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## ***Note From The Editor:***

The recent years brought forth a wave of continuous obstacles that diminished the number of active, much more flourishing publishing firms, magazines, newspapers, and more. The avenues of traditional publishing are disappearing as if a plague had swept across the globe, infecting those with a deep wound of debt and hopelessness that festered into a cancer that would consume from within. The light that once burned so bright in the realm of literary publishing was on the approach of much darker times. The production of this trend lies in a combination of areas (which goes beyond the scope of this commentary).

First, the economy; with money tightening, publishers refrain from betting on newcomers, knowing full and well that relying on current established writers would decrease the gamble they take when publishing and marketing a book.

Second, consumer trend; sometimes it feels that unless a book churns through the Hollywood hype machine it would go overlooked by the general population. It actually gives me pleasure hearing about other people's genuine interest in greats such as Kafka, Lovecraft, Voltaire, and such. I'm not even a literary geek, but I absolutely mean every word of that.

Third, everyone thinks they're an author now. The rise of self-publishing is a blessing and a curse. For those that have gone through rigorous training and discipline, for those that have honed their craft into a style through trial and error, developing and growing into a higher grade of writer, the ability to take command of the publishing process is great. However, for those that decided they wanted to write a novel after watching, let's say *Twilight*, and delve into the process without any thought for style, grammar, tense, and character development are the ones that saturate the system.

Though dark times may still lurk on the horizon, there has been an increase in independent online magazines, publishers, and blogs that offer writers a lot of choices. Deadman's Tome hopes to continue in its pursuit of becoming a serious and recognized spot for writers of all skill levels. We owe a lot to our fans, and through this collection, we hope to deliver.

Thank you,

Mr. Deadman

## ***Introduction***

Deadman's Tome emerged from the cool depths of the neglected earth as an online magazine under the name Demonic Tome. Branded with a name that enveloped power, intensity, and sheer determination, the magazine climbed out from the great depths. Fuelled with a rage unknown by that of mortals, Demonic Tome cried out a blood curling battle cry that caused those unfortunate to hear it to act out demonic sacrifices. His cry swept across the globe, beckoning those brave enough to pay him with their unwavering allegiance. Absorbed by his raw, potent, malevolent will, the brave ones were cursed with tales of absolute terror, tales that no man with respect of his sanity should ever hear. Month after month, Demonic Tome featured new stories from new ambitious authors. Those that couldn't withstand ran in horror, while others were eager to bathe the Demonic entity with their attention.

Then the accusations came.

Cryptic, yes. Satanic, no. Satan had no reach over us. But the limitations of the powerful name prevented the magazine from gaining what it needed, thus we changed our name but not our content.

This anthology presents select titles from a time when Deadman's Tome was Demonic Tome, a time of brutal horror, a time of unadulterated, unfiltered chilling content. Enjoy.

# The Way They Sell Their Souls

*Kristine Ong Muslim*

First appeared in Trip the Light Horrific ed. by Nancy Jackson, Rage Machine Books, 2005

After Dial-A-Prayer® went out of craze; Absolution, Inc. came to the rescue and saved the world from eternal damnation. The corporate empire rose almost overnight to become the world's most successful business enterprise. Its founder, Dan Cushing, a college dropout who was crazy about horoscopes (he was a Libra), thought of the whole concept of robots spewing litanies of pre-programmed prayers for every sin imaginable. The robots were bolted inside faux wooden chambers for privacy. People would select their sins available in all possible languages from a menu bar. Stick one dollar and a half inside the robot's slot and look at its dreamy penitent eyes as it mutters a highly inspirational prayer suitable for the sin committed. The prayers were crafted by experts: psychologists, linguists, religious scholars, historians, theoretical physicists, and even mathematicians. Dan Cushing's idea came with perfect timing. People needed instant gratification, a clean conscience without giving up anything, catharsis without responsibility. Church confessionals became passé, and the world was suddenly a better place to live in.

Demagnetized to perfection to make the metal look like human flesh, the mocking Absolution, Inc. robots' titanium alloy, water-and-fade resistant, guiltlessly beaming faceplates seemed to croon: "Dream me up something sinful and overtly homicidal, you schizophrenic nitwit, you... I can see through your eyes, your godforsaken lying eyes, and I find no repentance there. I know what you think when you fuck your bitch wife in the middle of the night.

How you wish you can tie her up and whip her lovely ass until she lies bloodied and half-dying amidst the sweat-stained satin sheets, because pain is ten times a turn-on than love. I know how much you want to straddle your neighbor's wife, jack off in front of your neighbor's ten-year old daughter, and doggie fuck your goddamn neighbor's dog. I know how much you want to become so much like yourself. I know you and how doomed you are in becoming human. I am here to slurp up and masticate your beautiful sins. I am here to pray for your redemption. Only for a dollar and a half."

One night, Dan Cushing accidentally blew his head off while cleaning his father's .38, a family heirloom. Emerging near his left ear, the bullet did everything except kill him. The slug tore off just a portion of his brain matter and left him a limp vegetable lying in some expensive hospital somewhere in New York City. His horoscope indicated that particular day to be his lucky day.

Absolution, Inc. went bankrupt a year after the pristine line of Savior™ robots hit the market. The new line of robots offered instant deliverance for eighty cents, complete with a full selection of religious hymns from every religious sect and language in the world. A matching song would cost an additional five cents.

Salvation turned out to be practically cheap so that everyone went out on murderous rampages and showed up at Savior™ cubicles afterwards, only to slather their battered souls with well-rehearsed lines of prayers from Aramaic to Latin to Oriental mumbo jumbo. Most of the time, toilet drains got clogged with chopped remains of slaughtered loved ones. There was simply so much to do, so much to become... After eons of evolution and centuries of sustaining a civilization, life was never this deliciously outrageous.

The soundtrack of this story: Joy to the world...

# So Sayeth The Devil

*Dawn Allison*

It was the last straw. About the six hundredth time a woman told Demetrius to go to Hell, he decided to go. He was tired of having no place to belong.

He went home before he embarked on his journey. Home, for Demetrius, was a shadowy mansion set on a bluff overlooking the abyss. Eleven granite gargoyles perched on his roof. They roused when they heard his footsteps and swooped down to peck at his eyes long before he got to the door. They were supposed to be there as guardians, to prevent any attempt at escape by the demons who lived down below. However, as demons can visit the surface for short periods whenever the need arises, such attempts were rare. That meant that the gargoyles feasted on anything that happened by, living or dead, without discretion. And they always went for the eyes. It must have been a rare delicacy to them. Well, any meat was rare enough, and what they got almost always belonged to Demetrius, the sole inhabitant of The Halfway House. Not a halfway house for recovering addicts and indigents, but The Halfway House, so called because it was half way between the surface of the Earth and Hell. He had to slosh through miles of sewers just to get there, which made him even more appealing to the damnable gargoyles when he arrived.

Everything about the place was jagged and unpleasant. Spires canted listlessly to the east and west, broken windows of red stained glass were blood-splattered teeth in oval mouths. A dragon wrapped itself around the banister going up the stairs, but its scales were worn smooth and every crevice collected tarnish. Gray paint, probably lead based, peeled away from the building as though making its own escape. Home sweet home. Such was life for Demetrius, the progeny of a mortal woman and Zamar, the demon of avarice.

He dashed inside, flailing his arms at the gargoyles as he went, to get some things from his house. Among them a canteen with water, which he stuck in his freezer, then waited for it to solidify. He had heard it said many times that people in Hell want ice water, and he wasn't about to go unprepared. He fantasized about using his canteen as a bribe to achieve his desire. While he waited for it to freeze, he busied himself collecting every scrap of rope he could find, including even the tasseled tiebacks of the curtains. It would be a long climb down and he would need every inch he could get.

After that, there was only one more thing to do. It took him almost no time to slice off the legs of his jeans and turn them into cut-offs. He cut them higher than his pockets, and little white flaps hung out on either side. They looked horrible with his boots, but he knew better than to tromp into Hell sporting flip-flops. The gargoyles were much pleased with his attire and attacked his legs with more vigor than usual when he left. The rivulets of blood did not compliment his ensemble a bit.

He suspected, once he lowered himself over the edge and began his descent, that he would feel the heat of Hell baking his flesh before he ever got halfway down. He was surprised to feel a draft of cool air, not winter cold, but air conditioner cold. The skin on his legs prickled and dried blood flaked off like dandruff. Feeling quite under dressed, Demetrius considered going back. He even started to pull himself up when one of the bits of rope he had lashed together snapped, and he fell. It was the curtain tieback that did it, of course. In the split second it took to travel the great distance from Up to Down, Demetrius had to laugh. He was, after all, coming to Hell by the most common route. A fall.

Demetrius saw the light. It was every bit as bright as people liked to claim, and then some. In fact, it gave him an immediate headache. He pushed himself up and rubbed his arms for warmth. The canteen of ice water was nowhere in sight, but he didn't suppose he would need it after all.

It took his eyes a few moments to adjust. The place was quite different from what he'd expected, starting with the too cold air. The floors all shone spotless white; though some of the cheap laminate

tiles were curling in the corners. There was a maze of black rope set up with a line of people (or things resembling people) winding in between. He had seen such a thing before, though he had never participated in one. He never did understand why anybody would want to stand in a line. Bland instrumentals blared through unseen speakers, making speech all but impossible.

Still, garbled, half-shrieked conversations polluted the air. The line inched forward. Demetrius stood a moment longer; waiting for the fabled Cerberus to come rushing out, slobber dripping from the corners of both its mouths. It didn't come. Demetrius didn't hear so much as a growl. A gory couple took their places at the back of the line. In front of Demetrius.

"Excuse me, but I was here first," he said.

"Go to Hell," the woman replied. He felt a sudden urge to strangle her, with her prim mouth untouched by the road rash that had eaten the rest of her face. He doubted it would have done any good anyhow. Instead, he stepped into line behind them.

It felt like an eternity that he stood there, the line moving so slowly any forward momentum was imperceptible. People kept coming, though, and it wasn't long before Demetrius was no longer at the end of the line. Not so much because he moved forward, but because they kept coming, and coming, and coming.

