

ATROCITAS AQUA

Come on in... the water is fine!

Dave Bowlin

Justin Stanchfield

Megan Powell

Paul Melniczek

Bob L. Morgan Jr.

Peggy Jo Shumate

Jason Brannon

Walt Hicks

L. J. Blount

Shawn P. Madison

Susanne S. Brydenbaugh

Steven L. Shrewsbury

Christopher Fulbright

HORNS

G. W. Thomas

Steven E. Wedel

DDP
Anthology
Series

ATROCITAS AQUA

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Introduction

Herman Melville said it best when he proclaimed that every path eventually leads to the sea. For it is the sea that holds our most sacred and terrifying fears, yet it also holds a glorious mysticism over us as a race, an attraction so strong that most of us flock to beaches, river banks, creeks, and lakes at every opportunity to stare out into the vast blueness and wonder: what's out there?

It is this unquenchable desire to know the unattainable and challenge the unknown that drives us and defines us as a species. Our hearts are forever locked away within the depths of the oceans that surround us, and we continually yearn to be part of this mystical world below our own. Perhaps this is due in large part because we ourselves are mostly made of water, and feel our amphibious past calling for us to return to our natural home, to return to the womb of this world where we first breathed and swam in its virgin bosom.

Yet, it could be something darker that leads us back to the water's edge time and again. Could it be that the dark and chilly waters whisper to the darker side of the human heart, breathing its poisonous fumes into our minds as gently as a mist washing over a barren and deserted beach, seeking to engulf whomever is found without, unprotected?

Whether our birthing as a people is of the ocean or not, one thing is clear and undeniable: most of us guard a deep and profound respect for the waters that cover seventy-five percent of our world. There is no other topic or substance so marvelously feared and revered as our oceans and lakes and streams.

Take my hand, Dear Reader, and swim with me through this journey of sixteen tales of watery terror. As we swim, if something reaches out of the darkness and gropes for your ankle, if something pulls you deeper into the depths of liquid madness, if your breath is stolen from you and you find yourself inhaling nothing but muddied water... do not fear, for it is just the ocean reclaiming what is already hers: your soul.

I'll be here beside you, if you should need me. Just scream.

~David Bowlin

BONE LAKE

Justin Stanchfield

Montana Territory, 1883

Ice melted off the sod roof, fat drops wicking down the icicles hanging from the eaves, split splat, split splat to the frozen ground. The Chinook was late, February bleeding into March, the dawn outside the little cabin sullen and cold. Annie Tate poured coffee into a chipped enameled cup, trying not to spill, her hand shaking despite the smoky heat blazing out the cookstove. Her left eye hurt, the bruise around it puffy, painful to the touch. A few drops sloshed over the rim, darkening the plank table. For a moment she thought the man seated in front of her might strike her again, but he did nothing, silent as death. She set the pot back on the stove.

"Don't go." She squeezed her eyes shut, biting her lip to keep from crying. She was so tired of tears. "Isaac... don't go."

He said nothing, simply drained his cup then pushed away from the table, his shadow large in the coal-oil flicker. Spurs jangled, sharp rowels dragging the hard dirt floor. Annie watched as he pulled on his long canvas coat then wound a silk scarf around his throat, the bright red cloth a contrast to his dark nature. Isaac Tate stared at her, his eyes lost in the gloom. Outside, a horse whickered, hooves sloshing through the knee-deep snow. He reached for the door handle.

"Isaac?" Annie wrapped her arms around herself. "How long will you be gone?"

"Long as it takes," he said at last. "Why should you care?"

"You're my husband."

"Fine time to realize it." He pulled the door open, the dank smell of melting snow pouring in. "Billy's here. I've got to go."

"You're just going to leave me here?"

"The cows are starving. They can't wait till spring." He reached behind the open door, found his

carbine, the barrel gray in the half-dawn, knuckles white around the stock. Isaac snugged his tattered black hat down and stepped outside. Annie took a deep breath and followed him as far as the doorway, shivering in the chill.

"I'm going to have a baby."

Isaac stopped, but didn't turn, rain-rich wind whipping around him, moaning through the little stand of pine behind the corrals. His grip tightened around the rifle. "Maybe you ought to talk to Billy about that."

Annie watched through tears as he wandered the muddy path to the barn, icy water spilling down her back like blood across the killing floor.

Dewey's Flat, Montana, Present Day

Mick Saurbeir pulled off the blacktop and parked his Taurus next to a dented flatbed, a bored heeler dog laying on it, watching him, head rested on his paws, ears flicking as Mick stepped past. He twisted at the waist, loosening his stiff back as he studied the little town. Gas station, post office, a tavern on either side of the highway that served as the town's single street. He reached back into his car for his scuffed briefcase, leaning across the seat. The car needed washing. So did he. Mick straightened, not bothering to lock the door, and walked toward the nearest bar, the screen-door creaking as he stepped inside.

A painfully thin woman behind the bar turned away from the television hung above the shelves of half-full bottles, and limped toward him. A boozy kid, no more than twenty, the only other person in the room, barely glanced his way, his eyes not half as bright as the dog outside. The woman leaned her elbows on the linoleum covered bar and smiled.

"What can I get you?"

"Coke, thanks." Mick fished a wrinkled twenty out of his wallet. She came back from the cooler and set the familiar red and black can in front of him, beads of condensation sweating on the silk smooth container.

"Need a glass?"

"No. This is fine." He took a long drink, the too-sweet pop tickling his nose, draining half the can in the

first swallow. He wanted a beer, wanted it desperately. These were the hard times, the lonely days when just the thought of that first cold rush pouring down his throat sang in his blood, humming him back to the blur he had wasted too many years inside. He took another sip of Coke, resigned that he would never again dare sample anything stronger. He was tired. More tired than he wanted to admit, the years and the miles taking their toll. Slowly, he set the briefcase on the stool beside him and opened it. A notebook and a micro-recorder sat beside an envelope full of photographs. He slipped one of the photos out, a High School picture of a pretty, brown-haired girl, and laid it in front of the bartender. "Ever seen this woman?"

The bartender turned the picture around and studied it, frowning slightly, tapping her left hand against the bar, the cheap silver ring on her finger clicking softly. Mick thought he saw a glimmer of recognition and pushed his luck a bit further. "Her name is Jennifer Mitchell, but she might be going by Jenny Hale."

The woman stared at Mick from under her thin, plucked eyebrows, suspicious. The boozy kid at the other end of the bar slid down and looked over Mick's shoulder, his breath reeking. He stared at the picture, his head wobbling.

"You a cop or something?"

"I'm an investigator." Mick pushed the picture closer to the kid. "Her parents hired me to find her. She left Salt Lake City last February, and they haven't heard from her since."

"Salt Lake?" The kid glanced at the can of Coca-cola, a look of disgust washing over his face. "You a God damned Mormon?"

Mick laughed. "Nope. Just thirsty. Do you know her?"

"Looks a little like that Janey who took up with Timmy Garr. What do you think, Vick?"

The bartender said nothing, but Mick was certain she agreed, her cheeks sucked in, looking steadfastly away. He turned back to the kid. "You wouldn't have an address for her, would you? They told me in Butte she might have moved out here." The kid swung his head, the movement exaggerated and slow. Mick sighed and took a business card out of his case and laid it on the bar. He finished the pop and stood up. "Well, thanks anyhow. Mind if I leave the picture here? My cell number's on the back if anyone recognizes her."

"Ain't no coverage out here," the kid slurred, turning back to the television, the encounter already forgotten. The bartender smiled apologetically as Mick shut his briefcase. He swept up his change, leaving a couple dollars on the bar, and walked back outside. The air was cool, tinged by the scent of sagebrush and diesel fuel, the mountains ringing the deep valley framed by slate gray clouds. A gust of

wind sent a plastic cup skipping across the road. He stood a moment, wondering if he should try the post office or the other tavern next, or just say to hell with it all and drive on. The screen-door banged open behind him.

The bartender walked toward him, her limp more pronounced on the uneven gravel, the photo in hand. She gave it back to him. "Look, mister..."

"Saurbier. Mick Saurbier."

"Okay, Mr. Saurbier. I didn't want to say nothing around Donny. He can't keep his mouth shut." She took a deep breath. "I know that girl. 'Cept she goes by the name Janey Hall, now."

"Know where I can find her?"

She stared at Mick, holding his eye. "You really working for her folks?"

"Yes, I am."

"She's living with a guy named Timmy Garr up by Bone Lake. She isn't quite right in the head, if you ask me." She waited while Mick scribbled the information down. "And, Mr. Saurbier?"

"Yeah?" Something in her voice made him edgy.

"Be careful. Tim Garr is an asshole. But he's a tough asshole." She hobbled away while Mick waited until she was gone, then turned the ignition, rolling up the windows, suddenly cold for no reason.

Montana Territory, 1883

The wind was stronger, shifting to the North, the warm, damp Chinook finished. The rain was turning to snow, tiny flakes stinging Annie's cheeks as she heaved against the sagging corral gate. The horses inside ran past her, tails high, smelling the storm, kicking up wet clumps of crap-stained snow. Annie ducked, avoiding the dangerous hooves. She didn't like horses. They frightened her, the sheer power in their sleek bodies a force untamed. Around her they ran, finally settling down to sniff the grain bucket in her hand. She wrapped a soft rope around a dun mare's neck and led her out of the muddy corral. Her feet already cold, Annie saddled the mare, fumbling with the cinch, dreading what lay ahead.

Snow fell heavier, the wind rising, trees swaying as she stepped into the saddle, settling uncomfortably

into the stiff leather. The mare danced, pawing the ground with her front feet, angry at being cut away from the others. Annie struggled with the reigns, dragging the mare's head around and kicking her uselessly in the ribs. She kicked harder, digging with her heels. The mare snorted but stepped out, following the wide swath the hungry cattle had left in the snow, heading toward the low, timbered gap leading to the lake and the trail beyond. Annie wrapped one hand around the saddle horn as the mare broke into a trot, slipping now and then on the icy path.

She had been a fool for falling in love with Billy Conlin. She'd been a bigger fool for letting Isaac find out. It was one thing for a man to lose a wife, far another to lose his partner. Isaac had lost both. Shivering and sick, she spurred the mare faster, afraid she was already too late. Snow swirled past, blinding her as she topped the stony ridge, a few boulders peeking up from sickle-shaped drifts. Annie waited as the gust settled down, trying to find her bearings, the trail rapidly vanishing under the falling whiteness. It disoriented her, turning her sense of direction around. Were it not for the broad trail the cattle had stomped as they followed the sleigh load of moldy hay off the ridge she would have been lost. The mare danced nervously, trying to turn her rump to the storm. Annie kicked her and started down.

Ahead, through a narrow gap in the scrub pine, she caught a glimpse of the sleigh, the little herd strung out behind, moving slowly toward a broad, perfectly flat expanse of snow. At the lead rode a single rider, breaking trail a hundred paces in front. Annie's stomach lurched as she realized Isaac was leading Billy and the heavy, horse drawn sled straight across the frozen lake.

From far below she heard a crack, rifle sharp, muffled softly by the swirling snow.

Mick Saurbier drove the Taurus as far as he dared, the dirt road more suited for a four wheel drive than a highway car. He pulled off in a small meadow, the tires bouncing across the deep ruts, trying to avoid the rocks poking up, then started on foot, huffing in the thin air, the road steep and uneven. Sweat ran down his back by the time he topped the ridge, his windbreaker hanging open as he stopped to catch his breath. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and started off again, the .357 Smith strapped under his left arm chaffing. He had thought about leaving it behind, but the bartenders warning made him think twice. The road leveled, twisting through boulder patches and stands of lodgepole, mistletoe choking the trunks, leaving misshapen growths bulging from their scaly bark.

The wind shifted, carrying the dank wet kiss of deep water with it. Mick pulled a folded map out of his back pocket, trying to make sense of the tangled skeins of abandoned logging roads and trails. He had stopped at the local Forest Service long enough to buy the map and ask the girl behind the front desk for directions. She had painstakingly traced the route to Bone Lake in red felt-tip marker, no doubt dying to ask why he wanted to go there. From the scattered reactions he had gotten around the little town it was clear most people held the same opinion of Tim Garr as the bartender. He stuffed the map back in his pocket, wishing the encounter was already over.

The road steepened once more, then abruptly ended on top of a small, wooded bench, a locked metal gate barring his path. A faded 'No Trespassing' sign hung on the wooden brace post, slapping in the breeze against the barb wire beneath it. Mick climbed over the gate, his weight dragging it down, swinging it wildly. He jumped to the ground on the other side, his ankle twisting painfully as he lit.

"Shit." He stood a moment, letting the pain subside. "Hell of a missing persons case this is."

He walked on, the hair along the base of his neck rising. Mick had never been a cop, never even been a fan of mystery novels or thrillers. Why he had become a private investigator remained the biggest unsolved mystery of his life. It was hard, dangerous work, and were it not for a certain talent in finding lost things, he would have given it up ages ago. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was already past four o'clock. He glanced up at the sky, the clouds darker, twisted and gray, writhing around the jagged peaks. Ahead, the road broke into a small, hilly meadow.

Once it had been a hay field, traces of ditches hidden beneath clumps of dry, yellowed grass. Sagebrush and gopher holes dominated the meadow now, prickly stands of gooseberry poking up through the piles of rotted fence poles and rocks. A forlorn plow lay tipped on its side, rusting into oblivion, while further below, nestled beside a marshy spring, stood a handful of tumbled buildings, the roofs collapsed, an ancient corral lying in broken heaps behind it. Not far away stood a camp trailer, the aluminum sides faded and dull. Mick squinted, looking for signs of life, but found nothing. More nervous than before, he trudged toward the trailer, glad now he had brought the pistol.

A faint chemical whiff clung to the trailer. Mick shook his head, disgusted. He had never been a cop but he recognized a meth lab when he found one.

"Well, well, Jennie," he muttered, "Aren't your parents going to be proud when I tell them where I found their little girl." He rapped against the door, trying not to act as nervous. He was about to rap again when he heard footsteps behind him.

A girl in a long, gray coat rode past the ruined barn, seated high on a dun colored mare. Mick waved at her, trying to catch her attention. If she saw him, she paid no attention. He waved harder, shouting. "Hey? Hello?"

The woman ignored him, kicking the horse hard in the sides, taking off at a canter toward a low saddle in the hills behind the abandoned homestead. Mick stood, angry at his luck, and started in the direction she had gone, his ankle throbbing. He paused a moment to check his watch. Madder than before, he looked back toward the girl on horseback, but already she was gone.

Montana Territory, 1883

Annie clung to the saddle horn, praying the mare kept her footing as they skidded down the icy trail. The timber closed in tighter, towering sentinels shrouded in snow, deep shadows blocking her vision as they descended. Scared as she was, Annie urged the mare faster, desperate to reach the lake. Through the storm, she heard the cattle bawling at each other, their nervous voices dampened by the swirling snow. It pressed against the air, loud as a freight train, a surging, liquid wall of sound, the distance impossible to gauge.

"Please, let me be in time," Annie whispered, understanding all too well what Isaac was doing, leading Billy, the herd behind him, across the frozen lake. Billy, poor trusting Billy, would follow Isaac across the lake, never realizing until it was too late that he was being lead to his death. Another crack split the air, the sound of thick ice snapping. Annie kicked the mare harder.

The frightened animal lurched sideways, her balance lost. Annie leaned out of the saddle, trying to get clear before the horse went down. Together, they slammed into a tall lodgepole, dislodging a brief avalanche of snow from the boughs above. Annie yelped in pain as the horse fell, catching her beneath the saddle, her foot snared in the stirrup. The mare leapt back to her feet, Annie struggling to free her leg, her left hand wrapped around the reigns. The mare shied, dragging her a few paces before stopping. Soaked and cold, pain spreading up her hip, Annie struggled to her feet, patting the sweating horse on the neck, calming her. She was shaking, the idea of climbing back on the skittish animal almost beyond her. She took a tight hold of the reigns then swung aboard, the mare dancing in tight circles before she managed to get her pointed once more down the uneven trail. Faster they moved, the ground leveling, the trees thinning at the base of the hill. The mare whickered, a dark, indistinct parade resolving out of the flurries, the herd already moving across the snow-covered ice, following the sleigh, a lone rider far in the lead.

"Stop! Oh, God, please stop!" Annie let the mare have her head, lunging toward the lake, the smell of black water swelling in the cold air.

Bone Lake, Present Day

The sun clung a moment to the rocky lip, then fell away, shadows swallowing the last drops of gold, the clouds bursting briefly into flame. Any other time Mick might have stopped to admire the impossible swirls of orange and neon pink, but not now. He zippered his jacket, the air chilling as twilight settled over the forest, walking faster down the narrow trail, still unable to find the horse's tracks in the hard-packed earth. The footing was difficult, sharp rocks jutting up. Mick tripped, stumbling forward, landing hard on his elbow.

"Damn it!"

He clambered to his feet and started down the trail again. The path dropped into a deep, rocky bowl, enormous boulders, the edges tumbled smooth by the glaciers that had left them millennia ago, looming

between trees. The scent of cold, deep water was stronger, an ancient smell that roiled in Mick's senses, primeval emotions floating to the surface. If a mastodon had run trumpeting through the trees ahead Mick wouldn't have been surprised. Desperate for a better view, he climbed to the top of the nearest outcrop, and moved cautiously toward the brink.

A small lake lay at the base of the hill, a narrow, sandy dropping into deeper water like a dark, baleful eye. Mick leaned away from the boulder's edge, dizzy in the gathering shadows. The wind rose, rich with the scent of decay and water so ancient it had been old when man first kindled spark to flame. Mick stared at it, shivering. Far below, riding hard across the swampy ground around the outlet, a rider on a lean, dun horse charged toward the shore.

Mick slid off the boulder, hurrying toward the lake as darkness settled around him.

Montana Territory, 1883

The frightened mare lurched across the soft, wet snow, the thin veneer of frozen mud crunching underfoot, the wet earth sucking her down. Annie clung to the saddle, little more than baggage, no longer in control of the animal. She was screaming, her voice lost against the herd's roar, Billy unable to see her through the snow.

But Isaac did.

He spun his horse around, already off the ice, and stared at her from across the lake, making no attempt to warn her off. Annie squeezed her legs tight around the mare's chest, hauling back on the reins, afraid the thin leather straps might break before the horse stopped. A sinewy creek, deeper than it was wide, wound past, the snow hiding it, a dangerous invitation to stumble. The little mare plowed ahead, heedless of the danger, her neck stretched out, ears laid flat against the back of her skull. Annie wrapped a dally of leather around her wrist, yanking the mare's head around, finally bringing the wild charge to a stop. Shaking, her legs weak, Annie shouted until her lungs burned.

"Billy! Stop. The ice is breaking!"

Maybe he heard her, the sleigh with its load of rank, brown hay slowing near the center of the lake. Annie stared, horrified as the ice heaved, lifting the sleigh and its driver a few feet before drooping, settling into a concave circle filled with slush and water. It crackled, giant's feet crushing the bones of the dead, a rippling curtain of sound. The horses drawing the sleigh struggled, bearing down against their traces, unable to break free from the brownish sludge. Billy leapt from the plank seat, leaning far out across the harness tree, knife in hand, trying to cut the team loose. Panicked cattle tumbled one after another into the water as the ice folded, splashing and bawling, only their heads showing. Annie watched as the sleigh listed to its side, slowly sinking into the water pouring up through the fractured

ice.

Billy cut the harnesses free, the huge chestnut horses floundering. He clung to the hay, scrambling to stay on top as it became sodden and water-logged, already sinking. The cattle swam around him, churning through the broken bits of ice, steam rising in the cold air. A few managed to get clear before the lake swallowed them, stampeding back the way they came, water rising in their wake. Sick to her stomach, all thought gone but to save the man she had sacrificed both honor and marriage for, Annie kicked the mare, slapping her flanks with the reins. The horse humped up, startled, bounding across the dark ring of water lining the shore and onto the ice.

"Hang on!" Annie slapped the reins from side to side, working the terrified animal into a frenzy. Closer and closer she came, spouts of water hurling up with every lunging step, the knee-deep snow hiding the slush beneath. Annie leaned forward, heedless of the danger. "Hang on, Billy! I'm coming!"

"No! Go back!" Clinging to the hay, he waved her off, but she paid him no mind, unable to stop the mare if she had wanted. She was close enough now to see his face, icicles hanging off his long mustache, his eyes wide. "Annie, get back!"

The world began to tilt, snow rushing up, the sky twisting as the dun mare stumbled, flipping head over heels into the black water. Annie barely had time to gasp before the water hit her, stealing her breath with its icy kiss.

Bone Lake. Present Day

A fingernail moon hung above the horizon, a ghostly sickle in a pale blue sky. Mick Saurbier jogged the last few yards to the water's edge, desperate to pick up the trail before night fell completely. The lake was calm, short rolling waves lapping against the crumbling shore, the water dropping alarmingly into the black depths a few paces out. The girl at the Forest Service had told him an improbable tale of a herd of cattle drowning in the lake, their bones still visible under the silt, but all he could see were lily-pads and sunken logs. He stood, catching his breath, squinting in the fading light, trying to catch a glimpse of the girl on the horse.

"She comes here every night, you know."

Mick spun around. A diminutive woman, brown hair tied back, sat on a boulder, hidden in the shadows, her knees drawn up to her chest. She was thinner than the photographs her parents had given him, dark circles under her eyes, but unmistakably the same girl. Mick walked toward her, wishing his heart would stop pounding in his throat and smiled, wondering how he had missed seeing her. "Jenny? Jenny Mitchell?"

"Every night, she comes here," the girl said, continuing on as if Mick wasn't there. Her voice was low and sad, too weary for someone so young. "I hear her wandering around behind the trailer, too, crying. She's lonely. So lonely."

"Jennifer?" Mick cautiously extended his arm. She turned, her eyes red-rimmed and glassy. "My name is Mick Saurbier. I've been looking for you for a long time." He waited for a response, but got none. "Your parents want you to come home."

"I can't go home," she said softly, turning back to the lake. "I can never go home again."

"Your folks think you can. Whatever happened between you is in the past. They want to work things out."

"No." Jenny sighed. A cold wind rustled the branches behind her, stirring the loose strands of hair peeking out across her high forehead. Mick stiffened, listening to the familiar thud of hoof beats against the hard-packed earth. He turned toward the sound but saw nothing, the skin on his neck prickling. The girl slid off the rock and walked down to the waterline, kneeling, stirring little circles with her fingertips. "I can't leave her now. She's so lonely."

"Jenny, there's nobody here but us."

She kept making circles in the water, watching them fade away. Mick knelt beside her and took her by the wrist, pulling her back from the lapping water. She didn't struggle, simply rose to her feet and stared across the darkening lake. Tears dampened her cheek, shining in the twilight.

"Let's go somewhere and we can talk about it, okay" He led her toward the trail, walking backwards to keep from threatening her. He never saw the broad-shouldered figure step out of the trees, a thick, dry branch tight in hand. It whistled as he swung, cutting a fast arc, splintering against the back of Mick's head. He rolled to the ground, bright points dancing in front of his eyes. The man with the stick stepped over him, the branch poised for the next strike.

"Didn't you listen? She don't want to go anywhere with you."

Bone Lake, Montana. 1883

No thought. No breath. Annie sputtered, flailing wildly, trying to find something to drag her out of the cold, cold water. It burned, fire against her skin, crushing bands of iron tight around her ribs. She gasped, unable to fill her lungs, her wet coat dragging her deeper into the horrible darkness. Beside her, the dun mare was swimming, panicked, already weakening. A drowned steer bobbed against Annie's

back. She spun around, clinging to the icy body.

"Annie! Give me your hand!"

Billy Conlin, lying face down on the floating mat of hay, reached out, leaning precariously across the frothing water. His lips were blue, his face deathly pale, but his grip was strong as he pulled her closer, struggling to get her out of the water and onto the slowly sinking raft. He drug her higher, water rolling around them.

He never saw Isaac raise the rifle to his shoulder, the bullet tearing through his chest, throwing him backwards into the lake. Blood spread in an oily film across the slush and broken ice. Annie turned her head, her muscles stiff with cold, watching as her husband put the rifle back in his scabbard and rode away. Too cold to cry, she tried to reach Billy's body, but her arm refused to move, the frigid water leaching up through the hay, sucking her down.

Mick rolled, the branch thudding beside him, shaking the ground. He clambered to his feet, ignoring the pain and dizziness, his mind racing to catch up to the attack. Swaying and unsteady, he backed away, his retreat blocked by the thick underbrush.

'I don't want any trouble.'

'Yeah?' The man raised the stick again. "Too bad, cause you just found some."

He swung harder, left to right and back again, wild and uncontrolled. Mick tripped over an exposed tree root, tumbling backwards into the water. It broke around him, washing over his face, the water so cold it stole his breath, forced every thought from his brain but to get out of the frigid weight crushing him. He tried to stand but there was nothing below his feet, only deep, black water. Down he went, unable to rise, his skin on fire as he sank. A slick tangle of water-logged trees caught his leg, rubbery branches tangled around his leg. Mick thrashed, desperate, to break free, ripping loose from the submerged trap. Gasping, he splashed to the surface, crawling hands and knees onto the silty shallows.

"You son of a bitch." Tim Garr stood on the rim glaring down, his face a demon's mask in the fading light. "I told 'em I'd kill any fucking cop who came around here."

"I'm not a cop." Mick pulled himself upright, standing in the knee deep water. "I just came here to talk to Jenny."

"Bullshit." Garr swung again, trying to reach Mick with the splintered club. "You bastards have been watching us all summer and I'm sick of it."

Arm stiff with cold, Mick reached into his coat and drew the Smith, his hands shaking violently as he leveled the barrel at Garr's chest. The pistol felt impossibly heavy, as if gravity had suddenly doubled. Garr's eyes widened, but instead of retreating, he jumped into the water, cold drops spraying out as he slogged through the muck.

"Draw on me, will you? Well fuck you!"

"Stay back." Mick's teeth chattered as he pulled the hammer, the cylinder advancing with a satisfying click. "Stay the hell back."

The club whisked past his face, the wind warm against his skin. Tim Garr swung again and again, beating the air in front of him, murderous intent in every strike. He was enraged, driven by anger and the meth lodged in his tightly-wound nerves. Mick felt the fallen log behind his legs, stopping him. Garr stepped forward, the stick behind his shoulder, twisting at the waist for more power. Mick pulled the trigger.

The muzzle flash was blinding and quick in the darkness, the Smith jumping in his hand. He had never shot anyone before, never even drawn his gun in defense, and now that he had was surprised at how little he felt. No fear, no triumph, simply relief as Garr twisted, driven by the bullet's force, landing face down in the water. The body went down, blood spreading as he bobbed to the surface, the exit hole a sticky red stain between his shoulders. The waves animated the body, arms and legs moving long after life had fled. Mick floundered to the shore and pulled himself up, shaking with cold, sick to his stomach as the adrenaline left his system.

He thought about pulling Garr out of the lake, but couldn't. Colder than he had ever been in his life, he set the pistol beside him and turned to find Jenny. A loud splash to his left pulled his eyes back to the lake. Jenny was wading hip deep toward the deep water, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Billy! Stop!" She nearly tripped over Tim Garr's floating corpse, ignoring him as she struggled toward the center of the lake. Without warning, she shot down, falling off the shallows, breaking water a few seconds later, gasping, her arms beating the water, a sick, slapping noise as she fought to stay above the surface. "Billy!"

Mick shut his eyes, his body recoiling at the mere thought of the icy water. He drew a quick breath, then stumbled back into the lake, falling headfirst in a clumsy dive, trying to reach the girl before she went under. Ice closed around him, his arms and legs refusing to obey. His hand closed around her collar, but he couldn't find the strength to pull her to shore. He sank, tiny bubbles popping out his nose, the dull realization that he was dying swirling in his brain as the water took him down.

Something brushed against him, a surging, powerful body, sharp hooves gouging his legs. Too dark to

see, Mick fumbled instinctively for the animal as it passed, grabbing the saddle horn. Still clutching Jenny's collar he clung tight, the horse lunging to shore, eyes white-rimmed as the mare struggled up the steep bank. Mick felt dirt beneath him and let go, Jenny falling on top of him, too exhausted to move. He hit the ground, staring up into a pair of sad, dark eyes, the girl riding the horse as transparent as frost on a winter morning. She smiled once, the crescent moon shining through her.

Then she was gone.

Mick lay on the stony ground, weak and shivering, water running off his clothes, turning the dirt around them to mud. He forced himself to his feet, pulling Jenny with him, slapping her softly to revive her. Dazed, she stumbled with him, leaning against him. Mick kept them on the trail refusing to stop, refusing to think about what had happened. Time enough for that later. Later when they were dry. Later when they were warm, the lake's cold bite cleansed from their bodies. He could wonder then, wonder and mourn the life he had taken and the dead that had saved them. Up the slope they moved, warming with the exertion, away from the black, silent lake. Jenny whimpered, a pathetic animal sob, shock only a few degrees away. He let her rest a moment, catching his own breath as the trail steepened, the wind moaning through the trees.

Far in the distance, he heard hoof-beats fading softly into the night..

Stooshie by th' Loch

Megan Powell

From: "Daniel Bates" <backpackboy02@hotmail.com>

To: whoa01@hotmail.com

Subject: Loch Ness

Date: Mon, 10 Jun 2002 17:20:20 +0000

Hey Nellie,

I'm having a wonderful time. Scotland's absolutely gorgeous.

And yes, I did stop by Loch Ness to say hello to the monster. It was a dreary day, all gray and misty. Since I was a tourist in a good mood, I thought it was positively delightful. The locals probably just thought it was a dreary day. Ah, well, if they want sun they can move to Long Beach, can't they?

Not surprisingly, the monster did not make an appearance.

But something interesting did happen later that afternoon. I went to a pub, and by now I'm pretty good at sniffing out the pubs the locals go to, rather than the ones for tourists. If I wanted to talk to Americans, I wouldn't have bothered to fly across the Atlantic, would I? Anyway, I went into the local pub for a while, had a pint and just soaked up the atmosphere. I wasn't doing an Ugly American routine, but since it was the locals' pub they noticed strangers, and I was a stranger.

For the most part everyone ignored me, and I didn't try to force my way into any discussions--I was really just after the ambience. But after a while, I noticed that one of the guys was watching me. He wasn't talking sports or politics. But he had the look of a regular, getting the occasional nod of greeting when another regular walked in.

It wasn't creepy, really--he didn't look like he was going to flip out and start killing people, and it was still early, with lots of witnesses around. So I walked over and sat down next to the guy and introduced myself.

(Like I said, it wasn't too creepy, but please don't tell Mom. I'd never hear the end of it. And just remember how interested she'd be to hear the full details about your misadventure with the Camry last summer. Not that I'm threatening or anything.)

A few minutes of conversation confirmed that he was indeed a local, by the name of Angus McFarlane. I shared my name, and the fact that I was bumming around Europe before entering "the real world," that I didn't really believe in Nessie, and that I'm technically a Catholic.

I made the guy's day, probably his week, quite possibly his year. He'd been watching me because he wanted an audience. I guess he must have worked his way through the other locals years ago.

I wish I could do justice to his brogue. His accent was thick enough to remind me why they sometimes find it necessary to dub movies from English into English. So I've taken a stab at genuine Scottish dialect, as close as I can remember. Just imagine a dimly lit pub, the smell of smoke and damp men and damper wool, and the half-mad gleam in eyes staring out of a weathered face:

Ye came hopin' tae see th' monster. Ye said ye dinnae believe, but toorists awl hope. Naethin' else is special abit Loch Ness.

Yoo'll ne'er see a monster, nane ay ye toorists. But Ah saw it ance.

It was a misty morn in nineteen sixty-six. Ah was walkin' frae a lady's hoose, nervoos 'at someain woods see me an' start tae gab. Ah'd jist begin tae think canty thooghts--mainly abit th' next time Ah'd see her--when Ah heard a soond. When Ah think back, it feels as thocht Ah'd jist heard it...but mebbe that's jist mah min' gain. We remember whit we want tae remember, an' Ah suppose it coods jist be Ah want tae remember 'at soond, since it will ne'er be heard again.

It soounded halfway atween a foghorn an' a cow in labur. An' thaur was somethin' musical abit it. Ah didne ken whit coods make 'at stooshie, but Ah kent whatever it was hud tae be bloody big.

Ah was near th' loch, but it took me a while tae wonder abit Nessie. Ah'm a rational fellow, nae some toorist huntin' monsters. Nae, Ah was thinkin' abit animals, real life animals 'at micht huv claws an' teeth. Nessie was sort ay an afterthooght, somethin' Ah micht tell 'em abit in th' pub, an' we'd huv a laugh. Another minute an' Ah almost got myself convinced Ah hadnae heard anythin' weird--'en Ah heard it again.

It was almost waur th' second time. Sure, th' first time it gart me jump. But th' second time...th' second time confirmed Ah'd heard it. Mair ay an existential sort ay terrur 'at time.

Ah didne like bein' aloyn in th' fog. Th' stooshie hud come frae th' direction ay th' loch, and runnin' in th' opposite direction was damn temptin', lit me tell ye. But Ah'm as curioos as th' next fellow, an' Ah confess Ah woods huv taken a certain amoont ay pride in findin' th' monster awl those rich toorists an' scientists ne'er managed tae fin'.

Plus, Ah was bit bad by a dog when Ah was a bairn. If Ah'd held still, mebbe backed awa' slaw, Ah probably woods huv been okay. But Ah'd run, an' efter thousands ay years ay domestication th' dog remembered whit it meant tae be a predatur. Ah was thinkin' abit 'at dog, lit me tell ye, an' Ah damn sure didne want th' beastie in th' mist chasin' me.

Ah gart mah way toward th' loch, real slow an' cannie. Ah kept tellin' myself nobody'd ever been eaten by th' monster 'at didne exist. That's whit Ah kept saying: "th' monster disnae exist," sort ay like when yoo're a bairn under th' covers an' ye ken ghosts dae exist, despite everythin' yer parents an' teachers an' everybody've said, but ye keep sayin' "ghosts dinnae exist" because it's awl ye can dae tae stop them gettin' tae ye. Ah ne'er did see a ghost when Ah was a bairn, but damned if Ah didne see a monster.

It was in th' water, but close enaw tae shair Ah coods gie a swatch at it. Ah saw jist its back, a lang, thin neck an' a wee napper. It reminded me ay 'at dinosaur, pleistosaur or whatever th' hell it is. While Ah was watchin', 'at wee geggie opened an' it gart 'at soond ance mair.

"Hello, Nessie," Ah said, wishin' Ah hud mah camera. Ah was wonderin' whit Ah'd tell folks, 'cause thes isnae a story ye want tae gab abit unless yoo've got proof, or dinnae mind bein' taken fur a nutter.

Jist 'en Ah noticed thes other fellow on shair. Ah was half relieved tae huv corroboration, an' half upsit he'd muscled in on mah discovery. Ah did nae recognize heem. He was dressed in black, wearin' a big cross at his throat. He held somethin' up, an' Ah remember thinkin' it was holy water, mebbe, an' heem a nutter tryin' tae exorcise th' monster or some pish.

"Hey!" Ah yelled, which mebbe wasnae smart, wi' a big monster sittin' in th' water an' a nutter on shair. But Ah was yoong, didne fear some guy older than mah dad, an' Ah was upsit he seemed tae ken whit was gain oan.

"Whit th' hell ye daein'?" Ah started toward him--an' sae did th' monster. Later Ah thought abit 'at, realized th' hin' he'd throon must've attracted it somehow, pheremones mebbe. Th' monster bellowed again.

Th' fellow bent doon an' picked up a rifle, an' Ah got mair scared than Ah'd been awl morn. Dogs an' wild animals micht kill ye because it's in their nature. But a fellow wi' a rifle...it's mair complicated. Ah froze, but he didne aim at me.

