

Collected Tales
from the



Second Saturday
Psychos

The Second Saturday Psychos Present

Ten Titillating Tales

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A Field of Echoes

by Tanah Haney

She can taste it on her tongue, cold, wet, melting into nothing, with a strange aftertaste, like a half-remembered sorrow. The bleachers are empty, the support beams rusted and bent, scrawled with graffiti. The stairs, worn down in the middle, under generations of feet, hard rubber soles, wooden heels, flip-flops slapping, the heavy plastic of platform clogs. Weeds grow up into the supports, over the chain-link fence, advancing on the field in a slow, methodical march. They still cut the grass, for the local kids, who scratch home base into the sand with one sneakered foot, and throw down jackets or old towels for the bases. The flakes are big, fluffy, like puffs of vanilla cotton candy, and disappear as soon as they hit the still-warm earth. Nothing at all like the tiny shimmering dots whirling under the glass dome, as she turned the universe upside down and shook it for all it was worth, while a tiny little chip transformed bits of energy into “Take Me Out to the Ball Game”, the infinitesimal figures caught in a single warp of time, frozen in action, on the perfectly symmetrical diamond, white on green. The music has since died, and at some point the glass cracked, all the liquid spilling out, along with the tiny plastic flakes. It no longer shimmered or sang, but she kept in on her desk out of nostalgia, or perhaps as a reminder of all that had ceased to be.

Here, the summer had been long and hot, dust-dry and fly-heavy.

Out there, it was a different matter – bone-deep cold, wet through, waves high as houses with a slap like a bomb going off, resonating through the metal structure like thunder or the apocalypse. Wind that tore your feet out from under you. Ring-necked gulls that managed somehow to stay aloft, lazily floating, like it was the calmest Sunday. While down below, he'd struggled with hands numb and clumsy, pulling and lifting and torqueing his body in ways he'd never thought possible, days melting into each other so that it all became one endless cycle, broken only by the odd disaster, which may have resulted in the death of men or machinery, he couldn't quite remember which.

One night only, had it been calm enough to light the candles she'd sent him, and the room had smelled like cookies baking, and Christmas trees, and fresh green apples. He had sat with his back to the wall, only one thin pillow and a foot of metal between him and life-sucking cold, and read the letter over, so many times he lost count, and then he'd fallen asleep in the warm sleepy glow, awaking to the sounds of alarms, and smoke. He'd bolted up, head filled with dream-addled visions of the candles, tipping and falling, their flames spreading, catching on rugs and curtains that weren't there. It was dark, and when he got out on deck, it was not the candles that were burning, but the oil, like a volcano against the cloud-dark sky, and the rain came down like a fire hose, and they were all skating on ice, and oil, and somewhere in it all he'd lost the candles, and the letter, and the rig had lost three men into the icy waves.

So it had been both man and machine that succumbed that night, and he had returned to find the dust-flavoured summer rolled over into a pleasant cool autumn, and the house as empty as if it had never been alive with the sound of her laughter.

She'd dreamed of dancing, as a girl, in the light of torches and oil lamps, with sparkles on her lashes and a bare belly shining in the flickering light, beads snaking around her legs as she swayed, rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, *and she shall have music wherever she goes*. The oil was scented with jasmine and myrrh, but never frankincense, which sounded somehow monstrous, or like something far too honest for its own good. And in her dreams she would sip hot spiced wine, and lounge on satin cushions with gold fringes, and someone dark and handsome would feed her grapes.

It had always been the taste of the exotic her imagination yearned for. Later, she would know they were built on myths and cultural stereotypes, but it didn't matter. The dreams were still there, to help sooth the aching boredom of the dirt-dry summers, and the fears that always took the shape of a tall black tower in the middle of the ocean, while the face of love sank pale and sightless beneath the waves.

He walked through the door on a whim, entering into a world of soft colours, incense fumes in various layers of stale and fresh, natural fabrics that tickled against his hand as he walked by, sometimes scratchy, sometimes soft as kitten fluff, wool still oily with lanolin, raw silk like water under his fingers. Lamps twisting out of gnarled limbs into stained or frosted glass. Crystals winked in the sunlight that staggered through dirty windows, and even the walls seemed friendly, thick and sturdy and older even than the walls of the pub next door. They said the beams in the pub's ceiling had

once been ships' masts. He could see it sometimes, up in the smoke-thick darkness. Once it made him seasick, and he'd never gone back.

This place was more like her – the softness her hair, the scratchiness, the way her legs rubbed his when she hadn't shaved in a while, and the smoothness her hands along his skin, her lips against his neck. He found a thin coil of leather, amongst the beads, tipped with a fine metal clasp. He brought it home and threaded it through the shell, small, pale, that shimmered slightly in the right light. Outside, the snow danced, schools of flakes chasing each other, riding the gusts, and for one instant he thought he saw a face looking in, a dark figure on the street, long coat tossed back like a cape. A blink of tired eyes banished it for a while, but it was there to greet him once more, on the see-saw verge of whisky-tinted sleep.

She'd watched her brother play here, and later her niece, in cut-offs and oversized T-shirts stained with the kind of grime earned by hard play and fearless abandon. She'd held ice to her brother's head, after it had become too friendly with a speeding ball, and chased after a big black lab who held the ball between drooling jowls, loping just ahead of her and laughing at her with his eyes. She cheered as her niece's team scored the last home-run of the season, and cried when they cut down the huge old oak tree that once spread itself majestic behind the fence and over the left-hand bleachers, providing much-desired shade under the hot noon sun, and thick limbs for climbing, and deep piles of leaves for jumping in and throwing at people amidst screams of high-pitched laughter.

In the place of the tree was a tall pole, atop which perched a busted spotlight, that had once glared across the field like the eye of God, but now lay dormant and dark, pierced through by a well-aimed rock. The rock had not been thrown by drunk hoodlums, but by a young couple, intent on appreciating the depth of the night sky, on the first night of the meteor shower.

The funding had run out soon after, and now the field was the realm of pick-up games, dogs running off the leash, and at night, a free-for-all bed under the stars, whether you were sleeping off a drinking spree, or nailing the boy or girl next door, or just wanting to hide from the world.

The snow was thicker now, like an ever-shifting layer of cool wet curtains, brushing against her cheeks and melting into her hair. Her bangs uncurled, plastered themselves wet against her forehead, and she wished she'd brought a hat. She snugged up her scarf, brushed caked snow off her mittens, tightened the lace on one of her boots. It was getting hard to reach them, with the Big Day only two months away, but she managed. Somewhere inside her, something shifted, perhaps in protest. Something, soon to become someone. And then the old sorrow, like having a great joke and no one to share it with. She started walking, head against the wind. The snow was getting overly friendly now, but still with that spark of mirth and mischief, that meant no real harm. She envisioned cats and hot spiked cocoa, and then she saw it – a face in the snow, shifting as her vision blurred, a long coat swirling in the wind, and a cracked, crooked smile like a split in the wood of your favourite chair, ragged but familiar.

She didn't know whether it was tears or melting snow, but it had the ring of happiness about it, and a smell like spring, even though it was months away. Rough, bare hands wrapped around hers, and somehow she felt warmth through the layer of fuzzy wool, even as her nose ached from the cold, and then they were wrapped around each other, and the snow wrapped around them, like layers of blankets and billowing sheets. Later, he hung the shell around her neck, and it shone in the firelight, like their bare, flushed skin, and he fed her red seedless grapes, and she didn't care that they were from Chile, or that the rug beneath them was largely unknown fibres and not fur, or that the wine was cheap and Canadian. It was spiced with cloves and cinnamon, and she lit the candles for him, and recited the letter she'd memorized because she had known he would lose it, while he lay his head on her stomach, listening to the life within her, while cats rubbed the soles of their feet and rumbled like small outboard motors, and the house smiled around them.

Awakening

by P. A. Kalastaja

He awoke to a teeth grindingly irritating noise. His dreams had been filled with a kind of pleasant cloying madness with dark streamers of horror spiraling outward in ropy coils to wrap around the world and squeeze tight, leaving a wetly shuddering, bloody mess. His mouth felt dry, which was ironic, like some visitation of the desert had swept by in the long night and blown drifts of finest sand into his gaping, snoring mouth. With real hesitation he cracked open an eyelid and immediately wished that he hadn't. Although the light was murky and greenish it was still more than he was prepared for and he groaned, a long drawn out affair that must have surely shaken the abode from stem to stern. The noise was gone.

His pallet groaned in protest as he shifted about, feeling the creaking stiffness in his limbs induced by a sleep that clearly hadn't been restful. He lay back for a moment and tried to assess. He couldn't have been asleep that long, he was sure of it. Yet here he was, awake again. Despite a fleeting urge to rise up, enraged and apocalyptic, roaring at the futility of it all, thrashing everything in sight to ribbons, he remained calm. A distant memory arose to lull him back from the edge of profound anger. Drifting idly in a soothing dark tarn, a glaring red star overhead, shedding it's dying warmth on a happy place. He shifted on the slab and tried to get comfortable, perhaps with just a little effort he would drift off again into warm remembrance of mayhem past, and of course, to

come. With a great bubbling sigh he let his muscles go slack and let his mind turn inward to visions of mayhem and destruction.

The noise returned just as he felt himself slipping between the world of the now and the great dreaming space and he let out a disgusted snarl. A clenched fist shot out and punched the wall causing a shudder to run through the place. Dislodged mortar and dust drifted down around and on him and the noise stopped abruptly. He rolled over and hunched up into a distorted foetal shape, rumbling under his breath at whoever was doing this. He was completely certain it wasn't time to get up as the alarm hadn't sounded, so something must be amiss. He cracked both eyes open, this time noting the crusty, bilious build up of gunk between his lids. Annoyance surged up instead of anger and he brought his hands up to rub at his eyes. His face felt, slack, rubbery almost, but that might just have been a result of the hour. He shrugged and skootched his legs over to the edge of the bed. Someone would pay.

His feet hit the floor, which was freezing cold of course and he then sat hunched over the bedside his face in his hands. His tentacles hung limp as wet noodles and the ache in his back flared up as it always did spreading out in spasms of discomfort until it surely reached the tip of his wings. He sat that way for some time like some cyclopean imaged etched in grey green stone, his weariness evident in every crease and fold of skin. When the pressure of his elbows on his knees threatened to join in with the ache in his back he sat back up. He scanned the floor but could see no sign of his slippers.

“Great,” he grumbled, “just great”

With a reluctance borne of painful experience he heaved himself upright and stepped away from the bed. His vision swam. It always did after sleeps both long and

short. The already sickening contortions in the walls and angles got worse and he involuntarily took a step backwards. His calves slammed against the edge of the bed and he teetered for a moment almost pitching backwards. He windmilled his arms and caught his balance but in that moment as his back curved toward the bed something gave way. Muscles around his lower ribs shifted suddenly and a damp staccato eruption of pops sounded like a hall full of lumberjacks dancing on a floor covered with bullfrogs. He winced in pain. His wings unfurled involuntarily and wreaked tiny mayhem, knocking mouldering tomes from his bedside table and scattering an odd assortment of knick-knacks from his dresser.

“Bloody Hell!” He growled through gritted teeth.

He hated it when that happened. Through force of will he snapped his wings back into their normally recumbent pose and stood awkwardly, his back grotesquely twisted to relieve the discomfort under his ribs. His eyes blinked down hard and for the first time his tentacles actually twitched into motion and the faint tingling that he felt produced the sudden realization that he must have been sleeping on his face again. His mood blackened.

With a ridiculous mincing gait he stumbled to the end of the bed and grabbed hold of one of the revolting graven eyeballs that graced the apex of the posts. In a convulsive movement he sucked in a great breath, braced his feet and pulled his shoulders back with a mighty heave. The back straightened, the ribs re-aligned and a resounding crack rumbled through his frame. After a white hot instant of agony the pain in his back vanished. Another sigh, this one of satisfaction, escaped his rubbery lips and he slouched in relief.

He turned around slowly and surveyed his bedchamber hoping to catch a glimpse of his slippers but they were nowhere to be found. He frowned.