By the time he finally reached the counter, he forgot why he had come at all. A frazzled woman in a red blazer tapped her fingernails against the desk and rolled her eyes so often they never seemed to stop.

"Help you?" She said for the third time. Demetrius' mind raced. He could think of nothing to say.

"You're going to have to go to the back of the line, then." She said.

"No! I was just at the back of the line." Demetrius said.

"No, sir," the woman did not even try to hide her irritation. "If you were just at the back of the line you wouldn't be here. Next please."

The man behind him stepped up and spun Demetrius back between the ropes. It took almost as long as waiting in the first place

for them to shove Demetrius all the way to the end of the line. Then he waited. Again. It gave him plenty of time to rediscover his reason for coming. He practiced the words in his head over and over until he could have said them backwards.

Finally, he made it back up to the counter. The same woman sat there, no look of recognition on her face. The second button of her blazer was missing. He wondered if it had been like that before. The devil was in the details.

“Help you?” She asked. Something in the tone of her voice made him want to forget why he came. He fought it with all his might, but it was still quite a battle.

“Yes, I’m here to see the devil.”

“Which devil?”

“The devil. The Prince of Lies, the Father of Darkness, the Lord of the Flies, and all that.”

“Do you have an appointment?” As if he just asked to see the dentist.

“Well, no.”

“You have to have an appointment, sir.” A sharp trumpet solo blasted through the speakers. It was more than just a little off key. Demetrius winced.

“Can I make an appointment?” He asked.

“No. You have to have a petition and ninety-nine dark deeds to get an appointment with him.”

“How do I get a petition?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the woman said, eyes still rolling.

“But I need to speak with him.”

“Then do your ninety-nine deeds and get a petition.”

“What counts as a dark deed?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the woman said curtly.

“Well, why not?” Demetrius felt the blood rush to his head. Not his blood, of course, but the last meal he had eaten. Too much more of this and he was going to throw it up all over the countertop.

“Because, you’re dead. So you can’t do any deeds without his express permission, dark or otherwise.”

“How can I get his permission unless I get an appointment?” He pounded on the counter with his fist.

“Sir, you need to calm down, sir.” She waited until he had taken a few deep, but futile, breaths.

“But I need to talk to him, to sort out some things.”

“Well, you could always wait in line. Occasionally he works the floor. I wouldn’t hold my breath, though.” She slapped her thigh as she laughed. “Get it?”

Demetrius grumbled and stomped to the back of the line.

Seven times, he repeated the same process. Seven eternities. He thought he glimpsed his father once, in the line, wearing bulky rings on every finger. He didn’t get to speak to him, though, since he was way ahead of Demetrius.

Demetrius would have given up on the whole thing, but there didn’t appear to be anywhere else to go. Every inch of the disturbingly white room was crammed with people and there was not a single door as far as Demetrius could see. All four walls, as one might expect, but no doors.

When he finally made it to the counter for the eighth time, somebody else was seated behind the desk. He didn’t recognize him at all. Who would have figured the Lord of Darkness would look like a hunchback with a face full of herpes?

“Help you?” Satan said.

“Yes, I wish to speak to the Devil.”

“Go on, then,” he said.

“You mean you’re?”

“Were you expecting Fabio?”

“No, I, just, well.”

“Moving on,” the Devil said.

“Here’s the deal. I’m tired of not belonging anywhere. They don’t want me on Earth, and that’s fine, they don’t want me in Heaven, and that’s fine, too. So, I’ve come here to give my allegiance to you,” it was hard for him to say while he was looking right at the thing. Demetrius took a deep breath. It was not the ideal situation, but anything had to be better than lonely limbo. “I will be your servant.” He finished.

The Devil clicked his tongue and drummed his fingers on the countertop. He wore a single silver earring that caught the harsh neon light and reflected it directly into Demetrius' eyes.

"Well, you see, the thing is..." he held out his hands and shrugged. His fingers were gnarled like old oak branches. Demetrius closed his eyes, knowing what was to come. "I'm not really looking to add to my staff at the moment, and since I don't want to give you false hope I might as well be outright. If I were looking to expand, I still wouldn't want you. You're not very cunning or creative, and hardly evil at all. You think I let in every Tom, Dick, and Harry who has ever tasted the blood of men? The place would be overrun! It's busy enough as things are."

"What the smudge am I supposed to do, then?" Demetrius felt hot tears in his eyes.

"See? Right there, you just said smudge. Not fuck, or even frick. Souls like you would make people believe I'm some sort of softie. Smudge isn't going to inspire fear in anybody. You're useless to me and what you do from here is not my concern."

Demetrius groaned. He latched onto the edge of the counter and tried to yank the whole thing loose. It did not budge. The Devil laughed. Demetrius could feel the heat rise in his cheeks.

"Fine." He said. He loosened his grip on the immovable counter. "Can you at least tell me how to get out of here?"

"I suggest you try the line." The Devil said. He interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. Lacking anything better to do, Demetrius followed his advice.

"Next!" The Devil said while Demetrius wrestled his way to the back. The music played on, sharp, flat, and endless.

# Sour Milk

**A D Dawson**

*Grim reader! Did you ever see a ghost?*

*Byron*

It was a chill evening and Tabby shivered uncontrollably. She wrapped her bare and sinewy arms about her torso in an attempt to thwart the penetration of a coldness that would not relent at merely skin and flesh. Bone coldness - that is the worst of all, to be sure. Maybe a punter would happen along shortly. She would then be able to settle down into the back seat of his car and stay warm for a short while in front of the car's heater. It was still early, however, and most would still be at home surrounded by their brats and eating a piping hot casserole- well cooked by a frigid lady wearing heels and a nice frock, no doubt. Stiletto heels and a black dress - not the attire to be wearing come a late autumn eve. They... the punters; they liked her to dress in this way.

She could see two more girls at the other side of the street they weren't having much success either. A patrol car drove slowly by; one of the officers held his ears in his hands and stuck out his tongue. She always thought that it was colder standing on the other side of the street and next to the icy waters of the canal. It was lighter on her side of the road and the wall to her rear gave some protection from the bitter wind, which blew down from the tops. She heard the chugging of a familiar vehicle and a battered van pulled up just short of where she was standing.

"Bit cold for party a party dress isn't it, Tabby?" said a hooded figure as she stepped from the van.

"Fuck you," came the expected retort albeit without any real venom.

The figure, a girl in her late teens, opened the back doors to the van and disappeared inside for a moment. She returned holding a

large thermos flask aloft – like the triumphant captain at her side’s victory.

“Would you like a drop of soup, old girl?” she playfully teased.

Tabby, who was only just into her twenties herself, nodded thankfully. The smiling girl carefully poured some hot soup into a polystyrene cup and handed it to the pitiful character that stood to her front. She wrapped her bony hands around the cup and let the warm steam waft about her face and throat.

“Not much going on here at the moment, Sidney. We’ll come back later,” said the girl to the driver of the van. She bowed theatrically and slammed the doors shut. “I’ll see you later, my dear,” she added with a flamboyant wave as she jumped back into the passenger seat.

Like a ghost that disappears into the night she was gone.

Tabby enjoyed her brief interchanges with the girl and was always sorry that she never dared ask her name for she had a good heart and that was without a doubt. She smiled through her cracked and sore lips as she remembered when their fingers had accidentally touched one evening when the girl handed her a steaming brew – alas, the warmth of her touch had refused to linger against her pale skin for more than a moment thereafter.

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted as a silver car pulled up to the pavement the walls of its tires scraped noisily against the curb. A door was pushed open.

“I suppose you’ll have to do, love,” uttered a grey suited man from the driver’s seat.

Tabby reluctantly threw the soup into the gutter and climbed into the vehicle. She didn’t recognize the driver; he wasn’t a regular hereabouts – she hoped that he wouldn’t hurt her too much. His car was warm – at least.

She heard the baby crying as soon as she had turned the corner into the bottom of her street – it never stopped. Her milk had failed to nourish it – it was sour. She had nothing good to give to it, her baby, and that is why it died. All that she ever had was bad. Her lips were

sore from where the man had shown her the back of his hand – it wasn't the first time, however; and it wouldn't be the last. Her father was the first. He had called her a whore and scrubbed off her lipstick with the sausage fingers of his rough bricklaying hands. She left to have the baby soon after – and never, ever, returned.

“Hey, bitch, come over here and have a suck on this,” leered a shabby middle-aged man as he climbed out from the shattered window of a nearby derelict house.

She would never feed from the punters – they were her lifeblood. He, the man – he was different; he was nobody. No one would ever miss him and disrupt the game whilst investigating his whereabouts.

She indicated that he should climb back inside the house and she followed. She could smell his beery breath as he made to kiss her.

“No mouths,” she screamed out almost hysterically.

He feigned shock and undid his belt buckle. However, before his trousers were at his knees, he was dead. He never felt the craft knife as it slit easily across his turkey throat. Tabby lowered him gently to the floor, lest she should disturb a casual passer-by. She looked out from the window and thankfully saw no one about. She looked towards her room across the way and she could hear the baby still crying in the darkness therein – maybe she should have left a light on for it.

She lapped fastidiously at his blood, like a pampered cat at a china saucer; it wouldn't do to ruin her clothes – her wardrobe stood sparse as it was. It was bad blood; she already had her share of that. However, in the way of things, with bad blood comes no guilt. If only she could feed from The Ghost. The blood would be good and nourishing; but the guilt would be overwhelming – she could never live with that. She once had an absurd notion that The Ghost would be so good that she would willingly let her take her blood like a blood transfusion. She could take a pint at a time and offer her tea and biscuits whilst she recovered. It was good to dream. She often dreamt of her baby too. She shuddered as she suddenly remembered how she had tried to suckle it next to the flaming braziers that stood under the town's viaducts. The image slammed into her brain like a hammer in

the hands of a skilful Smithy. How they had all laughed at her plight. How she had cried and screamed when the paramedics took her baby away. One of them, a man, put his strong arm about her shoulders and said: "There, there, everything will be alright." It was like he was talking to a child. It was how he should have been talking to her child if she had fallen over and scuffed its knees whilst out playing with its friends in the schoolyard. She could see tears in his eyes maybe he had a daughter too. They wrapped her in a grey woolen blanket to keep out the cold. She had lost a lot of blood it lay as a deep crimson pool under foot as they carried her to the waiting ambulance. She needed the blood back – it was all that remained of her baby after they had flung it into the incinerator by its scaly heels.