He aimed at th' monster.

Bang! Bang! His rifle soounded looder than th' monster's cries. Th' puir beastie twisted, an' th' napper senk doon toward th' water, like it was suddenly too heavy fur th' neck. Ah'd been huntin' afair, an' Ah'd seen animals taken doon, but Ah'd ne'er felt bad abit it. Ah was pure ashamed tae be a member ay th' same species as th' cheil in black.

He fired again, an' thes time th' monster stopped movin'.

It took me a coople ay seconds tae gang frae sad tae radge. Ah didne like th' fact he'd killed it, but whit Ah liked e'en less was th' fact he'd probably dain it jist tae git a trophy.

"Bastard!" Ah'd stopped thinkin' ay heem as a nutter wi' a rifle, an' started thinkin' ay heem as a hunter. But by th' time Ah got close, Ah realized that'd been a mistake.

Ah woke up in th' mud. Th' fellow in black was gain, wi' only th' knot on mah napper tae indicate he'd been thaur. Th' shoreline was a bit torn up, as thocht a monster-sized object hud been dragged oot ay th' water, but Ah doobted anyain woods notice, nae enaw tae wonder abit it.

Nae a body did, ay coorse. It was an impressife clean-up job. Th' monster an' cheil in black micht ne'er huv existed. Ah suppose that's why thaur was nae need tae make me disappear: th' loch attracts nutters, sae a body mair coods hardly make a difference.

Ah didne gab abit th' monster an' th' chiel in black, but Ah did nae forgit. Ah half expected tae hear somethin' in th' news: somebody'd proved th' monster's existence by shootin' it, an' th' trophy was on display somewhaur. But Ah didne hear anythin'.

In nineteen sixty-nine, it awl began tae make sense. 'at was th' year th' Pope gart some changes, bootin' oot saints 'at embarassed th' Kirk, awl th' ones 'at waur pagan gods tae begin wi', awl th' piddly ones 'at only got canonized tae placate th' locals. They waur embarassed abit St. Christopher carryin' Christ athwart th' river, but they wanted tae keep others.

They kept St. Columba, who'd subdued th' monster awl those years ago. Mebbe they thought Nessie's appearances woods undermine their saint.

That's when Ah spoke up. Th' Vatican sent a fellow tae kill Scootlund's national treasure. Ah used tae be Catholic too, but that's somethin' Ah jist coods nae stain fur. An' lit me tell ye, it convinced me tae keep mah St. Christopher medallion, e'en efter Ah threw th' crucifix an' rosary intae th' loch.

Mebbe it shooldnae huv surprised me. Th' Kirk is aye schemin', graspin' power fur itself. Scootlund suffers when someain else tries tae come in. Bloody shame th' wall didne hauld.

Ye think Ah'm a nutter. Local colur, mebbe, a charmin' toorist attraction. Ah'm used tae it by now. But Ah think it's worth it. Folk need tae be tauld.

Angus McFarlane is my favorite part of this trip so far. The story of the Catholics killing Nessie is just grand.

Hagiography's never been my strong suit, so I did some checking on the web. St. Columba did cross the loch when he was in Scotland centuries ago, despite bad weather, a druid's threats and boatmen's apprehension. Apparently there was monster-related turbulence on the loch, and he ordered the monster to behave.

As far as the Church is concerned, Nessie hasn't been seen since.

Gotta love the locals. See you in a few weeks.

Daniel

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--With thanks to Brompton's Cocktail

Shadow of the Swamp

Paul Melniczek

Wispy curls of swamp gas rose from the still waters of the bayou, thick and heavy with moisture. Thousands of insects buzzed and droned overhead, some of them grouped together in huge swarms, a singular entity sweeping above the tree tops. The air was oppressive, the dense humidity palpable on the skin of Chet Edwards as he walked towards his weathered skiff which was tied up at a sturdy wooden docking ramp. He looked down the length of the old canal into the deeper vegetation which signaled the beginning of the vast and murky quagmire, a brooding wilderness known and respected by the handful of frontiersmen who lived beneath its watchful eaves. Men who made their livelihood within its vibrant and perilous embrace, surviving the snares which lay in patient silence and existing in many different forms, some subtle, others visible to even the most unsuspecting eye.

The two room shack behind Chet was a modest home, scant on comfort but acceptable as a basic dwelling, built on fairly solid ground. But further along where the canal began, the footing soon became uncertain and treacherous. Chet lived at the fringe of a dangerous region, an area of stunning beauty, ripe with unseen hazards for the unwary and foolish. Native-born, he hailed from the nearby town of Slokine, several miles away, and the swamp had always been his home. A natural loner, Chet preferred the company of the bog's wildlife over the more-civilized human nuisances anyway. The denizens of the bayou were to be respected, acknowledged at all times, and he felt this deeply within his heart. Such feelings had always been there, ingrained in his very nature - an admiration for the vitality thriving in the dark waters beyond, but such emotions quickly eroded when Chet confronted members of his fellow race.

Greed, dishonesty, apathy, and general disrespect were the main adjectives he used to describe the majority of townsfolk. They didn't care much for anything beyond the limited scope of their vision. The traditional lifestyles were being replaced by the frantic pace of the younger, reckless generation. Men like Chet were a dying breed. He understood this well, accepted it as fact. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Reaching the dock, Chet unfastened the rope which kept the boat from drifting. Pausing to wipe the sweat from his forehead, his rough hands were insensitive to the soft towel. Calluses and harsh skin were the result of long years on the bayou.

The evening was unusually hot, even for the late summer season, and Chet's black hair was soaked, the gray flecks prominent in the fading light. He stretched out his long arms, knotted muscles flexing from the movement. He stepped into the boat, which was already loaded with the necessary supplies, and he paddled away down the canal. A blue heron glided upwards, and he watched the graceful expanse of the water bird's great wings. Nothing unusual, but he always appreciated the splendor and variety of the swamp's inhabitants.

Working the oars, he frowned, thinking about the coming trip. Chet earned his living by hunting gators, but lately his ventures had been fruitless, returning home only with fresh aches and an empty cargo. He'd been doing this for over twenty years, and couldn't recall things being worse than they were now.

The bayou normally teemed with the scaled reptiles, but something had abruptly changed everything. Chet needed to go out further with each venture into the deeper swamp in order to find a decent gator. The other few men of his trade complained of the same problem, voices muttering in frustration at The Green Pub in Slokine. Poaching was blamed, although no one had seen any signs of outsiders in the nearby waters. But that didn't prove anything. Regardless of whoever it was, the hunters all agreed that he must know the landscape extremely well, able to secretly navigate the channels expertly enough to remain elusive.

But arguments were frequent at the smoky pub. Old Rob Stoner blamed it on the sewage treatment plant which was located several miles north of town. He pounded the bar top with knuckled fists in anger, but Chet didn't believe the notion. If that was true, then there would be more indications of such in the lack of other game, not to mention the smell on the wind. The bayou flourished with a countless number of odors, perfume-sweet flowers, earthy shrubs, rotting vegetation, but nothing unusual as of late. Stinks the same now as it did two decades ago, Chet thought to himself. Nothing different here. No, it wasn't from the plant.

And besides, there were too many environmentalists poking around in the area for them to overlook something this obvious. Although the lack of gators was affecting the local waters, there didn't seem to be any similar stories from the surrounding towns. Whatever was going on, it was isolated to their region.

An Indian guide who stopped into the bar on occasion had sat there listening to the hunter's complaints late one evening. Chet remembered him talking to Rob in hushed tones, his face clouded, the narrow eyes staring dreamily in the dim lighting. The old hunter laughed in contempt when the Indian told him the reason for the lack of gators. Blamed it on the swamp's shadow, said to be the elemental spirit of the great bayou disturbed from rest, and was known to appear on rare occasion - that is, if the tale was to be believed. Seemed everyone had an opinion on the local misfortune.

Such thoughts swam through his mind as Chet glided the boat along, and the open channel of the canal transformed into a maze of submerged trees, ancient cypresses ringed about with vines and Spanish moss. High tufts of cattails and swamp grass lined the banks and sprawling water lilies emerged from the dank water, plants which thrived in the warm south bayou. A huge splash sounded next to the boat, and Chet snapped his head around in surprise.

He grunted as a monstrous bullfrog plunged into the murky depths, disturbed by the approaching boat. But it was something normal, healthy. And natural. All around him were the sounds of a world that few people ever have the chance to experience. Many could care less.

The swamp amphibians croaked their throaty calls in an endless choir, harsh and deep, the shrill cries

of marsh birds piped mournfully as they hunted, and myriad hordes of insects chirped, hidden away in the distance.

Chet was at peace with himself and nature here. It sustained him, kept the grizzled hunter coming back for more each day. A loner growing up, with no siblings and without a mother, he'd been raised by his father who taught him the ways of the bayou - how to survive in it and to be ever vigilant. Here existed magnificence and treachery, both partnered casually beneath the same hazy sky. Poisonous snakes, quicksand, and most of all the dangerous gators. His father had shown Chet all these things and how to avoid them and deal with any situation. Unfortunately, his father had fallen victim to the swamp himself by drowning in a freak accident when Chet was eighteen, forcing the boy to become a man within an accelerated time-frame.

As Chet rowed along, lost in memory, he scarcely took notice of the area where he drifted. Time passed along with the miles. He paused more often now, to confirm his bearings. He reached the edge of where he felt comfortable, and went further. But it didn't seem to bother him. The foliage overhead became denser, and the light grew dim. About an hour was left until sunset, but here the night quietly encroached already. Shadows lengthened, cracks of twilight spilling between the ancient trunks. The sun had fled, taking its warmth and cheer until the next dawn, leaving the land to fend for itself against the blanket of eager darkness.

Slowing the boat, Chet peered into the gloom, searching for a sign of his prey. He'd not seen a single gator yet this evening. Sighing, he paused for a moment, and lifted up a leather pouch from his feet, pulling out a bottle of whisky. He took a measured swig, wiping his mouth on his bare arm. He knew the limit when out on a hunt, and recalled several gator hunters who'd met with disaster from being drunk on the bayou. That was just damn stupid, he thought. Only a fool hunts while being tanked.

Resuming his motion, Chet paddled between a pair of large cypresses, their roots jutting from the water like gnarled pythons. As he floated along, an open space appeared from ahead. A pond of stagnant water lay in front, and an island loomed in the distance.

"Looks like we found a new hiding hole," he mused. "Maybe this is where all the gators been hangin' out."

The lagoon was surrounded by more cypresses, the water's edge ringed by towering grasses. The vegetation was lush and pure, and the area looked almost like an open-roof hall, massive and solemn. He stared ahead, a slight chill tapping along his back. Chet felt in awe, as if he'd entered into an ancient, forbidden sanctuary, sheltered from the hearts and eyes of men. He shivered, unnerved by this extraordinary place. Unused to such thoughts, he shook off the unfamiliar feelings and slowly scanned the lagoon in silence.

He continued, cruising forward and looking for a landing. As he neared the shore, there seemed to be an object partially submerged among several rocks. Drawing near, he saw that the thing was made up of long wooden planks. His curiosity increased and he glided closer, cautious and slow.

Hopping out of his boat he examined the items, and was shocked to see that it was a wreckage. Of a hunting boat. Chet tugged at the pieces, mulling something over in his mind. There was a strange familiarity to the destroyed skiff, and it took him a moment to recognize the debris. Cold hands of fear squeezed his spine as he realized the ship belonged to Rob. Unmistakable. Rob's boat!

Alarmed, Chet slogged through the mud, working his way to shore. The markings of a swamp cat were visible on several of the planks. Rob's own handiwork. But what had happened to the skiff, and more importantly, to its owner?

Trouble. The man was competent, a seasoned hunter. One of the best out there. And here was his boat, broken and useless.

Chet looked around, eyes catlike. His skin tingled, instinct nudging him to be extremely careful, for whatever did this to Rob's boat might very well be in the area yet. But what had caused this? Probably a large gator - unpredictable and deadly. Taking out his double barrel shotgun, Chet scanned the island, but nothing moved. He turned around.

The waters were flat, pristine. Too quiet for his liking.

He didn't like the feel of this place since he'd entered, an unwelcome visitor. But there had been no sign of any gators. Looking down, he searched for footprints of man or beast. Nothing. Only scattered rocks, moist earth. The dirt looked undisturbed. Certainly no indication of a struggle. Perplexed, Chet realized that something was very wrong here. The air had grown still and silent. No animals, birds, or even an insect called. The silence was utterly profound, and menacing.

The wary hunter crouched down, trying to determine from which direction lay the source of threat. He didn't need to see or hear it - he could sense it. Only someone who had spent their whole life on the bayou could have acquired such enhanced ability, and Chet Edwards was such a person. He was keyed up, suspicious of anything and everything.

Creeping slowly ahead, the hunter moved up the shoreline and deeper into the island. The undergrowth quickly became extremely dense, tugging at his clothes, tripping his feet. Tall ferns swatted at his cheeks. He stopped as massive spider webs blocked his passage. Poisonous species were not uncommon here. Chet moved to the side, avoiding the entanglement and its unseen creator.

Frustrated, he considered his position. Anything could remain hidden there, invisible to his probing eyes. Chet drew himself up and paused, concerned by the prospect of being ambushed in the brush. He continued in another direction, avoiding the middle part of the island. Keeping an eye on the quiet lagoon, he carefully picked a way around the thicker vegetation, searching for any clue to Rob's whereabouts.

Sunset had fallen, and the area was swiftly fading into darkness. Chet felt uneasy, and didn't want to be out in the lagoon late at night, but he couldn't stop yet - not without discovering Rob's fate. It was unthinkable to leave without knowing anything, for there would be no other help for the man, alone and possibly injured in the swamp.

Chet trudged along, walking several dozen yards when he stiffened as a terrible scream pierced the air, coming from the front of the island. His hands clenched his weapon and he snapped the barrel around, bewildered and alarmed.

Gone now was all caution, and Chet hurried back towards the agonized cry, retracing his steps, his heart pounding in rhythm to every fall of his boots on the sandy ground. It had been the only noise he'd heard since entering the lagoon, but he shrugged off such thoughts as restless imagination. No time for any nonsense, he told himself. Rounding a small clump of bushes, he slowed, nearing the landing spot. With quiet stealth, the hunter snaked ahead, shortly coming into view of the skiff.

The lagoon was still, the waters undisturbed. Everything appeared the same as before. The boat floated yet, and the remains of Rob's craft were still as he'd left them. Nothing seemed amiss. And yet there was only a terrible, profound silence. Except for the dreadful shriek, no other sound had reached his ears since entering the lagoon. Logic argued against the fact, but his senses could not be ignored.

It was getting difficult to see, and Chet knew that he had to leave. His own safety was now at risk, and there was still no sign of Rob. He cursed beneath his breath, gripped by uncertainty. Normally a confident man, he didn't like such feelings. But what else could he do? Chet peered over his shoulder, half-expecting to see the brush part and some wild animal emerge from cover. But nothing had followed him back. He eased forward slowly, silently, until he reached the shore. Striding through the shallow water, the hunter eased into the small skiff, taking a few planks from the broken craft with him for evidence. He tried hard not to think about what had made the scream, but it was impossible.

Paddling again into the slumbering lagoon, his arms trembled, and he found himself fearing the darkness and the unknown. This land was strange to him, even malevolent. Something was not right here. Chet couldn't put his finger on it, because there was nothing obvious. And the longer he stayed, the greater his own chance of meeting Rob's fate.

The water lapped gently against the small boat, and for a moment Chet considered calling out, but thought otherwise. As he neared the two giant cypresses, he looked back at the island that was shrouded in mystery, hoping for any indication of the missing hunter. The moon hovered overhead, unblemished by any cloud. Even the reflection which glared off the water seemed wrong, distorted somehow.

Chet scanned the shoreline, gasping in horror, dread clutching his heart.

A large black mass moved near the edge of Rob's boat, disappearing silently into the lagoon's murky depths. It had been enormous, like an immense mound of living sludge. Even in the dim light there was no mistaking the monstrous figure that couldn't possibly exist, and yet prowled the earth in that secluded swamp. Visible for only a few seconds, Chet caught a glimpse of something which defied all understanding, challenged his sanity, and awakened from sleep the darkest demons lodged within his deepest fears. But even more horrific than the very existence of such a monstrosity was the terrible victim which appeared to have been embedded into the thing's living body -arms, legs, and Rob's face, the eyes wide and pleading, a voiceless scream lodged within his muck-filled mouth.

The plight of the lost man was too much - impossible, an abomination, and Chet coughed up bile in revulsion, nearly tumbling into the water himself.

The gator hunter paddled away in a frenzy, arms moving mechanically as he desperately tried to leave the lagoon. His breathing was labored as he pushed weary limbs to their limits, too afraid to look back at the nightmare which dominated his every thought. Muscles groaned and limbs quaked. Time ceased to exist in his feverish mind as he journeyed through the shrouded marsh. The vision of Rob and the unspeakable entity raged before his eyes, and could not be washed away.

The grains of instinct carried him onward that hideous night, back once more into waters that were familiar, and he floated along in constant anticipation of an attack which never came.

Later on, Chet would scarcely recall the trip back to his home, numb with shock and fright of the ghastly event he'd witnessed. His hair actually turned lighter several days later, and he became sick for over a week, bedridden and weak. The town physician attended to him, blaming his illness on a swamp virus.

No trace of Rob or his boat was ever found, and the lagoon remained mysteriously hidden. The search was minimal, and a killer gator was blamed for Rob's disappearance, along with the lack of other reptiles in the region. The only skeptics were Chet, who was now considered to be unstable, and the Indian guide, who still whispered in the late night hours about how Rob had fallen victim to the swamp's shadow.

If one looked deeply into the eyes of Chet Edwards and gazed upon his haunted face, there could still be seen the lasting image of horror etched into his heart and mind, an unforgettable reminder of things which remained beyond the scope of man's comprehension.

Beneath The Loch

Bob L. Morgan Jr.

They'll never know, never no never
How strange life in dark water can be...

Life In Dark Water

Al Stewart

The icy waters close over my head. I'm jerked downward, down into the blackness. My eyes are filled with swirling, stinging brown muck. My lungs cry out for air.

My ears pound from the pressure.

It's got me by the ankle, dragging me to the bottom.

It's grip is like a vice, like a thing made of steel, not skin and bone.

Head hurts, I need air. Oh Gods, please help me. Save me from this thing.

I beat and tear at the scaly and slimy hand that has me. Jagged nails tear into my skin, digging deeper into my flesh. It won't let go.

The icy coldness of the water creeps into me, into my muscles, into my bones, filling me, consuming me.

Getting harder to move. Getting weak.

Let Me go damn-it! Let me go!

Lungs almost bursting. Need air.

Spots dance before my eyes. Winking dots. White and red and blue stars all around me.

It... drags me down.

No! No!

The mud of the bottom swirls around my limbs, my arms, my legs. The warm sun of the day is far away, so far above.

Blackness surrounds me. The blackness of the bottom. The blackness of the dead rotting things of the bottom. Soon, I'll take my place among them.

Tight constriction across my chest, inside my lungs. I've got to breath, need to breath.

No!

Noooooo!

In the deep water.

Darkness..

Silence..

No air!

Fight! Fight It! Fight the need to open my mouth and take in anything, anything that's there.

Fight! Fight!

Mud, slime, muck, crud, filth, swirls all around me, between my fingers, between my toes, burning my eyes, between my teeth, into my mouth, filling my throat, filling my lungs.

No-no-no-no-no-gods-please-no!

I try to scream. Can't scream. Lungs, throat, mouth filled. A deep never-ending pitch blackness swallows me completely.

I know I've lived this before.

"Honey, Honey. Wake up," My wife's voice breaks through the curtain of darkness I was falling into. I look up into her concerned face. She's shaking me lightly by the shoulder. My heart is still pounding.

For a second, I don't know where I am or who she is. I look into her pretty blue eyes and glance up and down her slim attractive body in the seat beside me and think, Oh yeah, if I just died, at least I'm waking up in heaven.

My wife, Karen sees how my eyes feast on her, blushing a bright red she tells me, "You stop that."

Everything comes back to me.

The certified letter. Inheritance, a fortune and a castle in Scotland from a relative I'd never known existed. And we are on the plane to go and see what it is we've just been given.

I stare at Karen dumbly for a moment. "Wow," I mutter.

"Wow I guess," Karen said. "You had me scared. You were yelling in your sleep."

The cobwebs were blowing out of my mind. "Man, that was one hell of a dream I just had."

A stewardess appeared behind Karen. "Is he going to be O.K.?" She asked my wife as though I couldn't answer for myself. "He was beginning to spook the other passengers."

"I'll be fine," I told the stewardess, whose name tag read Susan.

She went away and helped the other passengers.

The dream was fading from my consciousness so when Karen asked me what it was about, I said, "I'm not really sure what was happening other than I was drowning.. This is one of those recurring dreams and I have this one every now and then. Have had since I was a kid. This time it was just worse than usual."

"It sure didn't look like fun from where I was sitting," Karen told me. "You started making faces like that goldfish eating." She pooched her lips out and made kissing motions in the air. "Just like that."

"Really," I answered and imitated her, then leaned over and kissed her on the lips. She returned the kiss. We were like two feeding goldfish stuck together.

When we came up for air she said, "You'll have to have bad dreams more often."

"Definitely," I told her.

We landed at Glasgow International Airport and was met by a man in a limousine drivers uniform who was carrying a sign that read "Mr. And Mrs. Gerold McLanister."

When Karen saw that sign, she made a face like she'd tasted something foul. She's the kind of woman who wouldn't ever want to be known as anybody's, "Little Misses."

We were walking toward the guy so with a swagger I told Karen, "That's how it is over here in the old world Babe. Wives got to do what their husbands tell em' and be happy about it too. Over here, we rule."

That got me an elbow to the ribs hard enough to make me go, "Uuhnnh!"

"You best wake up from that dream," Karen said laughing. "This girl was brought up in Texas. Telling me what to do, don't work."

"Yeah, but I can try can't I," I told her. " And you best start listening to me. I grew up in Texas too. This cowboy decides what goes, in his home-on-the-range."

The next elbow, I knew was coming. So I blocked that one with my arm. "You can't hurt this cowboy darlin. You got yourself a Marlboro Man."

"Yeah, right," Karen said with a chuckle.

Our driver was not the talkative type. Any time we asked him a question all we got was a two or three word answer. He had one of those thick Scottish accents. So if he would of talked more, I probably wouldn't of known what he was saying anyway.

Is it very far out to McLanister Castle?"

"Yes sir."

How long do you think the drive will take?"

"An hour sir."

Is it a nice castle?"

"Yes sir."

"Is it a big castle?"

"Yes sir."

"Are we considered rich in this country?"

"Very sir."

Cool, I thought. I could enjoy learning how to be rich. Seeing how I'd been dead broke the rest of my life, being rich would be a nice change.

"Are we supposed to get titles or some shit like that to go along with this castle?"

"Yes sir."

"Guess you got to call me King Gerry from now on, right?"

"No sir."

"Well, what the hell do I get called now?"

"Shit-head," Karen whispered in my ear.

"Ha ha," I whispered back.

"Lord McLanister," Our driver answered.

"Lord... Man, I like that. All right Babe, from this moment, you got to call me Lord. Lord of the Castle. Make damn sure you call me Lord in bed too. And, I will reward you with the touch of the royal staff."

She giggled.. "I thought you gave up drugs," Karen said. "Cause you must be high if you think I'm calling you Lord anything."

She saw my face darken a little.

"Damn Babe," I told her. "You know, I'm just tryin to enjoy this, and you go cutting it down. Ain't every day I'm gonna go inherit a castle and a shit-load of money. The least you could do is play along a little. I was an orphan until a few days ago. Never even knew I had a family till this Solicitor-dude-thing, whatever-the-hell-he-is, tracked me down.. Aaaah, hell with it." I looked out the window at the rolling green Scottish hills. This was beautiful country.

Sheep were grazing on the other side of wooden fences in green pastures. The scene could of come out of a landscape painting done in the eighteen hundreds.

Karen slid over and cuddled up to me. She hugged my arm and laid her head on my shoulder.. I guess she figured she'd hurt my feelings or something.

She kissed me on the neck. "Honey, I'm sorry," Karen said. "I'll try to be nicer."

"That's O.K. Babe," I told her. "I can handle it. I can take it. You see, I'm a man. I can take what the world throws at me. I can take the pain Girl!"

She punched me on the arm. "You're being silly," Karen said.

"Here comes that abuse again."

She kissed me again and breathed in my ear.

I snuggled closer to her. "You ready to call me Lord yet?" I asked.

"No," Karen answered.

"Damn, that sucks," I told her.

"How about," She asked and paused, "If I call you Daddy, instead?"

Time seemed to freeze for a moment. Then I asked, "What, you're not?"

Karen nodded and grinned. "Yes, I am," She said.

I pulled her even closer.

When we arrived at Castle McLanister and our driver opened our door for us and I saw this place for

the first time with my own eyes, the thing that popped out of my mouth was, "You've gotta be shittin me."

What I was looking at was one of those huge mansions like they show on *The Lifestyles Of The Rich And Famous*. The place was enormous. It must have had at least two hundred bedrooms. From where I stood outside the main entrance, I could see that there were at least three towers that looked something like church steeples.

The place looked to me like one of those Bavarian ski resorts that I knew I'd never be able to afford to go to. The mountains in the distance behind the mansion just added to the ski resort effect.

Karen was standing beside me. Her mouth hung open in slack-jawed surprise. She turned and looked at me and tears were running down her face. "Oh my god," She said sobbing.

I took her in my arms and told her, "Everything's all right Babe. Hell, you don't like the house we'll give it back."

"I know everything's all right, you idiot," Karen said between sobs. "I just can't believe it. A week ago I was a waitress in a Denny's in Fort Worth. You didn't even have a job. I didn't tell you I was pregnant because I almost wanted to get an abortion. We couldn't afford a baby. Look what we got now." She sobbed louder and buried her head in my chest.

"Babe, you don't have to worry about nothing now," I told her.. "It looks like we won't have to worry about money ever again.."

The main door burst open and a middle aged couple rushed out to greet us.

The lady, a large smiling woman hurried to Karen and gave her a big bear hug and started dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. The lady told her, "You don't need to go getting his shirt all wet like that. I'd forgot what an overwhelming sight the estate can be the first time you see her."

The man, a big strong guy with gray, thinning hair and a big smile on his face told his wife, "Aaaaw just let her cry. You women gotta do that every now and then or you wouldn't be women. That's what we're for. To wipe your noses and swat your backsides."

He gave me a shake that left my hand numb. They introduced themselves as Kay and Gene Ayers. They were Americans who came over for the job of caretakers of the property and head of the estate's staff.

In the will of Malcolm McLanister, he named them sole inheritors of his fortune, if no living relatives could be found. They were the ones who launched the investigation that uncovered me: The living son of Malcolm's long lost brother Richard, who went to live in Texas after falling in love with an American girl his family didn't approve of.

Kay and Gene were the reason I was here and not in the unemployment line in Fort Worth.

They told us this as they showed us around the gorgeous estate. This place was decorated like a fairytale castle. Gleaming white marble floors, huge fireplaces, sparkling crystal chandeliers. It was hard to believe that I owned all of this now.

When I asked Kay and Gene why they made the effort to find a living relative and didn't just keep the money for themselves, they answered simultaneously, "It's not ours."

Kay said, "If it's not mine, then I don't want it."

Gene said, "I wouldn't feel right if I did something like that. You got to live with yourself and that wouldn't be easy if we just kept what was yours."

Honest people are rare in this world. I knew I'd just met two of them.

On our tour of Castle McLanister Gene and Kay pointed out several family portraits that decorated the walls of the many halls and staircases. My family went back so far nobody knew when they'd settled this estate. The oldest brass name plate I found below a portrait, identified a beautiful red-haired woman named Mary McLanister.. The date on the plate read 1417. That was the date it was painted.

Last week, I didn't even have any blood relatives. This week, I was seeing paintings of people so far back, I didn't even know how many greats to put before the names of these Great Grandpa's and Grandma's. It boggled the mind.

Most of the people in the portraits, Kay and Gene knew something about. They got along well with Malcolm and spoke well of my uncle. They were more like family than employees and this became even more so, when Malcolm developed lung cancer and he let them know he knew of no living relatives. Heart disease was common to the McLanisters. That and a series of unfortunate accidents over the past two decades, left Malcolm as the last of his bloodline. During his last months Kay and Gene spent long nights with him talking about my families history. He told them everything he knew about the McLanisters and they gave him their word, if another still lived anywhere, they would find him.

Some of the portraits were of people whose ends were a mystery. They just up and vanished.. Most of these portraits of vanished people were of men. Nobody knew what became of them.

"Probably not too unusual for back in those days, I'd imagine," Gene told me. "A guy gets knocked in the head after too many pints in the pub, I don't imagine a family like the McLanisters would want to shine a spotlight on a thing like that. Most of them

probably didn't vanish, people just didn't talk about it. The most recent family member we don't have a record of the death for, was over a hundred years ago anyway. So it isn't like we have Jack the Ripper roaming around.."

The outside grounds of the estate were enormous. It covered, according to Gene and Kay, about one thousand acres. Everything, from a lush flat green meadow, to the far border of a forest that ended at a lake whose far boundary was a sheer cliff face at the foot of the Grampian Mountains, was mine and Karen's.

On the next leg of our tour, they took us for a ride in their car, an old Rolls Royce, to see the lake. It was their favorite camping spot.

The lake, Loch Grendal, they called it, was stunningly beautiful. It was getting to be evening time and Loch Grendal was bordered on three sides by a thick forest that was in a shadow, cast by the mountain to the west. They hadn't mentioned the waterfall that spilled out of the cliff face from a height of at least one hundred feet and made a continuous bubbling splashing noise even in the distance.

A mist spread out on the surface of the rippling lake from where the falling water struck the surface, creating weird silver ghost images in the lessening light.

I got out of the car with Karen. With each step toward the lake that I took, I felt something happening to me. A strange feeling of vertigo seemed to be gripping me. I felt dizzy, disoriented, displaced. I looked at the lake and felt like screaming and couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't breath.

Karen was walking on ahead now. Talking with Kay about something. I could hear the words but couldn't understand them.

Gene was pointing something out to Karen when he glanced back at me and saw me froze where I was. He said something to me and I didn't know what it was. My brain had slowed. I couldn't move. I couldn't breath. I couldn't think.

Gene came back and grabbed me by the arm. "Are you all right?" He shouted.. That snapped me out of whatever it was that had hold of me.

I stood there swaying in the breeze. "Yeah," I told him. "I just feel a little dizzy."

The women were coming back to the car now.

Kay told Gene, "Let's head on back now. They've had a big day.. I'd be dead on my feet too if I was them."

Karen hugged me in the back seat as Gene pulled away from Loch Grendal. "Are you sure you're not coming down with something?" She asked. "You do look a little wore down."

"I pulled her a little closer. "Nothin that you can't cure later tonight," I told her. But when I glanced out the back window at Loch Grendal, I couldn't suppress the shudder that ran through me.

That night, we made love and I was right. Karen sure did have the cure for what illed me. Afterwards, we talked softly in the dark of how good the future was going to be. The world was ours now. To do with as we pleased. I fell swiftly into a deep, dark sleep.

Falling....

Backward....

Drifting....

Backward....

Falling....

Falling....

Falling....

Flashes of memories.

Being pulled out of a cave like a beast, by a rope at the end of a long pole.

They think I'm a beast, a thing.

Seeing other things. The ones that couldn't be captured, run through with spears.. Shot with arrows. Stabbed and chopped with swords.

They are like me. Dark green. Covered with a thick plating of armor-like scales on the back, shoulders, arms, legs and head. I have gills, two sets of eyelids. I am able to breath water and air. I am of the clan Grendal.

A race far older than man, we know to not overpopulate our territories or we will use up the game and all things suffer. We are one with Mother Earth. We respect her and she rewards us with a never ending memory that we carry from life to life. Always we remember where our spirit has been before.

These men-things, they do not respect Mother Earth. They rip her open and rape her and use her up until she has nothing to give back.

But no.

This is not me.

These are not my memories. I am only being shown this. I am a passenger in this Grendal's body. I can only watch as it unfolds before me. But, I am living it, as it happens.

Put in a cage, I am hauled over land, too long out of the healing water. The journey is long. I eat whatever is given me, even though it is long dead and does not provide healing to me.

I remember the face of the one who took me, who commanded the soldiers who speared and hacked and killed our women and children. I am a Grendal. I never forget.

Taken to a place of many huge piled stones, where there are men like ants in an ant hill.. This place, these men have called it Rome and themselves Romans.

I am taken to a place where herds of men sit and watch down into the center of a killing field as beasts

and other men battle to the death for their amusement. They hope to gain courage by watching others display it for them. They will gain nothing.

I am prodded from my cage by men with spears into the center of this place of death. The man who took me is here. He is sitting beside the one who commands all.

Out in the middle of this place of red sand they loose a beast at me. Hairy and standing on two legs, it is twice the height of me and four times my weight. The beast knows only hunger. I have only pity for him. I will make his death quick.

He charges in at me. Blind rage, claws slashing at me. But I have fought his kind before. I roll forward into a protective ball. All of my vital parts covered with my protecting plates. His claws slide over my scales. Bouncing off. Causing me no harm. As he comes down on top of me, I come up, out of my ball-crouch, slashing up with my own talons. I rip the beast's stomach open. I rip his entrails out.

It howls in pain. I leap on him and rip his fur covered chest open and tear the beast's heart out. I take no joy in this kill. It was unnecessary. No Grendal will eat this beast's meat.

Turning toward the man who took me, I hold the beast's still hot heart in my fists up to him. The words that issue from my mouth, I do not understand. But through the thoughts of this Grendal, I hear the curse. "I curse you forevermore.. Each life that you shall live, I will be there. Each and every time. I will end your life as you end mine today. In pain."

Then I saw this man who had taken this Grendal and his kin away from their home and murdered them for amusement. He was built heavier and more muscular than I am, with darker weather beaten skin. But this man's face, was my face. I was, in another life, Germanicus the Lanista. Provider of exotic beasts for the Circus Maximus.

They released beast after beast of different kinds upon me. The mob shouting out it's blood lust after each of my kills sounded like rolling thunder. Finally, exhaustion overwhelms me. I fall beneath the claws and fangs of a huge striped cat-thing. Today in the red sand as he takes my throat between his teeth and bites down, my suffering is coming to an end.

But for the one who took me from my home, his tale of pain is about to begin.

I am a Grendal. I never forget.

Waking violently, I reach for Karen and find only an empty bed.

"Karen," I yell, "Where are you?"

No response.

My heart is pounding. Fear races through me, adrenaline pumping in my veins. Sunlight streams golden through the window, scorching at my eyes.

Inside, I'm screaming, "Oh god, oh god, oh god no!"

I shout out again, "Karen, Karen, for god's sake, where are you?"

After flinging open the door to the hall I step out in only my underwear and shout for my wife again.

A maid I'd not met until now looks at me then averts her eyes. "Milady said she was going for a morning swim."

It was like being punched in the face.

The maid seeing the distressed look come over me says, "I -I don't question anything Milady might want to do. This is your home..."

I don't hear the rest. I ducked back inside the bedroom slamming the door behind me, dressed quickly and ran down the stairs to the garage. Grabbing a set of keys to one of the M.G. Midgets I squealed tires out of the driveway.

The picnic spot was only about a mile from the house. I drive like a madman, in the grip of panic sliding around curves in the road and almost ending up in a ditch twice. Driving over a blanket and towels and almost running into the Austin Martin Karen drove out here, I slide to a stop at the edge of the water.

She is out there, splashing in the silver lake.