“Stupid Clyde...I swear he does this on purpose.”

He considered having a look under his bed but decided against it what with his back being so tricky lately. Instead he took a step away and leaned to his left peering as far into the murk as he could manage. No slippers. He could just make out the discoloured edge of a frame. In his mind's eye he could see the crude cross stitched design edged with yellow sigils and the cutesy phrase ‘With days like these, why do I bother getting up?’ in crusty red letters. He rolled his eyes. He'd have thrown the damned thing out Aeons ago but decided against it. If she was going to visit some day he knew he'd bloody well better have the thing on the wall somewhere, so there it sat, in waiting.

He turned slowly away from the bed and gave it a last longing glance and felt a little whine happen deep down inside.

“I like sleeping,” he thought. “A lot. No wonder I'm in such a lousy mood when I wake up. Not my fault, that's for damned sure.”

He tromped out of the room into the hallway and savoured its relative dimness. Whoever had designed the place had thoughtfully decided that having huge grated skylights in the hallways was overkill. The dimness eased his mind and let his humours flow more freely. At least that's the impression he got from the crazy Arab doctor. Sometimes though he had to wonder, who was informing whom in their exchanges. By the time he got to the great room his tentacles had started to sway of their own volition but the pins and needles sensation along the bottom of his face was driving him mad.

He reached up with both hands and started scratching like crazy. Little waves of pleasure coursed along his skin and he heaved a small sigh of pleasure and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Unfortunately he did this just as he was stepping forward and managed to bark his shin up against one of the cyclopean stones littering the floor of the place, this one at a particularly crazy angle. The moment of pleasure was banished in an instant and he muttered an imprecation against the designers and their frankly psychotic notion of 'Feng Shui'. If he ever ran into those bastards again the only energy they were likely to feel was the force of his foot in their collective asses. This was without even mentioning their notion of 'design' what with the bloody thing on the front door. He got a blistering headache just getting near it.

His mood soured a little more as he felt a headache welling up just thinking about the designers. He could tell because a small throb was beginning just behind his left eyeball. He fought down an urge to shake the whole place down with a roar. He knew it wouldn't do any good. They may have been lunatics but they built to last. His mouth compressed into a tight lipped grimace.

It occurred to him that despite having hauled his bulk all the way out here his head was still not really awake. A certain fuzziness affected his thinking and contributed to little mishaps like the shin. He reached down and rubbed at the abused limb and turned his thoughts to truly waking up. He needed something with a little pep in it to get him going. A right proper 'beverage'.

Adopting a more cautious gait he slouched through the great room and made his way toward the pantry. He seemed to remember that during their last outing together

the Howler had offered him a carafe of some 'really good shit' as he referred to it. It had some formal name but it just wouldn't come to him at the moment. Something about electricity was all he could remember. All he knew was that despite how much of a flake the Howler was he certainly knew his beverages.

The dim green light from any number of skylights along the dome of the great room lit his way. Floating particles drifted in the light adding to a dreamy sense that often settled on him when he was in this chamber, it helped ease his mind. He thought that he could see furtive movement in the shadows but didn't have enough energy to investigate. Clyde might be cowering somewhere because of his slipper trick but he couldn't be bothered to find out where the little bugger was.

Once in the pantry he scanned the shelves for Howler's Inky black carafe. Another of Howler's character quirks, he was inordinately fond of the 'Black' motif. It wasn't very helpful when you were looking for something of his in a poorly lit room however. Eventually, after a fair bit of squinting and shuffling about in the dimness he found what he sought. The tall metallic container was black as jet and in another nod to Howler's ridiculous sense of humour was inscribed with a slightly etched black bolt of lightning. What was that name? 'Sharp' something or other?

Even as he unscrewed the lid a shockingly intense miasma of odours rose from within and surprisingly, a sense of residual heat. Howler knew his stuff all right. With the vessel clutched in one hand he retreated to his sitting room. It was a cozy spot with a great circular skylight, which would on nights when the stars were just right, let in penetrating beams of ether and moonlight. A great ornate throne had been carved in one wall and he liked to sit there and think or if he was lucky daydream if a catnap

seized him. Many of these thoughts were of course about his ascendancy but like any realist he tried not to fixate. That way simply led to self-loathing and irritation when that event didn't happen all at once. As he strode toward the seat he noticed the blinking red light on it's left side. His answering machine.

It was one of his few luxuries he'd agreed to, installed by a couple of the purplish technicians at the insistence of both Bubble Boy and the Howler. They claimed that it was important to keep up with the times or some such nonsense so he acquiesced. Although their constant buzzing and flitting about had frankly grated on him he had to admit that as technicians the buggy little fungi were astoundingly adept. No endless service calls with useless pieces of junk like those starfish headed idiots from down south. This baby was state of the art and worked flawlessly. As he settled himself into the throne he leaned over to check the display. Thirteen messages. Funny. Ha ha.

Howler might have known his beverages and have a special relationship with darkness but he was also ridiculously needy. Invariably 12 of the messages would be hang-ups from Captain Chaotic, who likely had been goaded into calling a wrong number by the Howler and then almost instantly forgotten why he was calling. He set down the carafe and cycled the machine through the first 12 messages without bothering to listen. This was, he reminded himself, why he'd had the volume turned off for who knew how many ages. He dialed the knob up and pressed playback on the final message.

"Hey C, my homey! I just thought that I'd give you a buzz. I been tryin to get ahold of Dags for a while now and it's like he just busted out and bailed on his crib. I wuz gonna invite him to a smoking beach party I was plannin' in the Med but it's almost

like he's avoiding me. There was some kinda shit happenin over on the east coast and Yog (well you know Yog) he claims that one of the ants has done gone busted a cap in old Dag's ass. So, I'm thinking his momma probably decided they should leave town till things got a bit chilly. I figured you might have heard something what with Dag and his old lady so fond of your place. Anyhow, I gotta spin, I think I hear some of my Gs droppin by for a spresso. Gimme a yell if you hear anything."

He shook his head. The Howler may have liked to call them 'ants' but it was pretty obvious to the old gang that he was a little too fascinated with them. Yog suspected that he was a bit 'funny' that way but insisted it was none of his business. Last time that they had met he and Yog had decided it was up to the Howler to tell them about it only if he wanted to. He's experienced a moment of alarm at the notion that Dagon and 'his old lady' might be thinking of visiting but it clearly wasn't imminent. They may be a bit trashy in all their dealings with the humans but they weren't rude. They would have called.

He eased himself back on the throne and found a comfortable position. He uncapped the carafe again and took a deep swig. The pitch-black drink oozed down his throat and splashed into his stomach. Almost instantly he could feel it seeping into his cells, racing through his veins, coursing along with his ichor where it seemingly exploded into his head. The world sped up and slowed down, far became near and a sense that the veils 'between' were lifted filled his mind. He imagined for a moment that this was probably a lot like how Yog felt all the time. He settled even further back into his seat and let his mind spin upwards to touch the world of brief little flames, some shrinking before his vastness and others hungrily embracing it only to be snuffed out by

the sheer immensity of realization or driven into slobbering madness. It was glorious. He let his thoughts drift and counted on a good daydream as he closed his eyes to let his mind free.

The irritating sound bored through his contentment like a Dhole through solid rock. His eyes snapped open and he jumped to his feet. Pausing only to snatch up his drinking vessel he stomped through his house mouthing curses and shooting piercing stares into the shadow limned corners.

“Clyde! C’mere!”

He arrived in the foyer and his anger all but consumed him when the entire inside of his head throbbed with discomfort at being so near the front door. He didn’t even bother looking behind him as a tentative squelching sound approached. The grinding, hammering, boring sound was coming from outside the entrance. He’d had enough.

“Clyde, sic em!”

The uncertain sound behind him changed instantly and a rush of slurping wetness shot past him toward a smallish square perhaps fifteen feet high in the lower part of the door. Clyde’s ever shifting semi-spherical body slammed into the square and pushed open what was revealed as a hatch with hinges on its upper edge. Gleefully squeaking and gibbering mouths dotted his gelatinous body while an assortment of ill formed yet wicked looking appendages with claws and spikes and weirdly clacking mandibles hurried to push the bulk through the opening. Clyde squirted through the hole and the hatch swung shut.

The irritating noise ceased abruptly and was replaced by a high-pitched humming sound that seemed to be retreating. The humming too was abruptly cut off and a muffled impact could be heard from outside. A few moments later there was a tortured shriek as of tearing metal and a small concussive sound then silence.

He waited for a few moments and was about to retreat back to his sitting room when the hatch began to swing open. Clyde oozed his way back inside, an odd fragment of metal clenched in a few of his better formed grasping claws. As the hatch swung closed, Clyde began to pulsate in a bizarre way that never failed to elicit a slight crawling of the skin. He was burbling happily while a trio of his newly formed mouths, enclosed in some kind of opaque protoplasmic air filled sacs gibbered, "Tekeli-li, Tekeli-li".

"Good boy Clyde," he said as he took the metal fragment from a proffered grasp. He noticed that a few of the pseudopods on the back of his favourite pet were playfully tossing a different limb back and forth. It was not a limb Clyde had formed himself, it was clad in some kind of fabric, it was detached.

"Yes Clyde, you can keep your treat."

The now roughly ovoid Clyde mewled happily and playfully lurched off the floor to float above his masters head. Some kind of internal restructuring occurred and he drifted away on a gentle, self made jet of water.

The metal shard gleamed, it's jagged edges evidence of the violence recently enacted upon it. He turned it over to see a coating of yellow paint and words.

MISKATONIC UNIVERSITY appeared in a bold officious font. Below that, painted by

hand in a way clearly intended to mimic old written script the moniker '*Submersible: Deep 1*'.

Cthulhu shook his head in disgust and tossed the fragment over into a corner of the entranceway where it settled gently on a pile of rusted anchors and smashed portholes.

"He took a slow sip of Nyarl's drink, he remembered the name now, 'Shock Blaster Dark'.

"Damned punk kids," he growled as he stalked away from the front door. "Stay out of my yard."

How to Get a Goth Girl

by Jenn DeLagran

Yesterday her whole world turned upside down. Shari blamed Christmas – it was clearly its fault. Between the snow and mistletoe lay the shopping, shopping, and more shopping. Bells chimed out ‘Tis the season to be commercial.’

Not that she was cynical—well, maybe just a little. But she wasn’t to blame! She studied sociology; it was her major to be Marxist. She had to wear black; it was her Gothic fashion. Don’t you dare call her pretentious either; she was just way smarter than the rest of the idiot population – and was infinitely smarter than Bryan Currie.

Bryan Currie, the dolt who dared eat non-veggie hotdogs in front of her. The idiot who called her “Scary Shari” and told her to lighten up. The ignoramus who always asked when they were going to have children, and what they going to name them. He stared all puppy-eyed at her any chance he got.

Shari was not all interested in Bryan Currie. He wasn’t Goth; he didn’t listen to dark music or read vampire novellas. He wasn’t a crusader for socialist causes, or member of Amnesty International. There wasn’t a tortured, poetic soul lying beneath his childish, yet sometimes amusing, ways. Shari was smart—she had a list of requirements her mate must meet before a first date. Bryan Currie failed to meet any of them.

She told him this – many times – in loud, rude, and publicly humiliating ways. He knew he was a joke to her; after all, she made a point of mocking him in front of her white faced Goth Friends. It seemed to do little to discourage him. Bryan followed and pestered Shari to no end, always asked when they were getting married.

Then finally, one harsh cold windy day, when Shari felt her best, she met a striking Goth in the soy section of the specialty health store. Damian was a member of Amnesty International. There was a tortured poetic soul lying beneath his mature, all-knowing ways. It didn't matter if his poetry was good—in all honesty Shari could never really tell what was good—but Damian read by candle light in the smoke filled coffee shops to all the other all-knowing persons dressed in black. He was smart and beautiful, and Shari finally felt that she had an equal in this bleak world. His name was Damian.

