

Despairs & Delights

By

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INTRODUCTION

Hello, my fellow horrorphiles, and welcome to this nasty little compilation by Lincoln Crisler. My name is Bailey Hunter and I was asked to write an introduction for DESPAIRS AND DELIGHTS. Why me? Well, I am a founding member of +The Horror Library+ which Lincoln has been a part of for some time, providing many great tales including a select few you will find within this anthology.

Having worked with Lincoln these past years, I can say that he is one of the harder working authors I've had the pleasure to meet. Between his 'day job' and his bid to bring more horror to the readers out there with anthologies of other's work, he also continues to hone his own craft and share his daemons for us to enjoy.

In this collection, Lincoln has brought together a wide ranging group of stories which touch on the many facets of the horror genre. As you read you will find everything from the darkness of basic humanity to the more supernatural horrors provided though otherworldly creatures. Each glinting edge is sure to provide you with shiver or a smile and sometimes even both. I know you will find, as I did, certain stories that will capture you more completely than others, but the whole ride will be an entertaining, quick paced and wonderful smattering (or is that spattering?) of this most beloved genre.

For myself I found an underlying theme of sacrifice through many of the tales and whether that sacrifice came from within or without, the results are worthy of the designation, 'horror'. I know that Lincoln didn't intend this, however it only added to the overall compilation for this reader. I'm sure that as you read this you will find your own common thread of dread.

With that in mind, I now leave you to discover Lincoln Crisler. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Bailey Hunter

Publisher - Dark Recesses Press

Founding T-12 Member - +The Horror Library+

Farewell Engagement

““Dude,” Jared hung up the phone and ran his fingers through his spiky black hair. “That was Preston. He got us another gig.” Preston, the band’s effeminate, emo-styled manager, had put together a regional tour for the Veins, and the kids had spent the last three weeks of their summer rocking out in New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. They were spending next week in New Jersey before playing the local stage at the Warpit Tour. There was no better way to finish the summer before senior year, in Jared’s mind.

Tim tossed his guitar on the bed, opened the door of their cheap hotel room and lit a cigarette. “You mean, on top of what’s already lined up?”

“Yeah, man. Some little club outside Philly, before we shoot into Jersey for next week’s shows. We need to be there tonight.”

“Fuck, tonight was our night off,” Mike muttered as he came out of the shower, towel wrapped around his waist.

“The guy told Preston he’d pay five grand. Besides, we won’t be traveling with the geek today. He’s going to meet us in Jersey day after tomorrow.”

“Five grand, eh,” Tim mused. “It’s worth it, Mikey. Besides, when we hit it big, we’re going to

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have to deal with a lot more bullshit than playing an extra show.”

Tim shifted into neutral and pulled the parking brake. “Ugh. Look at this place.”

The parking lot was cracked and pitted with potholes and the building itself looked condemned; soot-stained bricks, broken windows and rusty gutters. A stray cat cried from a nearby alley as Jared and Mike began unloading the van.

“Anyone else think it’s odd that the owner of a place like this is giving *us* five grand?” Mike grunted as Jared dropped his end of a large amp. “Damnit, man.”

“Sorry.” Jared grimaced as he hoisted the case once more.

“Maybe it’s one of those places that looks better on the inside,” Tim laughed.

“Anything would look better than this.”

They made two trips into the club without seeing anyone else. The place looked abandoned. The stage was dirty, the tables were dusty and the floor was covered with cigarette butts, old concert fliers and congealed, ages-old, spilled drinks.

“Who the fuck is going to come here?” Mike grumped as he and Jared lugged the drums onto the stage.

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A tall, thin man stepped out of the manager's office. He brushed a wispy cobweb from his thick blonde hair and extended his hand to Jared. "Oh, this place will be packed in a couple hours. Believe me; our patrons are very eager for a taste of something new."

"No offense to your place, man," Jared said apologetically, "But it could use a bit of upkeep." The manager's hand was cold and clammy, and Jared pulled his hand back quickly when the man released it.

The thin man shrugged and cracked a razor-tipped smile. "You guys are punkers, right? I'll write you a check after the show. I'm Dino, by the way." Dino shook hands with Mike and Tim and shuffled back to the office.

“Man, that dude seemed a bit off,” Mike mused as the band went back to the van for their guitars.

“As long as the check clears,” Jared laughed, wiping his hand on his faded jeans.

By the time the Veins set up their equipment, did a quick sound check and walked across the street to get some beers, the club was still empty.

“Not that I’d want to drink there anyhow,” Mike grinned.

“You’d think the help would have shown up by now.” Tim pulled out his fake ID and walked up to the bar to order a pitcher.

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“Even if no one shows up,” Jared reassured him when he came back, “That guy’s writing us a check or Preston will have his ass.”

“Little poser’s good for something, at least.” Mike poured the beer and passed it around.

“I’ll drink to that,” Tim said, and he did.

After a couple pitchers, Jared decided it was time to return to the club. They entered through the back door, which opened onto the stage.

“Holy shit,” Tim gasped. The club was now packed with people, and blanketed in a thick layer of cigarette smoke.

Jared spotted Dino leaning up against the far wall, puffing on a cigar and gave him the thumbs up.

“It even looks a little cleaner,” he mumbled as he strapped on his bass and stepped up to the microphone.

“You may have heard of us,” he addressed the crowd as Tim cranked up his guitar and hammered a power chord. “We’re the Veins. We’d like to thank Dino for having us,” the tall man inclined his head toward the stage, “And we hope you enjoy the show.”

Mike crashed into the drums, and the band began their set. The crowd piled in front of the stage and began jumping up and down. Some of the people even knew the words, and screamed along with Jared.

Though completely unaware they were in agreement, Jared, Tim and Mike didn’t think the band had ever played a better show. Their timing was perfect and their instruments and vocals were clearer

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than they had ever heard. This shitty venue had somehow brought out the best in them.

They ripped through a few songs, then paused for a quick break. As Jared gulped water from a gallon jug, Tim waved him over.

“Dude, none of these clowns are drinking.”

“It must be an all-ages show, Tim. No big deal.”

“Look around,” Tim urged. “They’re not even drinking soda. There’s not even a bartender.”

“He must have called in sick. The crowd doesn’t seem to mind. Let’s do this.”

“What’s up?” Mike raised a concerned eyebrow over the top of his drums.

“Nothing.” Tim shrugged and stepped up to his microphone to introduce the next song.

If the crowd’s reaction to their first few songs was favorable, it was nothing compared to their increasing furor as the set continued. More and more people packed the floor in front of the stage, until everyone was as close as they could get and the rest of the room was an ocean of dead space between them and Dino. The owner, still leaned against the wall, puffed his stogie and bobbed his head with the beat.

The band was carried along on the crowd’s wave of energy. Jared hammered his bass harder, screamed the lyrics louder and the crowd jumped

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higher, and even yelled louder. Tim looked over at him, mouthing something to him. He had an insane look in his eyes as his hands shredded the strings in a furious solo. Tim finished and Jared plucked the rhythm leading up to Mike's drum solo. Mike beat harder and faster as the crowd chanted unintelligibly, and drops of blood appeared on his brow. He wiped his hand across his brow as he tapped out sixteenth notes on the hi-hat with the other. He raised an eyebrow at the blood, but he just looked at Tim and shrugged. *Fuck it*, he mouthed, and played harder.

As Mike finished his solo and Tim began strumming the chorus, Jared threw his bass behind him and leapt into the crowd. They reached up eagerly to catch him.

All around, people pulled at his clothes, and his skin twitched in the places where they had slipped fingers beneath his garments. Their nails were sharp and their skin was cold and waxy. He looked up into the face of one man and screamed. The creature's skin sagged away from his eyes, revealing more of the bulging, bloodshot orbs and he grinned, exposing two rows of crooked yellow tombstones.

Two slender, pale girls oozed out of the shadows behind Tim; they could have been twins. One ran her fingers and lips over the guitarist's body as the other flipped open a straight razor and began systematically slicing tendons; behind the knees, under the armpits, inside the elbows and finally at the wrists. Tim played, oblivious to the caresses and cutting, until he was physically unable to continue. His clothes were

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soaked through with blood, and he was on his knees with his guitar in his lap. The girls slurped the spilled blood as Tim rocked back and forth in front of his mike stand like a charmed snake, grinning from ear to ear.

A large, half-rotten man clambered up the side of the stage, grabbed a rough handful of Mike's hair, yanked back and sunk his teeth into the drummer's throat. The frantic punk rhythm became more erratic the longer the ghoul drank, but Mike didn't stop until he slipped from the stool, knocking over the crash cymbal. The creature fell to his knees as Mike dropped and continued drinking.

The club's patrons screamed as their friends systematically butchered the Veins. Dino remained

against the wall, puffing his cigar; after all, this was part of the entertainment. After a brief moment he clapped his hands; the sound somehow carried over the noise. The crowd screamed and rushed the stage, each slavering ghoul eager for his piece. Dino strolled over to the pit, paused and looked down. He plucked a severed finger from the floor and considered it carefully... the bass player's.

“Kids had a lot of potential. Lot of power,” he mused. “That was the show of a lifetime.” He sucked the meat from the bone, then sauntered back to his office to cut Preston a check.

Knight of the Living Dead

“**A**nd remember, keep clear
of the Dark Oaks, this
night of all nights,”

Orland called out as Anders thundered away from the castle. Anders, bent low over his horse's neck, smirked behind his helm.