I throw open my door and jump out.

I shout to Karen, "Get to the shore now!"

She shouts back, "The water's great. Come on in. You don't need swimming trunks, we own the whole place."

"Come to shore!" I scream at her.

She waves to me. "Come on. It's great. The wa..." She vanishes beneath the surface. Jerked down from below.

"No!" I scream. "No! No! No!"

I strip off my clothes and shout for her again. She doesn't come up. I dive in and swim out to where I'd seen Karen go under and scream her name again and again. I dive under and swim around trying to find her, even though I can't see a thing in the murky water.

My ears are popping and my arms are next to collapse when I come up.

Karen's not on the surface and she's not on the shore. I take a breath and shout as loud as I can, "Karen!"

Something grabs my ankle. I'm jerked under the water. Pulled down into the deep, into the mud, I fight the thing, but it's strong. It's grip is like a steel cable around my ankle. I punch at it. Gouge at it's eyes, but it's too strong. It drags me easily wherever it wants me to go.

The lights are blinking in front of my eyes.

Need air! Need air!

Blackness engulfs me.

Flickering lights.

Candles... no, torches.

I'm laying on cold stone. Opening my eyes slowly, I see two of them, with their backs toward me and Karen laying beside me. They are tending the fire. Dark green, they are covered in scales. They are of the clan Grendal.

I see bones shoved against a stone wall. Human bones.

Torches jut from stone walls sending an uneven light into the chamber.

I want to cough, but don't dare. They stoke the fire, making it blaze brighter.. Karen's chest is rising and falling. She still lives. Her eyes flicker open. I put a finger to my lips telling her to be silent. For once, she listens to me.

A round pool of water is beside us. That looks like the only opening in or out of the cave.. It has to be how they brought us in.

I leap to my feet and kick one of the creatures on his forward leaning back. His thick scales stop the force of the blow from hurting him, but he's knocked forward into the flames and bellows in pain.

The other turns to me, his gills working in and out, gulping air in wheezing gasps. I throw a looping roundhouse right to his nose with everything that I've got. It feels like I punched a leather coated brick, but he does stagger back. I kick him where I figure his male organs should be and he folds over with a grunt.

Grabbing Karen's hand, we both leap into the round pool and swim downward into the darkness. After a few seconds of going straight down, we see a dim diffused light to our right. We swim toward it.

The coldness of the lake is inside my bones. My muscles are stiff, the dots are dancing in front of my eyes again. I fight unconsciousness.

We break the surface with big gasping sucking breaths and take in the sweet air.

We've surfaced just outside where the water from the falls strikes the lake. The mist from the crashing water is all over and around us. It's a long way to the shore. A long way off.

"That way," I tell Karen and point as we tread water.

We start swimming as fast as we can. It's painfully slow.

I'm grabbed and jerked under. Both of them have got hold of me. One on each leg. Karen's screams

come from the surface. I'm dragged down. Her screams fade away. I punch at them, like a baby. All strength is gone. I'm too tired, too weak to do anything.

Blackness again takes me to its home.

I awaken again in the cave. I'm chained up this time. Hanging from steel rings embedded in the stone wall. Many of the Grendal are around me. Looking up at me. Most of them are little ones. The one I recognize as the one I'd slugged, waves some little ones to my legs.

They tie ropes around my thighs just above the knees to stop most of the blood flow.

I'm too weak to even move. The little ones take bites at my feet. Their teeth are sharp and jagged. The bites sting. My toes come off, one by one. Each bite stings more than I think it's possible, sending waves of pain up and down the rest of my body. Each bite feels like I'm being touched with a branding iron.

They suck the blood out of every hole their bites leave. They seem to particularly like the taste of my toes.

The large one stands in front of me. He looks into my eyes.

We....

Connect....

I see images of past times when they have feasted on me. Hundreds of times. It is a good memory for this leader of the clan Grendal.

He speaks to me inside my mind. "Your son will grow strong. Your woman will only remember that you drowned in these waters. Your family will once again multiply and go on. In three generations, you will be back. And I will take you once again.."

"As it has been, is how it shall be, until the time for your kind is over. We shall always be here. Your kind will not. Such is the word of Mother Earth."

I knew that the children of clan Grendal would eat me slowly. Keeping me alive until they reach my vital organs. They would eat my legs. Tying each off as they go. Then, they would eat my arms. Tying those off. Then, they would eat my male organs. The most healing meat, is living meat. I could remember everything now. Every time in the past when I fed them.

As I watched one of them take a bite from my calf an old joke drifted through my mind..

Two cannibals were eating a guy. One started at the head. The other started at the feet. After a while the guy at the top asked the other guy, "Hey, how you doing down there?" The other answered, "Oh, I'm just having a ball.."

For some reason I didn't feel like laughing.

Living Doll: Jewel Of Lost Souls

Peggy Jo Shumate
(Brutal Dreamer)

Prologue

Annie Lansing is not an old woman by any means. However, she is ageing as everyone does. Life has not always been so kind to Annie. Zachary, her husband of twenty-five years, dumped her for a perky, petite, twenty-year old bubble-gum chewing floozy with an excessive Elvis fixation. Annie's auburn hair was still silky, though it was starting to dull just a little; her face, although still showing her youth, had begun to harden and crows-feet outlined her once beautiful emerald eyes, eyes that blended so well with her hair. Her lips were still full and ripe, but small lines had begun to tighten them ever so slightly. Yes, the old demon Age had begun its pursuit in earnest and there was nothing she could do about it but wait.

She sat on the stool in front of her dressing table and gazed at the stranger staring back at her in the silver-plated mirror. Brushing her hair with long, even strokes, tears sent wet kisses down her pale cheeks. Memories flooded in, unbidden, full of pain and longing. Memories, memories...

The large window in Annie's Antiques displayed many costly trinkets: dolls, treasured artifacts, special heirloom furniture, luxurious jewelry. Annie opened the large wooden door and flipped the sign to read "Yes, We're Open!"

She just had time to turn around and head toward the back of her store when the little bell above the door jingled and a shriveled old woman stepped inside the shop. Cool air chased around the room, sending a chill crawling over Annie's skin. A little sheepishly, she addressed her customer.

"Can I help you?" Annie's voice was barely above a whisper, and she noticed she had been holding her breath. There was something unsettling about the old woman's empty eyes that made the day seem just a bit dimmer. I must be coming down with something, she thought, if a little old woman spooks me! The light outside the display windows dimmed ever so lightly. Just clouds passing over the sun, she told herself.

"Yes," said the little lady. "Please have a look-see. I heard you were searching for obscure artifacts that sank with the Titanic..."

Annie reached out and took the wrapped offering from the woman's leathery and wrinkled fingertips.

"Tis very special, milady," the elderly woman cooed. "Be careful, you do not know the priceless possession you hold."

Annie placed the carefully wrapped item upon the desktop and gingerly unrolled the bulky object. The faded face of a doll appeared; a doll of fine, creamy white porcelain. Pieces of the porcelain had flaked away from the doll's expressionless face.

"She's very, very old," Annie uttered in a I can't hardly believe this tone. "Unless I am mistaken," she said breathlessly, "this is the Jewel of Lost Souls, isn't it?"

"She is." The antique chair beside Annie's desk creaked as the old lady sat down with a long sigh. "I've had this doll for eighty-nine years."

"Why would you want to part with such an heirloom?"

The old woman shrugged and then, with yellowish teeth showing, a grin spread across her wrinkled face. She patted Annie's hand. "You will find her the right home, milady."

Annie looked bewildered at the ancient woman. "I can't possibly pay what this gem is worth. This doll is virtually priceless, Ma'am." She looked at the old woman, clearly puzzled. "But surely, you already know that...?"

The woman nodded.

Annie wrapped the doll in the sheet and carefully placed her underneath the desk. "If I may, how did you come to possess such a unique artifact?"

The old woman closed her swollen eyes and began her worrisome story.

"When I was but a little girl, my dear mother told me we were going on a long journey across the ocean, on a huge ship. I was ecstatic, yet filled with much anxiety to be on the most luxurious ocean liner for her maiden voyage. Some considered that bad luck, and I was one.

"We were leaving England to come to America with new dreams and ideals. We packed a few belongings, only what we could carry aboard the ship and we were on our way..."

The old woman went on to relate her breath-taking experience of arriving on the majestic floating mansion: how the wrought iron staircases spiraled around the magnificent corridors, the iridescent crystal chandeliers swayed with brilliance, dancing rainbows of light throughout the floating palace. An there, within a special mahogany cabinet, was displayed the most lovely gem the ship had to offer, the Living Doll, the Jewel of Lost Souls.

The vintage doll was well known from many voyages before Titanic's maiden cruise, but this was the final journey she took. When the magnificent ship sank to the bottom of the inky black ocean, it took the Jewel of Lost Souls with it.

"Ma'am," Annie whispered when the old woman paused in her tale, "are you all right?"

The old woman writhed with arthritis in her knobby fingers, clutched them to her ancient face.

"Yes, dear."

She continued to tell Annie about the frigid waters, how she had stayed afloat upon portions of the burst ship. She saw, off in the distance, a small item floating up toward the surface of the waters. At first she thought it was one of the countless babies that had drowned, but soon recognized the porcelain doll, Jewel. One eye remained open while the other plastic cerulean blue eye bobbed open and shut with each wave in the icy waters. She paddled herself closer to it, and was finally close enough to grab it.

"You see, milady, this doll was rescued the day I was rescued; while so many other folks died in the cold, watery grave in Titanic's undertow, we were spared such a frightening fate." She looked out the window onto the busy street beyond, but Annie imagined the little old woman was seeing the deathly Atlantic water again.

"Sometimes," the old woman continued, her voice as far away as her gaze, "sometimes I wonder who really survived after all."

Annie's gaze danced to the doll as the wrinkled and sniffling woman swam through her painful memories.

Before the woman left Annie's Antiques she extended her dainty and said: "Anyway, milady, the doll is not for sale, not by me. She is yours now. It was very nice meeting you... Annie."

"You as well, Ma'am," said Annie. "By the way, I never caught your name."

"Jewel." the elderly woman shrugged. "My name is Jewel."

Annie caught her breath as the bulk of it seemed to be stuck in her chest.

"Jewel?" Annie gasped. "But..."

The old woman sauntered out of the store and strolled down the craggy sidewalk, then seemed to disappear before she was fully out of sight.

Annie picked up the doll and ran her fingertips over it. "I don't know, little darling," she said, her voice trembling slightly, "I just don't know how on earth you came into my possession." Annie began to feel her eyes moisten as she choked back a sob.

Waking up early the next morning, Annie rolled over in her cold and lonely bed. Her face contorted into a frown, noticing the empty right-hand side where Zach once placed his head. Where once she'd found solace and comfort, bounding in love, there was now an emptiness so complete she wondered sometimes if it would consume her. She pulled the edge of the pillow over her eye and dabbed a lone tear as it dribbled down her cheek.

The beautiful doll now displayed upon her dresser caught her attention and she bolted upright in bed. Somehow it seemed like the doll was beckoning Annie to hold her, to snuggle her, perhaps even to love her. Her eyes seemed to speak a thousand words, her mouth appeared to move, yet Annie knew that was impossible. All the same, the doll was calling to her lonely heart, if not with its eyes and mouth then surely with its tender beauty.

No, the doll was adamant, demanding her to come. She was living up to her name after all: Living Doll.

Annie draped her olive color legs over the side of the bed and covered herself in her silky black robe. Her reflection was captured in the mirror. Her legs seemed long, beautiful to say the least. Her skin felt smooth and cool as the silky robe stroked against her with each move she made.

She stood before it. For a moment, Annie was sure the doll's eyes had followed her across the room.

"Annie, you're getting jumpy," she chided herself. She picked up the doll and clutched it to her bosom. She smoothed out the tattered blue dress, unraveling some of the lace at the hem.

The thought of not going to work began to run through Annie's mind. Maybe she'd just get back into bed and lie there basking in the warmth of the morning sunlight, clinging as long as she could to the enraptured feeling of calmness that had come over her.

Back on her dresser where she belonged was Jewel, the doll seemingly more alive and real with each moment. Although she couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was, it just seemed so real, so alive... Annie rubbed her eyes. She gazed at her new possession.

Annie's eyes widened in horror as she stared at the little porcelain figurine. The doll rose, and one of its hands came up, her finger pointed at Annie.

"Wh...wha....what is this?" Annie started backing up and fell into her bed, pulling the covers to her neck.

Annie opened her mouth to scream, but she tumbled off the bed. She crawled across the cold floor into the hallway and froze. The doll stood before her at the end of the staircase. Blood covered the dolls face and rivered down the front of her dress in a shiny scarlet stream, oozing around her feet in an ever-widening puddle on the polished wooden floor.

"No," Annie screamed. "No, it isn't possible!"

As the blaring noise of the alarm clock rang out, Annie's eyes opened wide and she looked frantically around the room. The doll was still sitting on the dresser where she had placed her before she went to bed...

When the sun finally came up, Annie had hardly slept at all. The nightmares seemed to be occurring more often and lasting throughout the night. Her sleep since the breakup of her marriage had been restless; she kept waking up to such horrid images.

There was plenty of room for ambiguity for the reason Zach had left Annie. She was almost certain that he didn't leave because she wasn't a loving person. It could be perhaps she was a bit too clingy, or more likely, she reasoned, he left her because she was becoming an old woman. Somehow this hurt the most.

Annie sighed and removed her blankets and started her morning ritual. She stumbled into the steamy shower and placed a hot washcloth over her face as the water sprayed her. Barely able to stand up straight due to exhaustion, Annie held onto the side of the wall and sloped down into the tub. Her eyes closed and her body slumped as the water began to puddle.

Groping for the faucet knob to shut off the water, she buried her face into a soft terry cloth towel. She massaged her tight muscles and reached up around her neck, rubbing it firmly.

She felt as if her heart was being plunged into icy waters with each thought of Zach and his new little prissy passion weed.

Annie looked at her reflection once again in the full length mirror on the wall of the bathroom. She spent a few moments appreciating the elegant lines and curves her body had to offer, admiring bosoms that had not yet begun to sag as much as most thirty-year-old women - though they were beginning to show their age and not so perky as they used to be, she had to admit. Her fingertip rolled over the nipple of her right breast and she caught her breath. She had given Zach as good as it could possibly get, yet it wasn't enough for the sex fiend. He had to have better, younger, and blonde. Annie sobbed and slammed her hands against the glass and slid down to her knees.

Frustrated and angry, she grabbed the towel and draped it snug around her before going back to her bedroom to dress for the day.

Annie dabbed her face with the edge of the towel and sat at the dressing table, stroking her long red hair with a brush. The doll's reflection in the mirror seized her attention enough to get up and go pick it up, adjusting the dress as she walked back to her vanity. To her surprise, she found an inscription on the doll's back. Her eyes focused on the magnificently scripted words, and she read them aloud.

All ye that yearn for youth, Greetings. The Living Doll, the Fountain of Youth, shall give eternal youth to those that drink blood from her, at the meeting of night and day, from the coldest locale. Be forewarned: The Jewel must be iced from beginning to end, only on the fourth month and fifteenth day. You have been warned.

Annie's eyebrows shot to her forehead. "What the hell does that mean?" She tossed the doll to the bed in a huff, thinking she'd been the fool after all. The doll bounced as her deathly blue eyes remained wide open.

"Living doll?" Annie uttered, puzzled. "Now a 'Fountain of Youth?" It was enough the doll had read her mind and discovered her deepest desire. And April 15th was tomorrow...Surely that was no coincidence?

She walked slowly to the bed and stared at the doll. Pulling in a deep breath, Annie bent down and picked it up and turned her eyes back to the inscription.

She read the words to herself. Annie thought she would kill to attain her youth. She wondered if that was a joke but reasoned there was only one way to find out. She would try what was written on the doll and see what would happen. After all, it couldn't hurt.

Could it?

A smile spread across her face as a gruesome thought came to her mind: she thought of getting rid of Gloria, the bubblegum chewing bimbo Zach had dumped her for.

The girl had nothing to really offer the world, she had no one that needed her, nothing special she was trying to attain. After all, she wouldn't dare have children. No, that would ruin her perfect body and therefore she couldn't do that. The selfish bitch, thought Annie, who couldn't have children herself.

Annie wondered how she could meet with Gloria, where it would be, and how the deed would be done.

Slowly a smile spread across her face as the plan formed in her mind.

Annie watched as Gloria came strutting down the street, flashing her cleavage at every man she passed. She walked across the room to let Gloria inside, then closed the door behind her.

"Shhh," Annie said. "I never let anyone in here until opening time, but this is special." She left the sign on the closed side and the front lights to the shop remained off. "I know we've had our differences in the past but, well, when I saw this I thought of you...Come on to the back part of the shop; I've got something special for you to see." She escorted Gloria to the huge black-velvet Elvis picture.

Giddy and filled with childish giggles, Gloria followed Annie. Annie wanted to smash the side of her head right then and there. Chills ran up her spine at these thoughts, but the promise of youth was stronger, and her smile never faltered.

Sitting upon an easel was the velvet picture of Elvis mauling his guitar, wearing his white rhinestone jump-suit.

The loud shriek from Gloria hit the last nerve Annie had in her control. "Just look over the picture for awhile and decide what price you can pay, and we'll work something out." Annie held onto her last ounce of composure, but it was very difficult, especially with the smell of cheap perfume practically choking her.

She watched the younger woman gaze at the picture. Gloria was enraptured by it, no doubt imaging herself alone with the King. Annie rolled her eyes and reached behind her for some Christmas lights she had set out for this purpose. She wrapped them around her hands a couple of times and left enough gap in the middle to wrap perfectly around the noisy little bitch's neck. Anything to shut her up, she thought.

While continuing to discuss the picture with Gloria, Annie moved closer to her, and slightly behind. Gloria was traipsing her long, red-painted fingernails across the King's sideburns and singing "Lemme Be your Teddy Bear" so far off key that it quite literally hurt Annie's ears. She didn't think this girl could carry a tune in her hands to save her life. And that was indeed what she was going to need to do.

With a quick snap of the wrists, Annie reached her hands over Gloria's face and down to her neck. She wrapped the Christmas lights around Gloria's thin neck and twirled them tighter and tighter while the blonde head bobbed and nails scratched at Annie's hands. Christmas bulbs dug into Gloria's skin, tearing the soft flesh of her throat, spilling small droplets of her blood over the King's white suit.

Annie tightened the lights, and Gloria's body spasmed and her ocean blue eyes turn glassy and damp, filling with blood. Her lush lips hung open and her tongue dangled from her blue lips. Her struggled slowed to a halt.

Keeping tighter grip on the lights, Annie reached to feel for the right spot to see if Gloria had a pulse. Her fingers squished into wetness and torn flesh. She had thought her fingers wouldn't fit all the way in the holes of the skin. Like fangs, the little bulbs had embedded themselves into her neck.

Blood poured from the cuts. Annie pulled the hole farther apart, causing the blood to flow into a huge Styrofoam cup; it was like trying to tear her way through a tough piece steak, she thought. She felt a vein throbbing on her fingertips.

"What am I doing? Oh my God, what am I doing?" She kept screaming as she finished tearing open Gloria's jugular. "What have I done?" Scream as she might, she never slowed down, not for an instant.

A torrential crimson wetness flooded into the cup as a white foamy substance bubbled out of Gloria's mouth.

A short time later, Annie shoved Gloria into the large walk-in freezer in the back of her shop where she the previous owners, a grocer and his wife, had left it behind. Thankfully, it still worked, and Annie was sure the bitch would never be found.

Annie carried the cup to the freezer and took the doll out of the ice-cold. Using a large syringe, she poured the blood into the doll's mouth, as if feeding her a bottle. Annie lifted the little dress and did just as the inscription said to do. She turned the doll over, and the blood flowed into her own mouth. She gagged a few times, but swallowed it all, even licked the doll's cold lips.

Just to make sure she got it all, she spread the doll's legs and licked between them, where a small red spot had appeared. She drank Gloria's life into her own.

The alarm went off like a bomb, yet Annie felt happy to hear it, excited to open her eyes, ready to start her day. She kicked off the blankets and threw her sheer black robe over her naked body. It flowed behind her as she darted out the door and headed down the hallway.

A sudden burst of energy filled Annie; she felt better than she'd felt in years. She walked into the bathroom and began her typical morning ritual of showering and brushing her teeth. She stepped out of the shower and noticed herself in the mirror. Her eyes bulged from deep in their sockets, glorious and full. She hardly recognized herself. The lines in her face had all but disappeared, her lips were lush and full, and her eyes had spirit in them. They danced and nearly screamed as they looked back at her.

"Jewel," she snickered. "Boy is she a jewel," Annie thought of the doll while applying her makeup and heading out for the day.

She arrived at her shop and was greeted by Zach. He looked so good to Annie. She licked her lips, starting from the corner and dragging her tongue seductively to the other corner.

"Annie, you gotta minute?" Zach asked.

He was obviously concerned about something, but still he looked good to her. Those distinct jaw muscles, and his piercing chestnut eyes were enough to send her into a frenzy. She innocently smiled and grabbed his arm, leading him into the shop.

"You still working in this old dump?" he muttered.

"Sure am," Annie retorted. "What do you want, Zach?"

"Annie, it's Gloria."

"Gloria? Oh yeah, your girlfriend. What about her?"

"Yeah, she's missing. We had an argument yesterday morning, and she didn't come home last night." Zach's head dipped down to his chest. He shifted his hands in his pockets, rattling some loose change and keys.

"She's probably out Christmas shopping. You know her and plastic." Annie couldn't resist getting that last jab in on how fake Gloria was.

"Annie."

Annie shrugged and gave Zach a quick pat across his bottom, spotting how snug his jeans were. "You look mighty good these days, Zachie boy."

"Yeah, yeah," he spoke with a roll of his eyes. "You don't look so bad yourself."

Zach looked up, really noticing her for the first time. "Actually, you look damn good. What have you done to yourself lately?"

Annie was a trifle offended by this remark. "A blow torch and chain saw can do wonders for a girl's appearance, and if that doesn't work, have a guy you love leave you for some teeny bopper. Does it every time."

"Stop it, Annie."

"It's true. After all, a thirty-year-old woman can't possibly still keep her youth, can she?"

"I didn't say that, Annie," Zach growled. "You always do this."

"Do what, Zach?" Annie walked toward the window and opened the blinds of the shop.

"You know what. Make a big deal out of a simple comment."

"Well, it doesn't matter anymore, does it? After all, I am not your problem; that bubble head is."

Zach walked around the shop, picking up the artifacts.

"Hey Einstein," Annie spoke to Zach. "You break, you buy."

Zach put down the four thousand dollar glass statue and walked toward Annie.

"Well, I guess I'll go since you haven't heard from Gloria. She told me she was interested in an Elvis picture here at the shop; thought you might have seen her." Zach looked around.

"No, deary, hadn't seen hide nor hair of the girl, sorry."

Zach and Annie stood side by side. Annie extended a hand to Zach. "Truce?" she asked.

Zach held her hand and said, "Truce"

Annie felt her stomach tighten and her lips started to get dry. She was dying to try the new java hut across the street. Annie invited Zach to a cup of coffee. What the hell, she thought. Have to start somewhere..

Sitting across the small round table from one another, Zach scooted his chair closer to Annie's. "You really do look very pretty today, Annie. I mean that in the best way, but you can take it anyway you wanna take it."

"Thank you, darling," she cooed.

The waitress brought their large cups filled with coffee latte's, topped with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles.

Annie brought the cup to her lips, wary not to scorch her tongue. The melting cream oozed down her throat. She reveled in the cinnamon and chocolaty flavor, watching Zach run his fingers around the rim of his cup but not drinking from it.

"I really gotta go. Gloria might get home. She wouldn't..."

"What Zach? She wouldn't like you having coffee with an... old flame?" she said with a tigress's wink.

"Yeah, somethin' like that."

He tossed a twenty dollar bill on the table and walked out the door. Once outside, he looked into the glass window and watched Annie for just a second longer, taking in her youthful beauty. Annie knew he had felt something; after all that time of being married, one could tell sexual tension when she came across it....

Gloria never arrived home and Zach eventually gave up. He talked himself into believing she had tired of him as he had tired of Annie, and she'd taken off with the another man. He continued on with his life and stopped by the shop often to see Annie over the next several months. Their relationship seemed to deepen and Annie let Zach into her heart and life once more.

Months passed, then Annie's worse fears came true. One night, as she peered into the mirror on the dressing table, her skin seemed more leathery, her eyes looked sunken, and her crows-feet were deeper than a year before.

She grabbed at her face with her fingertips, pinching her skin, horrified and crying. Her chin quivered up and down and dented with each gasp. "No, no, no! Oh god, not again, not this!" She looked at the calendar on the wall. April 14th. "Already?"

Annie's hands trembled and her eyes closed, filling with tears. "Not every year, I can't do this every year!" She wept out loud in thunderous bursts.

Annie had no clue what to do; she cried into her hands, feeling the wrinkles appear - much faster than before. It was happening and it was out of her control. At this rate she would age twenty years by morning. She needed blood, she needed it fast.

Annie looked over at the doll, in its place on her dresser, unmoved for almost a year. The pit of her stomach churned as she thought back to Gloria and the coppery smell of blood. She could almost taste the salt again and she gagged.

Wrinkles were spreading like wildfire across her face, causing her skin to prickle. Coarse grayish strands streaked through her auburn hair. The demon, Age, had caught up with her once more. Except this time, he arrived with a vengeance and with an aching for the taste of blood.

Annie didn't know what to do and what she would tell Zach when he saw her hideous face. She figured Zach would leave her once again, and she cradled her age ravaged face into her hands. Her once soft hands were now chapped with dry age spots spreading over the surface.

"So you want blood, do you?" she yelled at the doll.

She sat on the bed, holding the doll out in front of her. The doll seemed alive somehow, knowing and alive. She rearranged the dress and brushed the dust from the priceless piece of time that would haunt her for the rest of her life.

"What do you want?" Annie whined. "You are the strangest thing I ever saw." She shook the doll in anger. Tiny currents of electricity passed through the doll and into Annie's hand. Her hands throbbed and her heart hammered ferociously. The bolts sparked from her fingertips.

She threw the doll onto the bed, and closed her eyes. Perhaps she was just in a nightmare and she hadn't aged. That's it, she reasoned, that must be it...

She stretched out on the bed and drew in a long breath and closed her weary eyes. The doll was propped upon the pillow next to her. She fought the urge to look at the doll, but her eyes fluttered and then opened, staring straight into the doll's eyes. Slowly, Jewel's head turned toward Annie and a sneer spread across the doll's round face. Her lips opened a bit and her eyebrows arched.

Annie shoved the doll away and dove to the end of the bed and out of the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

"Annie," a voice uttered from downstairs. "Annie."

Zach, she thought. "Oh shit! I can't let him see me. I can't let him know my secret." In a blind panic, she ran back to her bedroom and picked up the doll and looked at it, puzzled that the doll didn't seem to have life like features anymore.

She took the doll in the bathroom and started running water into the tub. "Just a minute, Zach," she yelled. "I'm in the shower."

Zach walked up the staircase carrying an armful of beautiful roses, peeling off the petals and tossing them on the floor and bed, filling the room with their sweet scent.

"Annie, I have something for you, darling," he said, standing outside the bathroom door.

"Wait there, don't come in!" Annie's voice blared from the closed door.

"Awww, Annie don't be so shy," Zach snickered. "We aren't strangers."

Annie trembled in confusion on what she was going to do. She placed the doll in the icy water in the tub. For a moment Annie toyed with the idea of getting rid of this demon thing - hell-bent on keeping her in its debt for all eternity.

She opened the bathroom cabinet and took out her nerve medication and swallowed two of the little pills. Annie looked at the pills... Suddenly she knew what she must do. Filling up a glass with hot water she dumped the rest of the pills from the bottle into the glass. They disintegrated into white sudsy foam that dissipated in the water.

She turned off the faucet to the tub and left the doll in the frigid water, and walked out of the bathroom. Her long, flowing hair glistened in the dim room; her flaws were camouflaged by the tree branches dancing through the moonlit window, the shadows caressing her naked body. Zach stretched across the bed and dropped some of the roses on his bare chest.

"Come here, gorgeous," he breathed into the darkness.

Annie put the glass to her mouth and sipped the water, then handed the glass to Zach. "Here darling," she whispered in his ear. "You will need this."

"What is it?"

She smiled. "It will keep your strength up."

"Oh yeah?" Zach gazed into Annie's eyes as he gulped the water and tossed the glass to the floor. He pressed his wet mouth onto Annie's and pulled her on top of him. Annie's leg slid up over his waist as they lay on the bed.

Zach's eyes became glossy and his voice was slow and confused. He forced open his eyes and looked at Annie. He saw a woman that appeared to be fifty years old straddling his waist.

"What the f..." His head rolled to the side of the pillow and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Zach?" Annie said, smacking his cheek. No response.

Annie ran to the bathroom and brought back a razor. She picked up Zach's pale wrist and sliced it slowly and neatly, watching the blood pour.

"I'm sorry, Honey," she said, over and over. "I had to do this. Besides, you didn't really love me. You loved my youth and my beauty, but not me. I can't go back to how I was before..."

The crimson flow ran down her fingernails and into the glass. She brought her finger to her lips and licked the blood from the tips. The salty taste made her shudder, but only for a moment.

"That's it, baby," she said, tossing the bleeding wrist to the side and patting Zach on the stomach. "You served your purpose, my love."

Annie picked up the glass filled with blood and took it into the bathroom. She sat it carefully on the countertop and lifted the doll from the cold water. Annie opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out the syringe and pumped the blood into the doll's mouth once again.

The thought of Gloria entered her mind and she sneered. "You two pervies got what you deserved," she muttered under her breath as she opened the doll's legs and squeezed the few remaining drops of blood from its stomach.

Blood dribbled down the back of her throat as she swallowed hard, gulping down the horrid taste. She gagged and coughed, but managed to hold down the scarlet liquid.

When all the blood was gone, she looked at herself in the mirror. "Nothing?" She peered closer in the mirror, tugging at her sunken eyes. "No changes?" She panicked.

Annie checked the time on her watch. It was midnight, just as the directions said; and she had kept the doll in a cold environment, and drained the blood into her own body, just as before.

"Oh no, oh no!" Annie knew she forgotten something, messed up somewhere, but she couldn't fathom what it was until she went back to the bedroom.

The queen size bed was empty. Zach was nowhere in sight.

She hurried to shut the bathroom door but something caught it before it slammed. Zach grabbed the corner of the door with his hand while he was stretched out on the floor, still bleeding.

"You fucking bitch," his voice slurred, barely above a whisper. "What have you done?"

Annie looked down at Zach; she was still holding the doll. "But it said..." she stopped, then her eyes grew cold and angry. "You were suppose to die, damn you! You were suppose to die."

Her face begun to shrivel, her body sagged, and her eyes receded into her head. She stared at Zach, croaking in an old woman's voice: "You were suppose to die..."

Zach pulled himself up to the doorway and grabbed the doll from Annie. Something in the mirror caught his attention, and he stopped to look at himself. He appeared to be twenty years younger, his face youthful, energy renewed. He just stared at himself, not quite believing what he was seeing.

Annie stumbled, lost her balance and fell backwards, bashing her head onto the ceramic tub. Dark scarlet ran down the sides of the tub. Her eyes stared at Zach for a moment, then slowly closed. Closed forever.

He looked at the doll and he turned it over in his hands, wondering what it was and where it had come from. His eyes spotted the inscription, and he read it with real joy in his heart.

He placed the glass under Annie's head and then poured the blood into the doll's tiny mouth.

"I got you, Annie, I got you!" He laughed as he drained the blood from the doll's mouth into his own, feeling better by the second.

While in a fit of laughter, the doll slipped from Zach's bloody hands and hit the hard floor, shattering into a thousand pieces.

Zach looked over at Annie. She was withered beyond recognition now, but as he started to age, he could have sworn her lips curled into a smile.

"Hey, Detective Richards!" The young man was gagging at the site of so much blood and gore. "Look at this."

Detective Richards had seen many murder scenes, but nothing as bizarre and inexplicable as a this one. A dead elderly woman in a tub, still dressed, with a dead old man on the floor. Strangest of all was the porcelain doll lying between them, unharmed and whole.

"Bet your wife would like that, Detective," said the rookie cop. "Hell, who'd ever know?"

"Yeah, said the detective. "Who'd know? And look, there's something inscribed on the back..."

Halo of Blood

Jason Brannon

Day 36:

I just shot Paul in the chest with a harpoon gun. He fell out of the fishing boat and hit the water with a loud smack, screaming at me in Haitian as the sharks ripped him apart. With all those teeth and appetites, the screaming didn't last long.

The water has a reddish tint that gets lighter as the blood spreads to the far reaches of the ocean. The boat is surrounded by it. As you might expect, the sharks keep coming, fighting for their hunk of flesh. That's ok. I can wait it out. Eventually they'll go away in search of other food, and I can safely venture to the ocean floor to explore the shipwreck in search of treasure. Until then, however, I'll just have to watch the sharks feast and remember the priceless look of utter surprise on Paul's face.

Of course, I never gave him any reason to suspect that I would double-cross him. We had divided spoils before-a few gold coins here and there, a jewel or two-and I had never been anything less than trustworthy. But those finds were all small time. Things always seem to change for the worse when money enters the picture.

I'm sure the sharks would disagree.

Afternoon of Day 36:

It's strange. The blood hasn't washed away like I expected. It just lingers there in the water, circling the boat like a bloody halo. I feel like I'm the bulls-eye on a massive dart board, awaiting the unskilled play of a group of capricious gods. It sort of puts a damper on the thrill of recovering treasure. It's like Paul is drawing a bloody noose around me in retaliation for that harpoon shot. Yes, I know that to believe something like that is akin to accepting some of Paul's voodoo beliefs. But I'm all alone out here on a massive boat. Imagination is the only companion I've got left since I shot my other one with a sharpened harpoon.

Day 37:

Relieved that the murder I had been plotting was finally done, I fell asleep after I was certain that no part of Paul would wash up on a beach anytime soon like a flesh-bound message in a bottle. I dreamt of gold, riches, wealth hauled away by the shipload, and a ring of blood that swallowed my boat like the mouth of one of those hungry sharks. To make matters worse the waves that battered the sides of my boat were rolling, thunderous walls of red froth. The entire ocean was an ocean of blood, maroon for as far as the eye could see. Even the sun was akin to the color of a coagulating scab.

I woke up from the dream sweating and realized that I had actually gone through with it. I had killed Paul in cold blood.

4:00, Day 37

The sharks have all cleared-out now that there is no more of Paul to fill their stomachs. That leaves the ocean to me. I've got all my diving gear on and am about to go down. Still, I'm a little hesitant.

Some of Paul's blood is still lingering about the boat. It's still a good distance away. Nonetheless, I can't help remembering my dream and the way the red nimbus of Paul's blood swallowed my boat in one massive watery gulp. It makes me wonder if he's planning on haunting this expedition. Too bad if he is. I don't believe in ghosts.

There's a difference, however, in ghosts and the supernatural. Paul shrieked at me in Haitian as the sharks ripped into his flesh with their teeth, and it bothers me a little that I don't know what he said. Although we never really talked about it much, I knew he believed in voodoo magic and summoning spirits. A large percentage of Haitians do. It's part of their culture. In fact, his beliefs were the very thing that pushed him into that bar on the night we became acquainted. He was trying to get drunk and forget what had happened in a zombie ritual he had participated in.

I didn't ask any specifics about the ritual then. I was too enthralled by what he'd said in passing about shipwrecks he knew of that had yet to be explored. Apparently, voodoo rituals are largely dependent on relics of the dead, and sunken ships were obviously a good place to find bits of bone and hair.

Of course, I'd rather find gold than gold teeth.