Alas, when she returned a few days later, the blood was well washed away by the rains as she had expected.

She wore a flimsy jacket this evening as the sleet turned to snow. Her umbrella threatened to turn inside out as the wind whipped relentlessly up from the cold pavement. The Ghost was about; she was handing out warm sausage rolls to the wretched - who waited patiently in line for their grateful turn.

She would have to be quick to trap The Ghost; she had seen her in action once before when she was threatened by Suzanne's pimp. Before Sidney could get out the van and come to her aid, she had felled the pimp with a swift knee to the groin nice. No one ever bothered her much after that and she could park up anywhere without being molested.

"That'll have to do, Sidney, we have nothing left," she said as she brushed an errant lock of dark hair back into her hood. "Take me home will you?" she added reluctantly.

A car pulled to the curb and Tabby was summoned inside – it was a regular. She jumped inside without her usual caution.

"Howard," she let out enthusiastically, "follow that van over there and I will give it to you for free tonight – oral and without protection."

Howard was only too eager to please and over revved his engine in his pursuit. They followed closely as the van left the

abandoned terraces behind along with the disused warehouses and redundant brewery buildings. They drove past the new cinema and shopping centre and found themselves on the dual carriageway and going out towards the new estates. They watched as the van pulled up to the curb and next to a fair sized semi with an open plan lawn to front. The Ghost got out and waved the van off. Tabby thought that she would soon disappear up the path and into the house. However, she did not. As the van disappeared around the bend, she turned and walked back towards the council flats on nearby Milton Street. Howard was ordered to follow.

Not many lights shone inside the blocks. It was late and most were asleep. Tabby watched as a tell tale lamp suddenly lit up a second floor flat.

Howard was soon satisfied and she hardly felt the chill as she stepped out from his warm car. The outer door lock to the building was smashed asunder and she easily let herself into the foyer. She was forced into the shadows as a comely woman wearing a woolen coat stepped out from the arriving lift. Tabby felt for the steel craft knife, which was tucked into the top of her stocking. Fortunately the woman passed without noticing her. She knew which flat it was and she was soon rapping lightly at the door. The door slowly opened and Tabby reacted at speed. Pushing the door hard against the opener, she grasped the startled Ghost by the scruff of her clothing. She pushed the blade up to her throat.

"Tabby? Tabby, what... what are you doing?" managed The Ghost before she fainted.

Tabby dragged the semiconscious form inside and closed the door behind her.

"This was much easier than I thought," she crowed to herself out loud.

The spluttering gas ring was yet to warm up the room and Tabby could see her vapor breath as she struggled heavily inward. She summoned up all that was left of her strength and hoisted The Ghost up onto a single dining chair – the room was Spartan to say the least. The Ghost looked thinner than she had thought her face almost gaunt. She had only ever seen her under the irregular lamplight of the back

streets where she worked. Notwithstanding that the room was brightly lit, it smelt of damp and mildew grew on the threadbare carpet that stuck to her soles as she went. She never thought that it would be like this. She roughly pulled the colorful scarf from around The Ghost's neck and made to tie it around her thin wrists as she pulled them to the back of the chair. She jumped back in horror. She fell to her knees as if in prayer.

"No, no, no..."

She heard the baby cry in the next room.

"My baby... it must be hungry," she uttered in a rational tone.

She hurriedly secured The Ghost to the chair with the scarf. She brushed aside her hair and kissed her gently on the cheek.

She soon scooped the baby up into her arms and held it close to her breast. Its cheeks were chubby and red – a noisy electric heater well kept the chill at bay in the nursery. A book of nursery rhythms sat on a chair and a bundle of knitting lay to the side. She could hear moaning from the other room. The Ghost panicked as the baby was brought before her.

"Don't hurt my baby, please," She tearfully begged.

"Call yourself a Mother," Tabby raged. "How could you leave this poor little mite all alone?"

"I didn't.... my mother..."

"...Out getting your next fix, were you? Sucked a syphilitic cock for a bag of brown, did we?"

"Just let me have my baby..."

"You don't deserve her." She said as she exposed her breast.

"You bitch. I'll fucking kill you if you harm my child!"

"Brave words from a smack head tied to a chair."

The Ghost inhaled deeply. "I don't do drugs anymore – I've been clean for nearly a year."

"You are still dirty... you are bad. You fed this babe sour milk"

The baby wriggled in her arms and held her hands out towards her Mother.

"See, she wants me. Let her go, please..."

Her words died as the blade did its job once more.

She felt no guilt and no remorse. Blood probably tastes the same whether good or bad.

She threw the dead baby to the floor.

Rock-a-bye, baby,  
In the tree top,  
When the wind blows,  
The cradle will rock.

The End

# Old Lady Eldridge

***Brandon Earl Hooks***

Devon Penny and Blaine Roby lived on Dubuque Street in the Gunter Grove neighborhood. Unfortunately, for old lady Eldridge, so did she; and she was about to become the next victim of the boys' cruel pranks. Devon and Blaine were known throughout the Gunter Grove community as pranksters, and hard-core troublemakers. Their track record of activity was astounding when it came to the elderly. Any chance they could get, they trespassed, rang doorbells, and threw rocks at houses. They escaped detection from the police every time. Parents forbid their children to associate with the hoodlums, forcing Devon and Blaine to have no friends, and to cherish one another.

The boys' favorite pranks included wrapping a house with toilet paper, or spray-painting the windows. When they were lucky enough to get hold of them, they set off firecrackers, waking the whole neighborhood. Ms. Eldridge of Dubuque Street was next on their list of elderly harassment.

The old lady lived all alone most of her adult life, and now three scrawny cats were her only companions. Perhaps it was self reliance which enabled her to keep active well into her nineties. Each day, her familiar figure, still upright and without the support of a cane, scurried the length of Dubuque Street, laden with shopping bags. This furthered their cause to terrorize her. The one thing they were in agreement on was that they despised the elderly, and this one was fresh meat for their undertaking. She lived in the establishment alone, and without a man protecting her honor.

There wasn't a call for violence against her. The mission was easy and painless; make her aware of who ran the neighborhood. There method for achieving this outcome was to knock on her backdoor many times, and insult her with the vilest words possible.

When this was done, they would hide in her storage shed, a structure that stood in solitude within the closed in, but well kept backyard.

Typically old ladies like Ms. Eldridge lived in ramshackle, neglected properties, like the one across the road from her superior abode. However, this singular old lady had bought and maintained a prestigious home with neat paint-work and tidy gardens. It was her retirement savings that did this for her. She worked many years of her adult life as CEO of an explosive, worldwide, law firm. Within two years of her retirement, she'd accumulated a vast fortune through the use of an IRA savings account. It was obvious that she didn't see the need to put any of the money into her looks. She kept it saved and decided the riches outweighed the need to do something about the level of her comeliness. I can attest to you how unattractive Ms. Eldridge was by the actions of one particular neighbor when she was seen outside for the first time tending to her rose bushes. A neighbor running into the house as if a tornado was barreling towards him is a solid, reasonable depiction of her incapability to show the world a beautiful woman.

There were certain, concentrated parts of the house that fed her obsession. She washed the purple drapes that hung in the window frames twice a day! She seemed to nurture a fear of robbery, as was evident when she was continuously observed pulling at the bars on her windows like a mad-woman trying to escape from her own house. The front door was black, and so it remained, even after the weather had delivered punishment on its color and texture over the years. When it showed signs of dying into a light, dirty, brown, she would simply take out the old Sherwin Williams paint bucket, and drive the brush over the door with a fresh coat of black. The huge rose bushes flourished every day, singing its music to the world, and to old lady Eldridge's lonely heart.

For three days during the week of the promised attack, the boys watched her house. When the fourth night arrived, Ms. Eldridge was gone. Her driveway was vacant. Maybe she was shopping for groceries. They thought amongst themselves. The entire day had gone by, and she never returned. They were too excited and carefree at

heart to really pay attention to the fact that it was after 1:00 am on Friday morning when she finally returned home.

They met each other Friday night by the street light at the edge of the crippled, abandoned house across the street from Ms. Eldridge's dwelling. It was ten forty five, and all lights were off in the old lady's house. They ran like marathon contenders to her backyard, and stopped at the back door. A gentle breeze tickled them as they stood at the door that divided an antisocial, old lady from the world.

There was silence behind the back door when they walked up to it, and then one of the cats whined softly, thrusting them backwards as if they had seen the old lady's face for the first time. Then something else happened that stilled the currents of their blood. There were slow, heavy footsteps approaching the door. One step... two steps... a third step... and silence.

The cat screeched in anger as a loud thump pounded the floor. Devon held his chest, hoping he could slow the pounding of his heart.

Blaine whispered to Devon, "Pssss, get ready to run to the shed. I'm gonna knock ten, hear me, ten times. When I finish knocking run as fast as ya can. I will stand here and wait until she turns the knob. Then I will catch up with ya."

Devon said nothing.

"Hey, don't ya be an ole wuss like ya were a couple weeks ago when the ole man pulled the gun out on us for trespassing and rolling his house."

Devon nodded his head and said, "Okay, jus knock on the door so we can get this over with. I hate the way I feel about this. Ole ladies scare the shit out of me!"

Blaine covered his mouth and chuckled. Devon stood away from the door, and prepared to make a run for the shed. Before Blaine could even conceive of knocking on the door, something occurred that almost forced Devon to heave. The old lady was talking to her cats! Her tone was sad and weary, and each time she spoke, the cats howled as if in answer.

“How could that young man do such a thing to me, my darlings? How could he physically violate me like that? He is a heathen destined for the pits of Hades.”