Superstitious old man, he thought. *Feast of the Dead, my ass*. If his lord, the Count, had seen fit to send his finest champion on an errand this night, what danger could there be? Anyhow, there was nothing his sword couldn't handle, and certainly nothing his horse, Fleetwood, couldn't outrun. Of course he was cutting through the Dark Oaks; going around would cost him an additional day. What did Orland know, anyhow? He

was a wise old sage, to be sure, but knew nothing of the ways of combat. Anders was a knight. He would ride to Ernif, roust the brigands his lord's subjects were complaining of, and return home while there was still feasting to be enjoyed.

The Dark Oaks *did* look especially forbidding tonight, Anders thought as he approached the forest at dusk. He'd grant Orland that much. By the same token, however, the Dark Oaks were *supposed* to be forbidding; a three-hour ride through thick, treacherous woods that had deterred the count's enemies for as long as the family had held the land. The peasantry had been scaring themselves with talk of walking corpses for almost as long, but what else could be expected from uneducated folk? Anders supposed he'd be scared

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too, if he wasn't a knight. He didn't blame them, really... but he knew better.

Fleetwood halted at the edge of the forest, ears pricking up as a stiff wind blew across the dusky field. Anders drew his cloak tightly around him and whispered to his mount.

“Come on, old boy. We've done this a hundred times.” Finally the horse acquiesced and plunged into the Dark Oaks. Branches smacked against Anders' armor and tugged at his cloak as Fleetwood, gaining confidence, moved faster along the familiar path. It was so dark Anders could barely see the horse beneath him, and the wind howled through the trees. There were no animals, no birds, no insects; only the rushing

of the wind, the whipping of the branches and the surefooted clip-clopping of the horse.

They traveled the next five miles in silence. Anders nodded in his saddle; Fleetwood's steady gait, the ungodly hour and lack of companionship conspired against him. When he raised his head for a sip of ale, he noticed a flickering light shining through the trees. He slung his aleskin back over his shoulder, took Fleetwood's reins, halted the horse and listened intently. There were low grumbling and moaning sounds from the direction of the light. Perhaps there was celebration to be had in the woods. Anders shook the reins and Fleetwood plodded towards the light.

When they were halfway to it, Fleetwood halted and pricked up his ears. His nostrils began

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twitching and Anders' hand slid instinctively to his sword. Suddenly, Fleetwood leapt into the air and galloped recklessly through the woods. Anders dropped the reins, released the sword and clung to his horse's neck for dear life.

“Fleetwood! Devil take you, slow down!” He screamed into the horse's ear, to no effect. Fleetwood ran, faster if anything, and burst through the thick brush blotting the light. Anders inhaled a fetid stench as he caught a glimpse of a campfire, and....

There's no way I just saw what I think—

His forehead slammed into a tree branch, and he slipped into unconsciousness.

Anders awoke on a bed of silky pillows. He inhaled the scent of vanilla and herbs on top of mold and decay. He raised himself up on one elbow, and his skin tingled at the light touch of fingers caressing his scalp. He shivered with pleasure and turned about. A slender woman perched behind his bed on a similar pile of pillows. Her face was covered with a tattered, soiled veil and her gown was stained and musty. She dragged a single finger sensuously down his cheek, and despite the dirt beneath the awkwardly long nail, despite the smell of the woman, he felt himself stirring in response.

“Long dead, my lover, but I still have the touch. It will be good for us,” she crooned. Anders forced himself out of her reach.

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“I demand you release me. I’m on the Count’s business.” The woman leaned forward to lay a finger across his lips. The front of her gown drooped, exposing dirty bags of skin hanging limply from her skeletal frame.

“I am the Queen of the Undead, my knight, and you’ll demand nothing of me,” she whispered sweetly. “Your business can wait a few hours. After all, this night is our only chance to couple.”

“Couple? You plan to bed me?” Anders’ eyes opened wide.

“The veil is at its thinnest, only this night each year. At this time and no other can I lay with a mortal and bear children. So many decades have gone by and no man has visited. I have so much to give to you.”

She crawled closer to him, and the odors of dirt and rot clogged his nose. She pressed the nails of one hand into his chest, and for the first time since awakening, Anders realized he was naked. He pressed a pillow to his groin to mask his manhood's betrayal and leaned away from the rotting queen.

"I am a noble soldier," he protested. "I'll not lay with a..." his mind, clouded with confused passion, worked furiously. "...A cadaver. I'll have my horse and my armor, if you please, and then I'll take my leave of you."

The undead woman climbed onto his lap and tossed the pillow to the side. She flicked her cold, wet tongue across his earlobe and Anders was excited and repulsed at the same time. He scrambled backwards

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and fell on his back. The zombie queen leaned over him, moving her hips, and he choked back the urge to vomit even as his groin responded to her grinding weight.

“I feel your excitement, my knight. It matches my own. Why do you protest?”

“You’re a zombie! A ghoul! You’re repulsive. How can the dead bear children anyhow? I tire of this game. If I have to find my sword and armor myself, I will strike you down before I leave.”

“If you will not bed me, my contradictory consort, there is only one other option. I’ll return your sword, your armor and your horse, and set you free from my domain. However, before dawn you must slay an entire village. I shall enchant your sword that your

victims may take the place of the children you are so loathe to place within me.”

“Slay a village full of people? Foul woman, I am a knight! I do not do such things.” Anders struggled to rise, but the zombie queen pushed him back with amazing strength.

“There are only two options,” she whispered. She dug her nails violently into his chest and ground her thinly-covered groin into his. Anders shuddered, placing his hands on her hips without thinking about it before snatching them back, like a child recoiling from a hot pan. She smiled.

“I’ll leave you alone to think.”

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What was he to do? Anders paced the interior of the small, moldy tent, kicking out at the pillows in frustration. Part of him wanted her—as crazy as that was—wanted to pull her onto him and release himself. At the same time, the thought of coupling with her repelled him; the idea of her rotten teeth nibbling his ear, the feel of her barely covered bones, the stench of her breath. There must be some kind of magic involved.

If there was magic, Anders mused, then it was reasonable to assume it would facilitate his decision no matter which option he selected. So he could bed a zombie or slaughter an entire town. He screamed in outrage and tore at his hair. If only Orland were here!

He took a deep breath and composed himself. From experience he knew anger clouded one's judgment. Killing a village of people he didn't know was surely better than spilling his seed into a corpse. He smiled grimly. It wasn't like he really had a choice. He whirled about at the sudden whisper of fabric as the Queen breezed into the tent.

“Have you decided? The night is already half-gone.”

Anders' jaw dropped as another thought occurred to him. The only village he could reach in time....

He sighed and set his jaw determinedly. “Bring my sword. You'll have your children.”

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Minutes later he stood in the clearing before the ashy ruins of the zombies' celebratory fire. Two ghouls helped him into his armor. The steel, once polished to perfection, was now an oily black. His sword was similarly changed. His would-be lover informed him that it was the enchantment; his armor now made him invulnerable and anyone slain by his sword would become undead. When he approached Fleetwood, who was tied to a tree, the horse bucked and tried to run, to the extent that he choked himself with the rope about his neck. Finally, gasping for air, the horse allowed himself to be mounted. Anders gripped the reins and turned back the way they had come.

“Good journey, Sir Knight,” the Queen smiled at him. She lifted her decaying skirts, untied a ribbon

from around her withered thigh and fastened it about
Anders' wrist. "Go with my blessing."

Lane Feeds the Multitude

Lane stomped the snow from his boots and entered the dingy, industrial kitchen. He nodded to Joe as he stripped off his coat and hung it on a long, rusty nail. He took off his gloves, rolled up his sleeves, addressed the sink and lathered to his elbows.

“How many are we feeding today?” Lane dried his hands, grabbed a sack of potatoes, a knife and a cutting board and sidled up to the counter, beside Joe.

“At least a hundred, by the Rev’nd’s count.” Joe grunted and scraped sliced carrots into a pot.

“Coldest Christmas on record... and even that’s not keeping them away.” Lane hacked away at a potato.

“Wonder it ain’t knockin’ ‘em off, either.”

“It is, Joe. Just not as much as we’d like.”

Joe punctuated his anger with short jabs of his knife. “Last night the ungrateful bastards were complaining there wasn’t any meat.”

“They won’t complain tonight.” Lane tossed his chopped potatoes in with Joe’s carrots.

“How d’ya figger? I checked the freezer again this morning. Not a damn thing.”

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“The Lord will provide,” Lane centered another potato on the board and leveled his knife for a killing stroke. “The Lord will provide.”

After finishing the potatoes and helping Joe with the celery and onions, Lane snatched his coat from the nail.

“Where ya goin’? Prayer service is in an hour.”

“I’m going shopping, man. Keep those veggies in cold water until I get back, huh?”

Lane turned his back on Joe, opened the door and stepped back into the cold, bustling city. He jammed his hands into his pockets and headed for the nearest intersection. A few blocks down the street, his

ride was approaching. He mined his pockets for change as he trotted to the bus stop.

The filthy city bus festered with people. Lane shoved himself into the last smelly, threadbare seat and closed his eyes.

The Reverend would hate what he was doing, Lane thought, but he'd never know. It wasn't like the Reverend helped in the kitchen, or ate with the homeless that came in. Besides, it wasn't an ongoing thing; last year was Lane's first Christmas with the mission, and this would be his last. His new job was taking up all his time now, but it was the least he could do. When he had gotten out after a five-year stint in prison the Reverend's ministry had helped get him on his feet. That's why Lane hated the bums. If he could

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lift himself up from nothing with almost no help, why couldn't they?