After the Dive, Day 37:

The first dive didn't turn up much. The sky was cloudy. The water was dark. My diver's light malfunctioned about halfway down. I had to abandon the search after only twenty minutes. Still, I learned something about that shipwreck that I hadn't before. I learned that I was just a little bit

frightened of it. Maybe the guilt of killing Paul was weighing on my conscience or maybe I was trying to convince myself that what he screamed at me in Haitian as he fell from the boat wasn't so bad. That still doesn't detract from the fact that there was still a lot of blood in this water. It should all be gone by now. The currents should have washed it far, far away. But they haven't. What's worse, the blood isn't just lingering on the surface of the ocean. When I began my descent toward the broken ship, I felt like I was swimming through an artery. Maybe it's just some sort of red algae bloom or something. The sharks haven't shown back up like they would if they sensed blood so I'm taking that as a good sign. Nonetheless, I think I might have a little insight as to what The Ancient Mariner must have felt after he killed that albatross.

I'm going to do a few tests on the water and see what shows up. I'm probably just being foolish.

Day 38:

No red algae. I expected as much. Add one more mystery to the list.

Paul was the historian moreso than I was. I handled the diving specifics, the excavation process, and the actual exhumation of any wealth that the ocean floor might have covered up. Paul did all the brain work, the sonar scans, the bookkeeping for our salvage company, and the research. He was always much better at that than me which is why I was surprised when he couldn't pin a positive I.D. on the captain of the sunken ship. He said that he had a strong hunch but he never shared it with me. I shot him too quick, I guess. It doesn't really matter though. I found what I was looking for on the 2nd dive. Gold ingots, blood rubies, silver coins, emeralds, jade, swords encrusted with gold and jewels. A king's treasure, probably of Spanish origin. Those galleons were notorious for being easy targets. Yet, despite all the chests of treasure in the shattered hold of the ship, the blood was there too. It kind of put a damper on my enthusiasm.

Of course, I made myself ignore the blood and go to work. But I'll have to tell you I was shaking when I made it back to the ship. After all, I was practically bathing in the blood of the man I had murdered.

While inside the capsized ship, I took some underwater video and have since been enhancing the footage in order to more accurately map the wreck's layout. To my dismay, everything was tinted in red.

I've been trying to filter out some of the maroon in the video, but haven't had much success. Even on film, I'm still haunted by Paul's blood.

1:00, Day 38

I've gone back down a couple of times and put in some support bracing to give the wreckage some stability. It would be a shame to have the shipwreck collapse on me after I've spent so much time and effort getting to this point. I actually murdered a man for this treasure, and I would hate to think that I did it for nothing. I've already got enough on my mind without considering that.

I can't even slip into my wetsuit and dive without expecting Paul to float out of nowhere and grab me. Yeah, I saw the sharks use him for an appetizer. But solitude and the wide open sea can do strange things to a man's mind. There's also the small fact that Paul's blood is getting closer and closer to my boat—a halo that's quickly becoming a noose.

Day 39:

I found Paul's journal in his foot locker. It seems he already suspected that I was going to double-cross him. He also figured out who the captain of the pirate ship was and kept it from me. Or maybe he knew about the ship all along and led me here with the intention of killing me before I killed him. That part of his plan went wrong.

The boat wasn't Spanish as I'd originally suspected, but, rather, hailed from a Haitian port. The captain was a man named Black Ngembe. In addition to piloting his ship, Damballah, Black Ngembe was also a voodoo priest. The crew mates, like their skipper, were also practitioners of black magic. Given Paul's beliefs in voodoo, a red flag should have been raised right then and there. But I guess I was too greedy for gold to ponder the convenience of Paul's "discovery."

"These weren't ordinary pirates," Paul wrote in his journal. "They used chants and incantations rather than swords and cannons. They called on the gods and the spirits of their elders to help them in their scavenger hunts. To judge by the haul they made, the curses worked. Damballah, a serpent god in the voodoo pantheon, was rumored to ride aboard Black Ngembe's ship and grant good favor so long as the crew performed the proper rites and sacrificed when it was necessary. No mention is made of Black Ngembe ever forsaking the rituals. That much would certainly explain the enormous treasure hauls the vessel seems to have made. What isn't explained is what happened to Black Ngembe and his crew. If they were in Damballah's good graces, it doesn't seem likely that they would be allowed to wreck and perish. Yet that is exactly what seemed to happen."

12:00, Day 39

With all that talk of voodoo and snake gods, it is a little unsettling to see so much blood lingering around the ship. Blood, after all, is the offering of choice for ancient gods. And Paul was a believing voodoo practitioner. Maybe he put a curse on me as the harpoon threw him from the boat. Then again,

maybe not. My mind is probably working overtime after reading that journal.

Day 40:

Despite any misgivings I may have had after reading Paul's diary, I returned to the Damballah today and ventured into the guts of the ship. The water inside was black like a massive pool of ink. And then I hit it with my spotlight. It turned to blood before my eyes.

It wasn't much of a stretch for me to imagine dark-skinned Haitians dancing and chanting on deck, raising their hands to the sky, calling out to Damballah to lead them to new ships to scavenge. The dance would be followed by the slaughtering of chickens and the spilling of blood. Then Damballah would awaken and rise up out of the sea, a massive serpentine leviathan with barb-like fangs that dripped venom and sweet milk, poisoning and sustaining her people at the same time. Black Ngembe would raise his hands to the god he served, his dark chest glistening with sweat and fervent zealous tears. Then he would draw a knife across his own throat and offer himself to the serpent.

I could actually see the blood jettisoning from Black Ngembe's carotid when I opened my eyes. It reminded me an awful lot of the way Paul's blood spurted into the air as the sharks tore him limb from limb.

Understandably, it was difficult to stay in the water with those kind of thoughts, but I made myself do it. I was relieved that there weren't any Haitians dancing and chanting on the broken deck, but not relieved enough to feel at ease in the murky red waters.

Even though the ship was ancient and demolished, it was clear that the vessel had been immaculately detailed by its crew. Intricate voodoo symbols had been chiseled into the wood-curlicues, concentric circles, and slanting lines. They might have been good luck curses or declarations of war. Since I wasn't that familiar with Paul's religion, I could only speculate.

The thought of all this blood in the water awakening some ancient god didn't make me feel any better as I swam through the wreckage. At any minute I expected to see an open mouth filled with fangs rushing out at me. But the waters were devoid of life. There weren't even any fish swimming nearby. I took that as a bad sign.

I had just entered the captain's quarters when I realized that this must have been a sort of makeshift temple as well. This was very likely the place where Black Ngembe had conjured up the old gods. This was also the approximate spot on the surface where Paul had met his fate, shouting Haitian curses as he was devoured. I expected to see Damballah at any moment.

Yet, it wasn't a serpent that made me race for the surface. Rather, it was a black-skinned man with red eyes staring back at me from the wreckage. I could be mistaken about the identity of the man but I don't think so. Paul's journal was accompanied by various sketches of Black Ngembe. The man was black as a cast-iron skillet and had rows upon rows of gold hoops running the length of his ears all the way up into the cartilage. This was the same man I saw floating in the waters near the Damballah wreckage.

Day 41:

I know I should head back for the mainland, but I can't bring myself to leave all that gold down there for the fish. They don't need it.

So far I've brought up six sacks of assorted riches with no further sign of Black Ngembe. I could live comfortably off of what I've salvaged, but I'm not satisfied with that. I want more. I'm pretty sure that what I saw was just a picture conjured up by my imagination and the environment. After all, I was about a hundred feet down in water that looks like blood.

Night of Day 41:

I really don't even know why I'm writing this as it will probably never see the light of day, but I know I'm in trouble now. The water around my boat is alive with sea snakes and blood. I know that Damballah is getting ready for me.

Day 42:

The halo of blood around my ship is getting smaller. That is not to say that it's going away. It's simply enclosing on my boat like two sides of a vice.

There's something else too. The waters are full of dead sharks.

Five Minutes Later:

Not sure how long I'll be able to write. Something's going on down there in the red waters. I can see Paul with the rest of the Damballah's crew. There is a wound from a harpoon in his chest, but

otherwise he seems to be fine. I keep forgetting that he should have an oxygen tank or something with him to help him breathe. Only he isn't breathing anymore. He's dead.

I think I understand why all of those sharks are dead now. Something they ate just didn't agree with them.

The blood is closing in on me now. I know that the red-tinted waters are just a precursor of what's to come. Although it defies all logic, Black Ngembe and his crew are chanting and performing rituals down there on the broken deck of the Damballah. Paul, the sacrifice that I unwittingly offered, has joined the shouting too. I keep waiting to see Damballah emerge from the ocean floor.

So far as the records indicated, Black Ngembe never ceased to appease Damballah with blood, and for that, he was rewarded and continues to reap. It would seem that Paul was the one who awakened the beast, and now, I will be the offering to satiate the mighty loa.

The subaquatic primal drumbeats grow louder as the water around me is satiated with red. I know that sharks are the least of my worries.

And I'm right when I see Damballah rising up from the ship's wreckage like a bleak soul from a broken body. It's every bit the Leviathan that's described in the book of Revelations.

The Haitian sailors spasm on the battered deck in what might be construed as religious fervor. Paul is there among them, looking up at me. The harpoon wound in his chest is still fresh. Blood, the lifeblood of Damballah, seeps out in stark red droplets. Paul is the reason for the resurrection of both the sailors and their god. I will be the reason they stay alive.

It's puzzled me until now why Damballah allowed Black Ngembe and his crew to die given their dedication to the rituals. But I think I understand a little better now that I see the sores that plague the skin of the Haitians. As they rise up to me, their lips peeled back like rabid dogs, I can see the black gums and the loose teeth that are tell-tale signs of scurvy. Damballah must have realized that the crew would probably all die sooner or later anyway. Death, in that case, would be better. Or at least death at the hands of Damballah. Paul's blood reanimated the zombie. And now they will live forever.

It seems that Damballah truly did take care of his followers.

Damballah is lingering around the ship, but the pirates will be at the surface soon. I shudder to think what they will do to me once they reach me. There is no place to run. I will soon be an offering to the serpent god.

The gold doesn't matter now. It seems my greed has brought about my downfall. Things would have

been so much easier if I hadn't double-crossed Paul in the first place and we had simply split the take. But, thinking about it now, I believe Paul brought me here for a reason. As a devout believer in voodoo, he wanted to find Damballah for himself-the real Damballah, not the spirit of the beast that any good bokor can call to possess him.

It seems that now Paul will have eternal life, and I will pay for my mistake for infinity.

Black Ngembe is rising to the surface quickly. Bubbles are floating all around me. The halo of blood closes in.

Goodbye.

Swamper

Walt Hicks

Darius Bonhomme slowly paddled the jon boat along the lazy current of the Loxahatchee River. Dusk was beginning to settle on the Florida river preserve, but the clamor of roosting birds was conspicuously absent. Dying shafts of sunlight shimmered through the heavy cypress branches, and the light breeze sent shadows scurrying along the thickly foliated riverbank.

Bonhomme had been aboard the flat-bottomed boat for nearly three hours, skimming along the serpentine north fork of the Loxahatchee. His entire body was tense with effort, sinews knotted in his powerful arms and legs. His narrowed eyes scanned the riverbanks carefully; his ears strained to hear the slightest rustle of saw grass. A chill northerly breeze sent icy fingers dancing up his spine, a premonition of an approaching storm. Bonhomme had seen no wildlife since his journey began, and even for mid-autumn, he could tell something was not right.

Two days ago, Bonhomme had stood in the lavish office of the Chairman of the Loxahatchee River District, Bennett Caldwell. Bonhomme had worked for Caldwell in the capacity of nuisance gator trapper several times before – most notably seven years ago when a rogue fifteen-foot bull had mistaken a young boy for a meal and drug the screaming child from the canoe of his horrified parents. That had been during the peak of gator mating season, early May, and was considered something of an isolated incident.

"Darius," Caldwell said amiably, "please sit down."

"Thanks, I'll stand. What'd you want of me?"

Caldwell swallowed hard and regarded the stocky, powerful looking man dressed in bush clothing, out of place standing in the middle of the elegantly appointed office. Caldwell was a little afraid of Bonhomme, wary of the scarred, rawboned trapper whom he only summoned in dire emergencies. Like now.

Donning the well-worn smile of the career politician, Caldwell shrugged. "Guess you heard about us having to close down the river preserve and Jonathan Dickinson State Park?"

"We do get the news out on the Big Lake, Mister Chairman. Some of us even have indoor plumbing."

"I'm sure. Darius, I'm afraid we got a bad animal loose in the preserve. A big bull gator, I'd expect. We've got three people dead, two more missing. The remains of the three dead – well..." Caldwell

indicated an open folder on his desk. Bonhomme leaned over the mahogany desk, took a quick look at the spread eight by ten crime scene photos, and grunted.

"We've quietly closed all access to the park as best we could. The signs say, 'sensitive environmental survey in progress -- please keep out,' but word gets around. Hopefully, nobody's stupid enough to go in there."

"'Cept for me?" Bonhomme grinned.

"You are a professional..."

". . . don't try this at home," Bonhomme finished.

The first attacks had occurred within the state park, near the fringes of the tidal estuary, where the Atlantic Ocean stubbornly intrudes into the waterway. The third death, as well as the two disappearances had taken place farther inland, well within the cypress swamp. Bonhomme glanced at the pictures again.

"This here is a special case, Caldwell. We're gonna have to have a different arrangement." Normally, nuisance gator trappers like Bonhomme weren't paid by the state or county – they kept the hide and meat of whatever they trapped as payment.

Caldwell pursed his lips. "I'm authorized a five thousand-dollar bounty, Mr. Bonhomme."

"In that case, my price is fifteen thousand."

"Darius..."

"There are other trappers. In the yellow pages, I'm thinkin'. The one with the picture of the cute lil raccoons is pretty good, I hear." He turned to leave.

"Okay, okay. Done. We need to reopen, as soon as possible, Darius."

Bonhomme left without looking back.

When he thought about the pictures of the victims, Bonhomme wished he'd asked for twenty-five thousand. When he thought about the pictures, Bonhomme knew he wasn't after a gator. First of all,

gators were usually harmless unless their territory was invaded or their young were threatened. Or, if stumbled across during mating season, which was April through May. Secondly, alligators, being cold-blooded reptiles, become mostly dormant in the autumn months. Bonhomme considered that the beast might've been a saltwater crocodile, since the attacks began in the briny estuary. However, he also knew that the American saltwater croc was normally just about as docile as the common gator, particularly in cooler weather. The victims had been torn to shreds, but there were no clear-cut bite wounds or claw marks. The bodies had been severely mauled -- ripped limb from limb. Florida panthers weren't very common in these parts, neither were bears.

Darius Bonhomme had been a trapper in the Florida swamps and waterways for almost all his forty years and found he didn't have a clue as to what he was hunting.

Bonhomme took off his sea grass fedora and mopped the sweat from his shaved head. He hated the jon boat, but the Loxahatchee was so narrow and shallow in many places, he had to drag the boat across fallen cypress branches and other obstructions. He didn't want to risk the unsteadiness of a canoe, or the confines of an enclosed kayak. Just around the next bend was the old slash pine shack of Trapper Nelson -- now a tourist attraction -- where he could make camp for the night. This thing seemed to be a nocturnal hunter, so Bonhomme decided it would be wise to bivouac in an enclosed structure this night.

The trapper thought of the I-95 bridge he passed beneath two miles back. The unknowing traffic zipped overhead as he slipped silently across the river primeval. Some thirty miles south, the Island of Palm Beach teemed with oblivious opulence. Enveloped in the centuries-old cypress forest, Bonhomme might've been on another world, or in some antediluvian past. It was a world and time he preferred, mostly undisturbed by the endless plunder and machinations of modern man.

Bonhomme dragged the jon boat onto the landing and hefted his gear bag. He heard a shuffling sound from inside the cabin and froze. The old slat door was ajar. He slowly reached over his shoulder and grasped the neoprene grip of the Winchester Coastal Marine 12 gauge shotgun, liberating it from its leather sling. He crept to the door, fingering off the shotgun's safety. Bonhomme took a deep breath and kicked the door open, flooding the musty interior of the cabin with the waning sunlight.

What he saw was completely unexpected.

A middle-aged man, dressed in an expensive tweed sports jacket immediately threw up his hands. A little girl, by appearances Native American, cowered in one corner of the small room. Bonhomme quickly drew the chrome-plated shotgun barrel toward the ceiling.

"What the hell you two doin' here? This area's off-limits to..."

Bonhomme abruptly lowered the shotgun, the bead centering on the distinguished -looking man's chest. The girl's hands had been bound with duct tape -- and the man was holding a leash attached to a collar around her neck.

"Sir, that's not necessary," the man said amicably. "My name is Hadley Van Dusen, and this is my niece Kimberly. We were separated from our party and ..."

"Van Dusen, you're gonna want to drop the leash, and step slowly away from the little girl. As much as we'd sometimes like to, around these parts, we don't tie up our kids and put 'em on a leash."

Van Dusen's eyes narrowed cautiously, even as he smiled in compliance. "Okay. Just don't get excited there, Mister ...?"

"Don't worry none about who I am. You get down on your knees and lace your fingers behind your head. You do something stupid, I'll kill you."

"Not to worry, sir. Not to worry." Van Dusen yielded to Bonhomme's demands, carefully watching the trapper's every move.

Bonhomme kept the Winchester trained on Van Dusen as he eased to the little girl's side. "Kid? Kid, you okay?"

The little girl looked up at Bonhomme, her swollen face wet with tears. She might've been eight or nine years old.

"I – I think so," she said weakly.

"This guy your uncle?"

"No. He's a bad man. A very bad man." Darkness was slowly creeping into the cabin, so Bonhomme turned on a battery operated lantern hanging from the cabin wall. He unwound the duct tape from the girl's wrists and removed the collar. She rubbed her hands together and shrank shivering into the corner. Bonhomme draped a towel from his gear bag around her. Outside, it had begun to rain, windblown drops slashing insistently against the window panes.

"Don't you worry about ol' Dapper Dan over there, kid. He ain't gonna bother nobody no more." Bonhomme retrieved a large roll of duct tape from his gear bag and wrapped a liberal amount of the stuff around Van Dusen's hands and feet. He then secured a length of nylon rope around Van Dusen's neck and tied it off around his ankles.

"Very nice knots, trapper," Van Dusen said derisively.

"Mister --!" the girl whispered fearfully.

Bonhomme heard it. The flat slap of something heavy into the water just outside. Van Dusen chuckled lowly as Bonhomme quickly secured the front door and lowered the steel hurricane shutters to protect the windows. Something wet and solid thudded against the door.

"We've got company, trapper," Van Dusen said.

The sounds of claws or teeth scraping against the deck outside, another splash into the river, and the cabin was enveloped in silence once more, except for the rhythmic white noise of the rain.

Bonhomme checked the door again; it was solid. "Professor, don't know if you knew it or not, but somethin' in this here swamp's already killed five people. That's why it was closed."

"Oh, I knew the park was closed," Van Dusen said haughtily. "I also knew that it would afford the little Indian princess and myself a good deal of privacy. Until you showed up, of course. Trapper, may I introduce Miss Nahimana Estasanatlehi, from the Seminole reservation just up the coast. Roughly translated, her lovely name means 'woman of tomorrow'. Quite beautiful, I should say, though I do prefer the 'girl of today.'"

Nahimana glared at Van Dusen.

Bonhomme kept one ear at the door, his sideways glare regarding Van Dusen. He didn't like dividing his attentions like that.

"Trapper, I'm sure you're familiar with the colorful history of our red brothers in this area. The noble savages. Our little Nahimana's ancestors moved down here from Georgia and Alabama, because the original inhabitants, the Jobe, Tequesta and the Calusa had been decimated by the incursion of the white man."

Something heavy thumped again against the outer wall of the cabin. The entire cabin shook and Nahimana shuddered. Bonhomme grimly checked the load in the Winchester.

Van Dusen continued, unimpressed. "It seems our noble red brothers could live and actually thrive in this hellish prehistoric environment, but they couldn't survive the smallest enemy – the viruses of the white man. Several tribes of peoples completely wiped out by influenza, brought here by the Spanish."

"That's real fascinatin' there, Professor. How's about I tape your mouth shut?"

Van Dusen shrugged. "For one thing, trapper, you're going to need me, by the sound of that auld beastie outside trying to get in. Something out there's developed a keen taste for human flesh and since the park's been conveniently closed, we're the only meat for miles." He smiled dreamily. "But I digress. Back to my point. Our little red friends weren't completely sweet and innocent, you see. Not like our little Nahimana, here. Oh no." Van Dusen stared pointedly at the girl. "For example, the Calusa were so intent on keeping their land free of the white man that they began – ahem – consuming them."

"That's a lie!" Nahimana screamed. Something smashed into the wall outside once more; this time, all the windows shattered.

"I'm afraid not, little one. The Calusa were fierce warriors who became cannibals. It seems they became somewhat addicted to human flesh as well. And, evidently, in the end," he smiled evilly, "they ate something that disagreed with them."

Nahimana looked at Bonhomme beseechingly. He looked at the floor. "He's telling the truth for a change, kid. Seems the Calusa went on a wilding spree, killin' and eatin' every white man in sight til they finally got captured, loaded on slave ships and forced to work the mines in South American. There they died of disease, starvation and overwork. A reward for their own cruelty, I reckon."

"Bravo, Mr. Trapper," Van Dusen said with mock appreciation, tapping his fingertips together in applause. "You seem to have a very good grasp of this region's bloody history."

Outside, something primeval roared loudly.

Bonhomme dimmed the lantern. "My wife's descended from the Calusa," he said quietly.

"Oh, priceless," Van Dusen giggled. "The trapper's married to a fucking squaw."

"What's her name?" Nahimana asked.

"Miakoda," Bonhomme answered, peering through the slots in the metal shutters. Something black and large was moving around outside in the shrouded moonlight. Bonhomme could smell the unmistakable stench of a very large predator.

Bonhomme thought about Miakoda at their home on the Big Lake and he suddenly was afraid for her. He could see her ruddy, sharp featured face studied in concentration as she chanted her esoteric spells each time he went out on a hunt. Oddly, it was only those times when she hadn't performed her rituals, that Bonhomme had been injured. He was trying to remember if she had chanted for him this

time.

Bonhomme had come from a long line of French trappers who had settled on Lake Okeechobee in the mid 1800's. His livelihood was a dying art form that few practiced today. Bonhomme respected nature and while most 'nuisance trappers' destroyed problem gators more than four feet in length, Bonhomme would relocate them at his own expense. Most gators were basically harmless, dispossessed of their natural habitats by the increasing encroachment of man, trying in vain to hold their own, not unlike the natives of this land before the white invaders came.

The thing outside was something else again. Bonhomme didn't necessarily hold with the superstitions of his wife, but he could smell the rot and corruption of pure evil coming from the creature. Or, maybe it was coming from Van Dusen.

Another earth-trembling thud. From a different corner of the primitive building. The thing was trying to find a weak point in the structure. Trying to get in.

Van Dusen shifted a little on the floor, working the duct tape adroitly. "There is an old local legend involving a creature known as the Swamper. A fearsome monstrosity that rose black from the marshes and drove men mad by the mere sight of it. The Jobe sent their bravest, strongest warriors to face the aberration, but none of the warriors returned. The Swamper left their mutilated heads on the paths into their village three days later. Eventually, the Swamper slithered out of the Loxahatchee and into the village under the cover of night and ate the entire Jobe tribe. Overindulged, the Swamper roared off into the night until it finally burst and the Seminole tribe was borne from the thing's exploded entrails."

Outside, a keening howl carried on the wind.

"As I said," Van Dusen continued, "the Seminoles actually migrated from Alabama and Georgia, so this rather morbid story was merely a folk tale constructed to frighten wayward children. Scared, Nahimana?"

"No, but you should be," Nahimana spat.

"I fear nothing that walks, crawls or flies above this earth," Van Dusen hissed through clenched teeth.

Bonhomme glanced at the ceiling as he heard some of the shingles ripping away from the roof, carried away by the gusting wind. "You might be able to scare little kids, Van Dusen, but I ain't much impressed."

Van Dusen leered, his lips wet with spittle. "My little sociological experiments with various youngsters of differing backgrounds notwithstanding, I have managed to elude capture by authorities

for the past thirty years. Not a bad track record." He stared at Nahimana meaningfully. "I have had a nodding acquaintance with the disappearance of nearly one hundred little girls in seventy-five major cities, from Sacramento to Bangor."

Bonhomme eyed a crack forming in the ceiling. "Well, you're all done now."

"That remains to be seen, trapper."

The trapper whirled without warning, jamming the Winchester's barrel into Van Dusen's forehead, slamming his head against the wall. "You're nothing but a worthless piece of shit. You gotta use little kids in order to feel somethin' -- anything. You're less than nothing, Van Dusen. And you keep fuckin' with me, I'm gonna feed you to whatever's prowlin' around outside. Got it?"

Bonhomme slowly eased the shotgun to the middle of Van Dusen's face. There was a bloody semi-circle in the center of Van Dusen's forehead. He chuckled softly. "We're all on the smorgasbord, trapper. I just hope I live long enough to see our friend eat a squirming little Nahimana."

Bonhomme's eyes narrowed and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"No." It was Nahimana. "That's what he wants you to do."

Trigger finger relaxed, Bonhomme grinned and laid the shotgun across his broad shoulder. "You know, kid, I think you're right."

Van Dusen shrugged. "I have escaped from much more complex and dangerous entrapments than this."

"He's afraid," Nahimana said with wonder.

The thing outside – the Swamper -- slammed wetly into the front door of the cabin and the wood splintered.

"Yeah, well, so am I," the trapper replied.

The entire structure began to tremble. Bonhomme knew that the shack had been built upon short stilts to accommodate the crest and fall of the river. The creature was rocking the old shack back and forth on the pilings, attempting to topple it.

"Everyone hang on!" Van Dusen shouted merrily.

Bonhomme was nearly to Nahimana when a shriek of wind ripped the roof away. Swirling thunderheads shrouded a blood red moon and Bonhomme could see a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye in the inky darkness. Van Dusen had freed himself from the tape and rope, and was rushing the trapper, shoulder first.

The shotgun somersaulted into the screaming wind as Van Dusen plowed into Bonhomme, knocking him from his feet. The four walls of Trapper Nelson's shack – which had withstood numerous hurricanes and tropical storms for nearly a hundred years – fell into the river and underbrush. The hardwood floor, covering the railroad ties that supported the building, remained.

Bonhomme frantically reached for the shotgun, but found only debris. He searched the darkness for Nahimana, but she was nowhere to be found.

"Looking for this, trapper?" Van Dusen asked mockingly. Van Dusen had the Winchester pointed at Bonhomme's head, point blank. "I thought about tying you up and torturing you to death slowly after I finish up with little Nahimana, but you are far too dangerous for that."

Might kick his legs out from under him, Bonhomme thought clinically, but he'd still get the killshot off.

"After I'd done with Nahimana, I think I shall pay your lovely wife – what was it, Miakoda? – a little visit. A bit long in the tooth for me, perhaps, but I think she might prove – interesting." Van Dusen's finger tightened on the trigger as he smiled at Bonhomme in triumph. "The timeless convergence of good and evil, trapper? I think not. Merely proof positive of the implacable laws of survival of the fittest."

That was when Bonhomme saw it.

The storm clouds abruptly cleared and the enormous scarlet moon briefly illuminated the swamp. A huge black, greasy oil slick – with giant serrated triangular teeth – rose up from the swamp behind Van Dusen. The hide was obsidian, smooth, and it encased the shape of an enormous writhing eel. The eyes were curved slits, even more unfathomable than the ebony skin. The thing – the Swamper – moved faster than the eye could follow, and abruptly Van Dusen was gone – except for his thrashing legs protruding from the black thing's maw. Bonhomme thought he heard the muted sound of the Winchester firing off a round – inside the Swamper's mouth.

Somewhere, Bonhomme thought he heard Nahimana whimper, and he tried in vain to go to her. A fat bolt of white-hot lightning split the night sky, shattering a centuries old cypress tree nearby. The last sights burned into Bonhomme's mind were the man-sized lump in the Swamper's gullet as it seemed to

swallow Van Dusen, the moon overhead appearing to smile down on the scene, Nahimana running toward the beast, and finally, the ragged cypress limb hurdling toward him.

A sensation of light and the gentle lapping of the waters of the Loxahatchee on a nearby bank awoke Bonhomme. Other than a painful lump in the middle of his forehead, and feeling like he'd gone ten rounds with a young prizefighter, Bonhomme was uninjured. Beyond the flooring and foundation, the remains of Trapper Nelson's shack were nowhere to be seen, reclaimed by the river, swamp and forest. He sat up, head spinning, vision blurred.

To the west of where the cabin formerly stood, the swamp had been trampled in an area as wide as a city bus, leading into the forest as far as the eye could see. At the edge of the new pathway, the cypress ruined by the solitary lightning strike. Otherwise, the ancient swamp seemed undisturbed.

At the point where the entrance of the cabin once was, Bonhomme's jon boat, gear bag and Winchester shotgun were neatly lined up. In the old days, it was the highest compliment paid to an enemy warrior – returning his gear to him, even in defeat. Bonhomme stood shakily.

Nestled in a shrub near the riverbank, Bonhomme glimpsed a flash of colorful clothing – Nahimana's sun dress. He hobbled to the edge of the gently swirling Loxahatchee.

It was Nahimana's sun dress. As well as her raven hair and her flesh – looking like the shed skin of an immense snake.

Bonhomme gazed skyward with moist eyes. Low between the towering pines to the west, a pale ghost of the moon smiled back at him dolefully. He thought of his wife Miakoda – whose name meant 'Power of the Moon' -- patiently waiting for him in their home westward on the Big Lake.

As he climbed gingerly into the jon boat, he spied one of Van Dusen's ragged, bloody shoes along the white sandy riverbank. As intelligent as Van Dusen had been, he had gotten the translation of Nahimana's name incorrect.

Translated from the original Calusa, it meant, "Mystic Woman Who Transforms."

Bonhomme swallowed hard and began the long journey home.

Atianqua

L. J. Blount

The sound of lapping water serenades the calm. In itself it was splendor, the tranquility and rapture of the moment. An odd mixture Stacey Natas ponders as she watches the sun fade behind the cool black horizon. She could almost spy the bend of the earth as the last espial of light faded to the coming illuminance of the moon. Moon petals dance along the white sand of the beach, uplifting the beauty along the calm waters. Yes, it was lovely and Stacey was grateful for being here.

A faint breeze rolls in and pulls her thoughts away. She turns again to her partner, his hair fluttering exaggeratedly in the breeze, as his brazen smile reinforces his inner arrogance. Stacey had to chuckle at the scene. Here on a romantic moonlit beach, warm breeze caressing the faces of two past lovers. The waters calmly lapping the shore in a rhythm that would mimic a fanciful romp, there he was, making love to himself in his self-absorbed thoughts.

"What's so funny?"

Stacey turned her face and ignored the question. She knew from experience that it was only a matter of seconds before he would forget. He was just that way. If you were not giving attention, then you receive none in return.

Still she felt for him, wonders to how she could after he left her the way he did, but she loves adventure and he was every bit of it. Whether on a deep-sea dive, in bed, or simply dinner, he always mixed excitement into his life. Here though, on this breath-taking island overlooking the Pacific their greatest adventure awaits. Though she longs for it, she wonders and that wonder was about to overtake the undeniable beauty of Pagan Island.

Okay, she thought, watching a small flock of birds float across the blue-black sky. I can deal with the concept of the journey, but this is irony beyond me.

She sat for a moment longer, eyeing the view before she intrudes on the silence. "I don't know why I agreed to let you drag me all the way out here."

Chase Dakota, smirked as he always did, in that smug way that said, "Because you would be with me."

"No, that is not why. You are such an arrogant ass." Stacey replied as she glared at him.

"Let's not argue okay? We both know what I am about and you came." Chase pointed at her to emphasize his point.

Stacey looked away. She always did when she knew he was right. He made her so angry. Could it be that she still loves him and that is why she runs when he calls? Was it truly the adventure and the fact she was the best copilot around? Or, because she was the only one crazy enough to assist in his navigation's? Did it matter?

Chase frowned, "Look Stace, it's an opportunity to do what no one else has ever done."

"Sure."

"An opportunity to take the Newt for its inaugural spin." Chase stood, wiping the sand from the rear he sneaked a peek to see if Stacey was watching, she was. "We will be the first Stace." Chase stepped back, waved his hands in such a way to make an invisible marquee. "Chase Dakota and Stacey Natas."

"But."

"We'll be famous. People will read about us. See us on the news. Shit! I'll be a star, Hollywood for sure. The next action hero and you..."

"Chase, two Fathers?"

He was silent for a moment. He recalled when they came to him. How he thought they were nuts, Jesus freaks over the edge. But they had money, lots of it. He sat back down next to her. They both looked out over the shimmering Pacific. "Stace," he began, "yes, two fathers. They're paying clients and it was the only way I could get the funding to finish the Newt."

"Yeah, but..."

"I know, it is odd. But no more than Refluci paying a hundred g's so he could get off at 20,000 feet."

Stacey laughed. "Now that was an odd and uncomfortable one."

"But we did it." Chase turned to her, placing his palm on her cheek. "Together, we'll do this too."

She smiled, tilting her head deeper into his touch. "Together."

Candlelight burns in an otherwise dark room. Cobwebs hang crookedly in dust captured corners. The

musty smell of old-forgotten papers filters through the hanging dust and stale air. Words scurried away from the mere eye of man and set aside for a greater purpose.

Silence, except for the whispering of words that should not touch the ear of simple believers undermine the stillness. A figure hunched and dark from the shadows crowds the light as he spies the words that were meant for Gods.

Father Galne sits with his papers. They are piled high on the back of a small wooden table, archaic in look and time. The table labors beneath piles of scriptures and historic writings. He pushes aside what he is reading and quickly shuffles through a pile of dilapidated scrolls until he comes across the one he seeks. He stops for a moment, as if pondering a thought, then unrolls the scroll and gently lays it out before him.

"Brother," he calls as he glances up from his studies.

Sandals scrape over a dirt floor in a stridor string quartet.

"Yes Father?" The monk approaches, and lowers his head in respect.

Father Galne remains silent, reading. His finger rush past the words, his lips in quick pursuit. He stops, looks up at the monk who awaits him. "It is true." He speaks, before turning back to his reading.

"Father?" the monk replies softly.

Father Galne looks up from his book with a wild smile. "It is here like I have always said. Right here," he continues, pointing at the weathered pages beneath him.

"Father?"

"Oh," Father Galne waves his hand to shoo the monk away.

The monk bowed and did his duty. Positioning himself back against the wall, he quickly came to the Father's side once more.

"Bother."

"Yes?"

Father Galne drew his eyes to the book, but this time reads aloud. "...is here that the gate to heaven shall reside."

He lifts his eyes from the paper. "I have found it!" He said in a glorious voice.

"Fetch me Father O'Demious at once."

The Newt swayed with the movement of the ocean. The Mast Ship had set her preciously where Chase had asked. He stood on the bow, peering down into the crystal waters at the vessel he had spent a lifetime creating. The Newt, the next generation N-Class DSV, with a shell even the space shuttle would envy.

"She beautiful," Stacey observed.

"She's my life."

Stacey smiled despite her wanting to scream.

"Two-days right?"

"Yes, Stace in two-days we're under." Chase slapped his hands together and smiled. "How about a little spin?"

"Structural and environmental?"

Chase paused for a moment, "Sure, environmental too."

"Don't want any dead fishes," Stacey said as she left to prepare.

"No dead fish," Chase replied as he watched Stacey saunter off.

The two met at the lift about a half-hour later. Both suited up and ready for the first test of the Newt.