Blaine could feel a scream begin to form. Before he could unleash it, he pounded on the door ten times. Devon darted towards the shed as if his very own life depended on it. He shut the door enough to where he could still see the back door. Blaine stood there waiting for Ms. Eldridge’s arrival. Devon shut the door and sighed.

“Hey, ya ole turkey! Let’s see yer ugly face!” Blaine antagonized.

Man, it is hot in here! Devon thought.

A long time passed, and all was silent. Blaine was still at the door waiting to play the joke.

Geez, what was taking the old lady so long? He thought.

He felt himself getting hotter by the minute. A breath of wind, like a thief in the night, slapped the storage shed, causing him to jolt, and sending a ringing throughout the structure. Preceding this came the sound of soft footsteps, like someone slowly walking through a yard of leaves.

Well, it is about time, dumb ass! His thoughts screamed as Blaine walked instead of running to the shed.

Typical Blaine; can’t even follow his own plans! He thought.

There was a dead silence as the footsteps ceased.

What was he doing?

He thrusts open the door, and before him was The Grin! It was not the type of grin where the person is thinking, I’ve got you right where I want you now! No, this was the type of facial display where this person was preparing to delight themselves over a brutal murder. This type of person wanted to see their victim witness a small glimmer of eternal hell, and they wanted to be the one to make it happen! This was old lady Eldridge, the woman rumored to be lonely, but harmless. She now stood before Devon. In her right hand was a sword that he was all too familiar with. It was a 16th century Renaissance Sword. It was a deadly sword he had read about a couple years back while surfing the internet during his unhealthy obsession over swords. This time the sword was no longer the object of his

fascination. Instead it was an object of horror, a long piece of European metal bathed in Blaine's blood. She held his corpse up with the sword. Saliva dripped off her milky, white teeth as she uncoiled her enormous tongue and wiggled it.

My God, what was this thing, or should I dare even call her a woman?! He thought, as he was too paralyzed to wake the neighborhood with his screams.

Nothing else in the world mattered but that smile! He couldn't remember if he even caught a full glimpse of her body. He knew that she must have been skeletal in her frame; by the way the corner of his eye captured her. There was a stream of white hair that flowed from her head, but his pounding heart had an intimate relationship with one thing; the smile! Her black eyes and cold blooded grin did all the talking, and that was enough to cause Devon's heart to beat the walls of his chest. Her grin spread further and saliva dripped as if she were a famished animal, hurting for Devon's blood.

Blaine's face was pulled downward and apart as if a monstrous hand had pushed out of his throat and was stretching the mouth to escape. All his facial bones and nerves were shattered. His face remnants consisted of a cross between unimaginable horror and unprecedented shock at what had been done to him by such a harmless lady.

Devon watched as she threw Blaine's corpse on top of the shed. She approached him with growing speed. As she stood at the door before Devon, she spit and cursed him. This time around her voice was weary.

"Young man, may I ask what you are doing in my yard this time of night... hmmm?" She asked as if she were just an annoyed old lady.

Devon fell to the side and hit the wall.

Ms. Eldridge grabbed him by the shirt and said, "Young man... hey!"

She slapped him across the cheek.

"Hey, I'm talking to you! What are you doing in my yard?"

Devon struggled to find the words, "I..."

"I asked your friend up there the same question and he had the same answer. Well, I had to just answer for him I guess."

She held up the long, bloody, European metal and gave it an adoring look.

"These ere such nice, fancy weapons, wouldja say? Perfect for the disposal of heathen children." She asked as she transferred the blade of the sword to Devon's throat. His heart pounded louder. Eldridge's ears pricked up like a dog hearing the sound of food hitting his bowl. Ever since she was raped by the bipolar 16-year old boy, her insanity had given her permission to hear everything! Now, her ears were in tuned to the pounding of his heart.

"Calm down there, young fella." She said. "Yer soul is gonna be so stretched with terror before I can shove this sword into yer heart." She said. "What good would it do me to try and touch that heart when it is cold, scared, and barely functioning?"

"I... I don't know." Devon said.

She lifted his chin up and stared into his eyes.

"Hey, it won't hurt that bad. I will make it a painless death. Promise."

"Please don't kill me. I won't tell anybody.... promise!" He cried.

Ms. Eldridge's mood suddenly changed. It went from cold blooded lack of remorse to vicious. Her face was dark with a contorted snare.

"Yer not gonna tell anybody, huh? Now, let's see if I have this correct. You and yer friend up there come trespassing into my backyard, wanting to play a joke on me, which by the way would never work to begin with.

While she spoke she took the sword and pointed it to the back of the storage unit. Devon looked back and noticed the frame of a skeleton like body lying face down. The frame was youth-like in size. His heart raced so fast it managed to skip beats.

She smiled again.

"Yes sir. That was the last youngion to try and outsmart me. Foolish boy!" She said.

"So, anyways, you and yer friend up there want to trespass on my property, and you say that you're not gonna tell anybody what I have done!"

She stretched her neck and faced him as if she were preparing to plant a kiss on his lips. The irony of her pleasant smelling breath was tremendous.

“My boy, you will be the one that will be going to jury. I just did what I had to do with an unruly boy.”

Devon couldn't scream. Even the sight of another murdered boy couldn't help him with it. He felt pale and weak. He never thought a person could literally be scared to the point of death, but it looked like he was the exception to the rule.

She withdrew her head from his face and pointed the sword at the area of his chest.

“I think I will shove it right there.” She said with a wink.

His heart beat louder and he felt weaker. He didn't care anymore. If she was going to do it, she needed to get it over with. His heart couldn't slow down from the brink of destruction. It had been pumping its terror-stricken blood for what seemed forever. The adrenaline racing through his body kept him alive a little bit longer.

Ms. Eldridge quickly withdrew the blade and looked towards the driveway.

“Did you hear that?” She asked.

The sound of car doors slamming relieved him a little bit, but not long enough, when he realized that whoever was out there was in terrible danger. The old lady's eyes rolled back in her head as she stretched her neck to see who was visiting this time of hour.

“Sssshh!” She whispered to Devon as she scurried away from the shed and into the darkness towards the back door. The visitors were police officers.

“Hey, new guy. We're just gonna try and ask this person here if they know anything about the robbery that took place around this area a week and a half ago. I know it's late, but tomorrow I'm off, and the sergeant wants me to feel you in on how we question citizens who might know something about a crime in the area.” The chief officer said.

“Affirmative.” The rookie responded. They knocked on the front door. The shadow of the old lady turned and flailed in the dark near the back door. Devon's head ached, and sweat saturated his palms.

It is a perfect time for me to get the hell out of dodge! He thought, but it was just that, wishful thinking that couldn't come to reality because he was paralyzed by the events playing out.

It was as if he'd been chained and couldn't move. The tides of blood in his stomach seemed to be sloshing around, as he felt his bowels move. He bent down and gripped at his buckling knees.

Must not have a panic attack! His mind screamed as if shouting at himself would somehow alleviate the doubt that was there. Hell yeah I was going to have an attack!

My best friend lay dead above me while I stand here in these four walls of searing hell, worrying myself to death over two cops whose fates will be sealed by their own blood if I don't do something to stop it!

The quiet night returned, and time passed by. A dog howled in the distance.

God, just let me die! His thoughts screamed again.

What followed next was the sound of a door slamming in the house. Trees bending slightly under the influence of a coming storm preceded screams from inside her house, like the cries of a tormented soul in hell trying to get the Almighty God to hear them all the way from the glory of heaven. Devon retrieved what was remaining of his strength, and flung open the door in a last attempt at escape. He ran into the throat of the night with a certain knowledge that would terrorize him for the rest of his life. He left behind two souls that didn't know anything about the evil that lurked in the mind and heart of a lonely, violated, misunderstood woman.

Devon was diagnosed with severe schizophrenia and paranoia. He was the patient at Bryce Mental Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where his parents visited him frequently. Over time he made progress and began to forget about the events that occurred that night. He thought about Blaine a lot, and wished he was still alive so that they could carry on their destructive pranks. Kids will be kids, the old saying goes, and these two boys were pure kids, immature, and reckless.

Ms. Eldridge escaped jail time for the murders on substantial proof of her insanity. She was institutionalized as a result, and would remain there. Devon never knew he could cry like a screaming baby, when one night he awoke to the door slamming, and seeing the Grin at the foot of his bed. He wasn't sure if he'd caught a full glimpse of her body, though.

# Immunity

*April Loche*

We were the only ones clinging to life in this used to be world that was now void of all but a few forms of life. We were called immune, but mostly we thought we were unlucky. Unlucky to be breathing in the acrid smoke that permeated every space we attempted to find refuge in. The smoke is what killed them, almost everyone, and everything. We were immune, so we were spared. Spared? Whoever thought that fucked up term aptly described us was very mistaken.

Our days were our nights. The sun as well as the moon was hidden behind a tremendous curtain of gray clouds of smoke. Some of the sunlight was able to get through, enough so that we didn't freeze to death, but not enough to heighten our dulled senses. We were nothing more than corpses that still breathed. Our loved ones, our lives, were all dead, and there was nothing to look forward to but more night days in our own purgatory. No one had the balls to off themselves, so we existed. We were immune, spending every agonizing second wishing we weren't.

There was no world, only barren landscapes that appeared to have been effectively erased, as a chalkboard. The few buildings that survived did little to stem the tide of choking smoke that followed us everywhere.

The pain we a felt did not lessen either, so we decided to end it. We wouldn't kill ourselves; we would perform a sort of anti-immunity. Although we were immune to the effects of the smoke in normal doses, we would certainly choke to death if we inhaled it full force. They would run into the highest concentrations, and stop pretending to be dead. Really dead seemed so much better. After all, there was no point in clinging to hope that didn't exist.

They would do it together, entering the smoke as a unit. I would stay on the outskirts, keeping anyone from attempting escape. Then I would stop my pain.