Lane was a firm believer that all people had something to offer their fellow man. Sometimes they just needed a little help.

The nap wasn't nearly long enough, but Lane managed to force his hand to the bell pull a few minutes later. The synthesized chime sounded, the bus slithered to a ponderous halt and Lane exited in accordance with the prerecorded instructions.

He lit a cigarette, pulled his knit hat low over his brow, looked down at the concrete and walked. Soon he saw what he was looking for, in a nearby alley. A dirty, unkempt, rag-garbed man leaned against

a stained brick wall, muttering to himself. The man looked up as Lane slowed down.

“Y’ gotta ‘nother smoke, brother?” Lane handed him a cigarette and lit it. The bum coughed a bit on the first drag. “I’m Mike.” Lane just nodded.

“Fucking cold out here, isn’t it?”

“Damn right ‘tis.” The bum was fairly young, Lane deduced, under the rags, dirt and filthy long hair and beard. That was good. He didn’t figure an older one would do as well.

Lane forced a smile. “I work at a mission. We’re having Christmas dinner. I’m headed there now, if you’d like to come along.”

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“Sure pal. Thanks.” Mike plucked a worn duffel and a rusty coffee can from the bags of trash that littered the alley. He shouldered the bag, sucked on his smoke and looked up at Lane.

“Let’s go wait for the bus.”

Lane and his new buddy caught several dirty looks from other passengers. Mike smelled like a barrel of shit, and he cleared out the whole back row of seats when he sat down. Lane forced himself to sit with Mike, but he sympathized with the others. Why should these people, mostly blue-collar workers, have to ride home with a smelly bum? He pulled his hat down over his eyes and feigned sleep, so as not to have to look at Mike, or the other people on the bus.

He signaled his stop a few minutes later, and the bus coasted to a halt just past the mission. He stepped off and continued away from the mission. Mike followed.

“We need to stop off at my apartment, first.” Lane lit two cigarettes and passed one to Mike. “I have a few boxes of canned goods to take over to the soup kitchen.”

“Cool, man.”

Lane’s whole block was deserted. He smiled as he tossed his smoke to the curb, trotted up the stairs of his building and held the door for Mike before walking down the hall to his apartment and unlocking the door.

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“Welcome to my humble abode.” The entrance let off into a small foyer that connected to the kitchen. He set his keys on a small table and moved aside to let Mike in.

“You want something to drink?”

“Sure, man. Y’gotta beer?”

“Yeah, they’re in the fridge. Grab a couple; I have to check my answering machine.”

Mike set down his bag and shuffled to the fridge. When his back was turned, Lane slipped a small black sack out of his coat pocket. It was a sock, filled with fishing weights.

He swung it at the back of Mike's head. The thick, smacking sound of metal on bone made him shiver. Mike dropped and didn't get up.

Lane rummaged under the sink for some rubber gloves and a face mask. He put them on, grabbed his electric knife from the counter and dragged Mike's body off to the bathtub.

"Told you the Lord would provide!" Lane knocked his boots against the step and walked carefully into the mission's kitchen. Joe was still there; this time he was helping a few of the church ladies with the dinner rolls. The vegetables were still sitting in the pots. Lane had five grocery bags in each hand.

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“Help me out with these, Joe.”

The two men took the bags to the prep counter. Joe whistled as Lane unloaded paper-wrapped packages of stew meat and roasts.

“Where the hell did you get these?”

“I got a bit of help from a buddy. Let’s get these roasts in the oven, eh?”

Lane grinned and grabbed the roasting pans from an overhead rack. Mike was going to help a lot of people this Christmas. All he needed was a little help himself.

Organic

Old Jani had borne Laksmi's insults for over a decade, and it was becoming tiresome. Ever since losing her husband, the farmer's widow let loose tirade upon tirade to anyone who would listen about the old woman who had killed her husband. Laksmi had sought Jani's help for her ailing husband; the witch tried her best, but the man's unpredictable reaction to the medicine finished him quicker than the sickness would have.

Once Jani's business had been profitable; people had come from neighboring villages and beyond to seek her aid. Now she could barely support herself; Laksmi's farm was near the main road into the

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village and she ran out to meet every horse, every carriage, to warn people about Jani. The income from those who paid Laksmi no mind was hardly enough to buy the necessities of life. She had tried on several occasions to talk to Laksmi, but every time was met with venomous words and one time, even a knife.

What made matters worse was that Jani could not harm Laksmi, and the farmer's widow knew it. No one had ever spoken ill of Jani's mother, Loris. Loris used the old, dark magic as well as charms and healing herbs. If someone wanted his enemies to suffer, he would go to Loris and the next day his adversary would suffer the most painful boils, sickening illness or inconvenient diarrhea. It was even rumored that she had once killed a man with her magic. Loris had lived long and well, wealthy and respected by all.

Jani, unfortunately, could not bring herself to use the dark spells. She simply didn't have the heart for it, and her mother's books of dark magic collected dust in the cellar because Jani could not muster the necessary emotion to use it. Dark magic grew from fear, hatred and anger, and Jani had never been comfortable with those emotions. So she suffered Laksmi's constant interference, hoping to someday have enough money to move to another village.

One day, however, as Jani was on the road to town, she spotted a chance to rid herself of Laksmi once and for all. In a ditch beside the road lay the body of Almer, one of the most hateful men in town. Angry when he was drunk and drunk almost always, Almer never had a kind word for anyone and would, in fact, provoke a fight with anyone he met on his way home

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from the tavern. Surely, Jani thought, had Almer the wits for her chosen work, he would perform her mother's darkest magic with a smile. She leaned over the ditch and touched her fingers to his neck. Almer had provoked the last fight of his life.

Thinking of this led Jani to another idea. There was a spell she had read long ago in one of her mother's books, a dark spell that required little more than a few words and the work of her hands. The emotion, in fact, was to come from the spirit of someone like Almer, whose body would be transmuted by the spell....

Yes, Jani thought, that's what I will do. The old woman covered Almer's body with branches and leaves and went back home for her wheelbarrow and a

piece of canvas. Upon returning to the site of Almer's murder she quickly wrapped the body in the canvas, wrestled it into the wheelbarrow and headed back home.

That night was the first of the new moon, and perfect for performing the spell. Jani dug a hole behind her shed, wide and deep enough to bury Almer standing up. She sowed the plot with salt and planted Almer in the hole. She covered the body with dirt and watered the ground with her urine. The sun was beginning to brighten the sky by the time she was done. She collected her tools, washed up and went off to sleep. It wasn't likely she'd miss a customer anyhow.

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For the next month Jani waited, patiently at first, bearing the occasional jibe from Laksmi with saint-like grace. As the days wore on, however, Jani began to fear the time when she would unearth the thing behind her shed. On several occasions she would come outside to stare at the moon and wonder at the silence of the night. She heard neither the hooting of owls nor the chirping of crickets. The air itself seemed thicker and charged with the kind of energy she could never bring to bear. Worst of all, the night before the new moon, she was kept awake by a soft, high-pitched whine from outside. Jani tried to block it out, but it could not be dampened by shutting the bedroom window, pressing her pillow to her ears or the sound of her own crying. When she finally fell asleep she dreamed of horrible things; demon horses trampling

her underfoot while an unseen voice mocked her for thinking she had the strength of her mother and condemned her for adding to the balance of evil in the world.

She woke up late the next morning and spent most of the day meditating, trying to drive the fear from her mind. When she was finished, it was close to evening. She sat down to a dish of stew and a glass of wine; she would soon need her strength. When she was done she gathered her tools and stepped out into the night. The patch of ground behind the shed was moist and still smelled strongly of urine; the earth was loosely packed and she quickly reached the bottom of the grave she had dug. In place of Almer's corpse lay a squirming foot-long root; it had thick tendrils in place

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of limbs, but was manlike nevertheless, and it pierced the night with its loud curses.

Jani wore gloves, having been instructed by her mother's book of spells that the root would be poisonous. Indeed, the grass touched by the dripping root wilted immediately, and the earth around the grave was smoking. Tears rolled down Jani's wrinkled cheeks as she gripped the struggling root. Finally she had the hatred necessary to end Laksmi's torment. She ran into her house and straight to the kitchen, forced the writhing root into a large basket and lashed the basket shut. Then she ran into her bedroom, hurled herself into bed and drifted off into a dreamless sleep to the soft crooning of the root in the kitchen.

She woke the next morning with the bright, hopeful sun in her smiling face. Today would be a good day, she thought to herself. She'd finally be free from Laksmi.

Being magical the root did not tire, and when she arrived in the kitchen she found it humming to itself in its basket. Jani built a fire, put a pot of water on for tea, and sharpened her cleaver as she waited for the water to boil. When the teapot whistled, she made a cup of tea, took a few relaxing sips, donned her gloves and stuffed cotton in her ears, thanked the gods there were no prying neighbors and untied the basket.

The root immediately started screaming, flailing its tendril-arms and kicking its tendril-legs. Its blind eyes seemed focused on the gleaming edge of the

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cleaver as Jani pressed the root to the table and severed the head with one swift blow. All went silent, for the first time in over twelve hours. She rolled the head onto a nearby cloth and began preparing the rest of the root for her recipe.