"Hold on." Chase put an hand on Stacey as the lift moved to dock with the Newt. The entry hatch

released in an exhaust of pure O2 and steam. The gases bellowed from the Newt, making it appear as if the inner hull was boiling.

"Serious pressure in that one." Stacey commented as she reached for the hull. Her fingers sank into the black outer skin of the Newt, then stopped as the skin reached the metallic lining of the vessel. Chase helped steady Stacey as she rounded a leg and straddled the hatch. She smiled back at him before slipping into the Newt as she might a evening gown.

Chase chuckled to himself and gave pursuit. "This is gonna be a blast," he said before closing the hatch.

"Engaged." Chase commented as he took his seat next to Stacey.

"Roger, systems check." Stacey ran through the corridor of switches and buttons to her left and right. "Systems go."

Chase donned his headset. "Titanic this is Newt do you read?"

"We read Chase, welcome aboard."

"Roger Titanic, steer clear of any icebergs while we're away."

"Roger that."

Chase turned to his copilot, winked and disengaged the hoist. The Newt rocked heavily from side to side for a moment, then settled into a gentle rock. "Engaging engines. One through four."

"Check."

"Remaining engines to engage. Five through eight."

"Check."

"Mini thrusters check. Engage one through six."

"Check."

"Mark."

"All systems go."

"Submerge in three...two...one." Chase rolled the stick to the left and led the Newt beneath the crest of the ocean.

The front observation window opened to a crystal world of radiant colors. The fish, coral and floor life were spectacular, but to the eyes of the Newt's two pilots, it was extra special, it was their world. The Newt maneuvered quickly to a depth of 500 feet before leveling off and moving towards the Mariana Trench. They had both seen it before, on the Sinkai some twenty-one thousand feet. Today they would venture further.

The Newt maneuvered into the trench like a car merging into traffic. The engines hummed, barely noticeable in the background. It was uncannily quiet in the box the outside world was silent and the water worthiness of the Newt was like floating on a cloud.

"She handles unbelievably," Chase commented as he pushed her deeper.

Stacey eyed the monitors and the sonar, "Wow!" She chirped.

Fifteen thousand feet into the trench and the Newt reacted as if she were still floating on the surface of the ocean. "Systems." Chase called.

"Clear all boards." Stacey turned off the inner hub lights and dimmed the external feeler lights.

"Dive time."

"Thirty minutes."

"Life support."

"250 man hours remain."

"Woo-hoo!" Chase exclaimed in a rather unconventional move.

"Newt is everything all right?"

"Systems go base," Stacey replied for her over spirited pilot.

She smiled as she watched the joy on Chase's face. Nothing but adventure brought it out of him. His inner boy, his wild eyes and fervent desires.

"Twenty-thousand feet." Chase announced moments later.

Quickly, realizing the coming milestone Stacey turned her attention back to the Newt. "Systems stable, multi-pressurization is active."

"I'm gonna level her off at twenty-one Stacey."

"Roger."

"And ... level."

Stacey checked the systems and the sonar. She engaged the feeler lights and took to a physical check. "Systems stable. Physical detects no abnormalities."

"Okay Stacey have a seat and let's drop her deeper." Chase waited for his copilot to secure herself before he turned the nose of the Newt down and throttled the engines.

"Environmental consistent. Disengaging feelers and focusing forward lamps." Stacey switched over the power from the side and aft lamps to the bow. The beams did little beyond the jib, but were enough to satisfy Chase.

"Systems."

Stacey checked the monitor and readings. "All go. Multi-pressurization is on and functioning."

"Dive time."

"Forty-five minutes."

"Life support."

"240 man hours remain."

"This ride is sweet."

Stacey watched the wild glaze in over Chase's eyes. He was, as he would say, stoked. He was right the Newt was spectacular. He had done it. The four seat N-class DSV would take sea exploration to the next level.

"Titanic you read?"

"They won't hear you at this depth Chase."

"She can do everything else."

Stacey smiled, "Yeah, but she can't do everything."

"Okay, get back to copiloting."

Silence filled the cabin as the Newt crept deeper. Chase pulled her level then announced their depth. "Mark and systems at," he paused a moment "Thirty-thousand feet."

Stacey didn't move. Her eyes wide she turned to her pilot. "Thirty-thousand feet?"

"Mark." Was all Chase said, in his smug and confident way.

Stacey frantically rose from her seat, leaning back over she engaged the feeler lights. In the aft of the Newt, she peered out the observation window. The dark world outside had invaded the Newt. The once semi-lit cabin was near black now, but she knew her way around a DSV well enough to maneuver within the Newt. From inside she could see even darker shadows moving within the blackness. Every so often, she would spy what should could only later describe as a gem floating within the ocean's black gown.

"Mark?" Chase's voice penetrated her wondering thoughts.

"Right," quickly she made her way around the Newt and back to her station. "Systems go. Additional check altimeter, gyrocompass, navigation and tracking system, sonar, all go."

"Full complements check please." Chase reduced the power to the engines and stabilized the Newt with the mini thrusters. He took to the cabin for a physical check and outer observation himself.

Stacey sat, turned on the cockpit lights and began to run down the compliment systems. "All systems check."

"This beauty is gonna take us to the bottom of the ocean Stacey. We," Chase pointed at Stacey then himself, "are gonna be the shit of the under water world."

"Yes we are," Stacey agreed with an animated nod.

"Mark, and let's take this baby home."

"Roger."

"You called for me Father Galne?" Father O'Demious asked as he entered the hidden space.

Father Galne looked up from his studies with a sparkle in his eye. "I have found it. The passage that confirms my beliefs." He pointed with open palms to the open scroll before him.

"It is there? It says that?" Father O'Demious curiosity piqued as the possibility seemed imperfect.

Father Galne waited for his brethren to take his place along side him before he broke into words. "It is a lingua from the time before Christ's birth. It is broken at best but I have used other writings to decipher its meaning."

"Then it is not authenticated?"

"No, but that will happen when we journey to the location depicted here in the writings."

"I was hoping for something more definite. I was hoping for the scriptures to confirm such a thing."

Father Galne looked down at the rough scroll that spread out before him. "This is the word of God. Look here it bears the sign of the Sacred Heart. It bears the tears of the Lord himself. Father Galne pointed at the dark streaks that ran throughout the scroll.

Father O'Demious nodded. "He looked down at the odd writing, go on."

"It says that 'The land beyond the Garden shall be, but this here Atianqua shall remained forever buried. For this is the home of our Lord. His creation Atianqua shall forever bear the creation of time.'" Father Galne looked up from his reading. "It continues from there to describe the make-up of the land. It reads as does the Garden of Eden."

Father O'Demious shook his head, "What is this place Atianqua?"

Father Galne smiled as he stood. He placed an arm around his brethren and announced. "At first I thought Atlantis, but the writing do not coincide with the myth, however in many ways it does. Atianqua, from the writings, suggests it is a place of great accomplishment. The land perfect, climate tropical and the fruit yielded by the land was like no other. It was an oasis, perfect in every way."

Father O'Demious was silent while Father Galne called for wine in celebration. The monk in service excused himself and scurried away to fetch the Father's wishes.

"But..."

"The people were in His image. Flawless race of God loving children. Atianqua was a place of great harmony and rapture, it was a garden that only our Father could create." Father Galne continued.

"Yes, but it is only legend." Father O'Demious interrupted.

"On the contrary dear Father O'Demious. This place called Atianqua is in the scriptures. It is Genesis. Can't you see the meaning of Heaven's Gate? It is the catapult to where life was created, where we were created. Atianqua is a solitary island on a vast world of nothingness. Until our Father woke and created the world around it. That place is here my dear Father O'Demious and we are to be the first to discover her.

"Yes. It is a mute point. We travel this evening for the Mariana's. I suggest you prepare yourself. Father O'Demious remarked; exiting the room as the monk appeared with a flagon.

Father Galne frowned, motioning for the monk to enter. "I celebrate alone."

Stacey watched the glass bottom boat as it approached. "They are hours late," she commented to Chase

who stood next to her. She looked on as the two men came into view. They were dressed for church. Their long black Monastic chasubles slapped in the rapid wind. Their tight collars pulled staunch around their necks and as they approached, their dismal smiles greeted their pilot and copilot.

Chase turned on his heels and left before they docked. He was pissed and rightfully so. Still, Stacey lost the appreciation being she was stuck to greet the two.

"Was that our captain?" Stacey watched the first of the two Fathers get off the glass bottom boat. They made their way quickly up to the deck and the first asked again. "Was that our captain?"

"Yes." Stacey extended her hand. "My name is Stacey Natas, your copilot."

"Copilot?"

"Yes Father."

"You must excuse him. My name is Father Galne and the old fashioned one there is Father O'Demious, and we are both very pleased to meet you."

Stacey chuckled as the two kissed her hand.

"He is angry?" Father Galne asked.

"Yes, but everything will be fine."

"We had such a time getting transportation to the Island." Father O'Demious added.

"Come, we haven't much time if we want to do this today." Stacey motioned the Fathers to follow as she headed to quarters.

"Yes." Father Galne replied as he followed.

"Christ! How long does it take to get dressed?" Chase complained as he watched the minutes tick away.

"Give them a break. Especially the old guy." Stacey chuckled, "Hope you're up on your CPR."

"Funny." Chase smirked.

"Captain!" Father Galne called as he exited behind Father O'Demious.

Stacey smiled at the irony of their Newt suits being black too. She turned to make a comment to Chase in time to watch his head disappear as he stepped down onto the lift. "Damn it."

"What was that?" Father O'Demious asked.

Stacey turned to realize that both Father Galne and O'Demious were standing behind her.

"Nothing." Stacey fumbled about embarrassed.

"He is still upset?" Father Galne remarked.

"No," Stacey nodded, "business he's all business."

They nodded and motioned that they should be going.

"Yes, follow me gentlemen and please be careful."

When Stacey reached the bottom of the lift with their passengers, she realized Chase had already boarded the Newt. She cursed again under her breath, drawing the attention of Father O'Demious once more.

"Is there something wrong dear?"

Stacey sighed, then nodded. "Please," she pointed to the hatch. "You want to enter the Newt as if you are riding a horse. Straddle the entrance then carefully pull your other leg in. There is a small ladder you will need to navigate to the hull floor, then move to the aft of the vessel."

She stepped aside and watched the two uneasy smiles move past her. Stacey watched them enter the Newt, and thought how grateful she was that Chase wasn't out here to witness it. In time, they were able to enter the vessel with Stacey in quick pursuit.

"Engaged," she called as she secured the hatch.

"No kidding," Chase snipped. "Titanic, guess what? We're ready to disengage."

"Shhh!" Stacey scolded as she took her seat next to Chase.

"Yeah-yeah."

"Newt, cleared for disengage."

"Hoist disengaged in three, two, one and mark."

The Newt rocked, whipping her passengers from side to side before she steadied. Stacey looked back between the seat to check on their passengers. They were in a heated whisper and hadn't even noticed that the vessel was ready for launch. She turned back to Chase and shrugged, he paid her no attention and called for a systems check.

"Systems go."

"Engaging engine in pairs 1-2, 3-4."

"Check."

"Engines 5-6 and 7-8 engaged."

"Check."

"Checking mini thrusters."

"Check."

"Titanic, preparing for submerge."

"Roger that Newt, happy hunting and hurry home."

"Roger." Chase broke a smile as he gunned the throttle and buried the nose of the Newt at an

exaggerated angle.

The Newt jerked forward then sped near straight down. Stacey jerked in her harness. She could hear Fathers Galne and O'Demious in swift prayer. She glared at Chase as he balanced out the Newt for a steady decent.

"So we're even now." He said as he chucked in time with the prayers of his passengers.

The trip from that point turned into one a bit more enjoyable for Stacey as Chase relaxed into his adventuresome self. The waters proved silent, as did the firm engines of the Newt. The blackness outside the vessel deepened as they dove deeper into the Trench.

"Titanic?" Chase radioed.

"Go ahead."

"We'll be out of range in about thirty seconds. Keep some ribs on for me and Stace."

"Roger."

Chase turned to his copilot. "Systems?" He asked with a raised brow.

Stacey surveyed the instrumentation. "Systems go."

"Will level off at twenty-one thousand. Continuing decent."

"Roger."

Stacey turned back. Looking out at the Fathers who continued to pray as the inner cabin darkened. She turned on the back observatory light to give them a little piece of mind.

"You're such a softy."

Stacey looked over at Chase with a glint in her eye. "You know it."

"Leveling off in three, two, one, and mark."

Stacey leaned into her instruments. Twenty-one thousand feet."

"Systems."

"Go."

"Dive time."

"Thirty minutes."

"Life support."

"220 man hours."

"Roger. Stacey how about we activate the SIT video and record this historic event?"

"Roger that." Stacey gave Chase a wink as she activated the SIT.

Chase smirked, his smug smile evident even in the dim light of the cockpit. "Let's hit it." He said with a gentle push of the stick.

"Multi-pressurization is active and operable. Systems go."

Silence filled the Newt as she descended deeper into the trench. Destination to Challenger's Deep. Smooth and steady the Newt rode against the upper current rush. Stacey took a moment and leaned into Chase in a whisper. "I've bit my tongue since they got here. What is it they hope to find at the bottom of the ocean?"

Chase replied in a steady tone, keeping his concentration on the dive at hand and simply replied.
"God."

Stacey sat back and return to her readings. They would stop again at thirty thousand feet for a final check of systems. Then it was to the bottom of the ocean.

Chase leveled off at thirty thousand feet. He called for his check as he reviewed his log.

Stacey squeezed out between the pilot chairs and took a moment to stretch before she ventured into the hull.

"How are you two doing?" She asked as she approached the aft.

"Very well," Father O'Demious replied.

"Yes, I am fine too." Father Galne replied, but Stacey could sense the nervousness in his tone.

"We'll be fine." Stacey reassured as she checked the inner structure. She peered out again into the black gown of the ocean, admiring the glistening gems as they hovered about the Newt.

She patted Father Galne on the shoulder and headed back towards the bow. "The Lord will reward you." She heard Father Galne say as she took her seat.

She ignored the glare she was getting from Chase and continued with her systems check. "We're a go." She said, being sure she didn't make eye contact.

"Roger. Mark, decent beyond thirty to cavity end."

"Roger."

The Newt drifted deeper into the blackness. They were relying entirely on artificial navigation now. Stacey looked over at the SIT screen. It recorded the blackness, but nothing more visible to her eye.

Every thousand feet Chase would call off. "Thirty-two, thirty-three," until he stopped at thirty-six.

Both looked out their observation side windows. Nothing. The Newt had stopped movement. The stabilizing thrusters engaged and they hovered there in the darkness. It could be the bottom of the ocean or it could have been in the middle of space, they wouldn't have known. The entire hull dove in to the same blackness, except for the subtle glow of the instrumentation panel.

"Well boys, here we are." Chase called back but received no reply.

"Fathers?" Stacey called.

"Look," Stacey continued. "We know you are disappointed but at least answer us."

"Disappointed?" Father Galne's voice moved quietly through the darkness. "We are not disappointed, only waiting."

"Waiting?"

With that the Newt lunged forward and continued its decent. "What the?"

Stacey read the uncertainty in Chase's voice.

Stacey pushed herself deeper into her seat. She listened as Chase continued to read the depths aloud.

"Thirty-eight, thirty-nine..."

"This is nuts." Stacey checked the panels.

"Forty, forty-one."

The Newt leveled off then rose filling the hull with a blazing brilliance.

As Stacey's eyes adjusted to the light, she realized it was not as bright she as initially thought. She looked around, Chase was next to her calling for a systems check. He ran over his instrumentation and was trying to disengage the artificial navigation system. Father Galne and O'Demious were both on their knees in the center of the hull praising God.

"Systems check, damn it!"

Quickly Stacey began to survey the panel and read-outs, occasionally stopping to peer out the front observation window. They were adrift in a large cavern. To her left the cavern wall, large gray and black rock that protruded from the water and wrapped over the top, maybe two hundred feet. To her right was a long stretch of land in the same contour as the top of the cavern, long for as far as she could see the gray-black surface stretched.

"Pull it together Stacey. I need a systems check."

"Roger that. All systems stable. Pressurization and life support operable. It's as if we've surfaced up there," Stacey said pointing above them.

"Impossible. Depth reading at forty-two thousand six-hundred and forty-two feet." Chase leaned forward and gave the gauge a few swift flicks.

"Is she maneuverable?"

Chase sighed, "No, I can't disengage."

The two sat back. Stacey looked over at Chase's offered hand and took it. They waited as the Newt drifted deeper into the cavern. She continued forward until she met land, where she gently docked and disengaged the engines.

Stacey let go of Chase's hand and began to review instrumentation. "All systems stable."

"Engines won't engage." Stacey watched the growing eagerness in Chase's eyes.

"Chase?" But before she should say anything else, he was up from his seat and heading for the hatch. She sat back, trying to calm her fear as the words came back to her.

"Disengaged."

She looked back to see Chase's feet disappear out the hatch. Fathers Galne and O'Demious were in quick pursuit, moving much swifter than they did entering the Newt. Stacey watched the three men as they stood, their eyes absorbing every inch of the terrain.

"Deep breath Stacey." Stacey Natas released her harness and exited the Newt after Chase and their two passengers.

The air hit her. It was tropical. Warm with a splash of ocean. It smelled like Pagan Island and the surface was like the island as well. Beneath her, the sediment rock was like walking on small waves captured and molded through time. A distinct smell filtered through the cavern as well.

"I figure lava and the smell is sulfur." Chase said as he approached.

"Where are they going?" She pointed off to Father's Galne and O'Demious who had wandered off further from shore.

"Don't know, let's find out." Stacey gave pursuit with Chase.

"So how did you two know about this place?" Stacey asked as she and Chase came to a stop.

"Scriptures." Father Galne replied.

"But what is this place." Chase asked.

"Come and I will show you." Father Galne waved an arm as he turned from the group.

They followed Father Galne further from shore and stopped atop a small knoll. There he pointed forward, "This is where we are."

Stacey stood atop the knoll with the rest. She looked out over a vast field filled with evenly lined rows of broken stone. She stood a moment longer before following the rest to the bottom of the knoll.

"What are they Chase?"

Stacey stepped back as Chase took a closer look. "They're unearthened graves?"

"Preciously." Father Galne agreed.

Stacey stepped aside as Father O'Demious moved past her. She watched the old man as he carefully examined the rocks that sat at the head of the unearthened graves.

Father Galne moved to the rocks as well.

"A'albiel, Aban, Abariel, Abasdarhon, Abel..."

"What is he saying Father O'Demious?"

"They are the names of Angels. These are the graves of our Lord."

"Af Bri, Afriel, Aftiel..." Father Galne continued.

"Enough."

"This is hell?"

Father Galne laughed at Stacey's observation. "Perhaps, as it were. In our time hell is a place of the damned, but in our earlier history the word merely meant a place of the dead."

"What is this place then?" Chase interjected.

Father Galne smiled, "Welcome to Atianqua, the lost Garden of our Lord."

Both Stacey and Chase peered at Father Galne. Stacey watched as Chase shook his head and turned away.

"You see, this is where the Lord created the world. From here with the angels of Genesis He forged our world. There," Father Galne pointed to the graves, "is where our father created the angels upon whose wings civilization came to pass."

"Father, what are these." Chase interrupted pointing to a smaller row of graves that remained whole.

"I suspect more of the same." Father Galne replied confidently.

Stacey followed as the two Fathers made their way to Chase.

Father Galne nodded before stopping at the first grave. He read aloud but did not carry the same look in his eyes, nor the confident and steady voice he did prior. "Barbatos, Alocer, Appolyon, Abraxas..."

Stacey looked over at Father O'Demious who carried a grave look across his brow. "What is it Father?"

"They are the names of devils."

Father Galne stumbled back. "How could this be? How could such things reside in graves along risen angels?"

"This Atianqua is not our Lord's." Father O'Demious added.

"No," Father Galne raised his hands. "This is the Garden of Eden, this is the creation of life. Why else would..."

"This is not an oasis Father Galne as you spoke. Look around you." Father O'Demious looked at Stacey and Chase. "We should be leaving."

"No!" Father Galne knelt. "Lord God in heaven."

Stacey shrieked as the ground beneath her began to shake. "Move!" She heard Chase say as he grabbed her arm and lead her up over the knoll towards the Newt.

As they neared the Newt, they both fell as the quake shook them from their feet. Stacey looked back, she assumed Father Galne and O'Demious were right behind them. They were not. They had stopped atop the knoll and were looking back over the field of graves, both genuflecting and screaming for their Lords presence.

"Father Galne!" Stacey yelled as she took to her feet.

"Back to the Newt, get her started and I'll be back with those two."

The ground shook again, sending both Stacey and Chase to the ground. A fissure spread quickly from the crest of the knoll down the clearing coming to stop several feet from where Stacey lie. She moved back, kicking at the sediment into Chase's waiting arms.

She could hear Father Galne crying, "What have I done? I have brought man to the doorstep of hell. Go and never return, this is hell indeed hell." From the fissure drew an enormous flame. The red and orange flame twisted and flicked like a tongue. Stacey watched in horror the flame as it swooped down and consumed the two. Their horrible cries moved through the cavern, as the two wallowed in agony.

The rumbling of the ground intensified. The ceiling of the cavern began to split and began to spit rocks and dust. Stacey felt the tug at her shoulder. Chase was trying to pull her to her feet. She rose, never taking her eyes of the flames that rose from the burning corpses.

She entered the Newt first. Taking to her seat she harnessed her self in and prepared to embark.

"Engaged," Chase said as he took his seat as well.

"Firing engines in unison 1-8 engaged."

The engines started. Stacey held on as Chase turned the Newt on a dime. "Submerge!" She cried for as they turned she noted the flames had engulfed the clearing and moved quickly to the ocean.

Stacey sat back as Chase gunned the engines began a quick decent. The Newt was fully submerged when it stopped. Again the engines, once silent labored loudly as they were given full throttle. Stacey looked around frantically.

The Newt rose from the water as if lifted. Flames burst around the hull of the Newt raising the inner cabin temperature to dangerous highs.

Stacey screamed as the flames wrapped across the front observation window. "What the hell is this?" Stacey cried as she jerked forward. The Newt had been returned to the water where it tumbled hard beneath the surface coming to rest at the bottom of the cavern.

She looked around, as far back as she could see out the front observation window. Nothing. "Chase, go!" She realized then that Chase had not donned his harness. Blood poured down his face as he lay back, neck broken.

Stacey panicked. "Chase damn it!" She switched on the artificial navigation systems, no response. "Shit." She slammed her fist against the console.

"Think Stacey." She grabbed the controls, switching main vessel control from pilot to copilot. She had never driven a DSV, but she had no other choice. Engines engaged on command and the Newt was back to full power.

Pushing the stick forward, she throttled the Newt in full gear. The Newt skated along the bottom of the cavern before she was able to raise it to a safe elevation. She only looked back once through the rear observation window into the crystal waters of the cavern. The fire was gone and the waters calm.

Stacey exited the cavern and the Newt rocketed up from the bottom of Challenger's Deep before she leveled off at thirty-five thousand feet. The main power grid flashed warning of a systems overload. Stacey frantically raced to turn off all auxiliary systems including the SIT. The main power grid remained steady and Stacey reduced power to the engines.

The hull of the Newt was pitch black with the exception of a few monitor lights. Stacey looked out into the blackness. There, hundreds of gems gathered around the Newt. They twinkled now like stars in a boundless heaven. They brought with them no comfort for Stacey as she was lost thirty-five thousand feet beneath the Pacific Ocean. She throttled the engines and began a vertical climb. As she

reached thirty thousand feet the power to the Newt collapsed. The hull sank into a blinding darkness beyond the twinkling stars.

Stacey's deep shallow breaths kept the Newt from being utterly still, that and the sound of trickling water as the Newt and her pilot drifted alone in the darkness.

Epilogue

Reporting from the Department of Information Sciences at Kochi University, this is Hasagawa Yurei. Two weeks after a Japanese fishing trolley resurfaced the research DSV dubbed "Newt" investigators still have more questions than answers. As first reported, the Newt went missing three months ago off the coast of Pagan Island. Searchers gave up hope and halted the search after three days. Investigators have identified the pilot and copilot as Mr. Chase Dakota and Ms. Stacey Natas respectively. Further, they have learned that two research partners were on board. Identified as Father Miguel Galne and Pietro O'Demious, but nothing more is known as to why the men of the cloth were aboard the Newt. Member of the docking vessel Titanic claim that the Newt was on a quest to reach the bottom of Challenger's Deep. This has not been confirmed nor denied, but reports suggest that with the technology of the Newt intact researchers may very well embark to verify the journey. Finally, investigators have enlisted the help of linguistic experts to try and interpret the meaning of a word, which was found mysteriously scratched into the hull of the Newt, 'Atianqua.'

On The Waterfront

Shawn P. Madison

Eddie Perdido tried to look calm as he opened the front door to Lucente's Bar and waltzed in like everything was just fine. As soon as he passed through the door though, he took off across the smoky aisle cluttered with standing bodies and lingering conversation and crashed through the swing doors to the kitchen area in back.

Profanity followed him in Spanish throughout the bar and more than one hand gesture had been pointed his way before he disappeared among the cooks in off-white aprons wearing mostly the grease from their fries and wings. The smells of the rear area assaulted his nostrils and he felt more than an urgent need to get the hell out of there.

"Hey, asshole! What are you doing back here?" a voice demanded and Eddie made haste toward the back door that led to the alley behind the bar. Just before he slammed open that door, his hand found purchase on a thin white coat, the kind used mostly by butchers, that was hanging on a pin. He pulled the threadbare thing over his shoulders and walked stiffly out into the dark cold Hoboken night.

His sneakers made loud clapping noises on the worn asphalt beneath his feet and, at 3:00am, it seemed that he was the only other person outside in the whole world. The drugs were still racing in his system, heightening his senses, making his vision swirl in and out of focus.

What in the hell did those two thugs want with him anyway? He thought and snuck a nervous look over his shoulder toward the bar. At least they hadn't caught on to his escape route yet.

Eddie rounded the corner on to First Street and made his way toward the waterfront area instead of the more heavily crowded Washington Street. Even at this hour on a Friday night, Eddie knew there would be crowds of people rushing to and from the multitude of bars that littered this popular section of Hoboken. Those two mysteries behind him would automatically believe that he would want to get lost in the crowds once they realized that he was no longer in the bar and would choose to go, he hoped, in the opposite direction.

His breath was frosting thickly in front of him as he made his way deeper into the darkness toward the Hudson River. He could see New York City sparkling across the Hudson. The river was still several blocks ahead of him but, even this late at night, the lights reflected beautifully off the serene waters of the river. He continued passed several empty cross streets and finally crossed River Street, aptly named since it ran along the Hoboken waterfront. Looking both ways, he could see along the entire length of the road. There wasn't a car in sight.

The Hudson lapped noisily up against the concrete buffer on the edge of River Street. There was a long pier, one of the few still functional but barely used, jutting out into the murky water directly ahead. Eddie looked behind him, up the length of First Street and saw nothing. Thank God, he thought and breathed a sigh of relief. This quickly faded when he suddenly noticed two shadows lumbering toward the river from several blocks up. Shit!

Eddie didn't think long about his options, his brain had been temporarily re-wired by all of the various illegal substances now coursing through his bloodstream. Almost instantly, he leapt out on to the pier and struggled over the uneven terrain to try and disappear into the darkness and the shadows of the clapboard shacks and machinery that dotted the wooden structure.

"Where is that little shit, Berto?" Manny Blanco rasped, a toothpick sticking out of the right side of his mouth and the taste of stale beer coating his throat. The cold, this fucking cold, he thought to himself and swore that that son-of-a-bitch Perdido would be dead once he caught up with the bastard.

"Keep walking, Manny," Humberto Conde said evenly and didn't break his rapid stride.

"Are you sure about him coming this way, man?" Manny asked and Berto held up one hand for silence.

Blanco shook his head and tried to thrust his hands deeper into the thin pockets of his leather jacket. The gun felt very cold up against his waist, even through two layers of sweatshirts. He dared not grab hold of the automatic's metal handle, knowing very well that his frozen hands couldn't take anymore cold.

"He came through here," Conde said and kept on walking.

"Shit, man, I hope you're right," Blanco said. "Cause, if you aren't, Emilio's gonna have our asses."

"Don't sweat Emilio," Conde said. "I have that covered."

"Right," Blanco said and squinted into the lights reflecting off the Hudson River directly ahead of them. "Shit, dude, I think I just saw something on that pier."

"Yeah," Conde said and kept on walking.

The air was much colder out here on the pier, Eddie thought as he moved out farther along the rotted wood planking. In several places he could see straight through some ancient timbers to the water lapping harshly below. There was a good strong wind over the river tonight, the cold seemed to move cleanly through both his sweater and the thin white coat he had nabbed from the bar a few blocks up. He couldn't control his shivering as the sweat caused by his nervous anxiety quickly froze along his body. What in the fuck do they want?

His two pursuers had stopped at the point where the pier met the street, about fifty yards away from his position crouched behind an old rickety dumpster. He had not gotten a good look at them when he first noticed he'd had some company back on Washington and Third Street. All he knew was that these two were after him and were following along with a definite purpose. What that purpose was remained a mystery. With everything Eddie had done wrong over the past week, these two could be working for any number of the scumbags that were lining the Hoboken streets these days.

He watched them both intently, trying to hide the cloud of frost that erupted from his mouth with each and every breath. There was little light besides the full moon to illuminate this part of the dock. But his two pursuers were standing half-in and half-out of the light from a streetlamp positioned to the left of the pier. Two more steps, pendejos, Eddie thought, just two more steps and at least I'll be able to see your frigging faces...

Something stirred in the water directly below him then, a sound that made him jump and swear before he could think of maintaining his silence. It sounded big, whatever it was, big and close. Hay dios mio! What the fuck was that?

"There!" Manny called and pointed toward the far end of the pier. "There's that mari'con!"

"Let's go, Manny," Berto said and his automatic instantly filled his right hand. "It's time we send this fucker to a place far colder than this."

"Whatever you say, jefe," Manny said and grabbed his .45 from his waistband. How he wished he had thought to bring gloves with him tonight. The figure of the man they were following had jumped out from behind a dumpster for only a second, curses splitting the night from about one-hundred-and-fifty feet away. Just as quickly, he was back behind cover but it had been a big mistake on his part.

Now, they would make an example of this little shit Eddie Perdido and leave his bloody corpse spread eagle on the street for the newspapers to photograph and the local news shows to report on. Nobody in Hoboken stole from Emilio Juarez and lived to brag about it. Everybody in Hudson and Bergen Counties knew better than that.

Goodbye, Eddie, Manny Blanco thought and smiled. He loved this part of his job. It felt good to get rid of the fucking stupidos who thought they could move into Juarez country or slight Emilio in some way and not pay the consequences. It also felt very good just to kill...yeah, Manny Blanco especially loved that part of his job...

Shit, I know those two! Eddie screamed at himself in rage and finally realized why they were chasing him. He had come across one of Emilio's pushers at an Italian restaurant on Fourth and Washington last Tuesday. The ass was stupid enough to be getting drunk at the bar while in possession of several bags full of some high-priced pleasure pills. Eddie had pretended to get drunk with the bastard, making sure the man had gotten more than his fill of vodka and tequila before leading him into the alley behind the eatery and smacking him across the skull with a small wrench he kept around for just that purpose.

He had been able to score a pretty good deal on the stolen drugs that very same night with Martinez in Jersey City. Of course, there had been a lot less of it in the bags after he had taken some for himself. Eddie had been pretty happy with himself after pulling off that particular scam a few nights ago. Now, he wasn't so sure if that had been the smartest move he'd ever made.

Both men had their guns out. The quick glances he had caught of their faces in the streetlights before they approached the pier had confirmed their identity and just who they were working for. Various options raced through his mind. He knew he wouldn't be able to bargain or plead with these two—they had their orders and would carry them out. He didn't have a gun on him tonight, only a knife, but that meant that he would have to get very close to the both of them if he were to confront them. The pier was large and had many hiding places, if he could get them turned around toward the far side, he might

be able to double-back and make it back into the streets. As for right now, he was cornered. The bullets would start flying at any second and he doubted highly that the dumpster would be able to stand up against that kind of punishment.

What to do? What to do? Eddie's mind was scrambling for the right answers. Too many drugs tonight was slowing that process down considerably. He could try to slip into the water silently and make his way quickly to the street underneath the pier before they realized what he had done. He would come out of the water freezing but at least he would still be alive. If he could get his frozen legs to start running once he gained River Street, he would be well on his way to escape.

That seemed like the best idea and he was about to slip one leg over the edge when he heard that sound again. A loud screeching sound, like a nail across a chalkboard. Amazing that he remembered that from those few days he had spent in school as a youth. And once again, the sound of something big in the water, something larger than an averaged sized fish, that was for sure.

Eddie panicked then and made a run for it to some better cover across the other side of the pier. The men ahead of him saw this and began to raise their guns. A large hole in the wood lay directly ahead of him, several yards away, the moonlight shining clear and blue on the dark water below. Forgetting about the sounds he had heard just seconds ago as the first gunshots sounded, Eddie made his way to the hole and prepared to dive in.

Manny Blanco let loose two shots at the fleeing figure of Eddie Perdido, one clanked off the dumpster and one disappeared wildly into the air over the Hudson River. The cold air felt scratchy in his throat as he gasped for breath while running over the uneven wood of the old pier. Berto had fired three times and Manny could hear his cursing as all three of his bullets missed as well.

Whatever strange sounds he had heard in the water were now forgotten as all that he could focus on was that little shit Eddie and how they would get their asses handed to them by Emilio if he were to get away.

No way, not tonight you little shit! Manny thought and pressed off two more shots. Both of them hit something, unfortunately neither struck Eddie Perdido. The little man was sprinting across the large pier, from one piece of cover to the next. Never in one place for more than a second. He seemed to be heading toward a specific place in the center of an exposed area in the wood. Why, Manny couldn't be sure, but once he was out there in the open he would be dead, dead, dead...

Almost there! Eddie knew, as he jumped over a rusted old barrel lying on its side and saw the huge hole in the timbers less than eight feet away. Another bullet shattered the silence of the night, whining past his ear, much too close for comfort. Then another, thunking into something solid just a few feet away. Keep moving, almost there!

These two weren't playing games, they were out to eradicate him tonight in this cold winter air and on this ancient fucking pier. But not tonight, no, not tonight, Eddie laughed. He wasn't planning on breaking stride when he made his head first dive through the hole and into the murky waters of the Hudson River. At least, that was what he had planned on doing. Unfortunately for Eddie Perdido, the thing he saw in the water through the hole in the pier just before he left his feet made him think twice. A terrified scream escaped his throat as Eddie tried to change direction in mid-air.

The thing in the water, not too far away, was bathed in the cool glowing light of the moon for the briefest of seconds, captured by his mind's eye. Teeth like razors shone blue in the night, beady yellow eyes like a snake seemed to stare straight through to his soul, hands with claws that looked sharp as blades were poised, ready to grasp him as he flew toward the water.

All of this he saw in a matter of two seconds as his body passed through the hole in the wood of the pier amid a steady stream of bullets and plummeted toward the water a few feet away. His scream of horror was cut off instantly as he met the beast that was waiting for him. A creature from the very depths of hell, or so it seemed to Eddie's drugged brain. Oh God, Oh God, Oh God... were Eddie's last thoughts as his head passed through the enormous mouth and razor-sharp teeth clamped down on his neck.