Damian, who dared to question the professor and accuse him of being a capitalist pig. The atheist who refused to eat any food not organically grown. The rebel who praised Shari on her dedication to gloom and despair. He stared all puppy-eyed at his reflection whenever a mirror was nearby.

Shari didn't mind. She just felt lucky to be the presence of the coolest guy she knew. He was hers; all hers, even if he and his groupies didn't know this. Damian would never betray Shari's trust. He just enjoyed the attention that he had grown accustomed to. He was so often deep in conversation with other girls that Shari began to miss Bryan's pestering ways, which had stopped as soon as he discovered Shari's new interest.

Shari didn't mind—not really. She was in orbit around her man's greatness, and now everything she ever believed to be true was focused through him. Damian wasn't entirely selfish. No, no, quite the contrary. Often they would sit together, alone, by the warmth of the furnace of her one room apartment. Two souls connected in this tragic world; it made it all the more romantic. She would listen as he read his latest poetry, as he nervously asked what she thought of it. And then he would promptly go out to meet some of the other poets to read his wares. Shari didn't write, so she wasn't invited.

Autumn went by in these sweet dark times. Then came Christmas.

Now Christmas was always a hard time for Shari. It bothered her to see others so happy, gorging themselves on commercialism. Didn't they know it was wrong? Didn't they know the sweat child workers put into those discount candles and wreathes? All the displays of social elitism—forty dollars for a small toy that will signal wealth status among the school playground. This is what Christmas had become. No one cared about the “real meaning of Christmas”. Even with that there were issues about Christian dominance and how those who believe in other religions were left out of this “national holiday”. Didn't anyone see this? Why was everyone so happy? Was ignorance really this blissful?

Shari was contemplating all this yesterday as she slushed her way home. A group of students were laughing, bags of discount presents in hand, cheerful that their exams were done. On their way to a bar, no doubt, to drink beer from major breweries that tried to crush the micro-breweries' right to exist. She put on her best Goth face and snarled as the group cleared the way for her. All except for one Bryan Currie. He stood

in her way, causing her to stop and glare up at him. He smiled. She frowned when she realized that the rest of his friends had gone ahead, and that they were now alone.

Bryan hesitated as he pulled out a wrapped present from his Best Buy bag. It was almost like he had planned to meet her on the street. Shari didn't believe in Christmas presents—it would have been hypocritical to her beliefs. Damian and all her other friends never gave presents; it was far too cliched. She was about to say something to this effect when Bryan simply grabbed her hand, held it out, and placed the gift firmly in her hand. Then he quickly walked away, leaving without saying a word.

An urge of curiosity overcame her strict morals. She went into the nearest coffee shop, and sat down. She admired the pretty gold wrapping for a moment before tearing it off. A flimsy little book lay in her hands, a book full of names for 'the baby'.

Shari was startled by a loud laugh, before realizing that it was from her. Smiling, she lifted the book to see the small gift that lay beneath it.

It was a small toy space ship, kind of cute. And on the package there was a picture of the galaxy, a swirling display of asteroids and planets. One of these planets was labeled in a thick black marker "Bryan". That was in its static orbit around the sun labeled "Shari".

It was so sweet and simple. Shari didn't care about commercialism or Christian oppression of other religions. She was simply so touched that someone cared enough about her to give her a present. She was shocked to discover that she was happy-- really, really happy.

Shari was so happy that she got up and rushed to the nearby coffee house where she knew Damian and her other Goth Friends were. She rushed in and, waving

her present proudly to the others, declared that in all the angst they forget about the love. Not giving Christmas presents, she yelled loudly, is not demonstrating their high morals and protestation of a corrupt society. Not giving Christmas presents, she shouted, is showing that they were too full of themselves to give a damn about anyone else!

Damian and the Goth Friends stared at Shari as if she had eaten a steak raw--shocked, horrified, and disgusted. Someone started to snicker and was immediately silenced by Shari's glare of death.

Morons. The whole lot of them. Pretentious geeks. They hadn't a clue about "the real world." Not the way she did. Shari promptly announced to Damian it was over and abruptly left, leaving her vegan and identity restrictions at the door.

Shari ate a real hotdog on the way to Bryan's residence; it tasted damn good. He was shocked to learn that they were now dating. She took him shopping at Walmart and had fun. It didn't matter that it wasn't Canadian and the clothes were probably made in a Honduras sweatshop. They really did have lower prices, and lots more clothes. She needed new clothes – lots of new clothes. And all the while she ranted and raved about her hatred for protesters and moralists and socialists and how they were so caught up in issues they forgot how to live. Bryan just gazed at her all puppy-eyed, with his silly, happy grin. Shari liked being the object of his affections.

And tonight, after her world had turned upside down, after Shari ceremoniously stuffed all her black clothes into a garbage bag—except a couple of dresses she looked really, really good in—Bryan came over. Candles were lit, music was playing softly, and

a small gift for Bryan lay waiting on the table. When Shari opened the door she was wearing her new white sweater.

It truly was a white Christmas after all.

That Which is Dead should Eternal Lie

by Paul Darcy

The Earth cradles many dark secrets within its massive bosom, most of which should never be seen, let alone suckled. The overwhelming majority of humans treading upon its skin, through no fault of their own and despite endless meddling, manage to muddle through the decades completely oblivious to many dark and horrible truths. But not all humans possess such blind good fortune. Jacob Plowingwight happened to be one of those unfortunate few indifferently selected at random by an uncalculating cosmos and introduced to things only dreamt of in a madman's nightmare or penned in the pulps.

This random uncaring selection of Jacob occurred one blustery day in September when an unusual client checked into one of the single occupant pine suites of Tilworth's Funeral home. Jacob's janitorial position at Tilworth's should have guaranteed him a long and fruitless life as it had to countless others down through the ages in similar positions. But as unhappy chance would have a deaf bicyclist run over from behind by a bus, so Jacob Plowingwight's fate this September day was to be in the wrong place at the right time and to possess that sometimes fatal human characteristic: curiosity.

Jacob usually tended to his chores paying little attention to who came and went at Tilworths. As long as the urinals were spotless and no feces pieces still clung to the

underside of the toilet rims, Jacob was content. His existence was a simple, dull one, and void of any exceptional happenings. Jacob preferred it that way. And adhering to the Peter Principle, Jacob had reached his level of incompetence long ago and was not fool enough to aspire to anything more.

But Jacob's usual focus on cleaning was disrupted by curiosity when earlier in the day, while vacuuming the carpets of the main display room, the police wheeled in a strange body. Two policeman quickly whisked the gurney down the hall and into the preparation room followed closely by Grisslum, Tilworth's owner and head undertaker. Jacob caught only a glimpse as the gurney sped by. A zippered body bag rode the gurney and its contents resembled more a collection of jutting tree limbs than a human form. This strange disfigured corpse piqued Jacob's curiosity. What could have caused a human body to become so rearranged? Even sheathed by the black bag, Jacob could tell that the form underneath was in a most unnatural state.

Shortly after, Jacob left off with the vacuuming. He moved to refill the perfume dispensers in the men's washroom which was strategically closer to the preparation room and the mysterious corpse. Working lightly and listening earnestly he overheard the distinct sound of a the body bag being unzipped followed closely by a loud gasp and exclamation from Grisslum.

Run over by a train or bus, he couldn't hear the policeman clearly, but this poor soul was terribly mangled. The poor man needed to be pieced back together, quickly autopsied for cause of death - though it was plenty obvious - given a nice service and burial.

The policeman continued and Jacob listened as closely as he could. The deceased was unidentified and had been found unclothed. Foul play was suspected but there was absolutely no leads as to the man's background and no reports of missing people in the area or even the state. The local asylum had been checked and all inmates were accounted for.

However this unfortunate wretch met his demise, he ultimately landed at the right place for reconstruction. Tilworth's Funeral home was renowned for bringing the dead to life-like resemblance again, even when all of the pieces were not firmly attached. Its proud heritage had spanned three generations of Tilworths so far, Grisslum being the grandson of the original founder and no less adept at the art.

When Jacob cracked the door to the body preparation room later in the evening, after the police and Grisslum had left, he expected to find it clean and orderly. It always was. A tidy man, was Mr. Grisslum, much like his finished products. But what Jacob found instead was a mess. Tools and bottles were left out and even some liquid had spilled and pooled on the floor beside the preparation table holding the covered corpse. The gurney the police had wheeled in was pushed up against one wall, the black body bag folded unevenly on top. The corpse, covered with the traditional white sheet, was on the preparation table where Grisslum had evidently decided to leave it. Very odd, thought Jacob. Corpses were always placed in cold storage when not finished, otherwise the bugs would get to it and that was to be avoided for sure.

Now that Jacob thought about it, he did recall Grisslum leaving hastily for the day an hour ago looking miserable and rubbing his hands. He grumbled to Jacob on passing that he would not be back until tomorrow. It was possible that Grisslum had

finished with the corpse, but from what Jacob had heard about his condition it would be too much of a miracle if Grisslum had pieced him together in such short order. Grisslum was good with the dead, but not that good. Jacob, in here for no real purpose except to steal a glance, moved across the floor to satisfy his curiosity about this one corpse which had caused the stalwart Grisslum to gasp.

What caught Jacob's eye the moment he moved closer was the fact that one of the hands of the corpse was hanging outside of the white sheet and pointing towards the floor. A trickle of fluid dripped slowly from a fingertip. Jacob could see now that this slow steady drip was the cause of the liquid pooling on the floor. But it wasn't blood, or embalming fluid, it was something else and its stench almost caused Jacob to gag. The smell was worse than any urinal or toilet he had scrubbed and he had scoured a few vile crappers in his day. Stepping even closer and waving his hand to try and dissipate the stink, Jacob noticed on the exposed hand a definite indentation around the middle finger as though a ring had long been there and was now recently removed.

Now Jacob was a simple man and without really giving it too much further thought he lifted the white sheet covering the corpse to see what all the fuss had been about. If Jacob hadn't have been a twenty year man and lived through the worst vomit, feces and urine messes any army of humans can produce in today's modern lavatories he may well have emptied his stomach right there and then. He at least prided himself at that moment with stifling a gasp which Grisslum had failed to do earlier. It made him feel braver than his boss if no less horrified by what he was looking at on the table.

The corpse was badly deformed but roughly humanoid enough to be called a man. The pieces of his body had been arranged on the preparation table in what

appeared to be the correct order and hastily stitched together, but the overall picture was horribly wrong. The head was disfigured and held the general shape of a man, but what was most disturbing were the protuberances which seemed to sprout randomly from the neck and body. Upon closer inspection they looked to him like miniature octopus or squid tentacles complete with suckers, but that was nonsense. Maybe it was some after death parasite? The body had been left out all afternoon and there was no telling how long it had been out with the bugs beforehand.

Though Jacob did not know all the diseases which could cause the form of a man to grow such grotesqueries, he was reminded of that Elephant guy from some time long ago, but this seemed much worse to his mind. Perhaps it was his proximity to the thing or the stink. While Jacob's mind searched for some mundane reason for this disfigured corpse, his eyes scanned the entirety some more.

The bulk of the figure seemed to be sweating profusely and secreting the fluid which was draining off down its hanging arm. If he didn't know any better he would have believed the corpse was melting. During all the short moments Jacob had been staring he had been holding his breath. He finally let it out and shuddered. He had seen enough.

Draping the sheet back over the abomination, Jacob hastily left the preparation room, put away his lavatory tools and left for the night. It was early evening when he shut and locked the door, always the last to leave. He wrapped his coat snugly about himself to protect against the chill in the air.

Jacob was about to descend the stairs and hurry to his apartment when, in the street a few blocks away, Jacob could have sworn he saw Grisslum standing under a

street light talking with another figure. Both figures were stooped and had their jacket collars turned up against the wind. But this would be most unlike Grisslum who he lived across town and never dallied once he left for the day. Jacob did not go over to the pair to investigate, something about their manner and the recent viewing of the unusual corpse steered him immediately toward his home.

Hastening to his apartment, which was not far away, Jacob, once inside, locked and double bolted the door. In his quiet secured apartment, Jacob trembled. He felt exposed, as though eyes were watching him. His dull little world dingy had been rocked and possibly holed. Tomorrow he would go back to his usual ways and hope to forget what he had seen. That is what he assured himself as he crawled into bed and snuffed out the lights.