She had decided that a pie would be the best method of delivery. As she severed the limb-like tendrils and sliced the body of the root into thin pieces, she gave some thought to exactly how she was going to get Laksmi to eat it. Would she invite the woman over, or perhaps bring it to her as a peace offering? Perhaps she could pay someone to take the pie to her; if she managed to keep the entire affair a secret she could avoid the scrutiny of the townspeople. Yes, that would be the best way. She could disguise herself and give a boy a couple small coins to run her errand.

She finished chopping the root, mixed it in with the fruit filling and prepared the crust. Her hands shook as she thought of Laksmi taking a bite of the pie and falling, twitching, to the ground. She cackled like a hen at this and then began crooning softly to herself. Soon the pie was ready for baking, and Jani lit a fire in her oven before gathering the debris from her preparation into the cloth.

Jani began to have second thoughts as she went outside to bury the waste. Perhaps this wasn't as good of an idea as it initially seemed. In a way, this would prove Laksmi right; she would be a murderer. She quickly pushed the thought from her mind. It didn't matter any more. She had tried to deal with Laksmi peaceably and had exhausted her resources. This was her life; she had no choice.

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Lost in thought, Jani tripped over a fallen branch behind the shed. She threw her arms out in front of her, releasing the bundle of cloth into the air. The cloth opened, scattering the waste everywhere. As she landed painfully in a heap, she felt something hard hit the back of her neck. She reached for it and screamed as pain ripped through her hand. She pulled back and stared in horror at the head of the root, still alive and biting through the glove and into her flesh.

Fire coursed down her arm as the poison worked its way into her body. She opened her mouth to scream again, but choked on the green smoke that began pouring out of her mouth. Her eyes felt like they were boiling in their sockets, and her brain was going numb. The root let go of her hand and rolled back into

the hole from whence it came, and the last thing Jani heard was its harsh, cackling laugh.

The Devil's Due

Charlie sat with his father in the hospital. He hated the smell, that awful smell of hospital *nothing*, and the feeling of *no change* that permeated even the walls. Nothing ever changed here. Whether they were coming in for the last time or leaving for the first, no one left their mark on a hospital. Charlie knew. He had spent almost six months going in and out of this very one earlier this year. What did he have to show for it? The receptionist didn't know him. The doctors didn't recognize him. Even though he had beaten death and the media had been buzzing for a month about his remission. That's what Charlie hated most. You were at the mercy of the hospital when placed there by

circumstance, and there was nothing you could do to affect it.

He had to admit, however, that a baby brother was one of the better reasons one could have for being in a hospital. Twelve years old was just the right age to begin understanding adult issues, and his parents' attempt to bring another life into the world had offered Charlie much instruction. His mother's spontaneous fits of crying, his father's angry words and finally the sense of peace a couple weeks prior to the happiness that clung to the walls of the house like a resin were a kaleidoscope of feelings, words and actions that Charlie could stare at for hours, analyzing, pondering. After a week of constant thinking alone in his room, he decided he was happy. His parents didn't fight anymore, his mother held her head up again and his

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father had even made time for a couple trips to the stadium, just the two of them.

Charlie's father, Bill, fidgeted nervously beside his son. Ten years in the making, this moment. When Charlie was two, Bill and his wife had tried again for a child to no avail. After a couple years they went to a doctor, who told them that Charlie was a miracle of miracles and it would be nearly impossible for Bill to father another child. His career was similarly sterile; despite his popularity with his constituents he simply could not garner enough support from the right people to campaign for a higher office than state senator. He couldn't even make a family properly, so there was no relief at home, either. He and Jane had even discussed divorce. And his boy, his last chance for greatness, couldn't care less about politics. The world would

forget Bill when he died and there was nothing he could do about it.

When his wife had given him the news, he didn't know what to make of it. For a couple nights, they had argued about that most obvious of answers, but when they had a paternity test conducted a month later, Bill could fault his wife no longer. He was, indeed, the father, despite all odds. This was a great moment. Proof of his manhood--a son to follow him into politics. He could see it now: boys' school, Harvard, a law practice and, in good time, a run for Congress. He'd be so proud of his boy, his last chance that had been God-only-knows how close to not happening.

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Charlie's mother, Jane, smiled though the contractions. Soon her dark master would come for her as he had seemingly a lifetime ago, when she had cried out in anguish over her ruin of a life. While her husband was at work she had asked at the top of her lungs for God, an angel, someone, to save her son Charlie and her marriage. The dark man had appeared, taken her into his arms and whispered into her ear. She had known who he was, but she didn't care. The dark man had answered her, at least. Besides, hadn't the serpent been right about the fruit in the Garden? She had nodded her agreement and then they had sealed their contract. She was at peace with her decision. All would be well.

Through the haze of the medicine she felt the pain of her labor, but she gave no indication. This was

part of it, she knew instinctively, and she wouldn't miss it for anything. As her life's last act, Jane wanted to fully savor this final experience, every bit of that which she had paid for with her soul. As she matched her breathing to the rhythm of her contractions and began to push, she heard the dark man's voice in her ear again. The voice that had promised her son's life and her husband's redemption. Aroused, she sighed and closed her eyes. As the baby ripped out of her, splattering her life everywhere, the arms that had embraced her once before enfolded her again and she heard his voice one last time.

Hope that doctor's not wearing his favorite shoes, Love.

The Hitchhiker

““I don't have much longer to live",
the hitchhiker said to Alvin.
Alvin watched the man settle
himself in. He was well dressed; face clean-shaven,
hair neatly combed. This guy didn't look like any
hitchhiker Alvin had ever seen. But of course, if he had
looked like a typical hitchhiker, Alvin would never
have picked him up.

“My name's Jason.” The hitchhiker looked
over at him. "Hey buddy, pull in at the next truck stop.
I'll buy you dinner since you were good enough to stop
for me".

"Sounds good to me."

They were sitting next to each other at the diner's long counter, drinking coffee, when something occurred to Alvin.

"What did you mean when you said you didn't have long to live?"

Jason looked up from his coffee. "Did I say that out loud?"

Concern showed in Alvin's brown eyes. "Yeah, back in the truck. Y'don't look hurt or sick. You got a price on your head or something, is that why you're hitching?"

The waitress came over with two plates: meatloaf, mashed potatoes and corn for Alvin; a rare steak and a baked potato for Jason. She set down the

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plates, topped off their coffee cups and went away.

"I'm going back home to die," Jason said. "I sold all my belongings before I left home. I didn't want to bother with public transportation. Hitching's a lot easier". He looked away.

The two men finished their meal in silence. Jason paid for their meal with a fifty-dollar bill.

"Can you let me off near Topeka?" he asked as they left.

They drove for an hour and a half before Alvin pulled over at another truck stop.

"Damn, I got to piss like a racehorse. I shouldn't be long".

“I’m going to get out and stretch my legs,” Jason said. Alvin went in to use the bathroom, and the hitchhiker went around to the back of the building, nervous with excitement and fear.

Damn it. I’m hungry again already. How long has it been? He looked up at the moon, expecting it to be bright and full like a police searchlight. However, he couldn’t see it at all. The hitchhiker shrugged and walked into the shadows.

There’s something about that guy that I can’t put my finger on, Alvin thought as he walked into the lavatory and unzipped his pants. *He seems pretty decent. I’ve never heard of a hitchhiker buying anyone lunch. And he paid with a big bill. Whatever his story is, he’s not one of those hard luck cases and probably*

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not a drug addict, either. He'll be an interesting story to tell the wife and kids.

He finished his business and walked over to the sink.

I wonder what he's running from. Or where he's running to. Alvin washed his hands and walked back outside.

Jason was waiting. He heard the truck driver exit the building, heard his boots scuff on the ground, heard him call out.

“Where are you, man?”

“Over here,” the hitchhiker struggled to keep his voice neutral. “Say, come here for a minute. There's something here that looks like a body.”

Alvin followed Jason's voice around to the back of the building.

"A body? I don't see a body."

"Perhaps I was mistaken," a voice came from behind him, still recognizable but significantly changed.

Alvin whirled around, surprised, and clutched at his chest as a clawed hand, covered in fur, came at him. He turned to run but the hand snagged the collar of his jacket.

"I'm sorry, Alvin." That unmistakable voice, and then it was upon him, all teeth and claws.

It ripped out his throat, and death instantly followed.

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Jason, himself once again, stared down at the destruction he had caused. The trucker's body lay broken before him, his blood and entrails strewn about.

It's getting worse. If I'm doing this shit, it's getting worse. He looked up at the sky. The cloudy, moonless sky. *The moon's not even out, let alone full. This is getting more serious.*

He ran through Alvin's pockets, found his keys and looked around for a place to dump the body. Beyond the truck stop he spotted a large cluster of trees. He dragged the trucker's body into the woods. He came to a stream and threw him in. *At least without the body, anyone seeing the blood and guts will probably mistake it for road kill. Perfect. Goodbye, Alvin.* He wiped a tear from his eye, disgusted by it.

That crap was for the weak, even if he did feel sorry for the guy. He walked back to the parking lot, to Alvin's truck. He collected his backpack, wiped down the keys, steering wheel and door handles, and headed for the highway.

The hitchhiker was wearing sunglasses, a leather jacket, t-shirt, and jeans. Julie opened the passenger door and looked at him as he got in and buckled his seat belt.

"I'm Jason. You are?"

"Julie. Are you running from someone?" she asked. They came to a tollbooth and the hitchhiker handed her a five-dollar bill as she rolled down the window. "Thanks." She continued down the interstate.