An eerie scream, one borne of terror and panic, pierced the otherwise quiet night. That horrific sound succeeded in bringing both Manny and Berto to an immediate stop just before it managed to fade into the wind blowing over the river. The two men looked at each other in utter confusion. Manny could feel the hairs on the nape of his neck standing on end. That sound, that dreadful sound, had not been a normal scream of fear. It had been horrible, long and desperate, a sound of cold and stark fright. A scream of someone who had just seen something come leaping out of his nightmares. Not the sound that a thug would make while being chased by other thugs. At least, not a sound that Manny Blanco thought a bastard like Eddie Perdido would ever make. Damn, it sounded like nothing he had ever heard.

Manny looked over at Berto and shrugged. "Did you hit him?"

"No," Berto said and looked forward again. A strange and muffled sound could be heard coming from the water below. A churning sound, a munching sound, a sound like something big was... was... eating?

"What the fuck is that, Berto?" Manny asked and the other man merely shook his head. They began to walk forward in unison, trying to make out the sounds of something they did not recognize through the normal sounds of the night; the dark water of the Hudson lapping with a definite rhythm against the pylons of the pier below, the sound of the cold wind howling through the air and the muffled hints of other movement around them on the pier. The sounds of distant traffic were coming from the streets of Hoboken behind them as well as from across the river in New York City.

But this other sound. This was something different. This was something monstrous, something that continued to make Manny Blanco's hair stand on end. A sound that instilled fear. A sound that meant death out here in the cold dead of moonlit night on this old wooden pier jutting out into the Hudson River.

"I don't like this, Berto," Manny said and stopped a few feet away from the hole in the pier. Both men could see the water shining below from the moonlight overhead. Both men could also see the large looming shadow within that hole, something unfamiliar that was moving around down there. In the water. Just a few feet away.

"Where's Perdido?" Manny asked and Berto just shook his head again, from side to side. "I don't see him either, Jefe. Let's get the hell out of here and call it a night."

"We have to have proof for Emilio, Manny," Berto said, indicating the camera-strap that hung from his neck. The camera itself was covered within Berto's thick jacket. "We go back without that, Emilio acts like we didn't do anything tonight."

"I know, I know, but dammit, Berto," Manny said. "This shit I don't like. What the fuck is that down there?"

"I have no Goddamn clue, Manny," Berto said and began to fish the camera out from within his jacket. "But I'm going to see if I can get a picture of that pato's body down there. That should be enough for Emilio."

"Go ahead, Berto," Manny said and took a step back. "Be my guest but I'm not getting close to that fucking hole."

Berto nodded once and took a careful step closer to the hole in the pier. The munching sounds or whatever the hell they were continued to emanate from the murky depths below. Manny watched Berto take one more step, two...just feet from the hole now. Berto holstered his weapon and pulled a small black flashlight from his pocket and struggled to turn it on. Manny saw the shock in his partner's face as Berto peered into the hole in the pier, his camera hanging limply in one hand and the flashlight still not working.

Through yellow eyes, it saw another standing above on the wooden platform. The stink of rotting wood and raw water filled its nostrils with pleasant memories. This is good, it thought and continued feasting on the wondrous blood and bones of the thing that had come through the hole above. Very good, more food...

It shuffled a bit closer to the hole, could see the one above peering down through small and limited eyes. Not fit for prey, it thought in an ancient brain as cold water lapped roughly against its torso and blood trickled deliciously from its mouth, but food not to be missed.

It glanced quickly about at the others in the water with it before finding the one above again with its eyes. Stark and bright in the dim light coming from the white orb above, the one on the rotted wood was coming closer, ever closer to the hole...another for me before the others feast...

Then the light hit its eyes and a wave of pain bit into its brain. Reactions were all that it had left to protect itself from this assault. Forgetting about the remains of the kill in its hands, it leapt from the water, grabbing the rotted wood edging the hole with scaly clawed hands and heaved itself upward.

Manny Blanco couldn't help himself as his legs propelled him a few steps forward, ever closer toward the hole. The look, that terror-stricken look on the face of his partner spurred him on. Curiosity was getting the best of him and he hated himself for it. RUN! His mind screamed at him but still his legs brought him closer. He peered over the edge of the hole and down into the water, where the eyes of Berto Conde were transfixed. As his eyes met the thing that lay in the water mere feet below where the two of them stood, Manny didn't know if the screams that tore through the night were coming from him, Berto or that hideous thing positioned just below them in the river. It all seemed to coincide with the flashlight in Berto's hands suddenly coming alive, the tight beam shafting down into the hole and capturing the thing in white brilliance.

He finally gave in to the instinct to run but felt rough hands on his jacket sleeve pulling him back. Trying to waive off the interference, Manny stumbled and went down to one knee.

"Fuck this, Berto!" Manny screamed and tried to regain his footing. Through another smaller hole in the pier, Manny could see more movement, more teeth, more yellow eyes peering upward from the water. "Jesus Christ, there're more of them!" he screamed.

Berto pushed him then, down to the pier, and tried to run past him as Manny felt something strong grab on to his ankle. He looked over his shoulder from his position lying on the wood and felt his heart stop beating in his chest. Ice flowed through his veins and he felt his bladder loose itself into the moist cold timbers of the pier.

The teeth were wrapped around his ankle, sinking slowly into the flesh. His foot could not be seen in the great gaping mouth of the creature before him. Manny screamed and managed to trip up Berto before he could fully get past him in his desperate run toward the streets of Hoboken. Berto went down hard and Manny heard the breath escape his lungs.

"Don't you fucking leave me, Berto!" Manny screamed as Conde struggled to his feet. "Help me, you fucking bastard!"

There were others now, pulling themselves up out of the water and on to the pier. Gray scaly things with silver claws resembling razors where their hands should be. Their eyes were piercing, glowing yellow in the subdued light of the moon. How many, Manny couldn't be sure. The teeth, oh my God, those teeth...

The pain that crashed into his brain when the thing chomped down on his knee overrode the previous numbness that had filled his entire being mere moments ago. Manny screamed again, screamed into the night over the Hudson River for as long as he could before his throat gave out.

More of them had joined the feast now. His mind separated from his body as he felt more teeth on his arms, teeth biting into his ribs, more on the other leg. He managed to catch a glimpse of Berto as he dwindled in the distance, running for the edge of the pier and for safety. The flashlight that his partner had been holding rested innocently on the pier now, about ten feet away, pointing at him and these things that were eating him alive.

Manny Blanco said his last prayers as he felt hot fetid breath on his neck and, somehow through his terror, managed to turn his head to face the killer about to strike.

So many teeth, so many rows of teeth, how many teeth could one creature have? Were his last thoughts as a huge mouth closed over his head, slashing through the thin tissues of the neck and throat and snapping the vertebrae with an audible crack.

Berto Conde ran, kept on running, so close to the edge of the pier now. Freedom and blessed life were only a few feet away. He tried to drown out the sounds of the feasting, those horrible sounds of Manny Blanco's death, from his mind as he drove himself onward.

No matter how long he lived, Berto knew that the unspeakable horrors he had witnessed this night and the sounds of those teeth gnashing and biting as they fed on his former friend would haunt him to his grave. The tears poured freely from his eyes, freezing on his face in the cold winter night that he had all but forgotten in his mad sprint for River Street and the safety of the city. Would these things follow him into the streets? He wondered as he nearly tripped on a piece of trash littering the pier and worked to steady his gait.

He could hear growls now, and more tearing, as the beasts in back of him made dinner out of Manny Blanco's now bloodless corpse. Those teeth, those fucking teeth! He swore to himself and turned for one second to try and catch a glimpse of his friend's demise.

Too far, he was too far away now to see anything in the limited light of his flashlight beam. He could have sworn that they were dragging Manny's body over to the hole, to the water where they had come from, these Godawful devil spawn creatures.

Just a few more feet now, just a few more feet, he thought as he swung his head around to once again face in the direction he was heading.

Berto Conde never saw the claws that raked across his face, tearing away his eyes and nose and most of his jaw before the teeth clamped down on his skull...

Water of the Rock

Susanne S. Brydenbaugh

As a child, Don Julian Santana Barrera moved with his family to an island in Mexico City's Texhuilo lagoon. One night, so local legend says, Don Julian was scared by a drowning woman's screams. Believing they were made by sirens in the lake, he began to collect dolls that washed up regularly on the island, and to hang them from trees as protection. From 1991, people from the nearby district of Xochimilco began bringing him dolls too, until the trees held hundreds. In April 2000, Don Julian told his nephew that the sirens were coming for him. The next day he was found floating in the water, and only the dolls can explain how he got there.

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They had no trouble crossing the Gulf of Mexico, or with the landing of the Cessna just north of Belize City. In fact, the Diazepam had worked wonders as he gazed from the plane's small window out over transmuting cloudsculptures. "Look Hala, a dog sitting on his bone," he pointed, and she leaned over with all the patience of a guardian minding her drunken charge and remarked, "Yes, I see...I do believe I see floppy ears, like the comic strip dog you like so much, Snoopy," except she pronounced it 'snowpee' as always.

And he laughed then, giddy with his fearlessness of the moment and reluctant to give all the credit to the sedative. Hala smiled his favorite smile with just one corner perking up in quiet mirth. It seized his heart and made his hand extend out to clasp her smaller one. "Why'd you bring me along?"

She had looked at him, her expression turning soft and puzzled, and reached out her hand with its olive skin contrasting against his much paler face. "Mathew, I could only bring someone I love to such a magical place." And then it was he who was puzzled, not quite sure if it was the Diazepam or a rare moment of naked spirit. And in the no-nonsense way of Hala, the conversation was dropped; he could almost see it descending from the dog-cloud that had morphed suddenly into a piano and an androgynous player. Play me a symphony, he thought, high with the answer he'd been given; high on love and laughter and Proteus-clouds that knew no solidity or conformity.

His revelry lasted another fifteen minutes before the pilot called over his shoulder that the tiny airstrip was just ahead and to ready themselves for the landing.

From Belize City they established a driver; Hala wouldn't call him a guide since she knew where they were going and just how to get there. She was the in sole charge of the expedition, but he was confused as of why she'd not just rented transportation. He'd seen more than a few such rental places as they drove through the streets and onto the Northern Highway and away from Belize City. This was Hala's country, he reasoned, she knew best and he trusted her judgment. Hala was a breed of woman apart from the rest; he'd known that from their first encounter on the campus at City University. She'd just moved to the States then, 'Appeasing her inquisitive nature', as she called it, over Art History textbooks and strong Columbian coffee.

From that time on they had been a couple. He took in the peculiar little statues of headless bodies with grimacing mouths and countless other peculiar artifacts she so loved when they'd moved into the tiny apartment on the Westside. He'd worn his patient smile when asked her millionth question about his American culture and his ancestry; what his last name, Ronsard, meant and its origin. But Hala herself was an enigma of confidence and cat-smooth grace, a locked box that no amount of prodding could open if she didn't want it to, and that was often the case.

The decision to visit Belize had come as a surprise, just a week before, but he'd attributed it to Hala's spontaneous nature and her need to visit the home she'd never talked much about. Over the years he'd learned, in bits and pieces, that she was an only child who lost both her parents in an accident while still young. No wonder she hadn't talked much about her home, he thought, such painful memories might be best left undisturbed. He remembered the twinge of guilt he'd experienced when he'd questioned her need to pack the malformed jade statues in her backpack, and how she had flinched, adamant about carrying those with her, like family, even as she'd had to neglect more useful items for lack of space. "No need for luggage, she'd said, "a backpack is sufficient for where we are going." No amount of playful inquiry would give him answers. "It's a surprise," she'd said in that tone of finality he knew so well.

Again he was amazed when the old army jeep left the highway for a smaller road and then for no road at all, but a dirt pathway between the bristling grass that widened eventually into the scrub vegetation and dense forest. He sat in the backseat with the impatience of a child, the sedative long worn-off, as he lost his resolve to wait and be surprised and asked where they were going.

"To my home," she said, and offered no more; so that Mathew swept fidgeting hands beneath his knees and gazed wondering out the vinyl window.

Several miles later, surely it was many, they came upon a village. A couple of dark-skinned men, aging, with tattered clothing on their backs walked to the driver's side window and spoke in their native tongue to the driver. An exchange of words and hand gestures ensued with the village men shaking their heads emphatically. The driver was trying to keep up his end of the debate with an ever-louder strain, and he halted Hala with his palm when she would speak up and be heard among the men.

However, Hala would have none of it. She leaned across the seat next to the driver and spoke the same strange words with vigor, and, a slight touch of venom, he thought. The men were shocked into silence and stepped slowly backwards, not turning around, but not looking in their direction either. Somehow Hala had never seemed like the demur little village girl that obeyed her elders, he wondered if this

older version surprised them now, or if they resented her for it. Mathew guessed that this particular village had not heard of equal rights at all, and smothered a grin at the thought of Hala teaching them what those rights meant. But then Hala had reached down and grabbed his Nikon case and thrust it in the older man's direction. "No cameras allowed," she explained to Mathew, dangling the expensive case perilously out the window over the muck and mire of rain sludge. The man took it in both hands and said something to Hala that Mathew hoped was a remark about the camera's safe keeping.

Hala sat back down and without being prompted said the name of her people in her native tongue.

"But what does it mean?" he asked.

And she stared straight ahead as what looked to be the whole of the village stood back in rows on each side of the car as they drove around the furrowed earth and mud-stick huts. "It means 'The Water People'."

The jeep climbed what amounted to hills and greentops as they topped the last plateau to a breathtaking sight. They stopped and got out of the jeep, resting against the warm hood as the setting sun illuminated the mammoth stone structures to an almost violet radiance along the half-mile length. The blue-gray of the rookery crumbled in many places, but the overall magnificence of such ancient ruins kept the scene alive.

The driver shielded his eyes with his hand and turned to the east and the large lagoon that stretched out for miles. "I will be back next week to retrieve you. I go no further than this," he said in the first perfect English Mathew had heard him speak. The driver then turned and spoke to Hala in the native language that Mathew was starting to feel remote and estranged from. Hala nodded and removed from her backpack several bills and a flat gold coin, which the driver looked both excited about and reluctant to take.

Then, oddly, the driver turned to Mathew and said, "The Crocodile Man. Don't go walking with the Crocodile Man."

And Hala brushed him off, practically pushed him into the front seat of the jeep and on his way. Back into the drab-green and mud-splattered jeep with the engine that ignited with strange Twenty-First century magic in a place that knew magic of a much more sinister taboo. Crocodile Man. Chills raced down his arms and backbone and the birds suddenly grew perturbed and cackled and cawed over the engine noise. Howl-screeches from the tree-clotted forest just beyond the western swell of the land and although he knew those voices to be from the howler monkeys, he felt the weight of three-thousand years peel away to expose a primeval realm. He could smell the mildew-soaked grass and vines and something older, something stronger that teased a small portion of his brain for recognition.

A gentle hand on his shoulder pulled him from the abysmal edge and once again he was back to the familiar and looking at Hala's concerned face. "You okay?"

He smiled, embarrassed and diminutive, thought to himself, it's the culture shock and the runaway imagination of a photographer's mind. "Yeah, I'm okay." And to make light of the situation, "Don't worry, the Crocodile Man can't scare me."

They hiked the short mile to the ruins with their backpacks as the sun sunk behind the forest. "Why didn't you want to stay within the village if it's your home?"

Hala swiped at the buzzing dragonfly that hovered before her face, looked for a moment as if she wasn't going to answer his question, but then, "I spent a lot of time up here in the ruins. The temples have always intrigued me and I consider them more my home than the village; besides the villagers think I'm cuckoo," and she swirled her finger around in circles beside her ear.

Mathew thought of his camera and gear, "They obviously think I'm a bit cuckoo myself. They were afraid I might steal away the essence of the Gods inside my camera." He shook his head, thinking of all the photo opportunities he was missing for the sake of foolish superstition. Couldn't help but be perturbed, it would've been easy to hide the gear.

"Mayans believe it's a relatively simple thing to do, steal someone's soul. No cameras, no video recorders, they believe the magic resides in the moment to moment presence. There is no beginning, there is no end. Time swallows its own tail."

Hala's words stayed with Mathew until they reached the stone hedge that led to the largest of the temples. Leaning against one of the tall stone pillars, Hala eased her backpack from her shoulders to the ground. All around them the sounds of insects came alive in the dusky darkness, and Hala took the flask of water from her pocket and drank deeply before pointing to the spot behind Mathew. "The Crocodile Man stands behind you."

He spun around, and there in the shadows of the clinging vines and mottled-gray bulwark, he saw the chiseled features of a hideous face, peering out of the forest of growth; easily eight feet in height. He shuddered in the view of its large eyes, time-eroded and sepia-coloured, while the rest of the face was dominated by patchwork moss and gray lichen. The eyes stared through him, beyond to the outstretched hand of the lagoon that seemed to be inching its way closer inland. Unbidden, the driver's hushed voice sifted through his mind, Don't turn your back on the Crocodile Man, and Mathew quickly turned back to the statue, hoping his paranoia wasn't all too transparent. Just a totem, he reminded himself, but still he shuffled closer to Hala. "Let's go set up house, I'm exhausted."

Hala nodded and rambled through her backpack for the small kerosene lantern, and once the wick was lit and warm light haloed the dark around them, Mathew calmed, and followed her along the ends of the Earth.

Together they walked through the corridor and into the desolate chambers of the temple. The place was large enough to be a small coliseum.

"My God, it's huge! He exclaimed, staring up at the multi-tiered walls. "Does this temple have a name?"

Hala closed her eyes and inhaled deeply as if she could fit the entire temple into the space of her lungs. With her eyes still shut, she answered, "It's called 'Altun Ha', 'Water of the Rock'."

Cut stones were missing in some places along the floor, evidence of excavation and scavenging or maybe something a little more ominous, something placed underneath those stones, hidden and molding, brackish-green food for the worm-gods long after the soul had been spirited away. Where the rock was crumbling away in the ramparts, darkness peered out. The kind of gloom that reminded him that most was dark without that bright globe of gas in the sky to shed a little light. But light would never be able to banish the dreaded night. Dark was everywhere. Dark penetrated space and time and grew and suffocated until the light choked and burned miserably out. The sun wouldn't last forever... but darkness would. Darkness would forever prevail. And he thought he saw the kerosene light flicker and wane as a result of his morose thoughts.

And as if Hala had tweezed the mental synapse from his head, "It's going to be a full moon tonight; we can sleep within the open chamber if you'd like to watch the stars."

But the moon wasn't enough, it was just reflected light from the sun, his mind whispered. Refractive pale light to feed the shadows. His chest grew tight and he wondered what was happening to him. He'd never had an anxiety attack in his life. He felt out of place, vulnerable, lost—and God how many hours until sun up?...

"It doesn't matter, I just want to go to sleep," he said, and briefly closed his eyes. Better to be within his own darkness of his own free will.

They unpacked their sleeping bags and settled within the outer chamber under the ceiling of stars, for which Mathew was grateful. The temple housed bad karma he was sure and he didn't want nightmares scratching at his sleep. The place was just going to take a little getting used to, he allowed. Of course it was creepy, it was in the middle of nowhere with a history of unspeakable deeds in the name of sacrifice. He gazed at the interior structures and wondered how in the world she had lived here, alone. Stretching out he tried to get comfortable on the hard flooring, at last giving up and just closing his eyes to the long day.

Hala eased over and laid her head against his shoulder and he fell into the rimless void of sleep.

She woke him with slow grazing kisses down the side of his neck. He held her and smoothed the skin of her back, pressing her into his skin. Central America was far away, they were in their own bed in New York. He heard the din of midnight traffic and saw through barely closed eyes the twinkle-light of buildings through the windows in their bedroom. Beautiful civilization. People living the beautiful noise of life. Beautiful red landing lights of a passing jet... and then he was awake quite suddenly, and

staring at the silhouette of the figure above them. Red eyes that didn't shine like landing lights at all, but were opaque in the night, the massive bulk of black shadow blocking out the stars above.

The Crocodile Man.

Hala felt him tense and rolled off of him, looked up and gaped at the figure above. Mathew threw his arm across her in an instinctive gesture of protection, but she pushed him back and stood, her long legs braced before the inky shadow.

"Go away! He belongs to me! He is of the house of Ronsard and I have claimed him for myself."

The voice of cold and decaying wind spoke leathery in the night. It rasped against the humid night air and turned it to hanging, hoary-gray fog. "Ahh, siren, go back to the lagoon from whence you've come. You have no claim within this temple of MINE."

Mathew trembled, tried to speak, tried to ask what the hell was going on with the talk of sirens in lagoons—and why couldn't he wake himself up? He bit at the sides of his mouth, at his lip, bent and pulled at his fingers. Wake up....

"No Spirit Walker, spawn of the Crocodile. This man is of protected blood. Through his veins runs the blood that protected this very temple from the Spanish Conquistadors who violated, plundered, and killed our worshipers. Find another to ease your hate upon."

The Crocodile Man's grumble-laugh filled the temple, slithering through the open air and mingling with the damnable fog. The night air coldly brushed against Mathew's skin and felt like writhing snakes so that his skin tightened against his bones. And then the great hulking shadow dissolved around them, but they could feel his malevolent company even while they couldn't see him. And then Hala jerked back, and her feet left the ground in small levitating increments until Mathew stared up, slack-jawed, at the soles of her feet. He tried to go to her, but as if the air held steel itself, he couldn't move; breathing was in trickle-motion and his muscles moved as if on a gritty conveyor belt straining ever slowly. He closed his eyes, his eyelids too heavy to move.

Sound moved in a whirlwind, he couldn't separate words from the out lash of moaning, if they were understandable or primitive it made no difference in the suction of dead air. He knew a thousand moments of futility as he waited for the end, and at last it did stop, disappeared suddenly, on a cusp.

Mathew thought he heard an instant where Hala had tried to protest, but all was silent as the air lightened and he at last could move freely.

The chamber was empty. No sign of Hala or the demon-god. The stillness grated on his ears as he

looked around for Hala, as he scrambled to the entrance and the long foreboding halls that he never wanted to be alone within, listening for movement, for footsteps in the rubble.

Mathew focused on finding Hala. He looked about for her, running through the tomb- silence calling her name, through the many snaking corridors and anti-chambers. With the passing of each minute it felt more like a nightmare. If he could just find Hala, then it would prove to be a dream or hallucinations...and he could calm himself and beg her to leave with him.

The trickle of laughter was low enough to be rain at first, but then it became louder until Mathew was sure it was Hala and he ran through the rooms, step after step of denial, relieved that it had just been one of those striking dreams, so life-like and real it convinced you even as you woke upright, sweat-drenched and white-flashbulb-eyes impossibly wide. Even as it took you several minutes to work it out—the surreal component vanishing under reality, and the ever logical mind taking over. And for his peace of mind, he all but convinced himself it was a dream. A Diazepam hangover. That all the weirdness of the day and the subconscious fears had dealt to his sleeping mind a vicious blow.

He followed the laughter to a smaller temple deep within the catacomb. In the center of the floor, a round pool of water faint light emanating from underneath, turned the water to blue-green paradise. Inviting, if only the circumstances were different.

The laughter seemed to be coming from the pool. He walked to its edge, the faint light a distant glow that could not be isolated, it simply floated to the top like air bubbles.

"I'm here Mathew; we belong to the water, you and me." Another peel of laughter as Mathew looked about the walls searching for her. "I've waited for so long, and now you must decide. Come with me, or stay, forever, with Him. You know it's I who loves you. Come with me, Mathew. Don't be afraid, water is comfort."

He found his voice at the bottom of his throat, shaky and thin, "What's happening Hala?"

An audible sigh, impatience in her voice as she called, "The lagoon is coming Mathew, you must decide. The water will take you or the temple will devour you—it's your choice, as it has always been with the Ronsards."

He looked up to see the water from the lagoon pouring from between the crevices of the boulder-sized flat stones along the room's walls; hundreds of rivets, releasing a cataclysm of panic. But he didn't have time to register the full measure of shock, for high above something else demanded his attention, two red pinpoints of light out of the indigo ceiling of undeterminable height. Twin pinpoints that flashed and grew brighter as they floated from the ceiling. Eyes. From a distance, it looked like a large bird, wings spread, gliding down in circular motions. But soon he knew, as the shadow caught up with the light of the pool and the ignorant-dark was where he wanted to stay. For there in the form of madness, of scales just beneath her breasts, and the wild untamed beauty of Hala, grew the tentacles of

medusa, and the long, jagged teeth of the hydra.

When he tried to concentrate on this new form of Hala, the collective consciousness of a hundred villagers filled his mind, wouldn't let him mourn his loss. He shook his head in an attempt to empty the invasion. His wounded heart plunged and he couldn't stop the pain from escaping, from ripping from his mouth, "No!"

The sound of water and his own scream reverberated through his ears and just under that thick roar, the sound of a chant and the deep thud of a drum thumping with a timeless rhythm; forest-born sound that enveloped him in its deepness. The primeval heartbeat of sadness. Of the realization that it was too late. Too late. The chasm in which he found himself too deep to ever escape.

The walls were closing in around him. The movement although slight at first, became increasingly known. From the spaces between the stones, emerged long ivory spears, sharp piercing points growing longer as the walls moved inward. No where to run, no where to escape the monstrosity of Hala; the rising water; and no where to escape the crushing walls and their kiss of impalement.

The chants grew more fevered, he thought he could distinguish words between the slurs and groans. Water. Yes, he was sure it meant water. Hala stood frozen with inhuman eyes upon him, anticipating some dawning of an idea from him. Water—water of...what? his mind screamed... and the last two words came from the rushing water, cascaded into his thoughts like a landslide of improbable design. Water of the Rock.

Hala's demonic head ripped back and her laughter echoed from every stone within. The walls came faster, and faster, until Hala at last stopped the hysterics and held out her hand. He stared at the beautiful hand, the same hand he'd held and that had caressed him for four years. The hand he loved and yearned for. His arm trembled as he slowly held it out. With the first touch of her damp, cool hand he knew she would take him into the lagoon, and the water would flood back into the lagoon before morning. He knew from the borrowed memories of hundreds that he could spend eternity here in this god-forsaken temple or go to the watery grave of the lagoon with Hala. He loved Hala. He'd always loved Hala, along with all the Ronsards of the past. Noble Ronsards, that had followed wherever she had led them, who now waited, sodden and united, at the bottom of the lagoon for him.

And if he didn't look at Hala's face, if he willed himself not look into her fiery eyes or hear her crazed laughter...it wouldn't be such a bad way to die...

Creating A Barbarian Man

Steven L. Shrewsbury

*"The ocean is of blood! See how it swims red
in the rising sun? Oh my people, my people,
the blood you have split in anger turns the
very seas to scarlet!"*

Robert E. Howard, *The Dark Man*, 1931

Taloric ran naked down the sandy beach toward the frothy waters. Never once did he glance back at the imposing cliffs of Dover. He'd seen them before on many an occasion, usually from a birlinn craft as it traveled in search of prey. When his bare feet hit the water he recalled the first time he spied the majestic white spectacle in southern Briton. He was with his father, the great long bearded Goran when their Pict reaving vessel strayed far off their intended route. As Pict pirates from neighboring isle of Eriu, there was never much call for their dark haired kind to travel this far south. Taloric gritted his teeth as the cold water made his body flinch, but he knew like all things in love and in war, nothing worth having was easy to get.

Splashing into the waters and swimming, Taloric forgot about Dover. He felt the greased fat around his body clash with the icy waters. Old women of the wood swore this substance would ward off the icy kiss of the water and the Pict youth prayed to his dark gods that this was so. So many of his brethren, near a dozen winters in age, had perished in the exercise of man making, the wise women made a balm for their flesh that worked. Though not the same in victrol as their Celtic neighbors the barbarous Picts made their own rituals for becoming a man. Taking long strokes in the waters of the sea, Taloric knew that if he would ever become the chieftain of his tribe he must make this trip. This grand sacrifice would show that he indeed possessed the toughness and breeding to be supreme over Pictdom. If the god of the waters, Nechtan, decided to smile on him, Taloric would triumph. In the back of his barbarian mind he hoped that Nechtan's embrace wouldn't be eternal this night.

In the frigid water Taloric buried his childish fear of giant, finned monsters in the waters and focused on what waited for him across the channel in Gaul. The idea of fair, Celtic women, better even than those in Briton, made his manhood surge. This was a difficult task in such chilly water, but the power of youth overcame such trivialities. Taloric followed his guides in the sky and knew that his regular paddling method would win the day.

For hours he swam, his powerful limbs working steady with his mind full of songs of war. The simple ballads of death to the Celts and any outlanders foolish enough to come near Eriu grew tiresome after repeated chants. After six hours these songs faded and were replaced by the oral tales of the priests of the oak. These shadowy priests were pale images of those of the wood that sang the oral traditions in Briton, but Taloric knew the barbarian history of Pictdom well. As he swam and avoided bubbly creatures trying to sting him, his mind focused on the history of his race.

Aside from the wandering savages that crossed over the mainland beyond fair Gaul and stepped into Briton ages ago, the seeds of Pictdom emerged centuries before in a far off land. Some said it was a place near where these new Romans came from and that it was warm and dank. The Romans Taloric heard of were small men and couldn't yet conquer Gaul. Others said the Picts originated from the land called Iberia where tall men with black hair lived. Taloric often wondered how much of these tales were true or if the bards simply created their past out of boredom. It mattered not to the youth swimming the channel. He would make himself a part of those tales, he told himself repeatedly. Someday the children swimming to Gaul to make themselves men would remember the name of Taloric and tremble!

He relished the idea that the Picts were the terrors of the high seas. No man would let themselves or their womenfolk near the shores in Briton and those in Gaul seldom did, either. After a raid, the overpowering stench of burning wood and flesh was as common to a Pict youth as horsemeat on the fire. Once, after a grand raid into the Northern region of Albu, Taloric was an onlooker as another Pict boy vomited at the scene. To himself, the half naked corpses laying in the slush, mud and manure were indeed sickening, but Taloric held his food down. The others jeered and lashed the other sickened youth as he couldn't take the sight or smells of the stiffening bodies. Even swimming in the channel Taloric could recall the only time he gagged after such a foray. It was when the wolves howled in the distance and the thought that these wild beasts would raid the battlefield the Picts just stripped clean of weapons soon as it was dark.

Eight hours into his swim Taloric was again gripped with a gloomy fear that he was off course, but he strove to concentrate on other things. Death never terrified him; Taloric believed he would live again someday. It was a common thought amongst Pictdom that life returned often and one would always come back either later or in one's grandchildren. If not, who would know? There was little to hope for in tomorrow, he reasoned. He wanted to get older, to be strong, to take women to love, to bed them, to eat, drink and to fight. What else was there? Certain men thought too much and Taloric listened to his old father Goran when he said, "I know what there is: my smell or taste or fell. That is what is real, not off of these spirits in the head!" The only spirits his father enjoyed were in a jug, the youth grinned in recollection. This act Taloric performed would prove his meddle to the smaller ones of weaker blood in Pictdom. He would show them his heart was in the highest place.

Since he had already slain a man on a reaving journey into Albu using a small battle-ax, the next step in Taloric's man-making was love. Not wanting to seize on a Pictish girl yet, for they were good for sons, he desired the hidden pleasure of first love. This would be had by the usual Pict method of attack and piracy. Something primal and murky dwelled in his soul, something from the bleak beginnings of all mankind. It strove the Picts on to share themselves with humanity and perhaps leave a remnant behind. Due to the strength of the blonde Celt giants, many Picts worried for their race. The man making ritual of spreading the seed helped to insure their race would survive. The world was full of sheep, blissfully ignorant of their world and Taloric was a wolf, he reasoned. A wolf obeyed only his instincts.

After what seemed like countless miles, Taloric was elated to see dry land. If he were able he certainly would've been sexually aroused by the sight. Close to a dozen hours passed since the barbarian youth started his trip and the night was nearing its end. Tanaris the Thunderer in the sky blessed him with

good weather, so all was right in Taloric's mind. As he approached shore, all of his ideas set in place: Taloric would make land fall, warm himself, and perhaps sleep a day in caves common there in Gaul, then make his choice of the women in Gaul. Fully aware of the Celts not being stupid of Pictish habit, Taloric would steal a knife first and make certain to be stealthy in his choice.

Stumbling across the shore, Taloric collapsed, free of the arms of Nechtan, but soon crawled to the sands. He couldn't find the caves spoken of for he was indeed off course and wandered until close to dawn. Eventually, he found a small cave and reasoned the day was done. Crawling deep in the cave near the beach young Taloric slept with a grin, exhausted, and dreamt of his next night and how he would be a man.

Awaking at sunset, Taloric was weary but knew he must act soon. After using a stone to carve a few pictures on the cave wall depicting his journey across the water, he left the cave and touched the ocean once again. Taking water from the sea, he made mud in the ground. Soon, Taloric smeared long lines of the grime over his chest and cheeks. Not yet tattooed like his father, Taloric put on his markings for attack and wore the Earth well. The naked Pict waited for full darkness and sneaked into a wooded area nearby. He soon discovered berries to eat, but it did little to satisfy the pangs in his stomach. Ravenously hungry, he hoped his lover would know where good food was.

Several miles from the shore Taloric found what he was looking for. At the border of a village a being enticed him like the songs of a goddess, yet she never knew it. She was a Celtic woman, tall, lean, sturdy of back with a small girth to her belly. With no hesitation the woman gathered herbs at the edge of the tiny community. Her large hips made his manhood course and he hid in the dense grouping of trees. With glowing ebony eyes Taloric watched her depart with two diminutive children back to the village. The small home was made of logs and the door she opened swung on iron hinges. From the mild glint from the moonlight on these rings Taloric could see they had been polished with fat for a high sheen. The smoke from the roof of this home mingled with the other discharges from other cabins. An odor wafted to the forest—one of burning embers, greased fat and cooking food. Taloric's stomach churned, but it was his heart that seized the day. All he needed was that glimpse and he loved her. She was for him and there would be no other.

After the night deepened Taloric slipped between the series of buildings and heard various songs in the night. A verse sang by young children in one cabin made him smile at the irony:

"A ditty, short and wise
That mummy told to me
Beware the trolls in the night
That swims out of the sea."

He could smell meat inside and his stomach roared. Taloric stalked around this woman's dwelling for a long time and saw no man enter in. It was then he spotted a black bird on a large perch outside her door. The eyes of the raven leered at Taloric, seeing him in the shadows clearly. Straight away, Taloric

bolted from the scene, legs pumping fast. Though the raven made no noise Taloric worried so he would be discovered through the black fowl. He knew certain women of the wood possessed trained ravens. The Pict wasn't foolish enough to test if this bird would give him away to the Druid priestess inside.

Hiding near a stable attached to a smith's working area; Taloric cursed his desire and bad luck and watched as various folks went out to the edge of the village to relieve themselves before retiring for the night. He tried to banish the thoughts of the woman he saw and find another, but Taloric was smitten. Why did she have to be a priestess of the Oak? Druid or no, he found himself enthralled and buried his primal fear of magic. Stealing an iron tool from the smith's forge, he decided to wait for his chance in the woods. There was no way Taloric would enter the Druid's cabin and take her in an enclosed space. The idea of dashing the brains of her young ones didn't affect him, but he didn't want to lose his life before he could reach true manhood. Celt women were fighters and one who could work magic may unleash untold terrors if he didn't act fast enough.

When the giant Celtic smith stumbled into the warm stable, Taloric froze. He nearly felt his lovesick heart stop. The odor of barley ale, sweat and fresh meat hit the Pict boy in the face... along with the realization that the giant worker of metals never spied him. When the drunken Celt slouched onto a stool, took a bite off a leg of some fresh roasted animal, Taloric gripped the stolen hammer and waited. When the giant drew back on the jug of ale, the Pict struck. Taloric planted the hammer in the middle of a mop of curly red hair and drew back. When the giant never reacted to the crushing blow, Taloric gasped. Moving fast, he slammed the hammer down in rapid succession. The jug of barley ale dropped to the straw mat near the door and the giant flopped over, hitting the ground so abruptly some of his brains spilled from the top of his cleaved skull. Taloric smirked, dipped his right index finger in the gruel oozing from the Celt's mane and spread the gore in circles on his tan cheeks.