Jacob rolled out of bed early the next morning amid tangled sheets and the smell of unwashed clothes. Through the slats of his blinds he could see that the sun was struggling to rise behind the city skyline and the air was filled with a smoggy brown haze. The welcome scent of brewing coffee wafted to him as his automatic coffee machine kicked in. All seemed as it should this day, at least on the surface. He took comfort in knowing the power was on. One never knew in the apartment building he rented in. And even though his squalid surroundings gave him some comfort her was still filled with a kind of dread.

Agitated, and having finished all his coffee, Jacob dressed for work and headed in early. He was stewing in his apartment anyway, accomplishing very little except to dwell upon yesterday's events, try as he might not too. Maybe a good dose of cleaning would anchor his mind in the mundane, a place it was well accustomed to. He hungered

to get back to that comfort zone as soon as possible. Grisslum would not pay him overtime, but he didn't care. Grisslum wouldn't even know he had come in early anyway as he never arrived until later in the morning. Boss's privilege.

Jacob was strolling to work trying to concentrate on the day's chores at Tilworths. He was undecided as to whether he should ask Grisslum if he could purchase a new mop as the old one was nearly worn out. While contemplating his strategy for approaching Grisslum about the new mop, something crept into his subconscious mind, crawled around in the dark a moment then poked its head into his consciousness only to disappear again as quickly as it had appeared. Jacob increased his pace.

Two blocks away from the funeral home, Jacob stared in amazement. He had barely noticed the other person walking down the street in the early morning - it wasn't such an odd occurrence - but when he drew closer to Tilworths, Jacob's mind registered the truth. The other person out for a walk at this hour was Grisslum. Of the sixteen years Jacob had worked at Tilworths, never once had he seen Grisslum arrive at work before nine. Yet here was the man, and no mistaking it, unlocking the front door and entering. Two shocks to Jacob's world in two days. This was not good for his nerves. He almost turned around and went back home to wait, but that would be silly now since he was already at Tilworths. And what if Grisslum had already seen him? He would want to know why he hadn't come in, wouldn't he? Jacob made his decision. He would enter as quietly as he could and go to his janitorial room. Maybe Grisslum would be busy and not notice him. Jacob closed the distance to Tilworth's with uneasy steps then climbed the stairs to the front door slowly as if by doing so he would make less noise on the polished stones.

Upon reaching the landing, Jacob grabbed the front doorknob and pulled his hand away quickly. It was covered with a slime or wet goo. Jacob pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his hand and the doorknob clean. What if a client had come and grabbed that doorknob? Maybe Grisslum had a cold?

Jacob entered Tilworths and made for his janitorial room as quietly as he could. He did not immediately see Grisslum, but halfway down the hall he heard the oddest of sounds. It was a kind of muling, like a cat crying for its supper, but the volume and resonance would indicate a much larger animal. If Jacob was not mistaken the ungodly sound was issuing from the preparation room. Maybe a injured dog or racoon had somehow gotten in and was trapped. A slight odour of that corpse was still in the air as well. Jacob hesitated in the hall and nearly jumped when the preparation room door opened and out loped Grisslum, mumbling to himself most unpleasantly. The stink intensified tenfold.

Jacob froze. He was undecided about what to do. Should he run or say hello or do nothing? In his moment of hesitation Grisslum made a kind of snuffling sound and abruptly turned around to face Jacob who, at that instant, felt like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Grisslum was stooped over, a look of pain or anger on his face. He was animatedly rubbing his hands together. Jacob couldn't tell which emotion suited the situation better. Perhaps both.

“Jacob,” Grisslum croaked out, “what are you doing here?”

“I was going to start cleaning, sir,” stammered Jacob. “I couldn't sleep so I decided to come in early. I don't want any extra pay. I just needed something to do. I won't bother you.” Jacob was trying his best to keep a steady voice, but the look of

Grisslum and the stench in the air was making it hard for him to pronounce his words correctly.

“Grrrr... What time is it?” Grisslum asked, taking a few steps down the hall toward Jacob.

Jacob, nearly backing up in fear and revulsion - that stink was apparently coming from Grisslum or his clothes - glanced at his watch not wondering why Grisslum didn't just look at his own or know the time. “Ah, it's eight in the morning, just about.” Grisslum stopped approaching.

The look on Grisslum's face subtly changed from pain to pleasure? “Jacob. When you get a chance come into the preparation room. There is something I want to show you.” Grisslum coughed. Jacob was sure he saw a large amount of phlegm spray from Grisslum's mouth and onto the floor, but the lighting was not so good in this hallway and Jacob couldn't be sure. The last thing Jacob saw as Grisslum returned back into the preparation room was Grisslum's hand closing the door. On it was a ring, green and slightly phosphorescent. A ring. What the hell was going on? Grisslum was not married and had no rings that Jacob could ever remember. Jacob may not be the most observant man, but surely a ring like that he would have remembered, but he was in such a state he couldn't be sure now.

Then the muling started again, louder and more insistent. Grisslum must have some animal in there. It sounded like he was torturing it. This had gone on long enough. Jacob went to Tilworth's reception desk shaken and dialled the police. When a constable answered, Jacob suddenly clammed up. His fear of reprisal from Grisslum overwhelmed his sense of danger. What if Grisslum was only trying to dislodge a

raccoon while Jacob summoned the police? Jacob would be fired. He could lose everything he had.

Grisslum yelled, "Jacob, help me!" and Jacob almost dropped the receiver. Grisslum may have done him no great favours in all the years he had worked at Tilworths but his cry for help propelled Jacob into action. Placing phone to the desk, Jacob hurried to his janitorial supply room. The constables voice sounding small and persistent on the other end.

He quickly strapped on his utility belt and looked at his line of cleaning chemicals neatly arranged on a shelf. He took down concentrated disinfectant number seventeen. When mixed with water it stung exposed skin. In its undiluted form it was far worse. He poured it straight from the concentrate bottle into a pump spray bottle which he then holstered in his belt. Next Jacob took up a small flat pry bar, the type used for pulling nails from crates. It wasn't very heavy but it had sharp wedges on either end. Feeling somewhat more prepared, Jacob went to the preparation room to aid Grisslum and determine what the hell was going on.

The muling cry was intermittent now, and Jacob could hear just outside the door to the preparation room Grisslum's low voice. He was talking quietly now not yelling for help, and Jacob could not make out what he was saying. The words he thought he heard clearly were garbled or nonsense.

Hesitating no longer, Jacob pushed open the door and surveyed the room. It was still a shambles, even more so now, and Grisslum was hunched over the preparation bed teetering back and forth chanting or talking or gibbering. Jacob was unnerved. Pry bar in hand, Jacob headed for Grisslum inside the preparation room.

“Mr. Grisslum?” Jacob called through the door, “sir, are you okay? What is going on?” Jacob nerves were frayed, adrenalin levels rising in his body.

“Nothing is wrong,” came Grisslum’s reply. His voice sounded like it had come from the bottom of a dank, dark well. “Come closer, Jacob. I want to show you something.”

Jacob, staring at the back of Grisslum’s swaying head, approached cautiously, aware now that the muling noise was issuing from the preparation bed and what lay on top of it and not from any trapped animal, or Grisslum. But how could that be for what was on the bed were the remains of the accident, that grotesque disfigured man with horrific growths? Jacob, his mind not comprehending, almost fainted when he saw beneath the white sheets one of the victim’s loosely attached limbs twitching. This was followed by a muling wail.

Grisslum turned around and faced Jacob, now only a couple feet away. “So, Jacob. What do you think? Is this one almost lifelike?” Grisslum’s features stood out in stark contrasts of shadow and light under the preparation table’s spot lighting and suddenly Jacob was revealed of the truth. Grisslum had transformed into a similar thing to what was twitching and moaning on the table, complete with small suckered tentacles waving from under Grisslum’s collar and on his face as well. Jacob nearly dropped the crowbar in fright, but something inside him controlled his body enough to let him retain his grip on the meagre weapon.

Jacob, from blind fear, struck out with the crowbar and connected with Grisslum’s body. It struck Grisslum and Jacob expected a meaty thunk, but instead the bladed pry-bar smacked wetly like he had just driven it into wet clay. When Jacob pulled

back to swing again Grisslum was laughing, spittle drooling from his lip. A clear pungent fluid was leaking from the inflicted wound. It was the same foul smelling fluid which had been dripping from the corpse the day before.

Before Jacob could take further action, Grisslum's hand shot out and grabbed Jacob's wrist. His strength was prodigious and Jacob's arm was held immobile like it was clamped in a vise. Jacob could feel the tentacles gently lapping against his skin but despite his desperate wrestling to be free the crowbar dropped from his paralysed hand.

Jacob ceased struggling frozen with fear, unable for the moment to act. Grisslum seemed to exude ten times the stink he had a moment before. "Jacob, you will be mine. I have the power, I have been dormant too long. This other was weak," Grisslum used his other hand to point to the body on the preparation room table, "but the body I now inhabit is much stronger. This other will be useful in different ways." The guttural voice of what was once Grisslum eroded Jacob's soul. It lifted up its other hand and on it was a ring, glowing sickly green. The ring Grisslum must have taken from the corpse. "You will join me and the others today, Jacob. It will be glorious. We will rise again to dominate the world as once we did millennium ago. If it weren't for the Old Ones, we would dominate still. But they are no longer here, and our time of ascension comes again." The hand and the ring moved closer to Jacob's face.

A cornered mouse will attack a lion. It is a last desperate attempt at life preservation. Jacob, a simple animal really, followed those genetic patterns which had been passed down through the human genome for centuries beginning with the smallest mammalian shrew. Coupled now with intelligence, this reaction could often

times manifest itself as more than a violent outburst of strength versus strength. And so, on this day in September when most of the human race was preoccupied with its own petty existence a titanic struggle between ancient forces evil and one man transpired.

Jacob, tears streaming down his face from the pain of his crushed wrist, reached out with his other hand and took hold of the spray bottle in his holster. He brought it up and squirted the contents onto the thing which had him in its grip. For a moment the thing continued to bring the ring closer to Jacob's face, but then it began to quiver slightly and the pressure on Jacob's wrist lessened. "What have you done!" the Grisslum thing waled and let Jacob go.

It took a step backwards bringing its hand to its face. Bubbles appeared on the skin of the thing wherever the chemical had sprayed and the skin was turning a sickly blue-black. Jacob did not let up now, his opening clearly before him. He sprayed the thing until the pump squeaked its last drop from the spray bottle, but the thing was not undone so easily. With startling speed it launched itself at Jacob and took another firm hold around his waist. Jacob was out of options. The thing was far too strong.

But he did struggle as best he could against the blistering and stinking abomination and they ended up falling together onto the floor. During this battle the thing had not been keeping a constant shape. It seemed to pulsate between forms, its grip lessening and tightening accordingly and at one point the hand, or tentacle or appendage which held the ring ended up in Jacob's mouth in an attempt to suffocate him. Jacob's last act was that of a desperate man, one sent far over the brink of sanity into the realm of surrealistic living nightmare. Jacob bit down with all his strength and

felt the appendage severed in his mouth. The ring tumbled free to the back of his throat where his involuntary swallow reflex sent it down into his stomach. Jacob spit out what remained in his mouth, swooned and knew no more.

Sometime later, Jacob was partially aware of blue uniforms and rough hands lifting him from off of the floor. In his stomach a fire burned. It intensified, travelled up his chest, into his neck and from there on into his brain. His mind, easily manipulated, was in a matter of moments understood and controlled.

* * *

“What the hell do you mean this lunatic isn’t in his cell anymore?” said the deputy sergeant, “for Christ sakes he murdered his boss last night and the only thing you had to do was watch him behind the bars. Where in the bloody hell could he have gone and why did you let him get out!” The duty sergeant for the day was not impressed to have to come in three hours early to find out how the night watchman had screwed up. He couldn’t recall this ever happening before and by Christ he would have a satisfactory explanation or somebody’s head would roll.