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"No," Jason replied. "I'm not running from anything or anyone. In fact, I'm meeting my destiny head-on."

They drove on for about an hour, talking about various subjects. After a while, Julie stopped talking. Her brow furrowed, as if she were deep in thought. She reached over and placed her hand on the hitchhiker's knee.

"I have a little extra money. We could get a motel room". She looked at him, silently begging him to agree.

Jason looked surprised. "I don't think that would be right-"

Julie interrupted him. "Why not? I know you

have things to do. I'm not expecting anything long-term from this."

The hitchhiker smiled. "I meant I'd pay for the room".

Their lovemaking was good and slow, and Jason was amazed. He had, of course, slept with women before, but Julie went at it with such stunning enthusiasm. She did so many things to him, all at once, without ever missing a beat, rocking back and forth and wrapping herself around him, on top and underneath him, digging her nails into his back and flicking her tongue across his lips, his nipples, his neck. Jason responded in kind, running his hands over her firm thighs and rounded hips, her rock-hard nipples, her sleek back. For the first time in days, the

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frustrated animal inside him was content, and that, more than the feel of Julie or the sound of her voice, gave him pleasure.

It was wonderful, and after a long time, they were both tired enough to sleep. The hitchhiker smiled as he dreamt.

Bloody hell... why didn't I think of that before?

His first waking thought. Julie came through the door with two cups of coffee. Jason took his and sipped it.

"Wow," Julie grinned.

"The coffee's not *that* good," the hitchhiker smiled back, laughing.

"I'm not talking about the coffee, and you know it!" She picked up a pillow and threw it at him.

He reached for her, she jumped into his arms and the coffee spent the next hour growing cold, forgotten in its cups.

Jason kissed Julie on the lips and walked into the bathroom. He didn't feel good about what he was about to do, but he felt that Julie would understand in time.

Julie's pants were on the floor. The hitchhiker took a roll of hundred-dollar bills and shoved it into the pocket. He scrawled on a napkin: *Never forget me*, and tucked it in with the money. He opened the bathroom window, jumped four stories down to the street and took off running.

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Two weeks later, a man stood on the top of the highest of the Colorado Rockies. His name was Jason and he had come there to die. He removed his sunglasses and stared up at the moon. He removed his shirt and his pants and the breeze stirred his flesh. Removing his shoes from his feet was like being freed from a set of shackles. He looked up. The moon was calling for him, blood-red and full.

The change began, as it always had before. His eyes first, from green to red in the time it took him to blink. His hair grew coarse and thick from places where it wasn't natural for a human being to have it, and longer and shaggier in those places where it was. His teeth grew sharper and his nails longer, thicker and sharper; his ribcage expanded. Finally, a tail sprung out, just above his naked buttocks.

His senses became stronger, sharper. He could smell the deer in the forest below him and fish in a stream a mile away. He could see the moon with its craters in greater detail, and felt the plants that were crushed beneath his feet. He could taste the clean air. He could hear insect noises in the distance.

In the space of about a minute, Jason had become a werewolf for the very last time.

He had come here to die because, unlike his father before him, who had been a werewolf and lived a long life, he had manifested a mutant strain of lycanthropy. Not only would he change into a werewolf in accordance with the lunar cycle, his life span was also severely curtailed by the more rapid deterioration of his body, more like the lifespan of a

wolf than that of a lycanthropic human.

His family's money and his own earnings enabled him to have medical studies performed and eventually genetic therapy, and of course he paid the doctors to keep their mouths shut and destroy any and all documentation of his abnormality. But the studies could do no more than help him understand his condition and monitor his progress; and the genetic therapy would stop the mutant gene from being transferred to his progeny, but could do nothing to reverse his own condition. So he had come here to die, back to the place where he had been born and raised, where he had first learned to take pride in himself for who and what he was.

Well, this is it.

Jason howled at the moon and waited for death.

Nine months later, Julie was in the hospital, preparing to give birth. She had waited a long time for this moment, and even though she knew that this was just the beginning, she felt oddly relieved. Even at this critical moment, however, her mind would not let her rest.

What will my parents say? They'll want to know who the father is... I can't tell them I spent the night with a guy I picked up on the side of the road, Julie thought. How am I going to take care of this baby?

And finally: I never knew his name.

A nurse walked in and handed Julie a worn

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envelope. "Your mother came by while you were asleep. She said this was in your mailbox."

Dear Julie,

I am sorry for the manner in which I left you at the motel, but it had to be done that way, as I'm sure you will understand by the time you reach the end of this letter. I wouldn't have had the time to make you understand then; we shared some special time together and I felt it was best not to spoil that.

I hadn't considered the possibility that you might get pregnant with my child until the morning after that wonderful night. Rest assured, you will be taken care of. If you do have my child, be careful.

More likely than not, he will be a werewolf, like his father. Yes, I can see you now, blinking your eyes and rubbing them to make sure you read that right. I say it again; our child will most likely be a werewolf. Make sure he has plenty of open land to explore, and don't worry too much if in a few years he disappears in the middle of the night during certain times of the month. If he's anything like I was, he'll be able to fend for himself.

There is five thousand dollars in this envelope, and a slip of paper. Go to the bank named on that slip of paper, and you will be given the keys to a car and apartment, and more money.

I want you to know that I never meant to impose such a responsibility on you. I hope you'll

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forgive me and not take it out on the child, if there is one. Everything I hold dear is now yours for the taking.

I know you'll be the perfect mother. You are so vibrant and enthusiastic. I hope I've given you everything you need to be the parent I couldn't be.

Love,

Jason

Julie's labor was short and easy. When her newly-born child was wrapped in a blanket and handed over to her, she quickly examined it. A beautiful baby boy, with ten fingers and ten toes, and lovely brown eyes that looked at her as if he himself were amazed at

his sudden appearance in the world. He began to cry, and Julie held him to her chest and rocked him gently, crying with him. She cried for Jason, who had been so tragic and unique. She cried for the world from which her son would have to hide his secret, like his father before him. She cried for those close to her who would draw away because they wouldn't understand. She cried for herself, that in gaining such a wonderful gift she had lost so much.

I hope you'll forgive me and not take it out on the child, Jason had written. How could she possibly do that? She smiled down at her son and soon fell asleep with him in her arms. Everything was going to be fine.

Three Blind Dice

Connor steps out onto the sidewalk. It's lunchtime, and he's hungry. He smells the peppers and sausages from the vendor at the end of the block, and starts to salivate. Just when he decides to give in to his appetite, he spots a man leaned up against his office building throwing dice.

"Hey pal," the man says, "I'll stake one-hundred dollars on a roll of these dice." There's a confident gleam in his eye, and though he is well dressed, Connor thought he smelled a bit off.

"I don't have money like that to throw away," he says, and walks by. He's always had trouble saying no to risks, and this one is very appealing, but losing a

hundred bucks would leave him short with the rent. Some risks just aren't worth taking.

“Don't worry about it,” the man smiles. “If you win, you get the cash. If you lose, we'll come up with something. What am I gonna do, take your soul? Odds or evens; pretty fair shot, huh?” He kneels down and rattles the dice enticingly.

Connor *does* like to gamble. He hunkers down beside the man, who places three dice in Connor's sweaty palm. He's shaking with excitement; it's all up to fate... luck and chance.

“I pick odds.”

“Toss 'em,” the man says. And Connor does.

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The dice strike cement, and three blind faces stare up at him. Connor, balanced on the balls of his feet, nearly falls backwards. The man grabs his shoulder and steadies him.

“What the Hell--?”

“Looks like I win,” says the man as he picks up his dice and stands up. Connor leaps up, prepared to protest, but the man aims two fingers at him with a crisp bill between them. “Here,” he says, “Hold on to this for me.” He hands Connor the money and walks off. Connor folds the money and puts it in his wallet. Obviously, the man is not all there. A hundred bucks is, however, a hundred bucks.

Connor whistles his way to the vendor. Today, he’ll get two sausages with the works, to celebrate.

Connor wakes up the next morning and staggers to the bathroom to take a piss. He runs hot water in the sink and stares into the mirror. There's no reflection.

“What the fuck?”

He runs his fingers over the smooth glass. Somehow, one of his roommates must be playing a joke on him. He runs a hot shower and shaves blind under the faucet. Once he's clean, he dresses to some loud punk rock he used to listen to in high school, and trots downstairs to the bus stop at the end of the parking lot.

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At the corner, where the lot lets out into the road, Connor trips and sprawls flat on the asphalt. He struggles to get up, but his hands are peppered with broken glass, and he lets himself drop to relieve the pressure on them. He rolls over onto his side to pick out the bloody glass.

Suddenly he hears the roar of an engine, the hiss of air brakes and a garbage truck barrels into the parking lot to make its pick-up. Connor tries to make it to his feet, but only reaches his knees before the truck bears him back to the ground. The last thing he sees is the driver, be-bopping to the radio and singing off key.

Connor comes to. There's a weight on his eyes. He brushes it aside and opens them. He's surrounded by flames that give heat, but don't burn his skin.

Mirrors that don't reflect and fire that doesn't burn;
what was the world coming to? Where was the truck?
Why wasn't he splattered?

In the distance he sees the faint outline of a man. He's walking towards him, tossing three dice into the air and catching them.

"You dropped something," he says when he reaches Connor, and kneels down. He picks up a banded stack of bills; 'one-hundred dollars' printed on the band.