Nestled in the thick overgrowth outside the village, the adolescent Pict watched a few younger women in the dim woods pass by. He let them come to the woods and pass water and leave. Gripping the iron hammer in his right hand Taloric knew he held each passing life in his figurative clutches. One girl turned her head, probably smelling Taloric, but she never walked in further. Too young to not be afraid of goblins or beasties, she exited the area without looking back.

Time traveled slowly for Taloric and he longed to be away from the forest. Always mindful of sprites or fairies and their insipid games, Taloric desired the life of the open sea. The feeling of the water under the pirate's boat and the wrestling of the sails... yes, that was a life for him. The looks of horror painted on the faces of the outlanders were burned forever in the halls of his mind. Aside from the hairy warriors bearing double-headed axes, the Pict vessels inspired such terror that it made Taloric smile just to think on it. Fast, grim, and decorated with the shrunken heads of their conquests, the Picts reveled in their reputation as wild hooligans.

When the night was half complete and sleep had almost claimed him, Taloric's lover came unto him.

His heart galloped and his black eyes sparkled as she lifted her long garment and squatted in the forest. Heat flowed across his flesh and his heart was thudding in his ears when the red haired woman rose up.

She was lightning fast and turned when she heard him rise. He would remember the look on that divine face forever: shock, but also of strength and challenge. Though surprised, she wasn't afraid. Taloric never expected her to be. Celtic women were as tough as some of their giant men. That is why he struck her skull with the smith's hammer before she could lift an arm or cast a spell.

Dragging her into the woods farther so he wouldn't be disturbed, his trembling hands pulled up her cloak. With all the gusto of an experienced ravaging warrior, young Taloric went at her. Over and over he conquered her. As every bit of air left her body, all he could hear were the cries from his heart, cries telling him how true the love between them was. Never had the boy felt such a way, not even in practice sessions. When he approached the ultimate moment of his manhood, Taloric noticed the gray trickle of her brains leaving the wounded skull. Disappointed but not abated, he finished. Drawing back, feeling the full release of maturity, he fought to restrain a howl of utter glee. It was time to return home, he knew, before anyone could discover his lover so true. He knelt and gave her a quick, single kiss on her cool lips.

Again filling up on berries, Taloric passed through the woods and covered the distance back to the ocean quickly. Smiling in the moonlight he stared at the distant surf and gave out a shout of glee. Surely, the Celtic fools would never hear him now! He ran to the sandy beach and caught his breath in the moonlight. Soon, he would labor in the embrace of his deity, Nechtan, and oh, what a song he would create about this adventure. He would tell it to his son as he taught him to attack, pillage and plunder the coasts of Briton, a song his family would sing forevermore.

Rubbing his chest as if to massage a raging heart, Taloric didn't relish the idea of the swim back home. When the sharp pain entered his back, Taloric was focused on the sea that he didn't immediately notice. After a moment, his ears popped and blinding agony attacked his senses. Taloric looked down and his heart was literally in his hands. No breath would come as his broken heart surged in his palms, skewered through on the end of a massive spear-head.

Falling to his knees, Taloric felt the ocean lap his flesh once before his sight grew gray. Looking back, he saw a frozen image of three Celtic boys, two blondes and one redhead, all holding long spears. One blonde youngster pulled the spear from Taloric's back and wiped the blood from the heron's feathers that dangled from the end of the foot and a half long blade.

"Well done, Vercingetorix!" a voice shouted, sounding to the Pict as if it were coming from under the sea.

"It was easy, Ocivatous!" another voice answered, distant as well, but gruff and full of pubescent fire.

Taloric thought he heard the Celtic boys entreat their supreme god Lugh of the Shining Spear to curse his soul in the afterworld. He knew two things as the waves tumbled over him and the arms of Nechtan bore him aloft from the earth. That the Celt lads were through the first phase of their man-making exercises and that he died a man.

Black Thorn

Christopher Fulbright

March 16, 2002

Dear Diary,

Shella, Bryce, Boyd and I all went down to Panama City Beach today. What a blast! It's certainly been a welcome change from the drear corridors of Miskatonic University, and the cold spring weather up there. Whoever could have thought the Gulf waters could be so clear and warm – the sand so fine and clean. We took two days to drive down to Panama City so it was great to be out of the car and actually doing something. Boyd and I have been on each other's nerves and the tension was hell... but today everything was almost perfect!

Almost.

We went to the beach first thing. Boyd was wading out as far as he could without losing his footing. I was laughing and following him out. It felt like we were miles from shore. Despite the fact that this place is packed with Spring Break-ers, the stretch of beach behind our hotel was actually pretty secluded.

The waves washed in around us, pushing us up and swooshing down around us.

"Linda!" He kept calling. "C'mon baby." I kept coming. All thoughts of our quiet night together were forgotten. We'd had a bit of an argument on some stupid theory of his – yet another stupid theory, and I'd made it a point to be very quiet and still, and sleep with my back to him in the hotel room. The distance between us had seemed like miles, but I wouldn't give in. I'm tired of the stupid arguments. All his damned thaumaturgical studies which I have no idea what use they'll be to him in real life anyway.

But today it was almost okay. Until he screamed.

His head was bobbing in the water about twenty yards away when a waves swelled behind him and I saw the black water – like a cloud of oil just beneath the surface. It didn't make any sense what I was seeing, because I know that oil floats, so it must have been the shadow of something.

Just as I reached Boyd, the black shadow passed beneath him. He bobbed down in the water as if to touch bottom and push himself back up.

"Ahhh!" He yelled and thrashed suddenly. "Ahhhhh!"

I had just about reached him. When he screamed, my heart froze and instantly I thought 'Shark, a shark's got him!' but he didn't go under.

His hand reached out and grasped my wrist. I was reluctant to go closer.

I pulled away from him. I used my legs to kick and my free hand to propel myself in a back float. Boyd still had my wrist. He was dragging behind me.

His face was a mixture of terror and pain. He looked behind him, down into the water. The shadow had passed, but still I wouldn't put my feet down to push us closer to shore until I could clearly see the sand through the water beneath us.

"Hey," Bryce called. "What's the matter?" He and Shella were sunbathing on the beach, sucking down Pina Coladas with umbrellas in them and rubbing suntan oil on each other.

"Everything okay?" Shella called.

I made it to the shallows and Boyd limped to the beach, one foot in the air, and then spun and flopped down, instantly lifting his foot up onto one knee to inspect it.

I gasped.

"Uhhh," Boyd said. He blinked a few times and I could tell he was light headed. I gasped and clasped my hand over my mouth. Bryce and Shella joined us.

"Oh my God!" Shella said.

"Jeez," Bryce said, kneeling next to him.

A black thorn about three inches long was imbedded deep in the arch of Boyd's foot. It leaked a lot of blood.

Boyd moaned weakly and reached for the thorn. It was a bit strange looking, with smaller spikes all around its base like some kind of evil anemone. He yanked it out and gave a little yell, pitching it back into the water. "Ugh!" He had this disgusted look on his face that I would have laughed at if there hadn't been such a hole in his foot. "It moved!" He said.

"Come on," Bryce said. "Let's get a towel on that."

All three of us helped him up but he swished us away with his hand, like he did to me in the library back at Miskatonic sometimes. It reminded me of how annoyed I had been with him for the past couple of days. I wondered if maybe the dark gods of the sea had seen fit to repay him for being so shitty to me.

Instantly I felt guilty. I feel guilty now writing about it. Boyd and I love one another, but it's a laborious kind of love. We have to work at it, and yet we're lost when we're alone. It's more than sex, which is more than I can say for my previous tryst with Aaron. I just don't how to define it. We've been going out for almost a year now, and it seems like we're married. Sometimes we love each other deeply, other times, it's a chore to be near each other.

Maybe it's co-dependency.

Hah!

Anyway, our day at the beach came to an abrupt end. Mark one off the Spring Break calendar. We had some drinks in the bar of the hotel, but then Boyd said he was felt like hell, so he headed off to bed early. When I got back here to the room, he was asleep.

Ah well, I wasn't up for it anyway.

More soon.

March 17, 2002

Well, I woke up to Boyd puking in the toilet this morning. Not the first time. Thing is he didn't have nearly enough to drink last night, so I was concerned. I went in to ask if he was okay, and he just snapped at me to get out.

To hell with him anyway, I thought. Foot or no foot, he didn't have a right to treat me that way. This is Spring Break for Christ's sake, and I'm gonna have fun.

Boyd stayed in all day while Shella, Bryce and I went shopping down at the Panama City Mall. I

stopped in when we got back to see how Boyd was and he was asleep naked atop the covers. His foot was wrapped up in a huge towel and looked silly – he acts like he got the damn thing cut off or something.

I let him sleep.

We all went down for a swim in the hotel pool and to tan for a while. (Damn my New England complexion anyway! I swear when I go back, I'm gonna have some color on these white legs!)

After our swim we decided to head out to some of the local bars on the Front Beach strip and Thomas Drive. Bryce practically had to force me to go see if Boyd was feeling any better so he could join us. I was really starting to miss having him by my side, but it was kind of liberating too. (I had three guys today tell me how "good looking" I was and ask me what was I doing that night. I laughed it off, but it did wonders for my ego! One of them was even pretty handsome. Nice tan, no shirt, grrrrreat body... mmm. Bad Linda! Bad... but Diary, you know what I'm thinking. Mmmm.)

Hah!

Anyway, I came up to see how he was – and he was still sleeping!

So we went. And I had even more guys hitting on me.

And it felt damn good.

March 18, 2002

Well, he's gone.

I suppose he might have gone down to get something to eat after 24 hours of sleep (!) but it would have been nice if he had let me know.

Sheesh.

Well, back to the pool. Hell with it.

Damn it, I miss my Boyd though. I wish he'd snap out of it and at least try to have a little fun with us.

Hell, we haven't even had sex the whole we've been here. All this attention's got me pretty riled up... if I don't get something soon, I'm gonna have to sneak off and take care of myself.

Hah!

Found his towel on the floor of the bathroom. It's soaked with crusty blood, and something else. Something black.

I hope he doesn't have an infection. Or worse.

I'm going looking for him.

March 19, 2002

Dear Diary,

I just about had it yesterday. I waited all day for Boyd to come back to the room while Shella and Bryce went out again. They went shopping and down to the beach, and I sat in this damn room. I don't know how many times I've gone through the whole "This isn't working out" speech. I ordered two movies from the front desk and both of them sucked, but I admit that I did watch "The Fast and the Furious" with Vin Diesel, and had to masturbate afterwards.

Oh my God what a relief. I felt dirty, and sexy, and tired all at the same time.

I fell asleep on the bed, exhausted.

When I awakened, the room was dark except for the lights of Panama City glowing through the window between a sliver of open curtains. I looked around the dark room and searched the shadows.

The furniture were hunched shapes that had taken on new proportions while I slept. The hotel was quiet around me. I didn't recall turning off the TV.

A cool breeze from the air conditioner kicked on. I was still naked atop the sheets. Shivering, I rose to turn it off.

The air conditioner was next to the window. I climbed softly from the bed feeling the need to be quiet.

My feet touched the carpet and I took a couple of steps toward the window.

Something moved near the curtains.

I gasped and stepped back.

A man stood next to the window.

Boyd.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see his shape, his features. His eyes.

He stared at me.

I felt the need to speak but couldn't say anything. Dread crept with tightness into my chest. Something seemed wrong.

"Linda," he said quietly.

"Boyd," I started, but didn't know what to say other than, "Where have you been?"

"I've been... studying."

Then I noticed the books on the table next to the window. They hadn't been there earlier. He must have brought them.

I was angry then, but not angry enough to give the "It's not working out" speech.

"Studying?"

He came towards me, hands slowly moving to my shoulders. His touch was cold. Not just cool, like chilled flesh, but cold.

"Are-are you all right, Boyd?"

He nodded slowly, and walked me back to the bed. We lay down then, close to one another, and I could feel the cold from his whole body. I'd been aroused earlier, but now I didn't feel it at all. And yet his hands were caressing me. My foot brushed his and I could feel a new towel wrapped around his injured foot. I remembered the blood and black crust I'd found in the old towel the day before.

"Your foot-" I started.

"-is healing." He said. "Shhh." He whispered. And his hands seemed... wet all of a sudden. Wet and slimy.

A strange feeling overcame me then. I don't know what it was. A tingling, like one time when I smoked weed laced with some PCP. But I was lulled into a half-slumber as he forced himself on me, and I was helpless to resist. I barely remember the weight of his body atop me. He pushed his way into me and we had sex. I must have been dry because I'm sore as hell today, but I can barely remember anything.

When I woke up he lay next to me, sleeping like a baby. When I looked at him I was scared. I got up and got dressed and ran out the door. I was going to go down for breakfast. I didn't want to go alone, but I didn't want to wake up Bryce and Shella. Didn't want to have to tell them what happened.

What did happen?

March 20, 2002

Oh my God.

I can barely put my pen firmly to paper, but I have to get this out, get this down. I'll never believe this in retrospect. It all seems so much like a dream that it will undoubtedly recede into my memory and be lost... my psyche professor says that the human mind does that to certain unpalatable memories, softens them like the memories of dreams, lets them drop from the front of the mind into the darker depths of subconscious.

I can hardly believe what I saw last night.

Was it a dream?

I spent most of the day alone. I read a book, I wandered around, ate lunch, walked along the beach.

Shella and Bryce were probably looking for me, but I didn't care. What would I tell them about last night? About Boyd?

I didn't know, and I didn't want to have to face it. I stayed gone all day, and late into the night, I spent some time with the handsome shirtless man in the bar. Even though I probably deserved some time with him (Michael was his name), I couldn't help feeling guilty. Damn my sense of loyalty anyway. But I was worried. Worried now about Boyd and what was the matter with him. He wasn't himself, that was for sure, and I couldn't just leave them all to their own devices the rest of the week, then show up, pack my stuff and head home.

Think the tension in the car on the way down was bad.

Hah.

The feeling of dread that pooled in my stomach the night before hadn't left. I was distracted while talking to Michael. He kept trying to coerce me back to his room, but the dull ache between my legs wasn't having any of it. I couldn't stop thinking about Boyd, so about one-thirty in the morning, I dismissed myself from the bar. I was headed up to the room. I was going to tell him I was concerned. That I wanted him to see a doctor.

The whole time up in the elevator, I thought through what I would say.

My elevator ride went undisturbed. The doors slid open on our floor. The corridor stretched before me. Our room was down around the corner.

The silence of the hallway closed in, like stifling old clothes in a small closet. I listened for sounds behind the doors, but there was none. I realized how late it was then. I realized I was practically tiptoeing along, and had to make a conscious effort to take real steps.

I turned the corner.

There was Boyd.

He stood in the hallway, pale white beneath the lights.

I caught my breath and dashed back behind the corner. I don't know why. Instinct told me to. I peeked around and watched him.

He was poorly dressed, shirt mis-buttoned, shorts wrinkled and unwashed, hair a mess. And that damn towel was still wrapped like a boxer's glove around his injured foot. He turned like a zombie, eyes vacant and shimmering black. They grazed over me and I ducked away. I counted. Held my breath. Listened for his footsteps.

He went the other way.

When I peeked around the corner again he was gone. There was an elevator on the other side. I hurried down the hall and spotted him as the doors closed. Watched the lights as they descended; he went to the bottom floor that led to the beach side exit of the hotel.

I hurried down the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator. I took them two at a time. When I reached the bottom floor I opened the door slowly, looking around the rear of the lobby. I caught the dark flash of one of the rear glass doors falling closed.

I followed him outside.

The breeze was warm, whispering through palm trees that lined the rear of the hotel. The distant sound of the surf ebbed in the air, rushed like the breath of the earth. I don't think that I breathed once, keeping a close eye on Boyd as he made his staggering way down the concrete path that led to the beach. I noticed the towel was coming loose from his foot. The moon was nearly full, so even though we left the lights of the hotel behind, I could see him clearly as he walked away, his pallid skin shimmering as though covered with some kind of oil. He stumbled once.

I gasped.

The towel had fallen away from his foot. It lay in a white pile near the end of the path.

I stared at what had once been Boyd's foot.

I couldn't be certain because it was night, and because I was far enough behind him so he wouldn't hear me, but God... his foot... it looked like a tangle of writhing flesh!

The sight gripped me. I couldn't move for a moment. Every part of my body wanted to turn back. Yet... I had to know where he was going.

The beach stretched for miles to either side of me as I made my slow way after him. There wasn't anything to hide me now, so I was ready to turn and sprint. My curiosity led me on. My awful

curiosity.

The ocean throbbed. The surf rose and fell, whooshing in quiet cadence with my slow breaths. Moonlight flecked with diamonds reflected off the waves of the distant horizon. A clear night and millions of stars above.

I paused behind a small rise of sand and watched as Boyd went to the edge of the water, limping on the deformed mass of wormy flesh. It sank into the sand.

We'd come a long way down the path, perhaps three hundred yards from the hotel. There was a lot of darkness behind me, and while I felt the urge to look around, I couldn't take my eyes off of Boyd.

He faced the great ocean and raised his hands to the sky. Words drifted back to me. Garbled... another language. I couldn't hear it all, but it sounded like some kind of chant.

I held my breath. Every muscle in my body was as still as stone. I didn't dare move and disturb this... ritual.

I heard his voice:

"Ph-nglui Mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn."

The sounds of the words were like poetry. Deep and resonant. I listened more closely, trying somehow to understand what was being said...

Movement behind me. Footsteps.

My body jerked involuntarily. I rolled over to the sight of a woman walking toward me, arms upraised. She joined Boyd's chant.

"Ph-nglui Mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn."

She was coming for me. Her eyes flashed darker than night, wan skin shining in the moonlight.

I froze. I wanted to scream, but couldn't bring myself to shatter the spell.

The woman stepped over me.

I saw her back.

From beneath a long cascade of hair, growing out from her back was a cluster of purple, swollen tentacles. Like some unearthly tumor that had gone unchecked.

She walked on by.

I stared.

Her voice was joined by the voices of others that had emerged from the shadows all up and down the beach. Perhaps twenty of them that I could see, each of them coming to the edge of the water, arms upraised. Chanting.

Then the most horrible thing happened. Maybe by that time I had totally lost my mind and was witnessing some impossible hallucination, but I swear...

The ocean heaved.

The waves of the surf suddenly grew more violent. The curling waves swelled perhaps a mile from shore. Huge black waves. Opaque as ebony. The surf began to roar.

Something rose to the surface. Something so enormous... I can scarcely recall the details – undoubtedly my mind blanked them out to save me from going completely nuts – but I remember a giant wave that rose, and kept rising. A huge blackness came nearer to shore, to those chanting, reaching out for them with giant appendages that swirled like whorls of water and yet rose from the depths like wicked cobras. A deep thrumming vibrated the earth, and I had by then begun to tremble uncontrollably... vague warmth between my legs was the only sensation I experienced other than gripping awe.

The watery cobras lashed out of the great darkness and like the tentacles of some giant squid enwrapped each one of the chanters where they stood, dragging them into the deep.

My memory is patchy. I'm a quivering wreck. I pissed myself for Christ's sake. And Boyd is gone. Oh my God... it took him.

I somehow made it back to my – our – room. I locked the door. I sat by the window, watching, searching the shadows, scanning the distant ocean and its winking waves. So deceptively beautiful. I kept giggling. And crying. Tears streamed down my face while I laughed and prayed to Jesus.

Eventually I fell asleep.

Shella pounding on the door of my room awakened me.

I started at the sound so violently that I screamed and fell from my chair.

"Linda! Linda!"

As soon as I opened the doors, I fell crying into her arms.

March 23, 2002

Dear Diary,

I question it all. I scarcely believe any of it could have happened, even a few days later. When I told Shella what had happened, she comforted me, calmed me... but oh, she didn't believe.

I'm not even sure I do.

We had to report Boyd missing. His parents flew down from Arkham. They asked me questions. We all sat and talked to the police, but by then my brain was mush and I needed sleep. They comforted me and brought me home.

My mom has been caring and concerned. There's been some gentle talk of seeing the school counselor, or maybe a professional. I don't know.

But there's something else.

I had my period today.

The discharge was oily and black.

Something's growing inside of me. I can feel it begin to squirm.

Oh God I can't stop crying... please Jesus, make it go away.

Make it die.

Captain O'Grady Blues' Key West Aquarium

Horns

The trenchant smell of saltwater, the briny scent of marine animals and aquarium food wasn't the ideal olfactory condition to be waking up to each and every morning, much less spending most of the hours of his days in, but Scott Bennett needed the money so he'd just have to get used to it. Captain O'Grady Blues' Aquarium, located in Florida's Key West, also offered free boarding to its workers; and because of his current, unsettled situation he considered where he could get some sleep, get a hot meal, and get paid all-important reasons to want to work there. Today would be his first day on the job.

He'd already tried the bigger aquariums around Key West, the more commercially flourishing aquatic parks, but was quickly turned away by all. Without a college degree, without experience, without permanent residence, it seemed they didn't even want to consider him. Captain O'Grady Blues' little sea creature show, in his opinion from appearances alone, was comparable in proportion to an elementary school sponsored carnival versus, say, Walt Disney World. It was a tremendous surprise that Captain O'Grady Blues himself had hired him on the spot, only minutes after meeting him. He'd figured his chances were next to none in getting the job. As already sharply and conveniently stated by the hiring heads at some of the more popular aquariums, the tourist boom was starting to dip as it always did this time of the year. Besides that, unlike the massive size of the touristy marine museums, Captain O'Grady Blues' plainly didn't require a large crew to keep it running. By all accounts, he was very lucky.

From what little conversation he'd had with the dumpy, clammy-skinned man, whose fat face had appeared as two fully inflated, grayish-white balloons mashing into place a pair of eyeglasses with crimson-tinted lenses, and wearing a black captain's hat, complete with the classic captain's insignia stitched in gold, he wasn't exactly sure what his duties were or where to even begin. He'd arrived late, after normal business hours, anyway, maybe sometime close to ten o'clock p.m., and just happened to notice the captain shuffling around a side entrance—obviously designated for employees only, designed to look like the bordering, tall wood fence, also shrouded by pindo palms. When asked if he was hiring, the captain at first seemed frightened, but then perhaps realizing that a young man was interested in working for him suddenly appeared to look inquisitive and quite reassuringly delighted. He had a deep, scratchy voice that spoke few words at a time. Scott, desperate for the job, had explained his homeless situation and a great deal more than he knew he should when interviewing for work, yet that seemed to have been the decisive moment in their brief encounter when the captain had welcomed him aboard. In the captain's waste-no-words instruction, he'd been told where to sleep and to start working the next morning. And it had been sealed with a fast handshake. For the most part, he had a pretty good idea that he'd likely be cleaning or doing manual labor of some sort or another.

Massaging the soreness in his shoulder, he walked along the planks past several small buildings in search of the captain's office. His bed, at least for the first night, was a hammock nestled inside a room

not much bigger than your typical broom closet, really. He wasn't used to sleeping on rope netting, and he was feeling it now, though it was certainly better than not having a bed at all, so he wasn't complaining. The winding, faded boards guided him past a dozen more small post-and-beam structures that were mainly used for storage, until he came to one, slightly larger than the rest, that had a wood sign on its door, upon which red, painted letters spelled out Captain's Den... He stopped in front of it, noticing several large piles of crab shells blockading the entrance, and thought it strange. Definitely the shells would hinder someone attempting to go in and out of the building, or be sent flying and crashing should the door swing carelessly open—although the hinges indicated that the door swung inward.

Pausing for a moment, he leaned forward to avoid kicking any of them and then knocked. Waiting a few seconds without any inside reaction, he decided to push just above the thick, frayed rope—with its knotted end—that served as a door handle.

"I wouldn't advise doing that if I were you," someone behind him suddenly declared.

Scott let go the rope and spun around.

"He doesn't like to be disturbed this early," a lanky, redheaded man with a ponytail and mustache and browned skin cautioned. "Well, actually he doesn't like to be disturbed at all."

Scott stared, unsure what to say. He noticed the man holding a large, white, plastic container that looked full.

"Park's not open yet, and he's not hiring," the man said, suddenly displaying an inimical expression.

Scott felt uncomfortable as he replied, "Captain O'Grady Blues hired me last night."

"Did he now?" the man said, scowling. "Now why would he go do a crazy thing like that?"

Confused but bordering on being offended and angry, Scott shrugged.

All of a sudden, the man's beetle-browed look was replaced with a large, genial grin. "Welcome aboard then." He clumsily clapped one spidery, thin arm around the container after appearing to have forgotten he was carrying it, and stuck out his hand.

Scott reached out, gave him his.

They shook hands.

The gangly fellow's hand felt slimy with the distinct, unpleasant smell of fish.

Frowning inconspicuously, Scott wiped off his hand on his shirt.

"I'm surprised the captain employed you. No, to be quite honest, shocked." He chuckled.

With the nod of his head the man signaled for Scott to follow him.

"Why does that surprise you so much?" Scott asked, walking beside him.

"Because there's no business, no room, no need. It's . . . things are different now that the captain's missus has died. The captain's changed, too." Stopping suddenly, the man said, "My name's Dr. Robert Dinger. I'm the keeper, but I prefer marine biologist, or animal scientist, or zoologist, or Director of Veterinary services specifically, head vet . . . jeez, what am I saying, I'm the only doctor here."

Laughing, he shuffled his feet forward once more.

"I specialize in *Octopus vulgaris* . . . octopods . . . the octopus, and it seems the captain has taken a special interest in the devilfish these days. And that, my new friend, makes me the captain's most valuable hand. Of course the good captain's park lost the heavy number of the tourists it was pulling in when he did away with most of the sea animals that'd always been showcased and when he stocked the aquarium with mostly octopi. Especially the shark exhibit. He let all his staff veterinarians go. I don't know what happened, but after the death of his wife he went through some kind of dark transformation and appears to be mourning her still. It's been forever. He stays inside his quarters most of the time, comes out after closing on occasion, and when you can get a moment with him, he is visibly grief-stricken. Gained a lot of weight, too. I don't think he cares about the welfare of his business anymore. I'm basically running the show. But I'm not going to bellyache so long as the captain's paying me triple what I'd be getting from any of the other aquariums, even SeaWorld. The captain's well-to-do. I've been on two of his yachts."

"I'm sorry to hear all that," Scott said. "My name's Scott Bennett, by the way."

"Great to meet you, Scott," Dr. Dinger said smiling. "What's your vocation?"

"Oh, I'm not on vacation. I—"

Dr. Dinger laughed, shaking his head. "No. I mean your career? Your line of work?"

Embarrassed, Scott answered, "Well, I'm not in a good situation right now. It's a long story and kinda personal."

"Go ahead, try me."

Scott looked at the man, saw his absorbing eyes staring curiously at him.

"It's about a girl," he began.

"Ah, isn't it always," Dr. Dingley joked.

Scott had a sense that Dingley wouldn't know.

"To make a long story short, I moved out here from Ohio believing that my girlfriend was excited about it. Turns out she's excited about someone else."

"Jeez, that's got to be hard," Dr. Dingley said with pity.

"Yeah, well . . ."

"So, what's Capt. Blues got you doing around here?"

"That's just it," Scott said, "I'm really not sure. Our meeting was kinda quick. I'd guess handiwork. That's why I was trying to find him."

"Well, like I said before, I'm basically in charge, so I tell you what. You can rub elbows with me today. I'll show you the aquarium grounds and all the resident creatures, and then tonight I'll speak to the good captain myself. Get things straight. OK?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

Dr. Dingley tipped the open container a little.

Scott saw it was filled with ripped up meat.

"Crabmeat and shrimp," Dr. Dingler said. "Feeding time."

"Is that what all those shells were doing in front of the captain's den?"

"No, that's Captain O'Grady's appetite. Like I said, he's packing on some weight, poor fellow. He likes it all, has a true seafarer's taste. Blue crab, rock shrimp, shark, yellowfin tuna, hard clam, spiny lobster, stone crab, cannonball jellyfish, American alligator, you name it, and in large amounts, too. Some folk lose weight after their loved ones go beyond. The Capt., well, he's working it out the opposite, I guess."

"How many employees are there here at Captain O'Grady Blues' Aquarium?" Scott asked.

"Four, now, including me, and including you. Seems like the captain's hired a few newbies just recently that's each lasted less than a week." Dr. Dingler suddenly stopped again, made a wondering facial gesture. "Not sure what happened. They were probably bored and left. Not much to do, like I said before. One gal was very attractive. What was her name? Hmm. Can't remember offhand. She had her CPR certification, I think."

"Well, I need the cash, so boredom's not a problem with me."

"Good. That's good to hear, Scott."

They resumed walking.

"You'll run into Jimbo, old guy with a bad leg. He's our water quality technician, among many other duties. Then there's Emma, she's—well—let's say . . . real friendly. Not what I'd call pretty, either, but don't let her get to you, she's harmless. Unless, of course, you're interested?" Dr. Dingler chuckled and lightly elbowed him.

Scott was pretty sure he'd gotten the joke.

"Emma's the one who handles the aquarium's accounting, information system, public relations, things of that nature now that the captain's wife is no longer with us. Like I said, we'd all be pretty busy around here if we had the business."

"I'm sure you still are. There's probably a lot to running an aquarium."

"That's true, very true," Dr. Dingler agreed, striding over to a small, open, waist-high tank beneath a simple tile shelter. He sat the container down by his feet on the board platform. "Tell you what, Scott, if

you seem to be getting along here, and you don't skip out on us, I'd like to work with you and perhaps make an aquarist out of you. How's that sound?"

Scott really wasn't sure what an aquarist was, but he had some idea.

"Sure. OK. Works for me."

"All right then," Dr. Dingler said with a smile, quickly straightening his ponytail. "Step up here and watch me feed the octopuses for starters."

Curiously, Scott bellied up to the tank.

Dr. Dingler brought the container up and picked out some meat.

Inside the tank, the bottom had been designed to look like an ocean floor. Rocks and shells spread over it. It seemed a little deeper, too, than it did looking at it from the outside.

"What we've got here are dwarf octopuses. Most of them are about four inches long."

Scott leaned forward.

Still holding a pinch of meat between his fingers, Dr. Dingler rolled up his short sleeve then reached in with his other hand and pulled up a shell. Leaning on the edge of the tank, he turned the shell bottom side up, keeping it just below the surface.

At first Scott didn't notice the tiny creature, until one of its arms—one of eight bearing two rows of suckers each—curled around the meat Dr. Dingler was offering. It had the same skin color and texture as the shell it was in. he watched as Dr. Dingler carefully removed a tentacle from his thumb.

"Smart animals," he said, placing the shell back at the bottom. "They can camouflage themselves, regenerate their tentacles, shoot a black ink at their attackers, inject a poisonous venom and digestive enzyme into their living prey."

"They look like aliens," Scott remarked.

Dr. Dingler smiled. "Here," he said, holding some of the meat out. "Want to give it a try?"

Scott bent backward, waving his hands out in front. "Er, no thanks. Really."

Dingler laughed.

As the afternoon wore on, Scott watched Dr. Dingler perform lots of routine chores. Enough of them that he was fairly certain there was going to be plenty of menial work for him to do. He met both Jimbo and Emma, and they were exactly as Dr. Dingler had, in short, described. Although, Emma was a tad more ugly than he'd imagined. More rounded, too. And she'd almost dry humped him while discussing something with Dr. Dingler. On the advice of the red-ponytailed vet, he didn't think about it, or at least tried not to.

Toward the close of the day, still there'd been no sign of Captain O'Grady Blues. No paying customers to boot... The aquarium vet wasn't lying when he'd mentioned the captain had gotten rid of a variety of marine animals. In fact, the place should have been renamed "Captain O'Grady Blues' Octopus Show".

There were so many of them—different kinds and all sizes. Dr. Dingler did come across as knowing his stuff.

Right before parting and setting off for a night's sleep, Dr. Dingler had assured him again that he would speak to the captain and discuss his employment in detail with the seclusive owner.

Lying in the net hammock once again, looking up at the darkened ceiling in an incommodious room, he wished he'd mentioned his sleeping arrangements to the vet. First thing tomorrow he would.

Outside the winds were strong, and the draft coming in from the door cracks was warm. Likewise, velvet moonlight seeped in through numerous breaks, making him feel as though he was in some dark prison hole longing to claw his way up to freedom where he could disappear into the magical shroud of the night.

He was about to nod off when he heard a strange scraping just outside the door.

He struggled to quietly climb out of the hammock. Stepping lightly to the door, he heard the scuffing a second time.

He held the knob and listened, his ear close to the door. The sound seemed to be weakening, moving away.

What is it?

A person?

Something heavy being wafted past in the wind?

Diligently listening, he could pick up the barely heard purring of distant street traffic in one direction and the relaxing tidal flow of the ocean in another. Afraid of never knowing what had made the peculiar noise, he opened the door just a ways and peeked out.

The hard wind pushed his bushy, brown hair over his eyes; he fought to keep it out.

Dancing shadows sprang from the small buildings to the boardwalk and back again, made by the many plants and trees lashing about in the wild air. Suddenly he saw something. A shape. A black form moving away from where he stood, disappearing around a corner.

Captain O'Grady Blues?

It was a large shape. And the captain reportedly liked to wander about after the park was closed, sometimes very late at night, though seldom from what he'd been told.

Scott felt the pain in his neck, shoulders, and back. The hammock just wasn't working.

Why wait until tomorrow to tell the vet about it?

Why not ask the captain?

Get it taken care of now, and get a good night's rest. It was hard enough for him to sleep reflecting on the problem with his, now, ex-girlfriend. It was her fault he was homeless and stone-broke.

Scurrying barefoot down the planks, he got up to where he'd seen the shape disappear. Again he spotted the big form moving. The outline was a perfect match for the captain, too.

"Captain?" he called softly. "Captain, can I have a word with you?"

But the round figure kept moving. At one point it even seemed to quicken.

Man, the captain really is a recluse.

As he chased, he thought how scared the captain had been when he'd first encountered him.

Bereavement over his wife's death?

People-shy?

Perhaps hiding something?

"Captain O'Grady?" he called again, running now.

The large shape turned another corner.

Scott followed.

He stopped suddenly, realizing he was facing a cul—a dead end between two buildings closed off by a tall wood fence. A large shadow flickered at the entrance and slowly the passage bled back into complete darkness. He remembered the passage from having seen it earlier in the day. There was no way out. Unless, of course, you scaled the fence, which had no holds and was at least ten feet high.

The scratching began; it issued forth from the darkness.

Scott felt his nerves chill.

Nervously he managed to ask, "Captain? It's Scott Bennett. Could I talk to you for a moment, if you don't mind, sir?"

What's he doing in there?

Carefully he walked forward with the sounds of the shrilling wind and odd scratching in his ears. Then, just as he verged on stepping into the dark, something sprang out at him as if the darkness itself had taken form and was trying to swallow him up...

He fell backward and landed hard on the planks. He couldn't see and felt something, a substance, covering his skin, his clothes, in his hair.

Grunting, he scrambled out of the passage on all fours.

Once in the light, he stood. With clouded vision he could see what, to him, amounted to be black guck all over his arms and hands. He tried wiping them clean on his shirt first, then tried clearing his eyes. The substance had no odor. He stood there, scared and confused, wondering what had happened. The scratching had stopped and there was no sign of anyone.

After a few moments of silent awareness, he ran away.

Frightened, he just ran, nowhere in particular but away. At one point, he stopped to catch his breath, and noticed the captain's den not more than twenty feet away. Surprisingly, the door was standing partially open. He noticed the piles of empty shells had been taken, too.

Did that fat bastard throw something on me?