Even when people have all intentions of dying, they have an inner spirit that rages against the gross injustice of it. This cannot be stopped, only temporarily paused at times. This wasn't one of those times. At first, everyone was in the smoke, calmly breathing as they always did, but when the choking began, panic ensued. Everyone was grabbing throats trying to pull air that didn't exist into their lungs. They began to run in wild patterns, eyes bulging, and then found the way out. As they began to run past me, I shot in no discernable order. I fired as fast as I could, bringing them down quickly. Mostly. Some were not kill shots, they were only wounded, causing agonizing screams and flying blood and brain matter to splatter my face. This did not deter me from my massacre. I would finish it at any cost.

The wounded, pleading for mercy, begging for me to stay my rifle, would not stop me. I killed and wounded, refilling the supply of death projectiles until all were still. I continued after, I was in an adrenaline fueled frenzy, seeing live people where there were none. I squeezed the trigger until the bullets were gone.

I collapsed from exhaustion as the adrenaline ceased coursing through my veins. The landscape was no longer barren. Dead were everywhere. Corpses were strewn about, some with open eyes, some closed. Blood still pooled around holes in their bodies. The ground was dark red, like a clumsy, giant painter had carelessly dropped a huge bucket of paint. My mind was playing tricks, as the view was becoming brighter by the second. Is this the way that insanity looks? It didn't matter; it would be over soon.

I looked up at the sky, the sky that should have been clogged with blackness. The sky wasn't as menacing as it used to be. In fact, through my murderous mind, it appeared to be almost clear. The sun, I could actually see the sun. This must be what happens before you die. The world becomes the way you want it for a brief time. I wasn't dying however, there were no wounds, and my breathing was the same as it had always been.

As the man who had killed the world, began to grasp the harsh reality of what was happening, his frail mind snapped, as he understood what real hell was.

HE HAD KILLED EVERYONE. He chanted to himself, Immunity, over and over.

# Blood Music

*Saul Lemereond*

“Goddamn it!” yelled Frank. He hoped Lisa hadn’t heard him. Sharon, his wife, would have his ass if she found out he’d been swearing in front of their eight-year-old girl. Frank winced as he watched the blood from his finger drip to the floor.

“You better hang that picture today; you’ve been putting it off for weeks.” This is what his wife had said this morning. The picture in question was of an old farmer’s wife, bringing milk into a small one-room shack. Through the open door of the shack, a snowy barren landscape could be seen. Sharon had bought the painting (which was not an original, but a reproduction) for far too much money because it reminded her of her hometown in Wisconsin. When she brought it to their current home in Florida and showed it to Frank, his first reaction was to wonder aloud why anyone would want a picture of an ugly old hag on their wall. Frank immediately received a “look” and since then had kept his opinions on the painting to himself.

So now on this day, which was Sunday, a day of rest and certainly not a day for hanging shitty pictures—Frank went into the garage, found his stud-finder, level, hammer, and nails. He went into the front hallway to the wall that Sharon had designated for the picture, located the stud with his stud-locator, took up a nail, placed its sharp side against the wall, and swung his hammer.

To Frank’s dismay nothing happened. The nail had refused to enter the wall as he desired. He tried again with the same result. The wall mocked him. He picked up the nail again, placed it against the wall, drew his hammer back, and with one last mighty swing brought the hammer down directly on his forefinger, which was pressed upon the nail. Neither the hammer nor the nail gave way, which resulted in a large chunk of flesh being torn from Frank’s finger and causing a

great deal of pain. It was at this moment obscenities and blood began streaming out of Frank's mouth and forefinger respectively.

It took a moment for Frank to calm himself. He studied the damage to his finger. Noticing he was getting nauseous, he decided to sit down. Blood dripping liberally from his hand, he pulled down his shirt sleeve and let it soak into the cuff. Looking down at the small pool of blood on the floor, another wave of nausea hit him. Frank had never liked the sight of blood. His entire life he'd never been able to find a good way of coping with the idea of his insides being on the outside.

Then he heard something. It was faint, almost like singing. He felt his nausea begin to clear, the strange faint sound floating softly through the air. He felt himself calming down as he listened more closely, trying to figure out where it was coming from. He could hear it clearly now, it was music, soft, faint, beautiful music. Looking now at the puddle of blood at his feet, Frank found it no longer bothered him so much. And still the melody played, tickling his ears and beckoning him. Needing to know where it was coming from, Frank got down on his knees and put his ear to the floor. The melody grew louder. He inched forward little by little until his eye was a blink away from his own fresh pool of blood. The music still filling his mind, he found himself staring into the red. There was a glint of something there, something he couldn't quite make out.

Frank noticed he'd taken his hand out of his sleeve to steady himself. His finger still bloody, but the pain gone. Looking at his hand there was still a feint trickle of blood making its way out of his finger. Frank smiled.

"DADDY!" Lisa's voice carried downstairs from her room.

"One second, honey," Frank got up to go clean himself off and tend to his daughter.

By the end of the day—accepting the fact that the picture had yet to be hung—Frank had forgotten most of what had happened in his hallway that morning. He'd have forgotten it completely if the music didn't come back to him the instant he fell asleep.

Frank woke-up, looked at the clock; it was 3:12. For the fifth night in a row that music had been playing in his dream. He cursed himself for waking up. His dreams had become the most enjoyable part of his life. He would simply float, surrounded by the soothing soft tune. So gentle and melodic. So comforting. In his dreams he experienced a world he'd never known before. A world that was serene. Peaceful. A world with no questions or confusion. A world completely right with itself. Frank tried going back to sleep, but wasn't tired anymore.

He found himself in the kitchen making a midnight snack. Slicing a piece of bread. The tune from his dream still playing through his head. Such a nice melody. Tickling his ears. He wished he owned it. Had a recording of it he could play after he'd gotten home from a hard day, just relax, unwind, and lose himself in a place where stress was all but a forgotten memory. He wished life could be like that for everyone. Then he cut himself. The beautiful song increasing in volume and intensity. He watched his blood begin to pool on the counter. Something glinted on its surface. He listened to the music play. Leaning in again, trying to see what was in his blood. Through dim light he could just make something out. Frank knew if he could somehow bring it closer to him it would be brilliant. He tried reaching into his blood but the counter holding underneath the shallow pool stopped his reach at the finger tips. He remembered glint of something he had seen when he'd bled from the hammer.

"It has to be the source," he thought, "Whatever it is must be brilliant."

Frank jumped as he heard someone walk into the room. It was Lisa, his eight-year-old. Her sleepy eyes were focused on the counter which had blood streaked all over its surface now. Frank wondered what had made her come. Was it the music?

"Can you hear that?" Frank asked his daughter. Hoping against hope he might share his newfound joy with his little girl. Lisa eyed her father questioningly as he reached out a bloody hand

"It's ok, Lisa, I just need to know if you can hear it."

Lisa stared at her father for a moment, but said nothing. Frank thought he saw some understanding in his daughter's eyes before she turned around and went back down the hallway to her room.

When Sharon woke up in the morning her husband was already sitting in the dining room reading the paper with the strangest smile on his face. She thought he seemed a little pale, but quickly forgot about it as she went to get Lisa ready for school. It was a good morning for Sharon. Her daughter was humming a tune that put her in the brightest of moods.

Sitting in his office at work, Frank stared at his computer screen and thought about blood. His now almost permanently smiling face was pale from the lack of it. The dreams had been waking him up nightly now, and he was sure he'd found the key to happiness. It had been flowing inside him his whole life waiting to set him free. He sensed his daughter knew it too, and the idea that he could share this intense joy with his own flesh brought his spirits ever higher. His entire life's goal had been obtained. Thinking again of blood, he wondered how something so simple could be at the root of such great fulfillment.

"Such a wonderful thing, blood," Frank thought "keeping me alive and giving me joy."

Over the past few days Frank noticed his vision take on a reddish hue. Growing redder by the day. He rather liked it. He knew he was changing and that those changes were for the better. His body was numb now. No pain on the outside. On the inside Frank felt a glow, an almost fuzziness allowing him to float through each passing day with unparalleled optimism. He no longer worried about bills. He no longer worried about the state of his marriage. He no longer worried about his daughter, the life he was giving her, the opportunities she might have in the future. All those worries were gone. Like they had never been there at all. Everything was ok and everything was always going to be. He'd even said these words to his wife the day before when she asked him if there was anything wrong. She'd given him a dubious look, but she would understand soon enough, he would show her.

There was only one problem. One thing left to uncover. There was something in the blood. He could see it. Every time he let it pool, whether in a bowl or the sink, he could see something there, just below the surface. It was the source, it had to be, but all his attempts to reach it had been prevented by the shallowness of his blood. He needed to find a way to reach it. Frank knew there must be a way but was not worried, it would all come in due time. Today was too wonderful a day for worrying anyway. It was a good day Frank had decided, for thinking about blood and admiring the red.

4:00 a.m., standing in his kitchen with a five-gallon bucket. Frank stared at the inch and a half of red at the bottom. He'd accumulated the blood over several nights of bleeding himself. Each morning before Sharon woke up; he'd put a lid on the bucket and place it in the basement freezer so it wouldn't go bad.

On this night as always, beautiful music filled Frank and he smiled as he let blood drip from a vein in his arm. He heard someone walk in the room and knew it was his girl Lisa who'd taken to waking up with him and sitting in the corner of the kitchen smiling as he did his work. Every so often she would come over to gaze into the bucket with him.

"It's there," he told her, "just below the surface. It's not deep enough to grab yet but don't worry, your father will get it for you soon."

Frank sat on the kitchen floor and let the music hit him in waves. Each note pulsing through him in a sublime orgy of warmth and joy. A heavy red fog now clouding his vision. Frank thought the world looked much better this way. He watched his daughter smile as he sat back to close his eyes and let the purity in his mind bring him to pure ecstasy. Closing his eyes, he wished he could be in this place all of the time. He thought about the source. Thinking if he could get it, go deep enough into the blood to grasp it, he would never let it go.