"I'll hold onto this for you," he chuckles.
"Enjoy your stay." He walks off, tossing the dice and catching them.

Victory Feast

““Dinner will be ready soon.”
Shelton ducked his head
into the dining room and
was met with raised glasses and cheers. The whole
family had chipped in to send him to culinary school
and, on the eve of his graduation, they were gathered
to see what he could do.

“Just stay out here. It’s a secret.” He shut the
door firmly and stepped back into the kitchen. He
turned to the cellar, then stopped, returned to his
previous position and cocked an ear to the door.

“I wonder where Janice is,” an elderly voice
trickled through.

That would be Great Aunt Tabitha, he thought.

“I’m a bit worried. The weather was getting nasty when I left my place,” he heard her say.

“I tried her phone. She must be too busy driving to answer,” Shelton’s father responded. Shelton chuckled, turned to the cellar door and ran quickly down the stairs, latching the door behind him.

“They can’t hear anything, mother. Remember the sound-bafflers I built for that science fair in high school?” He plucked an industrial-grade pair of headphones from a nearby chair and paused to look his mother over. The sight of her bare legs bound tightly with rope stirred urges within him he hadn’t felt in weeks. He checked the tightness of the tourniquet around her thigh and ran a finger down her cheek. “No

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one heard Nancy and me, either. Did you really need a jar of peaches *right then?*”

Shelton wheeled his mother over to a group of tall, curved foam walls. “Don’t cry, mother. You’ll be the first of many masterpieces. The second, third and fourth, too, if I feel inspired.” He lifted the lid of a dirty Styrofoam cooler and pulled out an IV bag.

“This will keep you healthy. What I’m going to do could put you into shock. I tried breaking into the veterinarian down the street last night, but he keeps all the good shit locked up. So this will just have to do.”

He tightened the ball in her mouth a bit more and wrapped a blindfold around her leaking eyes. He crossed the room and returned with an electric carving knife. “Just count to ten and it’ll be over.”

He crouched behind her and applied the knife just below the tourniquet. He could feel his mother struggling against the ropes, trying to scream through the ball gag. The knife encountered brief resistance before completing its cut.

“Shelton!” An anxious hand beat a rapid tempo on the cellar door. “You down there?”

Shit. “Gimme a minute, Dad. I’m trying to find some recipe notes I left down here.”

What the hell could he want now?

He quickly seared his mother’s wound with an acetylene torch, and yelled up. “Go back in the dining room. I don’t want you to spoil the surprise.”

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He administered the IV and quickly skinned and boned his mother's severed leg. When it was ready, he fed it through a meat grinder, wrapped the processed muscle in waxed paper and trotted back upstairs. The kitchen was empty. He sniffed the meat before setting it on the counter. *Damn*, he thought as he wiped saliva from his chin... *why haven't I done this before?* Then he returned to the dining room for a brief word with his guests.

“What's the ruckus about?” Shelton stepped around the table and stood behind his sister, Nancy.

“The police just found your mother's car,” his father began. “They haven't found her, but they suspect foul play.”

“Omigod,” Nancy whispered, and Shelton followed her hands to the beginning bulge of her belly.

“It’s OK,” he whispered. “No one will find out about us now, and she’ll always be a part of us.

“Dinner,” he spoke aloud, “Will be ready shortly.”

Game Over

Jack shimmied up close to Mary's car and tested the handle. *Yup. Dumb bitch left it unlocked. Suburban complacency.*

He cracked the door to the brink of turning on the overhead light and thrust his hand in, searched for and pushed the trunk release. After closing the door he climbed into the trunk. Then his wait began.

He slapped his jacket in search of his flask, found it and took a long sip. Who knew when the bitch would be working? It was hard to nail down a schedule when she couldn't keep a job. Jack knew he could be in the trunk most of the day before she went anywhere, but Hell, who crawls into someone's trunk as anything but a last resort, anyhow? He took another pull,

replaced the flask and drifted off into pseudo-sleep. In his mind, he held a rusty screwdriver and was plunging it deep, deep...

Thud

Jack tensed. At first, he figured he had pounded his fist (dream-screwdriver included) into the floor of the trunk, but a second thud, followed by that annoying, child-speak tone, told him otherwise. He gritted his teeth through Mary's walk-through of the Carseat Routine:

“Gimme your arm Aubrey there's a good girl
OK now the other one.”

Shit. I didn't figure on her bringing Aubrey.

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“Come on Aubrey let go of the stuffed animal so I can get you strapped in.”

Fuck it. I'm already in the trunk. Another pull of whisky. Three long years, three long years, and people wonder why I'm addicted to whisky and beer. There's one for open mic.

The burning scotch drowned out Mary's singsong long enough for her to get Aubrey strapped in, long enough to keep Jack from doing the job right there in the driveway. That would have been bad. How had he and Mary lasted so long, anyhow? His battle to have visitation with Aubrey was revealing more about her every day.

Don't open the trunk, don't open

She settled her fat ass into the driver's seat, the suspension groaned in protest and Jack sighed with relief. The engine turned over, the car backed out of the driveway and Jack frisked himself again, this time coming up with the screwdriver from his dream. He stroked it for a few seconds, gave his dream some serious consideration and returned the screwdriver to his pocket. Getting shanked didn't look like anything else but what it was. Jack tapped his fingers on the floor of the trunk in time with the radio.

One good friend to slap me around a few years back, Jack chuckled inside. Damnit. I can't even make the court see how fucked up this woman is. It would be a violation of her privacy. I'd be a stalker. How many fathers don't even want to see their kids, and I'm doing this?

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The car picked up speed and that, coupled with Jack's knowledge of the area, told him it was game-time. He felt around the ceiling of the trunk for the seat release straps, found and tugged one and pushed the seat forward slightly. Looking past the driver's seat and out the windshield, he saw the sign for an approaching onramp. He held his breath, cooked time like a grenade and finally threw the seat forward.

Mary screamed, for what little good it did her. Jack unbuckled her seatbelt with one hand and jerked the wheel to the right with the other. Sure, she fought, but she was a lazy creampuff and he had training. Jack bit the inside of his cheeks to keep from laughing.

All those crazy dudes who came back from the war and killed their wives for seemingly no reason? Riiiiight. No reason, I'm sure.

As the leading edge of the onramp guardrail split the bumper dead-center, Jack braced himself against the passenger seat. As Mary met the steering-wheel ribs-on, he whirled and secured Aubrey with his free hand.

The car was dead and gasping smoke, Mary was dying and just gasping, Aubrey was healthy and screaming and Jack? Jack was slightly bruised and quite amused. He pried the bitch's mouth open, dumped in a precious slug of whisky and dribbled a bit on her shirt for good measure.

Just pouring some out for my dead homey.

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Jack chuckled as he rolled back into the trunk and pulled the seat up after. He pulled the trunk release and cracked the trunk just a hair. The coast was clear, for the moment. Jack dashed from the car, leapt over the twisted guardrail and crawled his way down the sloping, grassy hill on the other side. He took up a prone position a few meters downhill. Then his wait began.

“Serves her right, if you ask me, Detective.” Sirens had woken Jack from his brief nap minutes earlier. He wasn’t worried about being spotted; the grass was thick and several feet tall--perfect concealment.

“Who the hell drives drunk with their kid in the backseat?” The other man responded. “She positively *reeked* of booze.”

“I know, right? At least the kid’s okay. Good thing she’s only three; poor dear has no idea what happened.” The detective spat on the ground. Gimme a second; I gotta call the kid’s father and tell him to come get her.”

Shit. Shit! Jack hunted furiously for his cell phone. All he needed was for it to go off—

Jack dug the phone out of his pants and thumbed, shaking, through the menus to the ringer options. He hit vibrate and then allowed himself to breathe. If those cops had heard the ringer....

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Buzzzzzz—

“Hello?” Jack answered softly. A brief pause.

“Oh, shit. Yeah, I’ll be there straight away.”

Vacation

Morris drained his glass, dumped another slug of gin on top of the half-melted ice, lit up a cigarette and sunk back into his chair.

Maggie goddamn Powers, he rubbed his temples. *Will you ever let me be?* He pushed himself to his feet and shuffled to the bathroom. If he couldn't dig into his brain and mine the pain from his head, at least there was the medicine cabinet.

He reached out for the mirror-door as soon as it was in reach and opened it without looking at his reflection. Carefully, he inspected the meticulously researched cocktail of sleeping pills, stimulants and anti-depressants the Department's psychiatrist had

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prescribed. He considered the sleeping pills, poured five into his hand, replaced the bottle and went back for the gin.

The doorbell rang. Morris set the pills on the end table next to the gin and answered it.

“Wow, it really is you!” He recognized Elizabeth instantly; the past decade had been kind to her. Even the tear-trails on her cheeks and the sleepless-dark circles under her eyes couldn’t quite mask it.

“Um.” Morris looked down at his feet for a moment, then stepped aside and let her in.

“I never thought I’d see you again after high school,” Elizabeth said. She had to raise her voice a bit; Morris had escorted her to the living room and returned to the bathroom to shave and put on some deodorant and fresh clothes.

“I never figured on coming back, either. How’d you find me?”

“I saw your mother at the grocery store the other day. She didn’t give me too many details.”

“I won’t either,” Morris returned to the living room, knocked the pills surreptitiously onto the floor behind the sofa as he reached for his gin and took a seat across from her. “I’ve talked about her enough, and it hasn’t helped yet.”

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“Her?”

