consistency with the nonsensical and yet hilarious way in which people become infect. Yes, Mourning Wood is a campy zombie comedy, but it isn't a zombie film that is anywhere close to the ones you've seen before. In most zombie films, and even in other cheesy and yet adorable campy zombie flicks like *Aaaaah! Zombies* the zombies tend to either loiter around or chase after people, but in *Mourning Wood*, the zombies go into a very intense humping frenzy where they violently grind their crotch on every surface like a cat in heat until they vomit thick globs of white goop.

If your thinking that's absurd, or that's completely retarded, then you wouldn't be the first to express concern for this very strange and alienating direction the folks at Fat Foot Films chose. However, one important thing to remember is that the film hardly takes it self seriously. To discredit the film for its low-brow humor would be like slapping your dog for barking. It is doing what it is intended to do. And for Mourning Wood, the intent is to tell a story about a group of friends that deal with an insane epidemic of mindless zombies with a frame of in-your-face, no-hold-bar humor without any fear of reeking.

Did I enjoy this film? Well, it had its winning moments, but I really wished they didn't try to cram like fifteen minutes of narrative back story drama in the beginning. I won't bullshit. I was pretty frustratingly long and testing on my patience. But ignoring that, the film contains a few gems. The claymation sequence in the beginning was freaking awesome. The Billy Mays' style infomercials were amusing at times, but my favorite little gem out of all them is the detail to the props. During a scene near the end, the boys make use of some strange hi-tech weaponry to destroy waves of zombies, and to create those props the people at Fat Foot Films used various items that would trigger nostalgia in any gamer worth his or her cred.

But like I mentioned, the film has its rough edges too. I wish I could say the long narrative sequence was the only trial of patience, but there are other scenes and clips that derail from the plot just to showcase video editing skills and allow time for more jokes. Other reviews have called this a product of love, and it is. Mourning Wood contains clips that skipped passed the cutting board because of love, because of the time and effort spent to produce them. With that said, there is one clip in particular that I am glad, very glad they left in. It is a joke of reflection. A joke that knowingly decimates any remaining bits of sincerity left in the film--which is much—in a way that practically excretes steamy, watery globs of raw horse shit all over the production. What I mean, is that your time spent watching and following leads to one giant troll fest, and you're invited to the best seat in the house. It wouldn't be enough to just to watch that clip on youtube, because without watching the entire film, you wouldn't get the most of the joke.

Would I recommend it? The case wouldn't even make a good coaster, but yes I do recommend it. I recommend it to those that enjoy campy zombie flicks that don't take themselves seriously what-so-ever.

Murder is Never Easy

Conner Clifton

Murder is never easy. There are too many factors involved. For one, you need to pick your target. Who are they? What are they like? Why are you killing them? Are you a serial killer, blindly killing anyone who fulfills your twisted ritual, or do you have a vendetta against this asshole? Are you going to make the kill quick and clean or are you going to drag it out and torture your victim?

These are the questions I have to ask myself every time I go out in public. Whether I'm at work or just going out to do my errands or even if I'm on a date, I'm constantly scanning the room, looking for people that I could kill. I'm not saying that I would kill them. But I definitely think about it. I work in retail so the only way I can really get through the day without taking my frustrations out on some poor idiot who can't tell the difference between Windows 7 and Microsoft Office are the endorphins that are sent to my brain whenever I visualize breaking a CD in half and slicing their jugular with it. To better understand my modus operandi, you should watch the new Sherlock Holmes. Whenever the titular character is in a physical altercation with someone else, he meticulously plans the entire fight before putting his plan into execution. I am like that with murdering someone, but I never actually seal the deal.

I think about murdering more than just strangers. I distinctly remember a quite brutal fantasy I had about my roommate during my sophomore year of college and his girlfriend. I always considered myself a fair roommate. I wore headphones when I watched porn and I always waited until he fell asleep before I would start my phallic operations. But he never talked to me about issues he had with me, and so he always had this pent up anger towards me. Communication is key in any relationship.

Eventually things reached a point where he let my ex-girlfriend into our dorm room while I was not around and she proceeded to rip up my prophylactics and flushed my weed. I could have gotten in my roommate's face, I could have gotten revenge. But I decided to be the bigger person and escape into my fantasy world where I am capable of chloroforming both he and his girlfriend, locking them up in a warehouse, tying them down to chairs that are facing each other, waiting for them both to wake up, skinning my roommate in front of his lover (her eyes would be pried open, mind you!), chloroforming his girlfriend again, sewing my roommate's skin around his girlfriend's body like a one-piece full body suit, placing a mirror in front of her and allowing her to wake up.

I recently had a series of ultimately ill-fated romantic encounter with a recovering cocaine addict. After she stood me up for the umpteenth time, I went through my usual routine of being incredibly non-confrontational and instead imagined exacting my revenge. I had it all planned out: I would anonymously send her a bag of cocaine with a typed note that said "You know it's good. I know you want more. Call me," and below that would be a phone number that would forward to her best friend. Oh, what a sinister plot! Oh, what petty revenge! How could anyone doubt my capabilities after showing everyone what happens when you commit an infraction against me that is as minor as standing me up? Clearly, I am destined to be the crime boss of the greater Houston area.

Of course, I never go through with it. I'm a bit of a non-confrontational pussy. I find that life is easier whenever I just sit and daydream about killing people instead of actually killing them. For one thing, I never daydream about the weeks of meticulous planning that would go into pulling off an operation like the one I just detailed. I guess if you're going to daydream about how to pull off a vicious torture-murder session, then you're not really daydreaming anymore. When I tell my current roommate about my methods to getting through my days, he always tells me, "You know, one day, imagining it just won't be enough."

Well, if I get home today and he still hasn't done the fucking dishes, then he may just be right.

Until Next Time:

Stay classy,

Mr. Deadman