Frank felt the melody fade and opened his eyes. The bucket was gone. He listened for a moment and turned his head. The tune was coming from his bedroom now, calling to him. Moving through the hallway the music exploded as he walked through the door of his

bedroom, everything was red, and his muscles turned to jelly and went numb. Frank's head reeled in complete manic euphoria. Looking toward the bed, Frank saw his daughter Lisa. She had taken his knife and opened a whole in her mother's throat as she slept, and then pushed her mother's torso off over the side of the bed so that the blood would drain into the bucket. Lisa stood by the side of the bed, bloody knife in hand, a smile on her face. Frank felt such pride. He and his daughter had discovered bliss. The ever swelling emotions being too much to handle, he was weeping openly. Then it came to him.

"Can we reach it now?" he asked, moving toward his daughter and the ever-filling bucket being fed by the corpse of his wife.

Lisa stood smiling as her father reached down through the red. Frank could feel it, almost in his grasp, just a bit further. In a moment of panic he thought it might be deep enough, he'd come so close, he didn't want to stop.

"I almost have it," he said to his daughter. Lisa nodded; she looked down into the bucket, and then smiled as she carved a hole in her father's neck.

As the bucket filled, Frank felt relief as his hand began to move deeper. "It is finally time" he thought. He and Lisa would never be sad again, never know anger or pain. They would be happy now. Not a worry between them. Then everything when black.

Lisa waited for the last of the blood to flow out of the hole she'd carved into her father's neck. Then the smiling eight-year-old sunk her hand into the blood, and reached down toward the light.

In the children's sanitarium, Lisa sat on her bed and smiled. Two doctors stared at her through the observation window.

"She does very little, but she seems happy."

"That's odd for a child who witnessed her parents' murder/suicide."

"I think she's suppressed it. She does very little in the way of activity and talks even less."

"She talks?"

“Very little, she never volunteers anything. She only responds to certain questions.”

“Certain questions?”

“Yes, she spoke to one of our nurses just the other day.”

“And?”

“And her favorite color is red.”

# Dark As Day: A Post Industrial Fairy Tale

*D. D. Bell*

Once upon a time, after the great machines had stopped dead in their tracks...

It was oppressive. It was as if a great weight was pushing down onto the town of M\_\_\_\_. The people walked with their heads hanging low and their sunken eyes looking down towards their scuffed shoes. A woman hurried across the busy main road to stumble into the oncoming traffic; an irate driver braked hard to avoid her. He waved his ham fist and let go with an unheard stream of expletives as she struggled to right herself. No one went to help her and a passing teenager with greasy hair sniggered behind his hand at her misfortune. It could have been called Tumble Town today; a young boy fell from a low wall upsetting his mother's shopping as they waited impatiently for the bus to arrive – it was 35 minutes late. She took her calloused hand across his grubby face; he did not cry but looked at her as if he wished her dead. Towards the precinct the wind whipped up a torn carrier bag that wrapped itself around the foot of a middle-aged man as he negotiated some steps – he fell the last few and grazed his hands as he tried to save himself.

“Hope you’ll never get old,” managed an old man as he dropped his walking stick in the newsagents shop. A young man – who wouldn’t get old – watched as the ashen-faced fellow bent with arthritic knees to retrieve it into gnarled claws. He felt at his back as he slowly straightened up – someone impatient for their newspaper complained for all to hear.

There was a strange and pervasive smell lingering about the town streets. No one could locate it. They sniffed at their shoes and smelt at the sleeves of their clothes as they went. Someone thought

they had an ear infection and turned their head towards the wind to waft it across their nostrils for confirmation.

The wind suddenly stopped and a great silence issued between the usual sounds; it was felt to no response rather than to be subliminally heard. The silence was punctuated by a clapping sound. It was like the sound of a class of schoolchildren simultaneously jumping from their chairs to their wooden hall floor on a given command; a discarded soft baby shoe edged nearer the kerb as the unfelt vibrations easily lifted its light construction.

Although a cloud wasn't to be seen, dark skies rested down onto the grey rooftops of the terraced houses that had avoided the bulldozer. Notwithstanding it was just after noon in early summer, the light indicated a late winter's afternoon. It wasn't cold, however; nor was it hot. Some sweated in coats and others felt cool in their shirtsleeves such was the peculiar climate. A breathless old lady had her collar loosened by paramedics as she took a giddy turn in the butchers when she discovered her purse to be missing.

The Raggedy man played his guitar outside the department store; he had little coinage to show for his morning's work – he forced a smile from his queasy lips when anyone neared him. The day went on and on; it seemed like a lifetime had occurred as a few hours had unfolded.

The first few died around 3 PM; the last fell at teatime. Everyone lay dead with no one to take them to their graves. A post mortem would have revealed the cause of death. Shocked coroners would have discovered an alarming reduction of oxygen carrying red blood cells in the vital organs of the dead - they wouldn't have had a clue what had been the cause as they sliced their finely honed scalpels through constricting veins.

They had looked down on them in the same way that a young boy looks at a recently discovered ant's nest. At first they were fascinated by their simplicity and watched thoughtfully. However, they were soon moved to ennui by their dull and dreary desperation as they watched them swarm seemingly pointlessly hither thither about their rapacious environment. Whereas a naughty boy, to

alleviate his boredom, would have poured boiling water down over the ants, their destructiveness was biological and much more sophisticated. Nevertheless they should have stayed until after dark to successfully complete their mission – for no creature had come from their underground to be killed in the daylight. Their veins are used to constriction and they are forced, because of the lack of oxygen, to move awkwardly and slowly in the night to replenish their own lack of red blood cells the best way they could.

Saint Pauls and Saint Peters stood at the eastern corner of the town; its small shadowy churchyard was fit to burst inside the low walls that surrounded it. After dark no one would go near the churchyard because, under the cover of darkness, clawed hands would slowly open the creaking crypt door to release the undead into the night. They would painfully rise from their resting place to wander aimlessly inside the confines of the walls. Historically, the ashen-faced creatures would gambol happily between the Victorian gravestones in their shrouds playing with each other like children from dusk to dawn; hoping an errant drunk should take a shortcut across the yard so they could jump out and scare him half to death. However, that was a long time ago. Nowadays they are as shabby as their worm-eaten attire and any caper that was in them is long gone – they sit idly in the shadows sucking on dead pigeons waiting for the welcome dawn return to their crypt for to rest.

As the years went by they took advantage of the genocide which had occurred in the Town and slowly moved back into the empty streets, from whence they came, to live in the vacant terraced houses they used to dwell in during their lifetimes. The houses lay in disrepair and mutant rats nibbled at their flesh during their day's rest. Nevertheless they felt safe and stayed near their own. There was no leader to the undead; each followed a common path that was set by hopelessness. However, things started to happen that brought them together... an unseen fear stuck out its icy fingers and began to rip out the unbeating hearts of their tribe... they named that fear, The Townsman.

\*\*\*

Myths sprung up about him and no one dared mention his name hereabouts lest he should hear and step out of the shadows to wreak revenge upon them for their careless utterance. Those that had claimed to see him, described him as lean with muscle and nearly six feet tall. He wore black to conceal himself in the darkness when he went about his foul employ.

Some said that he was an alien who was accidentally left behind in the town after the apocalypse – his craft never to return to find him. Others said that during the apocalypse he was laid on his back in a hospital bed with his blood being out of him whilst being cleansed. He finally awoke from his coma to find the doctors and nurses rotting at the foot of his bed. He staggered weakly from under his covers and found his blood safe and fresh in an aluminum thermos. He set up a line and transfused his cleansed blood back into his waiting veins. Refreshed by his transfusion and given super human strength because of its potency, he set out to destroy the undead who, in his ignorance, he blamed for the slaughter of the townspeople.

It was said that one of the undead was his woman; an East European immigrant named, Beekay – or Bikey as she liked to be called. She was not like the other undead; she was fit and sturdy, well nourished by NHS's finest – which he took for them from the same hospital where his resurrection had occurred. She was accused of leading The Townsman to the hidden covens, which were set in the secret basements and attics that stood off the dark back alleys of the town, to ply his deadly trade. According to the tales, The Townsman was very well endowed and knew how to please a woman – once taken by his spell a soul was lost to his warm pleasures. She was not the only one that he had seduced; sometimes it was what he was at upon finding unguarded prey in the shadows – whether maid or pale youth – instead of going for the kill. Nevertheless, it was said that it was always her that he would return to until one dawn they captured her. She had been uncharacteristically careless and had sought her day's rest in the terrace rows, where her ilk did reside nearby. They bound her to an old dining chair with chains and waited behind the

blackout curtains for him to come to her rescue – two canine beasts slavered at the ends of their chains. They waited...

...She neared demise as the days and nights went by; she was used to the richness of human blood running through her veins. She watched jealously as they tore at rats and small rodents with their jagged teeth whilst she sat in advanced blood starvation.

“He can’t be missing you very much, Beekay,” they scoffed. “Where is he; has he found another and forgotten you altogether then?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she replied weakly. “Who is it that you refer to?”

They laughed maniacally at her apparently defiant denial. She shook her long jet hair and tossed it so that it fell over her eyes – she had shut them out under the locks.

Then one still and moonlit night he came to find her...

An alarm had gone off on one of the nearby safe houses; no intruder was there by the time they arrived en bloc to investigate. In the house they were warned and they doubled their guard and shook the dogs to the ready. They waited. Someone thought they heard something outside – no one dared to go out so instead they sent out the dogs. They snarled their way into the backyard and disappeared through the broken fence and into the spinney beyond. From behind their bolted door they heard a fierce fight in the trees and suddenly one of the dogs leaped back over the fence and cried to be let in. They gingerly opened the door and let the pathetic creature inward. They decided to go and investigate themselves, leaving two of their number behind to guard the girl. After they had cautiously entered the wood they found the other animal lying dead; its throat had been rived open and blood gushed from the wound – they had obviously disturbed him, they thought as they took their mouths to the wound. After their fill they returned to the house to see the girl perished in her chair with her throat treated the same cruel way as the dogs; the guards were missing without trace also.

## Dark As Day: A Post Industrial Fairy Tale

They talked for many years of the incident and how they had put flight to The Townsman and how he would never return for fear of them. Some, however, still fear him and say he is still alive and waiting in the shadows to strike the unwary...