“Little girl. Murder victim.” Morris swigged his gin. “Anyhow, what brings you here?”

“*My* little girl, actually.” Elizabeth leaned forward. “I don’t think anyone but you would believe this.”

“Alicia’s been missing for two weeks,” Elizabeth began. “I sent her up to bed and a half-hour later, I heard her screaming and another noise, a strange...” Her brow wrinkled. “Grunting.”

“Like an animal?”

“Well, like a molester, was what I was thinking. But when I opened her door, her bed was empty and this glowing ball was floating out the window.

“Morris, fix me one of those?” She pointed at his glass. He drained it, went into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of ice. He made her a gin and passed it over. She drank half of it in one swallow.

“This gray, slimy thing jumped out the window after it, Morris.”

Morris raised an eyebrow. “What are you saying, Liz?”

“Alicia was abducted. By aliens.”

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“Well. I never would have expected something like this from you. You were always so...” Morris thought for a moment. “Grounded in reality, I guess.”

“I’d never make something like this up. The police don’t believe me, my husband doesn’t believe me. You knew me twelve years before I met Roger. You’ve arrested crazy people before, right?”

Morris nodded.

“Do I seem like one of them?”

Morris shook his head. Elizabeth left after another hour or so and, after walking her to her car, he went back to his chair, sank into it and closed his eyes.

Dear Lord, she’s aged gracefully. They had been friends all through high school and he had never

had the nerve to ask her out. Finally they had become such close friends that she talked about her boyfriends with him. That was the kiss of death for any hopes he may have had. She met Roger shortly after that, and the rest was history.

“What if she’s not out of her mind?” He asked himself. He was convinced that she honestly *thought* she saw an alien. “Worst-case scenario, some creep dressed in an alien costume snatched Alicia.” He had said as much to her before she left and she just shook her head and laughed.

“Still though, I can help,” Morris went to the kitchen for a glass of ice water and proceeded to the bedroom to sit before his computer.

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He started by downloading a map of the metropolitan area. Once that was done, he searched for news of any abductions or missing persons cases. There wasn't any.

“Damnit!” Morris slammed his hand on the desk. Failing Maggie was enough without adding this to his list of shortcomings.

Maggie Powers was the last victim of the George River Strangler. Morris had been on the task force charged with the Strangler's capture for two months without developing any serious leads. Finally he tracked the Strangler to his apartment, but only because someone had witnessed Maggie's abduction and finally came forward. When Morris kicked in the

Strangler's door, he had found Maggie dead in the bathtub.

Now, after a month of therapy, pills and administrative leave, just the thought of Maggie still brought tears to his eyes. He wiped them away with the palm of his hand, took a deep breath and began searching through the news again. This time he was looking for any indication of strange happenings or unsolved cases.

After skimming articles for an hour, he came across something of interest: a fire at an orphanage, not too far from Elizabeth's home, which decimated the building and left no survivors. The firemen were baffled by their inability to quench the flames; the fire didn't spread to the surrounding area, but extinguished

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itself only when the building was completely consumed. Two weeks ago. Around the same time Alicia was taken.

After the initial excitement of his discovery wore off, his exhaustion made itself known. He crawled into bed and immediately fell asleep.

It was nighttime again when Morris awakened. His waking thoughts were of the burnt orphanage. He doubted it was really any clue to Alicia's whereabouts, but a mystery was a mystery, and he needed to take his mind off things.

He took a quick shower, grabbed a flashlight and called a taxi. When he arrived at the orphanage he

found nothing but twisted piles of blackened metal. He sifted through the remains for an hour before giving up.

He didn't want to take a cab back to the hotel, so he decided to walk. He walked for about twenty minutes before passing a liquor store. He looked around before entering. Rows of perfectly-ordered bottles called to him from pristine, white metal shelves. All his best friends were there: Jack, Johnny, Jim and Jose. The four horsemen of the fucking Apocalypse.

Hell, he thought. If I can't do any decent detective work, I may as well stick with what I am good at. He bought a bottle of gin and a pack of smokes, wrapped the brown paper bag tightly around the bottle

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as he exited the store and ambled the few blocks into downtown. The aged, stained office buildings and department stores loomed over him like giant tombstones, and he only looked up when he swigged from the bottle. The further he walked the more on edge he felt; thinking about his old flame's missing daughter was impossible, even with the alcohol and nicotine. Morris hunched over inside his coat and quickened his pace.

A loud noise caught his attention as he passed by the alleyway between a seedy motel and an even seedier lawyer's office; it sounded like a fight. He poked his head around the corner.

A rather rough-looking teenager was struggling with an inhumanly tall, slender being. The creature had

gray, slimy skin and large eyes that reflected the meager moonlight. It also had the upper hand in the fight. The kid looked around for help; when he caught sight of Morris he cried out and began to fight harder. The creature followed its victim's gaze and stiffened when it, too, saw Morris.

Morris tensed up, ready to run, but instead of engaging him, the creature struck the boy a sharp blow to the head. He slumped over, and the creature cast him aside, jumped up and in midair became a globe of light which floated, a few feet above the ground, down the alley and onto an adjoining street.

Morris took a few running steps before noticing the kid's bike. He hopped on, threw off the backpack strapped to the handlebars and took off after the light.

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What luck, he thought as he followed. Elizabeth wasn't crazy, after all. He had just seen an honest-to-God alien, or at least something that could be mistaken for one. Perhaps he'd find Alicia after all.

He chased his quarry for twenty minutes before it floated into the parking lot of an abandoned warehouse and into the building through one of its many broken windows. Morris ducked behind a rusted-out dumpster and waited several minutes before abandoning the bike and creeping up for a closer look.

He crouched beneath one of the windows and slowly poked his head up over the sill; the room the broken window opened into was empty and dark, except for a sliver of light from underneath a door adjacent to the window. He knocked the few remaining

shards of glass from the frame with his flashlight and climbed into the room. He crossed the small patch of bare concrete to crouch beside the door and listened. After a moment he began to hear muffled, unintelligible voices. He gripped his flashlight in one hand and the doorknob in the other. He took a swig of gin, set the bottle aside and slowly cracked the door open for a look.

A tall, gray form stood sentry in the doorway with its back to him. Morris took a deep breath, quietly opened the door, slid behind the creature, raised the flashlight over his head and brought it down on the alien's skull. The flashlight hit with a dull thump and rebounded slightly off the alien's rubbery skin. The sentry crumpled to the floor. Purple fluid oozed from its head.

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It was wearing breeches that appeared to be made of vinyl, belted about the waist. Attached to the belt was a small canister; a hose ran from it to a mask on the alien's face. The creature held a long, slender object in its hands. Morris quickly snatched it up, slung it over his shoulder and dragged the alien into the room he had come from. Its translucent eyelids fluttered and Morris hesitated only briefly before removing the mask. The creature struggled to breathe for a moment before slumping back into unconsciousness.

Morris inspected the slender rod he had confiscated; at one end was what appeared to be a muzzle, and at the other a button and a small green bar of light. He pointed it out the window and up at the sky and tapped the button. A thin green beam of energy sizzled into the atmosphere. It was a weapon,

apparently. He took another swallow from his bottle, tucked it into his back pocket and stepped back into the brightly lit room.

It was a storage bay, empty except for several tall glass tanks and a small box covered in blinking lights. Two more aliens were hunched over the tanks, chattering to themselves, oblivious to the death of their comrade. He raised the object, pointed it at the creatures and pressed the button.

The green beam struck the first alien in the back; its body exploded, painting the walls various shades of gray and purple. The second charged at Morris, tackled him and bore him to the ground. He fired the weapon again; the shot went wide and struck the blinking box, sparking an electrical fire. The alien

wrapped its long fingers around his neck. He rolled over on top of it and flung its mask across the room. The alien threw him off and ran for a door on the far side of the tanks, which were now giving off thick, black smoke.

He ran after it. On the other side of the door was another large bay, this one filled with an enormous spaceship. His quarry was running towards it. As he dropped to one knee and took aim, another alien hit him from behind, knocking the weapon from his hands. He twisted and reached for his attacker's mask, but the creature leaned out of reach and kicked at him. Morris grabbed its foot and twisted; he felt something give. The alien let out a deep, throaty scream and jumped on him, sinking its teeth into his cheek. He hit the creature in the head repeatedly, to no avail. Finally,

he landed a solid blow to its jaw, and it fell back, taking a chunk of meat with it.

Pain blossomed in Morris' face as he struggled towards the alien weapon. Just as he reached it and brought it to bear, the alien scrambled to its feet and leapt into the air, becoming a globe of light. Morris fired and the green beam struck the light and swallowed it whole. The globe of light, now green, expanded slightly before dissipating into the air.

Morris reached into his back pocket for his bottle and poured a generous measure onto his face. The sting was horrible, but it sobered him up a bit. The bitter mingling of blood and booze in his mouth made him gag, and he struggled to keep from vomiting as he

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dumped the rest of the gin onto the ground and cast the bottle aside.

I'm such an idiot, he thought as he stumbled to the ship. *I've been medicating myself for no reason and I decide to quit when I'm actually in pain?* He reached the vessel unimpeded and crawled inside.

Its walls were smooth and curved, and emitted a soft glow. There were large, comfortable-looking chairs and blinking computer screens. A huge window dominated the front of the vessel. The alien Morris was chasing, now re-masked, was punching buttons on a nearby computer.