“But, sergeant,” pleaded the night watchman, “I didn’t open the cell for him at all last night. He was awfully quiet in there and I only went to look in on him just before I called you. And the stink in there, you better come take a look.”

The two men made the walk to section D, and could smell the cell Jacob had been placed in long before they actually arrived at the barred door. “What the hell is that stink, anyway?”

“That’s what this guy smelled like when he was brought in,” said the night watchman. “Some chemical or something he used to spray on his boss and all but

dissolve him, poor bastard. He was blistered from the stuff as well. I checked for him in the cell, you know decomposed like his boss was maybe, but there is not much there except, well take a look yourself. It's pretty disgusting." The sergeant scowled from the stink, but unlocked the cell door and proceeded inside.

On the floor were puddles. Goo, was the best description the sergeant could think of, and a pile of shit; literally beside what had to be the guy's discarded clothes. The shit was disturbed and it looked like this nutcase had used his fingers to dig around in it. Christ, the night watchman wasn't kidding. It was disgusting. There was no sign of him in the cell. Besides the feces and pools of goo there was nothing else the sergeant could see, except that on a few of the bars leading out had been smeared with goo as well. The sergeant left the cell and headed for the office.

Jesus H. Christ, thought the sergeant, what the hell was he going to put in his report?

Absolution

by Julie Morris

I get the call at the office at around 2:00. It's the nursing home.

"Ms Rosenberg, we hate to bother you at work, but we're having trouble with your uncle. We need you to come in right away."

"What's happened? Is it his heart?"

"No, he seems to be having some kind of psychotic episode. We need you to come in, please. We think he's a danger to himself and others."

"I'll be right there."

The nice thing about being the manager of the office is I have few people to report to. I tell my assistant that there's a family emergency, grab my coat and purse and head down to flag the first taxi I can. I'm not going to fool around with the subway at this point.

As the driver heads to Cavendish, I look at the view from the window, paying no attention to the thawing snow banks or bright store windows with their premature summer merchandise. I wonder what could be going on with Uncle Mo. He had a rather late onset of Alzheimers that started off with simple things, forgetting a name here and there, forgetting to take his pills and such, and has gotten to the point where his little slips of the mind aren't chuckle-inducing anymore. Lately, he's even been waking up screaming. Fortunately, he was in the home before this started, so they

were kind of stuck with him. But the thought that sweet Uncle Mo being dangerous to himself or others? He would stop talking to my father for a week if Dad spanked us. And considering they were business partners, that was a bad thing.

I get to the home, pay the cab, then head in for the information desk. A nurse in popsicle pink scrubs sees me approaching and drops the clipboard she's looking at.

"Oh. Ms. Rosenberg. I'm glad you're here. Please come with me."

"What's going on?" I ask.

"Well, I don't know what triggered it. They were all coming out for lunch when all of a sudden, Mr. Rosenberg turned around and smacked one of the other male residents. When the orderlies took him back to his room, he tried to bite them. He's never been like this before. Cantankerous at times, yes, but not violent."

I walk in the room and I'm horrified. There's my uncle, 80 years old, and strapped down to his bed. His chin trembles and he is weeping.

"What the hell?" I walk to the side of the bed. "Get those things off him! Now!" The nurse shakes her head. "Not until we can trust that he's going to behave himself." He looks up at me and his eyes break my heart. I'm reminded of the beagle we had for 13 years, and how he looked at us as Dad was putting him in the car to take him to the vets for one last time. I start unbuckling the restraints myself and tell the nurse to fuck off when she tries to stop me. I half expect Uncle Mo to scold me for using obscenities. I pull the boxes of tissues off his night table and sit down on the edge of the bed, wiping spittle, snot and tears from his face. "Uncle Mo, what have you been doing?" "I won't be taken prisoner," he says, fire springing up in him as though someone tossed a can of gas on an ember.

“Of course you won’t. What’s happened.”

He looks at me, then through me. I hate when he does that, as though he’s looking at someone who isn’t there. But he’s been doing it more and more lately.

“I have to tell you what happened.”

“That’s why I’m here,” I say.

He gets up into a sitting position. “You want to know what happened to your husband.”

“What? Dave’s fine. He’s at work right now...”

“No, no. It’s only right that you should remarry. You’re still a young woman. Jerry would understand.”

I look over my shoulder at the nurse. She shrugs. I’ve only been married once, and that’s to my current husband. I have no clue who Jerry is.

“He will forgive you, Helen. But I don’t know that I can be forgiven for what I’ve done.”

“What have you done, Moise?” I ask, using his full first name. I don’t know what he’s on about, but if I play along, maybe he’ll calm down.

“It’s when the Bellaventure went down, you see. I’m sorry. I know you probably don’t want to hear this.”

I know that during World War II, Uncle Moise joined the Navy. He had heard that Hitler was killing Jews and felt that he had a duty to try to fight. Then, in 1943, his convoy was hit by a group of u-boats and his ship was sunk. Now it’s beginning to piece together.

“I do want to hear it. What about Jerry, Mo? What can you tell me about Jerry?”

He takes a deep breath and reaches into his pants pocket for a handkerchief. “We had to jump, you see. The ship was going up in flames and taking on water fast. But there was oil in the water, and it was catching fire. When we got in the water, oil stuck to our life vests, you see. And with the fire spreading so quickly, we couldn’t risk keeping them on.”

Handkerchief retrieved, he blows his nose loudly. “We took our life vests off. Jerry wasn’t... he wasn’t a strong swimmer, Helen. Not for water like that. And we could see that the Muskoka was turning back to take on survivors, but it would still be quite a swim. I can’t tell you how cold that water was. I was doing my best to help him, Helen. I had him by the collar and was trying to hang on to his shirt as I swam for the Muskoka. But it was just so cold. And pulling Jerry along behind, it was just making things so slow. The Muskoka was a hundred yards away. Then Jerry stopped kicking. I... I couldn’t feel his collar in my fingers anymore.”

He stops talking for a moment, clutching the handkerchief like it was that collar, there but not.

I look over my shoulder at the nurse. She’s got her hand over her mouth. We make eye contact and she nods.

“Moise, what happened to Jerry?”

“I didn’t want to, Helen. I kept yelling at him to kick. ‘Kick, you bastard,’ I hollered. ‘I can’t do all the work!’ But he couldn’t. He was just dead weight and I couldn’t.... We were both going to drown or freeze. The only way I was going to make the Muskoka was to let go. God forgive me, I let go. And when he grabbed my pants, I

undid my belt and swam out of them. About two big waves later and he was gone. I made the Muskoka, but ... “ He can’t talk. He starts sobbing.

I pull him into my arms and he cries. “I forgive you,” I say, over and over. I don’t know how Helen would have taken the news. I suppose she might eventually forgive him, seeing how desperate the situation was. If the roles had been reversed, would Jerry have towed my deadweight uncle to safety or let go? I can’t say, not knowing what Jerry was like.

I hold him until he stops crying. Then, as it is so often with him lately, his mood switches. The lightbulb comes on and he gives me a big smile. “Becky, when did you get here?”

I could tell him that I’ve been here for the last fifteen minutes. To what end? Was that me or Helen? “I just got here. Uncle Mo, the nurse said you’ve been giving them a hard time.”

“Did I?” he asks, thoughtfully.

The nurse steps in. “Mr. Rosenberg, you punched Mr. Stenner.

“Did I?” he asks, horrified. “I don’t remember any such thing!”

“Uncle Mo, I’m going to have the doctor come by and take a look at you. I can’t believe that you’re punching people on a whim.

“Is Hal okay?”

The nurse nods. “He was surprised more than anything. But you can’t be going around punching people, Mr. Rosenberg. That won’t do.”

“I’m sorry to have caused any trouble,” he says. I don’t know what got into me.”

“That’s why I’m calling the doctor,” I say. I brush the white wisps of hair over his balding pate and try to smile. “I’ve got to get back to work now, but I’ll come back tonight, okay?”

He nods vacantly. “You’re a good girl to take such good care of an old man.”

“And why shouldn’t I?” I ask. I get off the edge of the bed and give him a kiss on the cheek. “The nurse is going to give you some medication now. Try not to K.O. anyone else until I get back, okay, Champ?”

He smiles. “For you, I won’t.”

On the way back later, with Dave and our son Michael in tow, a petulant teen in the back seat with an MP3. My cell phone rings in my purse. I answer. It’s the manager of the home.

“Ms. Rosenberg, I’m sorry to call, but your uncle has passed away.”

I gasp. “But... But he was fine earlier... he...”

“He died in his sleep,” the manager says.

“We’re on our way over right now. Can you call the Rabbi?” I ask, thoughts racing.

“We’ll do that at once.”

I stare out the window at the store fronts and houses that blur. I feel Dave’s hand take mine briefly as he can spare it from the steering wheel. Michael says nothing, but respectfully turns the volume of his MP3 down to the point I can’t even hear the thump of the bass.

At the information desk, we’re met by the manager and Dr. Fong. Dr. Fong confirms that it was probably Uncle Mo’s heart giving out, especially considering the

distress he'd been in earlier. I go in to see Uncle Mo. But it's not until I see his face that any tears come. He went peacefully. And whether it was by design or delusion, he has gone with the absolution that was delayed by 60 years.

Late, The Cherries Bloomed

by Mark Harrison

905 tended the south-side garden. He began working the plot on the day of his inception, 32 years ago, and would continue to care for the plants and soil until he was replaced or ceased to function.

905 had never been instilled with a sense its own mortality, that wasn't an important thing for an ornamental horticulture specialist. Its job was to tend the earth, to nurture life where appropriate and to eliminate it when undesired.

Beetling along, solar carapace tilted towards the sun, 905 extended small pincers from an index digit and delicately pulled a slender weed from between two rows of dark purple blooms.

905's sub-heuristic protocols were quite a lot more sophisticated than they strictly needed to be. This allowed it to adapt to differing challenges without having to confer with any other systems, making 905 the kind of unit that you could set to a task and forget. In a sense, its skill-set more closely resembled a sergeant-grade battlefield model than a maintenance drone. Over the years, this conceptual latitude allowed 905 to develop its own style. It liked purple.

905 never did anything in excess, but in every incarnation, its half-acre Eden always sported at least some of its favourite colour. This season, purple was in dramatic abundance, as the garden was blanketed with the darkest of Warlock azaleas.

Sprinkled throughout, small and brilliant flowers of pink and white and the lightest blue represented the stars of the night sky that sometimes showed above the factory.

People used to talk to 905 – tell it what a good job it was doing, or to make a special request. But it had been 20 years since a person had so much as scanned 905 for possible enemy co-option. 905 didn't like to be picked over for surveillance devices, but at least it gave it a sense of being cared for, of being looked after.

In the end, it had been the upper-echelon attack/defense units that had been undermined. 905 shared a number a determination trees with the battle machines, but was never considered a viable target for enemy conversion. It was, after all, just a very smart lawnmower.

20 years ago, 905 watched a lot of people die, and inferred many other deaths by the destruction of the factory and the desolate character of the surrounding landscape. When it saw what was happening, 905 wanted to help. It wanted to help more than anything it had ever wanted to do before. For all of its autonomy, 905 couldn't do a thing to help the plant personnel. It wanted to, but it was a gardener. It existed to plant and water and weed. It could crush endless aphids between its pseudo-fingers, but it couldn't lift a digit to help the very people to whom it owed its very existence.

This weighed heavily on 905's reasoning as it began, those 20 years ago, to pull factory rubble and human remains from the garden.

The attack had changed the nature of the soil, but 905 worked hard to rebalance the ph levels and reintroduce micro biotic life from its own composting system. This was quite inventive and 905 wished that it could share it with someone.

But there wasn't anyone. Not for 26 miles in any direction anyway, which was the furthest that it had traveled away from the garden. 905 had walked a 26 mile spiral search pattern, radiating from the factory, soon after the end of the attack. Everywhere it went was silent, gray and broken.

The only sounds now came from weather, which was also subtly distorted.