# Forbidden Grand

*Mercedes M. Yardley*

The divorce was final on Halloween. Actually, that was four Halloweens ago, but the fall leaves still drove Simon to his piano for solace. He banged out concertos with sweaty determination, playing Beethoven and Bach with the same violence that Scott Ian demonstrates while playing guitar for Anthrax.

"That's...lovely, Simon," his mother said one evening. She had brought over a pineapple upside down cake, and clenched it to her bony chest while Simon hammered out Fur Elise. "Very...passionate." She tried not to shudder, but that was only because she loved her son.

"Want to hear something that I wrote?" Simon asked her. His dark hair fell forward and covered his eyes. His gaunt face was horrifying in its intensity. His mother was surprised to find herself taking an inadvertent step backwards. Without looking at the keys, Simon began to play.

"Oh, my. I don't...I don't like it, son. Stop it, Simon. Stop it!"

Simon didn't stop it. He stared at his mother through his bangs, his eyes wide and wild. His face blazed with vibrant darkness, his fingers curling and retracting like claws as they scurried over the keyboard. The music was a hateful cacophony; his mother was a vessel. She was uncorked and filled and overrun. Her breathing raked the air, the tendons stood out on her neck. The cake and heirloom plate fell and shattered on the wood floor. She turned and staggered out of the door.

Simon registered the sound of the door slamming, and swallowed hard. He pulled his fingers from the keys and swiped his damp hair back from his eyes.

"Mother?" he said tentatively. And then stronger. "Mother?"

He slid the piano bench back and stood up. His eyes landed on the bits of sponge cake and plate scattered everywhere.

“Mom!”

Simon reached the door in two steps and flung it open. His mother was sitting on the porch, both hands grasping at the railing. Her face was a dull yellow that worried him.

“Mom?”

Her eyes skittered up to his. Her mouth opened in an ‘O’, rounder and wider than he ever would have thought possible.

“Demon!” she shouted, clawing at her son as he reached out to help her. “Monster! Devil!” She collapsed then, and Simon caught her awkwardly. He shook her, not quite sure what to do.

“Mom?”

Her eyelids twitched and then opened, her eyes rolling around in her head. Gradually they trained somewhere behind Simon’s right ear.

“I had hoped never to see you again,” she whispered, and went still.

Simon was forced to leave her in the hospital.

“Your presence is disturbing her,” the nurse told him almost angrily. “You’re certainly not making her any better.”

“But she’s my mother,” he said. Simon realized that it was a pathetic argument, but it was the best that he could come up with.

“Yeah? Well, she thinks you’re a devil. And who wants to be mother to a devil? It would be best if you don’t come back for a while. We’re trying to stabilize her, and you’re interfering.”

Well. He’d heard that before. Simon had been interfering all of his life. He looked up at the dead leaves blowing down from the sky. Maybe it was time for him to take a vacation.

He threw a few clothes and a razor into his duffle bag. It was just a few hours’ drive to the old hotel that his father had run when Simon was just a kid. Simon came here periodically. After things went sour in his marriage. After his divorce. Now that his mother thought he was housing the devil, it seemed like the time to come.

He pushed the ancient metal key into the lock and fought with it until it turned. His feet led him to the small room behind the stairs, and he threw his bag down on the dusty bedspread. He'd take care of the housecleaning later, but right now he had only one thing on his mind.

His feet tapped loudly against the black and white tile floor as he drifted toward his first love. His real love. The ballroom was shadowed, shades drawn against the wind and rain outside. Cobwebs graced the chandeliers, but Simon only had eyes for her. A dark shape at the far side of the room. The forbidden grand.

Simon pulled the cover off of the piano as tenderly as he would disrobe a lover. She was darkness and shiny keys and the reason that he had learned to play in the first place. He sat on the bench, scooted it back to the correct position, and curled his hands lightly on the keys. Something lovely, something soothing. To whisper that he was here.

His fingers drilled viciously onto the ivories, onto the black keys. The song that rumbled out of the grand was all clashing accidentals. It was hatred set to music.

"No, that simply won't do at all, Simon. Not here. Not on her."

Simon's fingers froze. His eyes darted to the right. An ethereal woman sat beside him on the bench. Her pale hair floated around her face like water. She laid a translucent hand on his and shook her head.

"This is not your music," she said. Her voice was melodic, water over rock, a flute choir. "This is his."

"I..."

That was as much as Simon could muster. He was strangely proud of himself for not passing out cold.

The woman smiled sadly at him. "It seems that you have forgotten. That is all right, my love. I have not forgotten you."

Simon gawked at her. He seemed unable to shut his mouth. Sweat rolled down his waxy skin.

She took her hand from his, laid it on his cheek. She stared intently into his eyes, and he was stunned to see such deep color there when the rest of her was so evanescent.

“Simon,” she said. The way she said his name stirred something within him, something almost remembered. “Simon. You will have to make your choice.”

She disappeared then, faded away bit by bit until Simon was staring at the dust motes dancing in the air. He had a choice? If that was the case, then he would choose her. He would always choose her.

That night he lay awake and thought about the mysterious woman. Finally he kicked off his covers and padded out to the grand piano. Music tickled in the back of his head. Forget sleep, since it wasn't coming anyway. He needed to play.

He took a deep breath as he ran his fingers over the keys. It felt like coming home. Better than that. Coming home always felt lousy.

Ghostly. She was beautiful. Simon began to play.

The music hurt. It was madness. The piano began to groan under it.

“Simon.”

He turned to the voice, still playing. It wasn't his ephemeral, translucent woman. It was Katherine. His ex-wife. Happy freakin' Halloween.

His fingers didn't miss a note. “What are you doing here?”

She took a hesitant step forward, pushed her brown hair out of her eyes. “I heard about your mother, and when you didn't answer at your apartment, I figured you'd be here.” She was frowning. Simon suddenly remembered that Katherine always seemed to frown. “That music,” she said. “It's awful.”

“It's mine.” Simon played a little louder out of spite. “Don't come after me and then criticize my playing.”

“I'm not criticizing your—” she stopped herself, shook her head. “Why do we always do this, Simon? Why can't we just have a nice conversation for once?” She stalked over and tried to pull his hands from the piano. He was too strong for her, and stubbornly continued to play. Katherine slapped at his hands. “Stop playing that stupid song!”

Simon leapt to his feet. “It's not stupid!”

Katherine shrank from him and fell to the floor. Simon was strangely happy to see her like that.

“Simon. No.”

The voice came from behind Katherine. He looked up and saw the ghostly woman. She shook her head sorrowfully at him, her hair drifting like mist. Simon felt ashamed.

“I’m...sorry, Katherine.”

He held out a hand to his ex-wife, who glared at it. She scrambled to her feet by herself.

“That’s it. You’re crazy! You want to know why I left you, Simon? It’s because you’re nuts. Immature and obsessed with your music. Your mother is dead. I thought that somebody should tell you.”

She stormed away. The door slammed behind her.

Simon stood silently.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. She floated closer, her feet inches from the floor. “I was hoping to tell you about your mother myself, when the time was right.” She laid her hands lightly on Simon’s shoulders.

“She’s dead?” he asked. His brain wasn’t functioning correctly. “My music killed her?”

“It’s like I told you, my love. It isn’t your music. It’s his.”

He looked at her. “Whose?”

“Mine.”

The room seemed yanked into darkness by the deep voice that boomed out from behind the piano. The woman sucked in her breath, and her hands tightened on Simon’s shoulders. Simon turned.

The man seemed too big for the room. His face was harsh and his nose looked like it had been broken. He radiated irritation and distaste.

“Dad?” Simon said.

The man snorted. “You never were very smart. You got that from your mother.”

“But you’ve been dead for years!”

“No kidding, genius. Doesn’t mean I haven’t been around.”

Simon edged toward his father. The ethereal woman didn’t move.

“Been around? Like looking after me?”

“Rich. Looking after you. Sure, kid. That’s what I’ve been doing.”

Simon glared at him, but the big man continued mockingly. "Because you're important to me. Son. My important boy."

He laughed, an ugly sound. Simon clenched his fists, but the woman smoothly slid her hand into his.

"Be still, darling," she whispered. Simon's father smirked at her.

"Ah, you. Still keeping an eye on him after all this time? I would have thought that you had better things to do."

The woman straightened her spine. "Leave this place, William. You aren't wanted here."

Simon's father leered at her.

"You don't frighten me," she said, and William barked out a laugh.

"That's a lie, and you know it," he said, and slid his large body onto the piano bench of the grand. He winked at Simon. "Want to hear something, boy?"

William began to claw at the keys. The piano vomited up heavy, bilious music.

Simon recognized it immediately. "Hey, that's my song!"

William closed his eyes, his fingers scuttling over the ivory keys. "No, it's my song. You couldn't create something like this, it just isn't in you." He opened one eye and fastened it on Simon. "But it could be."

"It could? How?"

He heard a gasp behind him, and whirled around to see the woman sinking to the floor. Her hair tangled around her head like weeds. She sounded like she was choking.

"No! What's wrong? How can I help you?" Simon dropped to his knees beside her. He ran his hands frantically over her face and throat, but couldn't see what was causing her distress. He looked at his father.

"Dad?"

William grinned at his son. "See? This is power, Simon. Music can control your emotions, and now I've found a way to control your mind. It's tough without a body, though, son. So how 'bout...you let me use yours?"

"Dad! She's dying! You have to help me!"

“Dying? She’s already dead. Been dead for years.”

She was convulsing now. Her blue eyes rolled in her head and her bare feet kicked at the floor. William paid her no heed, but continued his torturous song.

“Ever wonder why I never let you touch this piano, Simon?”

“You told me that I wasn’t good enough.”

“You won’t. Never will be, no matter how many concert halls you play in, no matter how many people buy your CDs. That woman? I bound her to this piano years ago. Every stroke I make, every note, it’s her. It’s always her. I own her. And a man ought never to touch another man’s property; know what I’m saying, boy?”

“I...don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Simon glanced down at the lovely woman. She had gone even more transparent, barely more than mist.