He ran at it, screaming, and fired the weapon. The lethal green beam hit an invisible wall and dissipated. The alien leapt for Morris' throat, and he

dropped into a crouch. It went over his head, and he kicked it in the head as it landed. The creature curled into a ball. Morris ripped off its mask and kicked it in the face until he was certain it was dead before rolling it down the ship's entrance ramp and following after.

Morris searched the rest of the building before returning to the room with the tanks. There were a few more offices, but they were undisturbed. A few minutes of exploration revealed that he had eliminated all the aliens in the warehouse.

At least, all the grown ones.

The tanks were made of thick glass; they were wired to the blinking box he had damaged earlier and were filled with a clear liquid. There were four tanks, and each held five children. Attached to each child by

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a thick, green umbilical cord was a lumpy, fleshy sac. Morris' blood grew colder the longer he watched. An alarm sounded, startling him, and the liquid began to drain out of the tanks.

Once the liquid drained off, a section of each glass tube slid to the side and the children tumbled out onto the floor. One rolled twice and came to a stop against Morris' foot. He looked down and recognized Alicia's face from a photograph Elizabeth had shown him. His heart raced as he checked her pulse and breathing. Both were weak but steady, and he patted his pockets for his cell phone. A moment's frantic search revealed that it was missing.

As he turned to check the other children, a movement caught his eye. The sac connected to Alicia

was trembling, and a tiny, thin gray finger was poking out of a small tear in it.

He tried to fire the alien weapon at the sac, but nothing happened. The green light on the weapon's display was dim; its power was finally exhausted. He hefted it like a club and swung it at the sac. Again. Again. Soon he was covered in pale, whitish-gray flesh and pink blood. He checked Alicia's pulse once more. Nothing.

Morris sank to his knees in the remains of Alicia and her alien parasite. He was supposed to serve and protect but now he had failed two children in less than a year. He covered his face with his hands and screamed until the sound wouldn't come any more.

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When he finally fell quiet, the silence was broken almost immediately by several fleshy, moist, ripping sounds. Morris uncovered his face and turned to the rest of the children. Several of the sacs were in the process of being breached by newborn aliens. Morris vomited all over as he did the only thing he could think of. He swung the weapon furiously, pounding the nineteen other sacs into unrecognizable paste.

He knelt, panting and choking, in the midst of the mess and checked the nearest child's vital signs. Dead. He checked the rest. All dead. Twenty children; the fifteen from the orphanage, most likely, augmented by Alicia and four other runaways, vagrants or abductees. The oldest looked maybe sixteen; the youngest, three or four. Their nervous systems were

linked to the sacs, Morris reasoned, or they were unable to survive outside of the tanks; it didn't really matter which. It was done now, and twenty more kids were as dead as Maggie Powers and he had failed them just as much as he had her.

When he felt he could stand again, he piled the bodies atop the gray-pink mess and went off to search for gasoline. A nearby exit led to a small, fenced parking lot. He found an old, rusted forklift hulking in a corner, draped in cobwebs. He brushed the webs aside and looked at the fuel gauge. It had a half-tank; more than enough to do the job. He severed the fuel line with a thick piece of glass, went back into the building for his empty bottle, filled it with fuel, staggered back to the mess and poured out the gas. He was grateful for the pungent smell of fuel that covered

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the odor of dead meat. For the first time in twenty minutes, he wasn't fighting back vomit.

He found some matches in his pocket, lit one and threw it at the pile. Heat washed over him as he turned and walked away. Tears flowed down his cheeks and mingled with the gore drying on his skin as he said a silent prayer for Maggie, Alicia and the others.

When he finally opened his eyes again he had to choke back more vomit. His arms were caked in gore to the elbows and his clothing was soaked in sweat and blood. He stank of alcohol, meat and fluids both alien and human. The large warehouse bay was beginning to fill with the gut-wrenching smell of

burning flesh. He struggled to his feet and shuffled back to the other bay.

The smoke hadn't reached the room that housed the spaceship yet, and Morris figured the fire never would. There was a heavy, metal roll-down door that he struggled into place, cutting off the bay from the rest of the building. He leaned against the door for a moment, panting heavily.

Satisfied that, for the moment at least, he was safe from both fire and foes, Morris let himself into one of the offices he had found earlier. The room was tastefully decorated and had likely belonged to the building manager at some point. He had noticed an adjoining shower during his earlier exploration. He stripped off his foul clothes, climbed into the shower

and turned the hot water on full blast. He cleaned himself as best as he could with a thin sliver of soap, patted himself dry with a few paper towels and dressed in a pair of coveralls that he found hanging in a closet.

The office also held an office chair and a small wooden desk, upon which sat a thick coating of dust and a computer. He booted it up and leaned back in the chair. After thinking for a moment, he tapped out two quick emails. One was to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Morris figured that if they didn't just dismiss the email as a hoax, they might actually prove the existence of alien life. The second was to Elizabeth, telling her everything, letting her know that Alicia was in a better place, and saying goodbye.

When he was finished, Morris left the office, and returned to the spaceship. He stared up at it for several minutes, considering its smooth, seamless lines and gleaming, otherworldly metal. A real alien spaceship. His for the taking. He grasped the handrail and climbed into the ship again.

“What do I have here, anyway?” he asked himself as he looked around the control room again. He walked over to what appeared to be the main panel. A large button was blinking. Beside it was a small screen showing what looked to be Earth and the solar system. A small, stylized spaceship pointed away from the blue-green planet, and a string of characters formed three rows down the left-hand side of the screen.

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“Well, this looks like a pre-programmed course,” he advised himself. “If I stay here, I’ll likely spend life in jail anyhow. They’ll think I butchered those kids.

“As much as I deserve death for failing them, I think I’ll take a chance on having it count for something. Whatever planet they were heading to next, I can at least warn them.”

He pushed the button. A low humming sound began deep within the ship as the entry ramp melted into the doorway, sealing the hull. Morris wandered to the rear of the room, found a ladder in the floor and followed it down into a sleeping area. The thick, synthetic sheets and pillows felt good on his skin as he lay down.

Of course, he thought as he drifted off, comforted by the sounds and movements of takeoff, If they were headed back home, I'll have a really good chance to pay those bastards back.

Author's Note

Thanks for picking up my book, Dear Reader, and making it this far. A few of the pieces in *Despairs & Delights* came from a special place inside, so getting them published (for the third time, in some cases) feels particularly great:

The Devil's Due was my first published work as a serious writer. I decided to try my hand again during a deployment to Afghanistan after a five-year dry spell, and two different versions were published a month apart. The one in this book is the full-length version, created at the behest of author/editor Andrea Dean Van Scoyoc.

The Hitchhiker is the oldest of my published works; I was sixteen when I wrote it nine years ago. After successfully publishing a few more stories while in Afghanistan, I returned home on leave and decided to dust off some of my old stories from high school that had been locked away in a fireproof lockbox for years. This one made it into two magazines without any modifications. A few other works from that time showed a bit of promise, and I hope to share them eventually.

Game Over was written during my five-day drive from Watertown, New York to El Paso, Texas. At the time of my move I was in the middle of a legal fight with my ex-wife for the right to visit my youngest daughter. Obviously I haven't acted this out, I have no plans to, and the characters represent no one in particular, but it's fun sometimes to play with the imagination, and therapeutic as well.

Those particular stories aside, a lot of my life is bound up in these pages. They span from the beginning of my deployment in early 2006 to the time of this writing, as a matter of fact; I'm still revising Vacation. I've gone from

newlywed to settled-in, I've adopted one child and begat another and I've moved virtually cross-country. I published an anthology, an e-zine and have returned to anthologies.

I've shared that almost two-year period with a lot of people without whom my life would have been radically different: Consuela, Cheyann, Abigail and Liam, of course; Fran Friel, AJ Brown, Jon Fesmire, RJ Cavender, Boyd Harris, Bailey Hunter, Garry Charles, Andrea Dean Van Scoyoc and John Everson; the fine folks at the Horror Library and The Other Dark Place; all the writers who've given me advice, all the editors and publishers who've helped spread the products of my disturbed mind and you, Dear Reader, who is hopefully consuming as fast as I can produce.

Drop me a line at lincoln@lincolncrisler.com and stay tuned to <http://lincolncrisler.com> for news on my upcoming projects. Trust me folks; I'm just getting started.

Lincoln Crisler

El Paso, Texas

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About the Author



Lincoln Crisler is a horror, fantasy and science fiction writer from Rochester, NY. His love of reading and writing began at a very early age and, as a high school student, he cut his teeth on print journalism in addition to the occasional short story. He has written for Rochester's Northwest Times and Democrat and Chronicle newspapers. Following high school, Lincoln enlisted in the United States Army and is still serving today as a communications specialist. His work has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea, Fort Hood (TX), Fort Drum (NY), Iraq and Afghanistan. He is a veteran of both Operation Iraqi Freedom (04-05) and Operation Enduring Freedom (06-07). He is currently stationed at Fort Bliss, TX.

After a five-year hiatus, Lincoln began writing new stories and seeking publication. Since July 2006 his fiction has appeared in a variety of print and online venues, as well as being a Contributing Writer at The Horror Library. His editorial debut, *Our Shadows Speak*, is available in print and electronic formats. Lincoln is married to what might very well be an angel in disguise and has two wonderful daughters and a son who will probably stick his ass in a nursing home when he gets old and starts shitting himself. Updates on his work can be found at www.lincolncrisler.com and he can be contacted at lincoln@lincolncrisler.com.