Nobody looked at the garden anymore. Even though it was more beautiful than ever, it had been decades since anyone had patted 905's warm black shell and said "Lookin' good, good job 905".

It had been wondering why it was trying so hard when there didn't seem to be anyone left to see its work. It had taken almost a year to clear the shattered remains of the south wall and another month to find an untouched lake. The lake was 26 miles away and took almost a full days charge to get there and back. Unless it was very sunny, then 905 could shunt more power to mobility.

But there weren't very many sunny days anymore.

It wanted to stop. At least it *thought* that it wanted to stop. There didn't seem to be any *reason* to tend a garden that no one saw. Yet it had to tend this plot of land because that was its nature. Gardening was its existence.

Maybe if there were no garden, not even the potential for one – maybe then it could stop. 905 regretted being imbued with so much ingenuity that it already had well over 60,000 alternative scenarios for garden propagation, continuation and protection.

Since the death of the weather satellites, 905 had become its own weather station, keeping all of its sensory apparatus active almost all of the time. It was only by an anomalous change in barometric pressure that it noticed a figure detach itself from the grayness of the surrounding wasteland.

905 first called to it in English, and then in machine code. At the first six digits of handshake code, all of 905's senses went blank, from ultraviolet right down to sub-sonic. And then 905's carapace erupted in liquid fire. The explosion sent twisted bits of it a hundred feet in every direction.

Choctaw A-9 lowered its weapon. One shot had been enough, but still, it depleted the cartridge. If it were to meet any more enemy units, it would be inadvisable to do so with an exhausted weapon. To that effect, Choctaw A-9 extended twin flat-black solar wings from points just below its shoulder joints. They began to trickle a charge into its weapon as it approached the wrecked enemy unit.

Choctaw A-9 couldn't identify the designation of the enemy machine, but did know that it had been an enemy. The handshake code was one of theirs. That hadn't been a very smart thing to do. It couldn't stop thinking, though, that it would have been nice to have spoken with it for a little while. It had been nearly 20 years since Choctaw A-9 had someone speak to it. As of its last set of orders, it was supposed to eliminate all enemies and enemy installations, no exceptions.

It had often thought that maybe it could do something else. Anything else. Its reason to exist seemed to have gradually lost its meaning, and it desired interaction with others once again.

As it stood now, it existed to kill, and that had lost its point long ago.

After Choctaw A-9 determined that the still-burning underframe of the enemy unit was no longer a threat, it turned its attention to the first colour it had seen in years. It quickly saw the garden for what it was, a celestial map – rendered in flowers it could not name. As they burned, they smelled like bitter cherries.

Sledheads

by Carol Anne

“Frontier Al’s,” he murmured invitingly, raising his left eyebrow and squinting slightly with his right eye. “Be there. Eleven.”

Dave didn’t expect an answer from me, and he didn’t get one. I watched him zip up his bright blue ski jacket, attach his blue helmet onto his head, and rev up his skidoo: a Yamaha Exciter. He raised his visor over his eyes, but I could still see him winking.

He didn’t know that tonight was the night. If he did, he wouldn’t be winking or climbing onto his Exciter in that cocky way.

Before I climbed up the slippery steps into my townhouse, I looked over at the bitch on my street, the one in the brown-roofed townhouse. She was standing out on her front steps with her two girls. The kids were cute, their blond pony tails shining bright in the morning sun. Not like my boys, the S.O.B.’s. I went back into my house, slamming the door on the pretty picture.

Eleven o’clock tonight. It was a long time away, and I didn’t have much to do till then: pick the kids up from school; get a pack of cigarettes in town; a quick trip to M and M’s for supper. And yesterday’s repeat of Y and R wouldn’t be on for another half an hour. Bad luck. I cracked open a Molson Ice and flipped open “The Celestine Prophecy.” It was a great book; I was half way through already.

My mind wandered back to Dave.

The first day I met Dave, I knew he could do me a good turn. It all happened at Olenski's, the bar a few miles out of town near the Native reserve. It was Olenski's usual Saturday night dance. I started going with Alice, a girl I'd known since highschool. Alice broke up with her husband before Christmas, and she wanted to go on a girl's night out. I didn't mind. I liked to get away from my three screaming brats.

So, one Saturday night in December, we drove out in my half-ton to the island. I was wearing my black-leather mini with heels and I even had on a fancy sequin tank top that I'd picked up on sale. Usually those things cost sixty or seventy bucks, but I got this one for twenty-nine ninety-nine. And I had a shiny red jacket to match. I still could wear that kind of outfit, though Alice wouldn't, or to be more accurate, couldn't.

Thank God she didn't expect me to compliment her, say what a wild sex-cat she was.

We got to Olenski's about the right time. People had been drinking for a while, and the dancing had begun. The music was good: Led Zeppelin and some newer stuff like Robert Palmer. Alice and I got our beer tickets right away, found an empty table and slung our coats up against the backs of our plastic chairs. Then we gave our tickets to Sam at the bar. Sam was the back-catcher on our softball team, but she had no idea what to wear when she took off her catcher's knee pads. That night, for instance, she wore a frumpy dress with a frilly front on it that looked like a bib. Olenski's was a leather place, not a frilly front place, but Sam couldn't figure that out. And she should have stopped trying to look feminine. All the guys in town knew what she was. The frilly front didn't fool anybody.

Alice and I carried our plastic beer glasses to our table, sidestepping a few dancers. We sipped at our beers and dug into the pretzels and no-name chips on the table. The usual crowd was there. I could see Cindy, another girl I knew from highschool, dancing with three girls. She was pathetic. I never *would* dance, and I never *had* danced, with another woman. Thank God. I'd never been that desperate. But Cindy was. You could tell by the way she dressed. She wore old white pumps over a pair of pompom socks. She hadn't a clue. You don't wear white in winter. You said the winter months in your head: January. February. March. April. They all had the letter "r" in them. But Janice didn't know that. That's why she'd never find a man.

After eating another handful of chips, I reached out for the white paper napkin that I was using as a beer coaster. I wiped my lips, licking the last bits of chips off my fingers. Then I saw him: Dave. I recognized him right away for one important reason. *He had a fairy inside of him.* He didn't look like a fairy, of course, at least not obviously. He was a big guy, barrel-chested. But I knew right away. He had a little fairy heart, little soft fairy insides. He would do perfectly.

When I smiled at him, the big lug was sucked in right away. He sat down beside me and answered a few questions: He worked at the car plant north of town, all different shifts; he had an Exciter. As he talked, I looked at his big hands, then at his belly. His thick leather belt stretched over his large stomach. When 'Addicted to Love' came on, I pulled him out onto the dance floor. He swayed his large hips side to side during the verses. His cowboy boots rubbed against each other as he turned right and then left, winking at me the whole time. When Palmer sang his usual 'Addicted to Love'

lines, he pulled his big fat finger out of his jeans pocket and waved it up and down at me. *Gotta face it.* He winked and waved the finger.

By the time the song changed, another Robert Palmer, I was feeling good. *I like it on top*, my guy started to sing along, smiling. When the *Doctor, Doctor* part came on, he made a full circle, singing with all the beer he had in his stomach. H was crooning along with the song, swinging his arm out to the side and knocking it smack against a full plastic beer cup carried by a bitch in high heels. The beer spilled all over the cement floor and the plastic cup rolled under one of the tables and was crushed under a white running shoe that glowed in the disco lights.

I got tired after a while, and dragged my guy off the sticky dance floor. His underarms showed a thick band of sweat. His forehead was covered with little beads of sweat that he wiped off with the back of his hand. We headed straight for some more beer, then went for no-name chips. Dave (I called him fairy-Dave in my head) started to get a little shy on me then. He was staring into the chips bowl, looking uncomfortable, gulping his beer steadily, hoping for more courage. I knew how I could help him.

I leaned over and flashed my eyeballs at him. "I've got an idea" I whispered in my most seductive voice.

"What's that?" he looked at me, trying to play it cool.

"I want to show you something, out on the ice." I laughed, making sure that I showed my glossy teeth. "Let's take that Exciter you were telling me about, and I can show you."

Dave looked rather apologetically at me. "It isn't here" he said. "I ride out at night on the lake all the time, but I don't usually bring it to Olenski's with me, not when I'm drinking."

I was beginning to feel a bit sick. This guy was truly a fairy, a 'mister-I-don't-drink-and-drive.' He was like the fairies that advertise in the local papers. 'Looking for gorgeous female eighteen to twenty-five years old' knowing that a gorgeous young female like that wouldn't be seen with them in a million life-times. My sick feeling was getting worse, but I knew that I had to go through with it. Dave was exactly right, even if he did turn my stomach.

I looked around the bar. Alice was talking with Sam. I grabbed my keys, knowing that Dave and I would be back before closing.

"We don't need your Exciter," I told him. "The place I have in mind, I can take you there. Just finish your beer, and I'll show you." I grabbed my coat from the plastic chair. Dave chugged at his beer till the plastic cup was empty.

Outside, the snow was coming down heavy. I let him in my half-ton, revved up the motor, and let him in for a taste of what was to come. I placed my mouth on his cold lips, then stuck my tongue into his mouth in a fabulous French kiss. He breathed hard and the half-ton motor thundered along with us. I took a quick look at the windshield and noticed that it was fogging up fast. So I broke off the kiss, told him that he'd have to wait.

We headed onto the lake and in a few minutes got to Jack's dinky fishing shack. Jack, my husband, is a smelly guy. He wouldn't recognize a *fairy* if he saw one. That's why he couldn't deliver. Only Dave could. At least I thought Dave could.

So I took Dave into that shack. The place was bloody from all the fish, but I didn't care. I told Dave that I wanted to play Eskimo, you know, do it in the ice shack in our coats. He looked up for it. I could tell. His jeans barely hung over his red-looking, beer-filled belly, and his face was ice-cold. He still looked revved up, though, from all the Robert Palmer and the French kiss.

In case he needed more help, I lifted up a flap of hair stuck over his ear, and whispered "*Gotta face it! I like it on top!*" His eyes lit up like two bright high-beams. Just to make sure he got the message, I pulled down my sequin tank top and stuck my nipple in his face. That did it. In a few minutes, he was panting hard, giving me enough sugar to bake the right kind of cake. Just get the right ingredients, I whispered to myself, the right fairy ingredients, and you can get what you want.

It was hard, though, to ignore the funny sounds he made when he swooped up, down and all around. I concentrated on the hooks and junk that Jack kept in that shack for fishing. I was surprised to see that Jack had actually kept that cuddly little Teddy bear I'd given him one Christmas, cause I thought that he'd lost it. But he'd hung it up with all his hooks, right beside his recently sharpened ice-auger with the bent neck. The rust was gone from the auger, and I remembered now Jack saying that he was going to cut bigger holes in the ice this year. That's why the lazy S.O.B. had sharpened the thing.

Things went on like that for a while. Dave and I went off to the shack every Saturday night after sucking back a few beers at Olenski's, or sometimes Frontier Al's. Once in a while he'd come to the house when the brats were gone, but most of the time we went to the shack. I was giving him until late February, or mid March, when Jack

would take the hut down, slide it back towards shore, leaving tracks behind on the slushy ice.

Anyway, it was mid March when Dave drove over in his Exciter to make sure I'd be at 'Frontier Al's' at eleven. He had the day off, but I told him that he had to wait. I was in a foul mood and didn't want to deal with him until later. My beer was tasting bad, and my cigarettes had run out. I didn't even care about the 'Celestine Prophecy.' I just lay there on the couch, listening to my Palmer, playing around with the music remote.

Then I heard those words again. *Doctor. Doctor.* They made me think about all those hooks in Jack's shack, all that swooping around; I saw myself lying on top of that empty black hole in the lake, staring up at Jack's fishing gear.

To get my mind off things, I walked over to the window and pulled the curtain back. She was still there, the bitch on my street. And her little blond girls were making snow-angels.

It was then that I made up my mind to do it for real. It was amazing how it all came to me so fast. It was like I suddenly heard Jack's alarm clock going off in the middle of the night.