“What are you doing to her?” he asked his father.

William’s eyes had a strange sheen. Simon had to turn away from his broken glass smile. “Can you die after you’re dead? Yes, you can. I learned how to obliterate souls. You know what that makes me? A god. More than a god.”

“That’s crazy!”

“Shut up, boy!”

Simon looked frantically around the room. He jumped to his feet and ran for the emergency exit. He used his elbow to break the glass surrounding a fireman’s hatchet. He grabbed it, held it over his head, and raced back to the grand. His love.

William’s eyes were wild. “No! What are you doing, son? All of this power! What’s some woman to you? Do not touch! It is forbidden!”

Simon hesitated for just a second, and then shut his eyes. He brought the hatchet down over and over on the piano. The lid split. The wires snapped. His father’s wrathful music caught and was drowned out by the noise of the piano’s death.

Then he turned the hatchet on his father.

“I am going to kill you, boy!” William screamed, but there was no key left unbroken on the piano, no way to send his music from the

other side. Suddenly his red face whitened, and his mouth froze mid snarl. Simon turned around to see the woman on her feet, her eyes blazing and her hair streaming from her head like flame. She held out her hands to Simon's father, and he exploded into light before disappearing completely. Simon looked at the ravaged grand. The soft wood was exposed through the thick lacquer like flesh under the skin. It was too human. It seemed obscene.

"I am sorry. About your father. Perhaps there was another way..."

She didn't finish. The aura of strength and horrifying power had faded away, and now she was just a very beautiful woman with regret covering her like a veil.

Simon slipped his hand into hers. "I really don't think there was another way. That's just him. He always destroys things." He studied her closely. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. Simon noticed that she seemed a little more solid than before.

"He really chained you to the grand somehow?"

She nodded again. "He did so when he killed me. But look," she said, when his eyes goggled and he started to speak again, "you destroyed her, and I'm free. I can go wherever I want, do whatever I want." She raised her blue, blue eyes to his.

Simon swallowed hard. "So what do you want to do?"

"I want to leave this place."

"And go where?"

"Remember when I told you that you had a choice?"

"Yeah. I chose you over my father."

She smiled. "Use that power of choice again. Choose somewhere for us to go. Somewhere wonderful. Preferably somewhere without a grand piano. At least for a while."

# Everyone Is Zombies

*Ty Johnston*

There must have been an apocalypse overnight. Maybe The Apocalypse. I don't know. I haven't read my Bible since I was a kid.

But I have read the morning newspaper. People in far countries killing one another. People in this country killing one another. People in my hometown killing one another.

I must have missed the apocalypse, sleeping next to my wife in our five-hundred thread count sheets.

Oh, well.

I chew my breakfast of oatmeal bread with blueberry jam, then swash down my usual glass of orange juice. Then I straighten my blue and red striped tie, grab my black leather briefcase and head for the door.

I would kiss the wife goodbye, but she goes to work before I wake.

Outside, I rush down the little pathway of pumpkin-colored bricks that leads to our driveway.

I hear the clatter of steps next door and pause next to my Nissan.

Troy Wilkins is staggering out his house toward his BMW. His tie is pearl white over a shirt the blue of late night. He smiles, but it's a dreary smile below dreary eyes.

I see the truth right away. He can't fool me.

He's a zombie.

He waves with a snap of his wrist, a dead snap, like cracking leaves beneath your feet in the woods, then he's in his Beemer and backing out onto asphalt.

I hear more front doors open and I stare down the stream of houses that front our road.

There's Butch Holloway in his blue button-down over jeans heading to his contractor's job.

There's Nancy Ross in her snappy pink power suit chugging her way to her Cadillac before going to the real estate office.

There's Joe Blow in his tattered, stained t-shirt limping along, the three kids straggling behind as he climbs into his Ford Explorer. He's taking them to school before returning home to get some sleep before his second job starts at the Taco Bell.

I stand there and watch all these people.

They're zombies. All of them.

They don't see that I see it, but I see it. Their slack jaws. That hinky way they walk. That false wave they give before driving off to their jobs.

Yes, there must have been an apocalypse. It's all adding up. People killing people. Zombies. Everyone is zombies.

But none of them attacked me. None of them tore my flesh away with their rotted teeth.

I shrug. I've got to get to the office.

Five minutes later, sitting in traffic, I stare about. To my right and left, in front and behind, are more zombies.

Zombies can drive. I didn't know that.

Another ten minutes and I'm pulling into the parking lot at my office building.

As I hustle through the crowd of undead piling into the front door of the building, I spot Bud Jenkins.

Bud waves at me. Calls me over.

He's the first real human I've seen all morning.

"You ready for the big presentation?" he asks.

I nod slowly, taking in his silky red tie clipped with a thin gold bar over his shirt of pale blue and white vertical stripes.

"Great," Bud goes on with glee. "I think we've got this down. I think we're really going to do something today, make a difference."

I stare at him without blinking.

He slaps me on the shoulder. "See you after lunch!"

With that he's gone, breaking his way through the zombies to enter our home away from home.

Upstairs, on the third floor in the sixth cubicle on the right in the back, I plop down into my chair with the torn cushion and power up my computer.

A few hours later, after I lose a couple of bids on eBay and finish drafting my pre-meeting report, it's time for lunch.

An apple from my suitcase, a cold turkey sandwich from a machine and a cafe latte from Starbuck's. A zombie intern picked up the coffee for me after I gave him five bucks.

That's lunch.

Then it's time for the presentation.

Bud is all hyper. He's nearly jumping up and down as I follow the zombies into the room with the long, egg-shaped table surrounded by a dozen or so squeaky chairs.

Bud goes to the front of the room next to a chalkboard while I sit between my boss and his boss.

I look around. Everyone in the room is a zombie. Except for Bud.

My boss glances at me with saggy zombie eyes, and then looks to Bud and nods.

Bud jumps into the presentation with gusto. He's off like lightning. Every few minutes he asks for me to chime in, and I do, offering an opinion or highlighting some special point we had agreed upon earlier.

It was a great presentation, all fifteen minutes of it. We had spent four months working on it. Our plan would save the company tons of money. Our plan would make the company tons of money. Our plan was bold, dramatic and it was the right thing to do.

But Bud is talking to zombies.

When he is finished, they tear him apart.

They eat away his brain, his heart and finally, his soul.

They rip him to shreds, and nearly pull me along for the ride.

By the time we are finished, Bud is a zombie too. I can see it in his sunken jowls and shuffling footsteps.

I spend the afternoon online. I check the bank balance, see it's in the red, then use a credit card to buy things I don't need, no one needs, over at Amazon.

I avoid Bud's cubicle the rest of the day. Once you've seen one zombie, you've seen them all.

Then it's time to drive home.

I steer among the army of zombies that has taken over the world, and I pull my silver Nissan into the driveway next to my wife's red Nissan.

For a moment I have hope. Maybe my wife is alright. Maybe she isn't a zombie. Maybe they haven't gotten to her.

I rush indoors, hoping beyond hope.

I run into the kitchen, finding microwave dinners in plastic plates cooling on paper plates at the marble-topped stand in the middle of the room.

My wife's back is to me. She's ripping open plastic wrappers of plastic utensils.

"Honey?"

She turns.

And I know it's too late.

She stares at me with that zombie stare, a pair of plastic forks and knives dangling in her hands. Her once golden hair has turned the dull gray of dead seagulls. Her once blue eyes have given over to a pair of black, soulless marbles.

She says nothing, just holds out my share of the utensils.

Eating, stuffing my maw with carrots and peas and pork chops that had been frozen less than an hour ago, I start to think about what I can do about the apocalypse, about the zombies.

There's only one way to kill a zombie. I've seen the movies. You have to shoot them. Shoot them in the head. It's the only thing that works.

My grandfather's old pistol is upstairs in the closet.

I shiver as I stare across the table at my wife filling her mouth with cooling pig meat. I can't kill her. I don't have it in me. Even if she is a zombie. I loved her once.

No, I have to start somewhere else.

After that poor excuse for a meal, I tell the wife I am tired and I'm going to head upstairs for a nap.

She could care less. Zombies don't sleep. They just plop down in front of the television and turn on "Friends."

Upstairs, I rummage through the closet, and then I find it. The gun. The pistol. It's older than I am. My grandfather had left it to me when he had died years ago.

Thank God grandpa wasn't around now. I wouldn't want him to be a zombie.

I push the little button in the side, and the cylinder thingy falls out. I don't know much about guns, but I know what bullets look like and there are six of them snugged into the cylinder of the weapon.

So, six zombies.

It would be a start.

I drop the gun on the bed.

I yank off my tie and shirt and head to the bathroom. I don't have any camouflage, but a gray sweatshirt and jeans should be appropriate for zombie hunting.

In the bathroom, I flip on the overhead light.

And my world tumbles apart.

I stare into mirror. I see the scrubby chin, the tallowy flesh of the face, the deep-set, red-rimmed orbs staring back at me.

I am a zombie.

I am one of them.

My eyes stay locked on myself as I shuffle back from the mirror.

I stop in the doorway to the bedroom.

There, on the bed, rests my grandfather's revolver.

It's a .357 magnum.

That sounds pretty powerful. Probably enough to blow a hole through a zombie's head.

I glance at myself in the mirror again.

Dead skin. Dead eyes. Dead life.

I glance at the gun.

I reach for it.

## ***Epilogue***

Sorting through the stories was not easy. Deadman's Tome developed quite a collection, and we hope that the contributors that didn't appear in this collection don't take the absence as anything other than size limitations. We could put every single story we have ever received in the collection, but that would create an overwhelming anthology, or would it? Only time will tell.

I hope you enjoyed the best of the demonic edition of Deadman's Tome. As a kindle owner you get first access to this awesome collection of morbid content, but this is only the tip of the iceberg. Deadman's Tome houses some talented writers and poets. Thom Olausson, a man that lives and breathes darkness has submitted some awesome poems and commentary. Check out Deadman's Tome previous issues at [www.Deadmanstome.com](http://www.Deadmanstome.com)