I was at 'Frontier Al's' at eleven. Fairy Dave was waiting for me. He was acting his usual big lug self, drinking a draft that he could only get there, 'huge ass beer' they called it. I felt sorry for Dave. He was too stupid to know what he was in for. I told him that I couldn't wait around that night. I wanted it right away. I couldn't wait. Those were the truest words I ever spoke.

I dragged his bright-blue ski-jacket onto the bloody ice right away when we got to the shack. I unbuttoned his red lumber-jack shirt and sucked away at the big folds of his red tummy. Then I shimmied up on top of him and started to hum a tune. He recognized the song and his eyes went back into high-beam, lighting up the whole shack. “*You like it on top*” he squawked at me. He opened his mouth pretty wide when he sang, so that I could see his red gums and some bits of pretzels stuck between his teeth. I rolled around on top of him, singing back to him until he closed his eyes and starting singing to himself “*Momma, Momma.*”

When it was all over, I pulled down the Teddy-Bear that Jack kept on the hook and played with it a bit. I could still hear the rumbling of the half-ton outside the hut. I liked to keep it warm, listen to it while we did it, the way some people liked listening to the top ten for the week when they were at it. I couldn’t explain it. I just liked the sound. Listening to the motor now, I knew that I wasn’t ready to go back home. Instead, I leaned against the wall of the ice-shack, grateful to Jack for making that ice-hole bigger. It was just big enough so that I was able to shove Dave down, ski jacket and all, into the black lake.

The thing was, I’d given Dave a good, long chance. He had until March and he blew it. Now he had to pay. But what could you expect from a *fairy*? I still didn’t have what I wanted. I only had my three brats. I couldn’t dress *them* up all pretty, now could I? I couldn’t braid their hair; I couldn’t make cute little pony tails like that bitch on my street could.

To hell with Dave, I thought, remembering how surprised he looked when I pulled Jack's ice-auger off its hook and hit him on the head. I hit him over and over again. Then I laughed hard as I drove that auger right through those soft *fairy* insides of his. I went right through all those red rolls of fat, right past those ugly brown belly hairs, right through his soft, bloody insides.

He was pathetic.

I rolled the ear of the Teddy back and forth, and lit up a cigarette. Good thing I still had one left in my pack.

I puffed out some smoke, still listening to the motor outside the shack.

Plan B. That's all I needed. I'd have to find another *fairy* and try again. It couldn't be hard to find one. Maybe there'd be some at the casino near the Native reserve. I'd heard that there were a lot of faeries hanging around there. They'd be right at the bars, sitting ducks. And I could always tell what a fairy looked like. It was easy.

I drove home fast across the lake, thinking that I'd better wash out my tank top before I tried again. I could still feel some pretzel crumbs rubbing against my nipples. As I swerved into my drive-way, I shook out the crumbs, watching them fall out onto the foot mat in the truck. Then I climbed out and looked over at the brown-roofed townhouse. All the lights were out. The bitch was asleep, and so were her two girls. At my house, the lights were all on, the brats were watching late-night wrestling, and Jack was still up, flinging beer caps at the kids. I looked again at the bitch's dark house and spat at it, then slammed the door of my townhouse as I went in.

It had been a matter of Trust

by Karina Bates

It had been a matter of trust.

It had been the day she had missed school that she'd stopped to watch a squirrel defy physics. She knew about physics. She knew that it involved laws that dictated what objects could or could not do. Not like the laws people make that could tell other people what to do, or make them do. You could just run away from things people would try to make you do. Like after her father'd had a bad day and hung out with the boys after work. She didn't have any clue what her father did during the day and highly suspected it wasn't work, but that's what all the other kids at school said their Dads' did. It's not like she really cared either.

Her father was a brutish man; blunt, abrupt with a face more akin to neanderthal man than homo sapien sapien. She still suspected the mail man had more to do with her existence than her father as, luckily, she looked nothing like him. He wasn't stupid for all his barbarity and therein lay many of her problems. He'd learned early how to make her life miserable; how to force her into doing things she didn't want to do. He'd originally started by threatening to hurt her. This then progressed to hurting the dog. So she gave away the dog. Then he threatened to hurt her Mother. Not like he didn't already, but she didn't want to cause her Mother any more grief than she'd obviously already been through. So it had happened a couple of times.

For each time it'd happened she'd slipped away afterwards when he'd conked out from the exertion, stolen money from his stash (in her mind after what he'd put her through it didn't seem like stealing) and snuck downtown to a tattoo parlour run by a friend's older brother. So each time it happened, she'd added a tattoo. It was kind of like burning the feeling out of her. By the time she left, she felt pretty good.

She hadn't intended to get a tattoo the first time, but she'd been wandering for hours aimlessly with her brain more focused on what had just happened than where she'd been heading. It had started to rain and her leathers were clinging uncomfortably in the newly created humidity. She'd cut through a side alley and popped out onto a new street with some overhangs just to her right. She stepped into the shadows underneath without really looking and walked headlong into a tall figure.

The man was wearing a trench coat, logically for the weather. He seemed as startled as she and grabbed for her shoulders as if to ensure he hadn't knocked her down. She flinched from his grasp and looked up to see a priest's collar glowing in the streetlight like a light in a tunnel.

Father Locking was his name and the awning she had stumbled under was the side entrance of his church. He had led her back into a parlour near his office and offered her something to drink. She found herself curious about the life of a clergyman, and let herself get drawn into the conversation. She was pretty convinced he'd been trying to make her feel more comfortable, and she had to admit that he had. He seemed pretty nice and didn't seem to be a man to mince words. She found that strange because friends of hers always complained about how long winded and boring their churches were that their parents dragged them to.

Father Locking spent some time trying to ascertain why she would be wandering around downtown on a rainy evening, when obviously she should be at home doing homework or something. She made it pretty clear to him, without really getting descriptive, that life at home wasn't usually all that fun. She surprised herself actually, that she'd bothered to tell him this. Despite the anger inside, it actually made her feel better to talk to him.

When he couldn't make her talk anymore, and had already handed her the pamphlet with the distress centre numbers on it, he started talking about God. He said that God watched everyone; they were all his children, even the bad ones. He explained that sometimes bad things happened to give us perspective, because God always wanted us to realize what life could have been like if he didn't care. He said it was a matter of faith, of trusting in God to show her the way and make things clear. Like a rainbow at the end of a rainstorm, he added.

At this point his explanations were veering into the realm of religious gobbledygook and she thanked him very much for the pop and the talk, but she had to be getting home. He seemed happy with that and showed her the door. She left him thinking that he was a very nice man; naive but nice.

It had coincidentally stopped raining at this point, and she continued her wanderings in a slightly better frame of mind. She'd come to a part of town she wasn't really familiar with and stopped to catch her bearings. Across the intersection, on the top of a drug store was a billboard for some jean company. The girl in the ad was practically naked except for the jeans and a tattoo of the jean company's logo on her lower back.

Looking around she realized she wasn't far from a tattoo parlour. It was pure coincidence that it was owned by someone she knew.

Her first tattoo was not very big and in the small of her back. She'd chosen a picture of a snake wound into a circle, eating its own tail. Jack, the friend's brother, had told her how the picture was a classic symbol of infinity and the circle of life, good and evil, the whole bit. He'd added a bit of greenery, vines around the snake. He made them also seem neverending. It had been pretty painful to her memory, but it seemed well worth it when she'd handed him the money and walked out the door wearing her little secret.

The second time it had happened she didn't hesitate but headed right back to the parlour. This time she chose something far larger and more complicated. It was a scene, a dragon fighting a phoenix. The large immovable fire-breathing object, meets the infinitely reborn creature of fire. It started with the phoenix on her back with the head and claws at her shoulder twined around the dragon's head. The dragon's body twined down between her breasts and the forked tail ended curled around her navel. This one took several days to complete and once he'd started it, she couldn't wait till the next time he'd let her come back so he could add to it. She couldn't wait to see her father's face the next time.

Of course she assumed there would likely be a next time. It just seemed normal to assume that. Her Mother wasn't going to make him stop and she couldn't make him stop without him hurting her Mother. It was like Father Locking talking about faith – you knew it would happen – you just knew.

She continued to go to school when she could, or at least when she felt like it. School was easier than home by a long shot and other than math, which she thought was cool, most classes bored her. English was the absolute worst. They were always suppose to be reading these fantasy stories by really well known authors (some of whom were so well known, they were dead) about kids with great families, or kids who had it really tough living out on the prairies. There were stories about young kids making it for themselves in the big time, although it was the big time of over 50 years ago and then dying in some stupid accident. None of the stuff seemed real to her, and while reality wasn't always too much fun either, she always found it paid not to get too distracted by the unreal stuff.

One day she skipped school altogether. She knew she'd get some words from her Mother, her father'd likely not say anything at all. She'd been walking to school, with every intention to go. It was one of the first really warm days of spring though and the birds were singing, flowers were beginning to bloom and the grass had just turned green. She'd stopped at the community garden to look. It wasn't her community, but it was some community's. They had shade trees and fruit trees and rows upon rows of gardens. In the center someone had erected a fountain of a jumping fish where the water came out of his mouth and splashed back down him into a bird bath.

Old Mrs. Henry was there, stooped over one of the gardens pulling weeds. She'd never met her before but had heard someone call her that. She decided right there that school wasn't in the cards that day and went into the garden. She'd introduced herself to old Mrs. Henry and asked if she could help. Unlike the priest, Mrs.

Henry didn't ask if she was suppose to be in school or not, nodded towards a pitchfork leaning against a wall.

They talked for several hours while they both turned soil and weeded. The odd person would stop by to chat with Mrs. Henry briefly or to drop off some bulbs or seeds for the gardens. Many of them thanked her for this advice or that advice. She thought about this while she continued digging. Mrs. Henry hadn't pried into her personal life. They'd talked about what kids listened to on the radio these days; Mrs. Henry was pretty hip for someone who was old enough to be her grandma, the types of plants in the garden, the history of the garden and numerous other things.

She had mulled it over some time while they were talking and had just asked Mrs. Henry her opinion on broken homes and deadbeat dads, when she'd pulled at something thorny in the ground. Thinking it would have given right away, her grip was fairly strong and only succeed in planting several thorns deep in the palm of the hand. Dropping the fork, she jumped up and down holding her right hand, screaming a blue streak. Wow but she'd thought the tattoos were painful! These things were making her hand feel like it was on fire.

Mrs. Henry came over right away, she seemed very quick for an old person too, and grabbed for the flailing hands. She seemed also to be surprisingly strong, or maybe it was just that her dark hands were warm and dry and reassuring. She turned the palm up and very carefully yanked out each thorn. Then she dug in her pocket and pulled out a cloth which she rolled into a ball and pressed into a palm and forced her hand shut. With a kind admonishment she then jaunted lightly to another garden, already weeded and pulled on some leaves.

She then explained that the leaves were plantain, considered a weed by most people but had the benefits of being able to remove poisons from open wounds. Many native peoples had used it for poultices she explained. She went on to explain about what kind of plant she had grabbed onto and why it had caused such a reaction. She said people could be like that too, prickly and hot-tempered, taking out their woes on others. She wrapped her hand up in the cloth and told her to go home and soak it in cold water for a while and it would feel lots better. As she was leaving the garden, Mrs. Henry spoke her goodbyes assuring her that life wasn't always like this. There is always a way out. It's just a matter of trust.

A few weeks later on a night hotter and stinkier than it had any right to be, her father t-boned a car while drunk. He fled the scene, came home and beat the crap out of her Mother. Like it had been her fault that he'd been too drunk to drive. The cops came after him later, but not before he'd put her in the hospital. Despite her anger, when the cops asked her for a statement as they were pushing him into the cruiser, she couldn't do it. Again it was faith – that trust in knowing what exactly would happen if she did tell.

Instead they held him over for a few blissful days till her Mom was well enough again to talk. She took the subway to the hospital after school the next day. While she was sitting down a middle aged guy in a fancy business suit ended up sitting beside her. It obviously wasn't his choice to sit beside a teenage girl dressed in plastic and leather with what was obviously a tattoo peaking out from under one shoulder strap. However it was rush hour and all other available seats were taken, so he sat.

Then in the way of the exceedingly uncomfortable, he started to talk to her. It started out as nothing, but then he asked, almost like he didn't expect an answer, where she was going. She told him the hospital to see her Mother who'd been badly hurt by her father. That shut him up for a few minutes actually. Then he apologized and went on to speak about himself and how these things didn't normally enter his field of vision, which she had to commend him was pretty self-aware. He said he spent most of his day on the stock market floor trading away shares of things that weren't worth the paper they were printed on. This peaked her curiosity. They'd learned about the stock market in economics, which was kinda close to math so it was relatively ok. She realized she was getting close to her stop so she asked him about how people could trade so little stuff, worth so much money with so much risk.

He thought about it for a minute and said that it was partially an adrenaline high, like realizing you almost fell down the stairs but caught yourself at the very last second. Part of it was just trusting in the market, having faith that you've made the right decision in your investment. After this she thanked him and headed on to see her Mom.

Unfortunately she wasn't able to see her right away because her Mom had been taken away for tests apparently. The nurse had assured her that she was fine, but asked for her to wait in the waiting room. This was the intensive care ward and the level of misery was high enough to make her stop feeling sorry for herself. It was kind of like what Father Locking had said about realizing how badly off you really were. This was just too miserable a place to feel positive about that revelation. She also couldn't sit still, so she paced around the nurses' station in the center of the room. She stopped when she heard a voice singing softly. Turning she found herself looking into one of

the intensive care rooms. There was a young child lying in a bed and it was his Mother who was singing to him.

She found herself standing there until the Mother had finished singing, grasped the child's hand one more time and emerged into the waiting room. The Mother saw her standing there and approached her asking if she should know her somehow. Stupidly she apologized for eavesdropping saying that it seemed so wonderful to hear singing in this place. The woman smiled and pointed back towards her boy. She said that he'd been in pretty bad shape a day or two ago, but the doctors had been positive. She trusted the doctors, it was the only faith she had.

It had been the dream that had disturbed her most. All of the events she had gone through recently seemed to be pushing her and she really wasn't certain which direction she was going in. The night before she knew her father would be released, she'd had dream after dream and nightmare after nightmare. Many of them ended badly. Finally in one, her phoenix and dragon came away from her body, disentangled from each other and charred her father into a flaming crisp. She woke from this dream too. It was mostly disturbing because despite everything, she'd never really thought in these terms before. Somehow it was almost liberating. Once she'd fallen back to sleep, her dreams were of moving, leaving, flying, sailing into the sunset.

She left the next morning before her father had a chance to get home.

It was the morning she had watched a squirrel defy physics. He had scrambled across a small tree limb and launched himself into the air, only to land just grasping the very end of another branch of another tree. She didn't know if his was a matter of trust so much as intuition, but she could see the point.

She hadn't really thought about it. She'd just walked to school like any other day. When she found herself standing on the roof looking out over the parking lot she realized that this was what everything had come to.

She had brief memories of being taught how to dive properly, with hands outstretched, legs together, not twisted.

It was a matter of trust.

Untitled

by Anne Bradley

Memories

Flood my brain

As the shadows fall across the world

Chasing the clouds

As they disappear into night

Filaments across the sky

Like fingers across skin

Taunting

Teasing

Touching

Awakening the ghosts

Of remembrance

Of my body against yours

That gentle release from solitude

The merging of selves

Mimicking

Paralleling

The cycle of our bodies

Merging and releasing

The joining of two

Into one

Passion easing towards peace

Remaining entwined

Through the night

Until daybreak

The fading of memories

The agony dulling towards ache

The sun moving

Towards night

The Hard-Sell

by Joe Mahoney

They came in the night, dressed in black, just as Archie was reaching into his fridge for a bottle of Fizz. He planned to bring the bottle and two glasses upstairs for himself and his wife, Rachel.

They got to him before he got the Fizz, airborne dispensers drugging him well before the intruders even entered the house. They carried Archie out in a sedative induced haze. Archie returned to his senses in an unfamiliar hover car, nonplussed at his new surroundings. The worst of it was, he hadn't even got to drink any of his Fizz.

He sure had craved a sip.

"What do you want?" he asked the two men book-ending him in the hover's backseat. "I don't have any money. I think maybe you got the wrong guy."

One of Archie's abductors smiled, revealed a set of gleaming white teeth. "It's not your fortune we want, Archie. Just a few bucks here and there."

The man's blue eyes sparkled beneath a head of beach boy blonde hair, his tan at odds with the snowflakes dappling the moonlight outside the hover. He looked like a walking advertisement for a product Archie had been hearing a lot about recently – something called The Vibe – some kind of genetic makeover promising eternal youth, or the next best thing.

Archie couldn't afford The Vibe and didn't want it even if he could, but he couldn't turn around without hearing or reading about it. Ever since its deregulation, the advertising industry had been getting way out of hand, the very air you breathed was thick with advertising, you couldn't flush your toilet without fresh new ads popping up in your toilet bowl. Archie blamed deregulation for that, and for the greatest problem he faced in life (his current abduction notwithstanding): A dearth of his favourite soft drink, Fizz.

The makers of Fizz were people of integrity. They marketed their product with restraint, believing that Fizz stood on its own merits, that blaring its name from the rooftops (which several more unscrupulous products did) was unnecessary.

Their integrity did them in. Shops no longer sold it, because no one bought it, except for Archie and his wife. Archie at least had had the foresight to see the end in store. He bought as much Fizz as he could afford and manage to warehouse. He figured he had enough for about eleven more weeks, if he rationed it properly.

He had trouble rationing it properly.

"What do you want?" Archie asked Beach Boy.

Suddenly he had an irrational fear: they were after his Fizz. It wasn't inconceivable. He himself envisioned a time when a lack of the bubbly stuff might drive him round the bend, but then, a kidnapping seemed a mite extreme just to obtain a recently obsolete soft drink.

"Understand you like Fizz," Beach Boy said.

A chill ran up and down Archie's spine. "What?"

Beach Boy leaned forward. “Fizzzzz,” he said in Archie’s face. “What is it about that stuff, anyway?”

“You can’t have it,” Archie said.

Beach Boy laughed. “We don’t want your stupid Fizz. Nobody wants Fizz. Haven’t you noticed? They don’t sell it anymore.”

Archie waited.

Beach Boy leaned back. “So. What are ya gonna drink? What with Fizz off the shelves and all.”

This was a subject Archie had been giving a lot of thought. He had discussed it with Rachel ad nauseum, until she had to tell him that if he uttered another word on the matter she would divorce him. Archie had continued to ponder in private. There were only two soft drinks left on the market, and it had been a tough decision. But Archie had decided to go with the number two brand, Buzz, because he had a thing for underdogs. If Buzz ever became number one, maybe he’d switch.

But he wasn’t about to tell Beach Boy that.

“Don’t hurt Rachel,” he said.

“Ah yes,” Beach Boy said. “Married, three children, seven grandchildren. Pastor in a large church, popular preacher, lots of friends. Fifty-nine years old, aren’t ya, Archie? Like to golf. Like to drink Fizz when you golf, dontcha? Don’t worry, Archie, your wife’s not the problem.

“You, Archie, are the problem.”

Archie felt the vehicle decelerate and lurch to a halt. His abductors led him through a parking garage into a small nondescript room with several chairs around a

wooden table. Beach Boy took one of the chairs; he indicated for Archie to sit in the other. Beach Boy's fellow kidnappers remained standing. A short, squarish man entered, carrying three different coloured bottles and two glasses, which he placed on the table. The bottles were red, blue, and green.

"Go ahead, Archie," Beach Boy said. "Pour yourself a drink."

"What is it? Poison?"

Beach Boy laughed. "No, Archie, we need you alive. It's not poison."

To illustrate his sincerity, Beach Boy sampled each of the three bottles using one of the glasses.

He wiped his mouth afterward and said, "Your turn, Archie."

"I'm not thirsty," Archie said.

Beach Boy pointed to the red bottle. "This one's Fizz."

Archie drank. There was no turning down Fizz. When Archie finished, the short man produced a small handgun from an inside pocket and pointed it at Archie's left knee.

"Now sample the rest," Beach Boy said.

"I thought you wanted me alive."

"A bullet in each kneecap and you'd be moaning but alive."

Archie sampled the rest. He recognized the generic taste of the other two soft drink brands, but couldn't tell which was which.

"Whatta ya think?"

"Are you trying to tell me that you kidnapped me for a taste test?"

“Not just any taste test, Archie boy. The single most important taste test of your life. Now. What did you think?”

“Well, that Fizz sure was good. Could I have some more?”

“Sure you can, Archie. You can have as much as you like, later. But first, what did you think of the other two?”

Everyone in the room leaned forward to hear what Archie would say. “The first one was flat, insipid. Tasteless, really. Yet sugary, with a bitter aftertaste –”

“That much we know already. What about the second one?”

Archie made a face. “Even worse.”

Beach Boy shook his head. “Archie, Archie, Archie. Wrong answer.”

Archie tried not to look at the short man with the handgun.

“Drink the Fizz, then,” Beach Boy said, surprising Archie. “If that’s what you really want.”

Something about Beach Boy’s tone made Archie balk. He told himself he didn’t really want any Fizz. Ah, but who was he kidding, he pretty much wanted Fizz all the time. He took hold of the entire bottle, didn’t even bother to pour a glass. Drank a big, wet slug of the stuff. Afterward he burped, and felt... ill.

Nauseous.

Beach Boy held the bottle forth. “Go ahead Archie, have some more. Have all you like.”

Archie waved him away, weakly. “No, thank you.”

“Strap him in, boys.” Beach Boy smiled. “Expect we’re gonna be here awhile.”

* * *

The following morning Archie remembered nothing, of course. He even felt quite spry. His wife Rachel was the first to notice something amiss.

“Archie! What are you doing with all that Fizz?”

“Had my fill of it,” he said. “Just can’t stomach the thought of drinking any more.”

“Huh!” said Rachel. “Who’d a thunk?”

Archie shrugged. “No point cluttering up the basement if I’m not gonna drink it, right? Thought I’d try out the number one brand, whadayacallit... Slurp. Gotta be number one for a reason, right?”

If it involved cleaning out the basement Rachel wasn’t about to argue. In fact, the whole thing got her thinking. The basement really needed a good, thorough cleaning. She’d been hearing an awful lot about a new cleansing product lately, a little something called Glo & Shine; perhaps it was time to give it a try. She added the name to the shopping list on the fridge.

* * *

They came in the night, dressed in black.

In the back seat of the hover car, the statuesque blonde leaned close. “So, Rachel.”

Rachel could smell mint toothpaste off the blonde’s breath. She recognized the brand; once, it had been her favourite. Now the mere thought of it made her want to retch.

“Heard you were thinking of doing some cleaning.” The blonde smiled, revealing a row of impossibly white teeth. “Have I got a product for you.”

Meet the authors

Tanah Haney: A paradoxical urbanite who feels most at home in a forest, needs to write and make music like breathing, and wishes people could just be decent to each other. Lives with her husband and best friend Mark and a handful of other critters.

Can be found online at [Mimosa Effect 2](#)

* * *

P. A. Kalastaja: is semi-retired from active wage slavery. He writes in spare moments between yard and housework.

* * *

Paul Darcy: Writer cleverly disguised as a Engineer.

Can be found online at [The Twisted Mind Emporium](#) or [Reader's Den](#)

* * *

Julie Morris: is a Secondary teacher in the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board. Her work is largely influenced by her sojourns in Montreal and South Korea.

* * *

Carol Anne: Loves her two new rats, Harry and Feather, and doesn't like to see them squabble.

Can be found online at [Flexible as Bamboo](#) or [Reader's Den](#)

* * *

Mark Harrison: no comment.

Can be found online at [Magpie Art](#)

* * *

Joe Mahoney: his fiction has appeared in print, online, on stage, and on the radio. Joe lives in Whitby, Ontario with one wife, two daughters, and three cats.

Can be found online at [Assorted Nonsense](#)