Some kind of marine animal bile?

Did I catch him out during one of his nighttime eating bouts?

Someone threw this shit on me.

And that someone sure as hell looked a lot like the captain!

Mad, though somewhat still shaken, he went up to the captain's domicile.

"Captain?" he said, standing just inside the doorway, looking in.

There was no answer.

"Captain?"

He carefully stepped inside. A few lamps provided dim light. The room looked a mess. The walls were caked in thick layers of dirt, hanging picture frames just barely jutting squares of gray. Dirt and broken rocks cluttered the floor. It looked something more like a storage garage than a living area. There was also a heavy smell of seawater in the room. Creeping farther into the den, he discovered the first skeletal human remains.

As he screamed, he caught a fast movement in the corner of his eye, and as he turned to run, felt the sudden clasp of something strong around his arm, felt it wrap itself securely around him.

He fought to break free, but it jerked him with such force that he was helpless.

"Easy catch," the captain said in his familiar rough voice as he presented himself, smiling fiendishly behind his crimson-tinted glasses and under his black hat.

Scott screamed and struggled, punching and clawing the thing that he could now recognize as a tentacle grasping and dragging him toward the captain. He saw the horrible image of the tentacle projecting out from under the shirrtail of captain's black polo shirt.

It dragged him closer.

His feet, stained with the black goo, slid across the dirty floor, kicking rocks and fragments of bone.

"Let me pick you apart," the captain boasted.

Within inches of the captain's blubbery head, Scott threw a punch. His fist struck the captain in the face, crushing his lenses.

The captain screeched but did not let go.

Scott watched as the busted parts fell from the captain's mug, then was overcome with terror when he saw the man's fatty face begin to unfold and stretch grotesquely into a single, huge bulbous mass. Now two freaky, fish-like eyes—positioned incredibly wide apart—focused in on him.

The captain yanked Scott up against him, threateningly baring a large, dangerously sharp beak where a human chin might've been.

Scott felt faint, could almost actually feel the blood draining out of his brain.

"What's going on?" someone shouted.

Quickly turning his head, Scott saw the aquarium vet, Dr. Dingler, standing in the doorway with a look of unbelievable shock in his eyes.

"Help!" Scott cried.

Dr. Dinger grabbed a rock off the floor and rushed in.

A second tentacle lashed out from under the captain's shirt and knocked the rock out of his hand.

Still struggling, Scott watched as the vet was pulled closer to the captain by yet another tentacle that had clasped itself around the ponytailed man's waist.

"Stay out of this, Bob," the captain croaked.

The tentacles were so strong that Scott was convinced the captain could easily crush his bones if he so chose to.

"It was the unknown species we found, wasn't it, Captain?" Dr. Dinger gasped, fighting for the air to speak. "It did this to you, didn't it?"

The captain made a horrid sound, that Scott could only guess was the equivalent of a laugh.

"What happened to your wife? The new hires that have gone missing?" Dr. Dinger charged.

Then, Scott saw Dr. Dinger attack the captain by thrusting his hand above the captain's shirt collar. A great deal of his arm disappeared into the captain's flesh that much resembled a wrinkled leather sack. Whatever he was doing caused the captain to utter a piercing cry. It also seemed to weaken him, make him tremble.

Almost with no difficulty, Scott broke free, flinging the tentacle off himself.

He ran for the door.

Dr. Dinger!

He couldn't let the man die.

Crashing into the door, letting it stop his momentum, he turned back, but saw that it was too late. He

watched horror-stricken as the captain shot across the room, with a speed he would have never imagined the corpulent man capable of, and force the struggling Dr. Dingler down with him into a hole in the floor, surrounded by rocks. Their fast descent brought up a wave of seawater that spilled over the rocks onto the floor.

Slowly, Scott backed out of the doorway.

The winds kissed his numb face.

Then, without gesture or word, he ran—ran as fast as his feet would take him.

He was going to see his ex-girlfriend, kick her skinny, betraying ass, take some money, and he was going home.

How Deep Is Your Love?

G. W. Thomas

*"Love is a familiar; Love is a devil; there is
no evil angel but Love."*

Shakespeare

23:33

I wiped the sleep from my eyes as I walked into Telford's Book Shop. The phone call can come at any time. I always come.

I yawned and waved to one of the triplets that work in the store, red-haired, and identical to his two brothers. I always thought there was just one guy but Telford insisted there were three. If he said so...

Telford was behind his desk, small-boned, Scotch in looks and temperament. He wasn't untalkative tonight. His small spectacled eyes worked back and forth over a copy of CLICKERS.

"Whatcha reading?" I asked casually.

"Gonzalez. Can't stop once I start. God, I hate that fucker."

"Okay. Whatcha got for me?"

Telford didn't look up from his book, just pushed a card towards me. I picked it up, knowing what I'd find there: a title, a name and an address. There was a photo paper-clipped onto it.

"I'll get right on it," I said mostly to myself. Telford just pointed at the clock, (saying "Oh that's good, you fucker..." to his paperback). The clock was ticking he meant; I had twenty-four hours to find the book written on the card and I'd receive half the rental fee: a cool million. Some bozo had paid Telford two million clams in rent and now didn't want to return the book. That's when I get the phone call.

I looked at the card once I was sitting in my Miata. The title was familiar to me – The Book of the Black Sun. The old tingle passed up my spine. If I found it in less than a day I'd have enough credit

with the store to rent it myself for an entire year. I'd been saving up. I had even passed on a chance to read *The Necronomicon* in a rare Egyptian translation just for this. The *Black Sun* volume was my book. From its pages I had found more arcane lore than any other book.

Let me explain why. The Book was supposedly written in the future, then sent back in time. Most arcane books are written in Latin or Greek, but these are translations. The lore becomes diluted as it passes from writer to writer. Only the *Black Sun* had never had this problem because it was written in English --future English granted -- but a recognizable tongue.

But before I could delve back into this weird volume, I'd have to retrieve it. The name and address were not familiar to me, not a regular like Old Bob or the Pink Lady or Willy Two-Dicks. Despite the name, I knew the type, deadbeats who try to run and hide. This loser's name was Shelley Brixton, 790 Panjarvis Blvd.

I looked at the photo. Shelley Brixton was an unattractive blond with rough skin and a mouth too big for her small chin. The picture was a Polaroid taken only six months ago.

A woman. Not unheard of, but unusual. And if you think that made it easier, you're an idiot. Men are safer because their reasons are simple. With women, you just never knew.

I could make a few assumptions at this point. Telford's bullies would have kicked in her door already. She wouldn't be at home. Still, I knew nothing about Shelley Brixton. And if the goon squad hadn't totaled the place I might find a clue. That's what I do. I find books. And to find books you have to find people.

I drove over to 790 Panjarvis Boulevard. It was a modest brownstone. The locks were all in place but it took me only seconds to pass into the comfortable home.

I started in the bedroom. Nothing unusual there except black silk sheets. The kitchen and living room were also unproductive. I found no blood stains, so Telford's men hadn't run into anything nasty. In fact, after an hour I could find no sign of any magic. I started to wonder if I had the right house.

It was only after this search that I really started thinking. The photos in the living room told me more than anything else. There were lots of pictures, in wood frames, in silver frames, on the wall. The oldest were of ugly immigrants, I suspected, relatives. A sign on the door of an old meat shop read MARSHALL'S MEATS. Several pictures had that sign.

A number of graduation photos confirmed my suspicions. Shelley Marshall. Brixton was her married name. So where was Mr. Brixton?

There were wedding shots. I took the most recent-looking shot. I needed something to work from. The couple in the picture wore those tear-away track outfits that were popular a few years ago. I could find no newer pictures of Mr. B, with his dark, handsome looks. The husband had fucked off two or three years ago. Why? Was it important? I didn't know. Yet.

I had a better look at Mrs. B. in this last photo. Tall, blonde, nice bod, the nose was big but interesting. She didn't look like the type who had trouble attracting men. And yet, no new boyfriend. The old pictures still fading away on the wall.

Then I remembered Telford's Polaroid. I took it out and compared the two Shelley Brixtons. Obviously the same woman, but man, had she let herself go. Probably fifty pounds heavier, complexion shot, her hair oily and darker.

The total lack of arcane paraphernalia in the place told me that the ex-Mrs. B. was practicing elsewhere. The house was clean. A woman who could afford a two million dollar tab for renting a book could easily afford a second spot just for magic. But how to find it?

When I have nothing I always start with as much information about the renter as possible. There are all kinds of public records. I'd start there.

1:51

Public records offices are not open at two in the AM. But, thank God for the Internet. Back at home I fired up the computer, made coffee and started surfing.

You wouldn't last ten minutes in this racket if government information was hard to get at. After an hour and a couple of hacker tricks I picked up in Hong Kong (the same ones I used to wipe out every kernel of information about myself years ago) I knew the important details.

Shelley Fabares Brixton (nee: Marshall) was born thirty-one years ago. She was married six years, never divorced. No death certificate on the hubby. Shelley's credit cards showed she spent money like she had it. Her tax forms confirmed it. Her birth certificate explained it. She was the daughter of Brigadier General George Marshall, the fishing-shipping tycoon. (Oh, that Marshall!)

The husband had dropped off the books two years and seven months ago. There was a Missing Persons file but the cops had never found anything. He was Ted Brixton, born in Fisherman's Inn, Mass., only ten miles from the Marshall clan in Edwin. Three years older than his wife, no previous interesting facts. There didn't seem to be a new boyfriend and considering her present looks it wasn't hard to figure out why. She must be the pining type.

All of this was useful but none of it explained her dealings in magic. Why should this woman rent a two million dollar book? I almost thought she never had. Until I looked a little closer at her bank statements. There was one re-occurring payment, starting about six months back. Five hundred dollars a month for--? Couldn't say but it was to a private citizen in Fisherman's Inn. Either she was being blackmailed, keeping an ailing relative or she had a landlord.

The recipient was one Abel Marshall. A quick check told me he was her uncle, the Brigadier's younger brother.

That was why I had missed it before. A relative. But why did she have to send cash to a rich relative? A black sheep cut off from the family? I wouldn't know until I got to Fisherman's Inn and started snooping.

2:33

Travel was going to make my schedule tighter. Fortunately, Fisherman's Inn is only an hour and a half either way. The Miata could get me there quick if I took the Innsmouth highway.

So, it was a field trip. I'd need my traveling cases Number One and Number Three. One contained all the weapons I might possibly need: silver goose shot cartridges for the shotgun, cross-cut slugs for the .44, an emergency cartridge-maker, a spear-gun, a bang-stick, an Uzi and four grenades. Number Three contained a rubber dinghy, sea flares, a small snorkeling/scuba outfit. Number One went into the Miata's little trunk, Three into the cramped back seat. Just enough room left for me, a bag of Jalapeno chips and the stupid bouncy-head dog on the dash.

The Miata tore up the highway between town and the coast. I drove past sleepy fishing villages, trendy holiday spots and other tourist traps until the landscape became less obliging. The houses took on an empty quality and finally disappeared altogether. There'd be nothing to see until the rough coastal mountains gave way to Fisherman's Inn and its sheltered townsite.

3:57

Pulling into Fisherman's Inn at four in the AM does nothing to quell the weird feelings the place gives you. The old gray buildings are dank, smell of fish and sea-salt. The cars are rusty and few. The whole town faces out onto the cold Atlantic like a forgotten Melville novel. It's a hellava place to be born in. Worse if you get stuck there.

I drove to the nearest phone booth. Using the lights from the car, I looked up the addresses of every Marshall in the book. There were seven. Abel Marshall had an old shack down a narrow seaside road. I pulled up to the yard before the sun had started to pink the East.

How to play it now, I wondered as I sat looking at the old shack. Behind it I could make out a few out-buildings and a slope down to the water. Did I want to try one of my bogus cards: tax collector, a writer doing research, a lost tourist? Or would it be better just to use goon tactics?

Telford pays me because I'm not just muscle. I play things smart. I put the pistol into my coat, a few other surprises into my pockets along with a badge that identified me as a government agent. The old moonshiners scam, I decided.

I left the Miata at the roadside and walked up the weedy gravel path to the front door of the shack. Old tires and rusty bicycles were the only lawn ornaments. The absence of dog crap said No Mutt. (I've been fooled before.) I knocked loudly, ready with my badge. I heard cursing through the thin walls. Imagine that at four in the morning?

Curtains moved. An old face showed, then asked through the window, "What the fucking Jesus do you want?"

I showed him the badge, didn't say anything.

"Yah?"

"Treasury department. I need to talk to you."

"Don't know no rum-runners. Clear off."

I played my ace-in-the-hole. "I'm looking for Shelley Brixton."

The ugly, little man disappeared. The door rattled a second later, then opened to reveal the rest of the old geezer. He was five foot nothing, stringer than crow meat, with a week's scrub on his cheeks and a whiskey-burnt nose.

"Shelley? What's she got to do with rum-runners?"

"According to our records she pays you five hundred a month. We believe this is part of a money laundering operation—"

"Hell and tarnation! That ain't no liquor money. It's pure-honest rent."

"What is she renting?" I asked with my Fuck-you-bore-me face. A year in the DMV back in my early days made this real easy.

"She's renting my boat house, down on the shore." He yanked a thumb behind him in the direction of the ocean.

"Let's take a look. If it's full of booze—"

"You gotta warrant?" Even old whiskey sponges like this old fart watch Law & Order.

"Yes, I gotta warrant." I pulled the .44 out of my coat and slapped him across the face with it. "Let's go."

The old man got up off the floor. Blood darkened his yellow teeth. "You ain't government."

"No shit, gramps. Up and at'em. We've gotta boat house to look at."

He didn't say anymore, just hiked up his long johns and started to the back of the house. His bare feet picked their way around rocks and thistles until we were at the back of the building. I could see the boat house (just another shack, really) farther down by the water. The moon painted a last glow over the dull walls with morning fast approaching.

We walked slowly through the wet grass. I had to dodge the occasional hole in the ground. Old Abel knew every square inch of that yard. Still, he never made a break for it. Didn't say a word.

The boat house had a side door. I shoved the old man aside, tried it, then sent him in first. He turned on a pull-string light. We looked around. It was what you'd expect: boat stuff, old life jackets, crap mostly. But what was in the middle of the shack made my heart flutter. The first real proof I was on the right track. On the floor were two sleeping bags. Beside one was a wooden box, the kind Telford uses to keep his books in. The box was open and empty.

"Where's the book, Abel?" I snapped.

"Don't know no book."

"Who's been sleeping here?"

"Shelley, And –" He didn't finish his sentence, just broke out into a grin. I thought for just a second before I reacted. There could only be one reason why Abel would break into a grin. Someone – or something – was behind me!

I rolled forward. Not in time to duck the claws that ripped into my coat but with enough momentum to kick Abel in the nuts then roll aside with my pistol ready.

I fired without seeing who I was shooting (not usually a good idea but it's saved me too many times to argue.) Something big and dark clawed at me again then turned and ran. The door flew open and it was gone.

I ran for the doorway, gun ready. I could hear Abel puking behind me and forgot about him. My eyes were staring against the dim light of the rising sun. What I saw in that new light made my heart race. A woman, wearing scuba gear. In her hands, the book. All around her dark, scaly creatures with large protruding eyes. There for a second and then gone into the water.

Let me just describe these creatures briefly for you. You've seen the Creature From the Black Lagoon, right? Nothing like that. These critters were as tall as men, more hunched with dark scaly skin. Their heads were larger than a man's with fishy eyes and froggy lips. Between those lips, serrated teeth like a fish has. On the ends of their webbed hands are claws like paring knives. I had shot one but not so much as a drop of blood on the sand.

Shelley Brixton and the book had gone to the bottom of the ocean... If I wanted to wait, some time she'd have to come back. If I wanted to kiss half a million bucks good-bye. The other alternative was: go after them.

The first thing to do was take care of Abel. As I turned he had a shovel raised over his head, ready to brain me. I ducked, kicked, taking him in the crotch again. This time he didn't get up. I checked him quickly for clues or magical devices but he only had a week's growth of beard and puke breath.

Back up to the car next. I got out my scuba gear, the spear gun and the bang stick. Once I had it assembled on the beach the sun was up above the horizon, giving me a little more light. It took twenty minutes to suit up, check my gages and weapons. I crawled into the surf feeling as heavy as an express train.

The spear gun had a powerful halogen light on the front. I fired that up and began sweeping back and forth in front of me as I dropped down the steep drop-off. If I could see it, I could cut an new asshole for it.

I dove slowly, allowing myself time to adjust to the pressure. The water wasn't that deep, only thirty to forty feet. I moved along, expecting to see fishy-eyes at any moment coming out of the darkness at me.

As I reached fifty feet I began to see slimy masonry on the sea floor. Old buildings now covered in muck. This gave me something else to worry about. Who was waiting behind the next stone? If so much as a fish had left the shelter of those walls, I'd have perforated it instantly.

It was a mud cloud that drew my attention. It wasn't an attack on me but two figures locked in a death struggle. As the silt drifted away I could see one of the fishy things from the beach was fighting another. The second one had deep red patches across his face. Was it two rival warriors fighting for territory? Were the red markings like war paint? Where was Shelley Brixton and my book?

The beam of my light ended the fight. The red-faced creature finished off his opponent with a savage bite then charged up the light beam without a moment's pause. I looked into his open mouth and beastly eyes.

I fired. The spear lashed out, but the creature was too quick, evading it with ease. The attacking shape flitted away from me. I suspected a rear attack and spun. I wanted to hit it with the bang stick but I couldn't find the creature in the darkness. I stopped waving my light around, and pulled a flare from my belt. These are special protective flares I make myself, a combination of phosphorus and magical ingredients. Not only do they cast about fifteen feet of light in every direction but they also repel unwanted guests.

I broke the flare just in time to see my fishy friend swipe a clawed hand at me. The hard nails tore into my shoulder. I lashed out with the flare, jamming it into its flat face. The reaction was not what I had expected. I thought Fishy would back up in a hurry, maybe even leave me alone. Instead, he began to shake with a terrible tremor, thrashing about, not at me but in great circles. At last the skin on its face exploded releasing a red leech-like thing from its body. The crimson ribbon fluttered in my direction.

I reacted instinctively. I hit the leech with the flare. The ribbony thing burst like a balloon, filling the water with red liquid. The fish creature started to recover. I had thought it dead, its face a mass of torn skin. Fishy looked at me but this time his eyes were almost human, calm. Then he swam away.

My vision got foggy. Some of the red in the water was me. I was passing out. Shock, probably. I wanted to swim up to the surface but I just drifted downward instead...

I'm happy to report I came to. It was on a sleeping bag on a dirty floor. I figured from the smell I was in the boat house. Someone was growling at me. Someone else was screaming, "No, don't kill him." With those words I figured I'd better wake up.

"I saved your husband," I said boldly.

Everyone shut up.

"I've been doing some thinking and I've figured a few things out. Including why I saved your husband."

"He's lying," said a deep voice belonging to someone that sounded like he was talking with a frisbee in his mouth.

"Ask him yourself."

"There isn't anybody here who you saved. Quite the opposite, mister," said Abel's squeaky old voice.

I got my eyes open and looked around. There were three of them. Abel, Shelley and a creature who looked like the one I'd saved, only his face was still together.

"All right, let's come back to that one. I have a few other questions. First, how many of those red-faced things are there?"

"Six. My husband is one of them," answered the woman. I studied her face. No longer a beauty, her jaw was wide and her hair was short and patchy. Give her a few more days, months, years? And she'd be as big an uggo as fish-boy sitting across from her. Only Abel looked human and just barely.

"I saved one of them. I can save the rest. But for a price. I want the book."

"It's yours," said Shelley.

"He's lying. He's playing for time. I say we kill him." This from a guy who made Godzilla look like an underwear model.

"I'm not lying. Where are the other five?"

"Six. You haven't proven anything."

Abel cut in. He looked like he was tired of arguing. "There were six originally. They left Y'garna for the Great Deep last year. When they came back they had the Red Devils attached to them."

I laughed. "Red Devils. Ain't that the kettle calling the pot black?"

Ugly growled a deep fishy growl (if you can imagine that?) but I ignored him.

"I don't know where the one I saved went. I was in no condition to follow him. But the leech that came out of him burst."

There was excited talk. I let them babble on. I used the time to gather my wits. There were three people in the shed, no wait, four. Over by the door another one of the fish-frogs stood unmoving, guarding the door.

"Okay," Shelley said with finality, barking down the others protests. "It's a deal. You cure the infected Sea People and you get the book. I only rented it to find a cure. It's all the same to me."

"I agree. Can you bring the infected ones here?"

"No, they only stay in the deep water. They hide in the ruins, waiting for us to come."

"And then?"

"They eat," answered frog-face. That was hard to believe that anything that size could prey on something as nasty as him.

"I said we should hunt'em down and stick dynamite up their –" Abel gave a gesture to bring home his meaning. His expression said, "But nobody listens to me..."

"That would be a shame," I returned. "I think we can rescue them."

"Tell us how," demanded fish breath.

"Where are my car keys?" I asked, searching my empty pockets. Shelley handed them back along with my coat. She kept the gun. "Is my car still on the road?"

"No. We moved it. It's just outside, in the yard."

"Good. Then I'll show you." I got up but slowly sat down again. My whole shoulder burned. I looked at the bandage on my arm. "How bad is it?"

"You're going to need a doctor," Shelley said, offering me a hand up. It was slow work. The guard at the door let us out. It was dark outside.

"Fuck, what time is it?" I said.

"Nine thirty."

"Goddamn it, we need to hurry."

We went to my car. I had a gun and two sets of razor claws aimed at me as I opened the trunk. I wasn't up for tricks. I had a square deal so I'd see it through. I got fish breath to pull out traveling case Number One.

"Now tell us?"

"One more thing. I have another condition." I went back to the trunk and extracted something. I explained. Shelley and fish-boy agreed for once. They both said, "No fucking way."

"My terms or forget it. I want the book and I want this. Catch one of the Red Devils and put it in this jar. Agreed?"

"No," said the woman.

"Why not?"

"These Red Devils have killed many of the Sea People. What's to say you won't free it or use it against us?"

"Lady, you rented the book so you must know a little bit about people like me. We are students, researchers of ancient lore. I don't want to do anything to hurt the Sea People. I just want to study one of these leeches."

"Why?"

"Because I think I know what it is. If you'd read more of The Black Sun volume you'd know the story of Tregisih. It's an asteroid beyond Yuggoth, where two travelers met a creature bearing 'the marks of

infestation'. They killed the creature but the 'infestation' escaped. Somehow these creatures came to Earth from space. I'd like to talk to such a creature."

There was more deliberating. Fish breath pointed out I was weak and easily killed. Shelley countered with I knew how to save her husband. Abel just picked his nose and ate it.

"It's a time-limited offer, " I said thinking of myself. Telford was back in town watching the clock.

"You have a deal," Shelley came back. "Now tell us."

I opened the traveling case and took out five flares. "Break these and apply them to the face. The skin will burst and the infestation will escape. The flare will then kill the leech. But make sure you catch one."

"But there are six, not five," said fish-boy, taking the flares.

"I'm telling you, one of the infected is cured. But let's not argue. Time's a-wastin'". I gave him a sixth flare and the jar.

Fishy and his big friend dove and were gone in seconds. Shelley took longer, arranging her diving gear. Eventually she joined them. Abel stayed behind, to hold the gun on me while I sat tight. I stopped looking at him because the way he kept staring made me think he was planning to shoot my nuts off first.

With nothing else to do, I sat on the sand and watched the waves roll in. Abel sat near by, cradling his old rifle. I didn't doubt he could pick me off if I was stupid enough to run.

"Been thinking," I said.

"Good for you. Shut up." He kicked sand at me.

"The five hundred a month. What was that for?"

"I told you, you dumb fucker. It's rent. For the boat house. Shelley's been living here ever since she got that book."

"What do you need that for? You're one of them rich Marshalls."

Abel spat. A wad of thick phlegm landed next to my hand. "Damn it, shut up. I ain't rich. Or are you blind as well as stupid?"

"But your brother--?"

"The General. Yes, he's rich. Acting all hoity-toity and all. People don't even know great-daddy changed our name."

"Yah? What was it?"

"Marsh. We built the hall in Innsmouth. So he changed it to Marsh-hall."

"So you needed the cash, huh?"

"Yes, and don't get no ideas about bribing me or nothing. I can't be bought. Not all us Marshalls are as rotten as my brother."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Abel. I can tell you really care for your niece. Pretty girl."

The old man snorted. "Yes, she's got the family looks, all right. We always was a good-looking people."

I left it at that.

22:45

I had begun to worry I was wrong. Maybe the stick didn't work. Maybe it was a lucky hit or a—

A fish head popped up. The water filled as seven more followed. Several of them clutched their torn, bleeding faces. One had a jar for me with a squirming red thing inside. It was fish breath. He shoved it at me. "I don't ever want to see this thing again."

I accepted it without thanks. "And the book."

Abel brought it over. He swung it at my crotch but I dodged. I just grinned and let it go at that.

The last thing I saw on that beach will stay with me forever. It was the fish-boy I had freed. I guess he had gone back for the others. And there was Shelley Brixton, in the his arms kissing his wet, ripped up lips. Love is blind. Or demented. You decide.

23:25

I was on the highway, but just taking my time. I wouldn't make it to Telford's before midnight. I'd finally lost a half fee. I had had the record.

Still, not all was lost. I had the Black Sun back in its wooden box on its way home. It was still worth half a mill.

And I had my buddy, old slimy. He rolled around inside the jar like live strawberry jam. I might have lost a half million but I had something else. An extraterrestrial parasite to study. I was sure I could get him to talk. It was just a matter of finding the right host.

I cheered up. I even started to sing. The Bee Gees, if you can imagine that? But what else? I was in a romantic mood. Shelley Marshall Brixton was reunited with her love. I have a feeling she'd soon be sharing the same dermatologist too. Her wide mouth would grow teeth and her eyes would bulge out. But what the hell? Ain't love grand?

When the Lady of Byblos Calls

Steven E. Wedel

Randy Collins awoke needing to piss and wanting to be at the beach. The first was easy enough to remedy; he rolled out of bed and staggered into the bathroom of his home, raised the ring on the toilet and took aim. Spray came off the stream of urine on one side as if pulled away by a magnet, speckling the white toilet with spots of yellow.

"Dammit." Randy shook the last drops out and tucked himself back into his briefs. He grabbed some paper and wiped down the side of the toilet, then sniffed the air and swore he could smell sand and seagulls. He remembered his dream.

It was a vivid dream for a Nebraska corn farmer who'd never been within five hundred miles of an ocean. He had been standing on wet sand in the boxer shorts and T-shirt he wore to bed. Mist swirled around him in the darkness. The sea breathed toward him in whispering waves, promising, promising, promising until finally reaching him and firmly caressing his toes, his ankles and then his knees, urging him forward. And it had felt good, welcoming. Then he woke up needing to piss.

Randy went downstairs and hit the button on the coffeemaker. By the time he was cracking eggs over a warming skillet, the rich smell of coffee had filled the kitchen and he could hear somebody else moving around upstairs. He peeled apart strips of bacon and laid them out to hiss and pop in another frying pan.

"Hi Daddy."

Randy turned around to find April, his eight-year-old daughter, standing in the kitchen doorway. She was wearing her long pajamas with Winnie the Pooh on them, her feet were bare, her long blonde hair disheveled and one fist was rubbing an eye.

"Good morning, sunshine," Randy said. "Want some breakfast?"

"Chocolate doughnuts?"

"Nope. Eggs and bacon, with toast."

"Where's Mommy?"

"Still sleeping, I guess."

April turned and ran away, but was stopped at the stairs where she met her mother. "Mommy, Daddy's trying to cook again," the girl squealed.

Randy smiled as he heard his wife, Michelle, laugh. "Well, let's go see if we can save our food," Michelle said. A moment later, mother and daughter entered the kitchen holding hands.

"You told on me," Randy said, cocking an eyebrow at April.

"I don't like my eggs all black and hard," the girl said.

"And I want bacon that doesn't hurt my teeth," Michelle added. She was wearing her long flannel nightgown and Randy wondered if she'd bothered putting her underwear back on after he'd pushed the gown up to her waist in order to make love to her last night.

"Well then, fine," Randy said. "I'll just leave this woman's work to the women. But I'll have you notice that the coffee smells like it's going mighty fine."

"Uh-huh," Michelle agreed. "But that's because I put the packet and water in the machine last night."

"I'll be in my dressing room," Randy sniffed, then tilted his chin toward the ceiling and strode out of the kitchen, April's laughter trailing behind him.

When Randy came back, dressed in a flannel shirt and overalls, the breakfast was on the table and his female companions were just sitting down to eat. He lowered himself into a chair and sipped his mug of coffee.

"Mommy's eggs are yellow," April said. "Like they're supposed to be."

"Mommy's eggs are yellow," Randy mimicked. "Maybe I like mine black and crunchy."

April stuck out her tongue, then giggled.

"We should take a vacation," Michelle said. "I'd like to see the ocean. We've never been to the coast."

Randy lowered his mug and studied his wife. "What made you think of that?"

"I don't know. I just woke up wanting to see the ocean. We should do it."

"We're just a couple of weeks from harvest time," Randy said. "We can't take a vacation now."

"We could go after harvest," April said.

"You too, huh?" Randy asked.

"I want to go on vacation and play in the sand on the beach," the girl said.

"It'd be fun," Michelle added.

"It's going to be cold by the time harvest is over," Randy argued.

"We could go down to the Gulf of Mexico, or to L.A."

"Michelle, that's a little more than just a daytrip, you know."

"Think about it. Okay?"

"Please Daddy?"

"All right. All right. I'll think about it. Jeez, a man just doesn't have a chance in this house anymore."

The family finished breakfast and Michelle gathered the used dishes while April ran back upstairs to dress for school. When she came down, she and Randy went out to his Ford pickup to wait on the bus. They sat in the cab; Randy started the vehicle and turned on the heater. Soon, they no longer could see their breath puffing out in front of them.

"It's cold early this year," Randy commented.

"Will it snow pretty soon?"

"It better not. We have to get that corn out of the field. The harvest crew won't be here until next

week at the earliest."

"I like the snow."

"You can have all the snow God wants to give you, but not until after harvest. Okay?"

"Will we go to the beach, Daddy?"

"I don't know, sunshine. Wouldn't Austin get jealous of all those other boys seeing you in your bikini?"

"DAA-ddy!" She slapped at his arm.

"You thought I didn't know about him, didn't you?"

"He's not my boyfriend anymore. He broke up with me and he loves someone else now."

"Broke up with you? What kind of dumb boy would break up with my baby girl? I guess you'll just have to be daddy's girl forever."

"No."

"You mean you already have another boyfriend?"

"I'm not going to tell you," she said. "There's the bus!" She threw open her door and jumped out, slamming the door behind her before Randy could tease her anymore. She raced to the end of the driveway and scrambled up the steps of the yellow school bus. Neil, the driver of the bus, waved at Randy before closing the door and pulling away.

"Little booger's just growing up too damn fast," Randy said, grinning. He left the pickup running and went back into the house, where Michelle handed him a thermos of coffee and kissed him. Randy ran a hand down her back and squeezed her butt through the flannel gown, noting that the underwear was in place. She still smelled warm and comfortable, as if the luxury of sleep was trapped like a fragrance in her hair.

"Want a quick repeat of last night?" he asked, starting to pull up the gown.

"Get out, you horndog." Michelle pushed him away.

"I should be in the store for lunch," Randy said. "I'll expect something hot and inviting. And you can have some food ready, too."

"Out, you pervert!"

Randy went back to the truck, poured some coffee into the thermos lid that doubled as a silver cup, and dropped the pickup into gear. As he waited for a couple of cars to pass on the narrow state highway that ran by his house, he flicked on the radio of the truck and sipped coffee during commercials. He owned just under one thousand acres of land in central Nebraska, more than half of which had been in his family for three generations. He'd added three hundred forty acres to the spread five years ago when old George Maynard retired and moved to Florida. Most of the land was planted in corn, though he'd left the new acquisition devoted to wheat because old George had done so well with it.

Randy pulled the truck onto the highway and headed toward the farthest end of his kingdom. On his left, his own corn stood tall and straight, the long green leaves unmoving in the morning stillness. The corn on the right side of the highway was a few inches shorter and Randy could see holes in the leaves where bugs had been at it. He smiled despite himself.

"Told Bill he ought to invest in more fertilizer and better pesticide," he said. "And water. Corn's gotta have water in the summer."

A Garth Brooks song faded out on the radio and the morning news came on. Randy turned up the volume.

"Breaking news this morning from southern California, where cult members have committed a mass suicide," the announcer said. "About three dozen people, including twelve women and ten children, chartered a yacht yesterday evening. When the boat didn't return on time, the owner notified the Coast Guard, who found the yacht abandoned about fifty miles off the coast of Los Angeles. A journal found on board, apparently written by cult leader Lenora Godwin, says the group has given themselves back to the lady who gave them life. Coast Guard officials say they believe the cult members jumped overboard during the night. Only about a dozen bodies have been recovered so far."

"Only in California," Randy muttered. "Freaking nuts. Shouldn't be allowed to have kids."

The announcer switched to talk about the upcoming gubernatorial elections and Randy tuned it out; he always voted a straight Republican ticket and didn't need to hear who was throwing what mud at whom. He left the highway and started north on a gravel road that soon became a dirt road. A quarter of a mile later he was parked in front of the gate that opened onto the northernmost section of his land. He hopped out of the truck, unlocked and opened the gate, and was back in the cab in time to catch the

weather report.

"It's a chilly one out there this morning," the weather announcer said. "But it'll warm up as the sun climbs. Temperatures this afternoon should top off just a couple degrees below normal, with no chance of rainfall today. A ridge of warmer air will be pushing across the state this evening and into tomorrow, bringing our temperatures back up, but increasing our rain chances as we head into the weekend."

Randy drove through the gate and killed the truck's engine. He finished off his cup of coffee and stepped out to be with his crop. Only about a twenty-yard patch just inside the gate wasn't planted with corn. Randy took his .22 rifle from the gun rack over his back window, grabbed a burlap bag from the bed of the truck, and entered the corn, the gun held loosely at his side.

He zigzagged through the crop, stopping every thirty feet or so to feel the firmness and check the circumference of an ear of corn. He held leaves between his fingers, checking textures, looking for evidence of pests, and moved on. Randy walked until he found himself at a fence. He recognized it as the western boundary of his property, so he walked along the fence line for a while, until he spotted movement.

"I've got you now, you son of a bitch," he whispered, raising the rifle to his shoulder and aiming at the waddling shape of a raccoon moving from stalk to stalk, trying to reach an ear of corn and bending the stalks in his attempts. Randy squeezed the trigger. The varmint jumped, waddled quickly for a few feet, then stopped and never moved again on its own. Randy bagged the body and went to sling it over his shoulder, but the bag slipped. Trying to catch the bag, Randy dragged his hand across one of the two rows of barbed wire strung across the top of his fence.

He picked up the bag and more carefully settled it over his left shoulder, then looked at his hand. There was a small, shallow cut just behind the thumb. A little blood was leaking from the wound, but nothing to be concerned about. Randy was about to let the matter go when he realized the blood was not flowing down the back of his hand. Instead, it was moving horizontally, toward his thumb, which was pointing west.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," he muttered. He quickly wiped the blood onto the thigh of his overalls, picked up his rifle, adjusted the burlap bag and moved on.

He cut straight through the corn for several dozen yards before zigzagging back toward his waiting truck, again checking his crop as he went. Once there, Randy threw the burlap bag and its contents into the Ford's bed. Back in the truck, he'd left the radio on and it came alive when he turned the key.

"Are all these events related to one another?" a woman's voice asked.

"They could well be," a man answered. "Goddess cults have increased in prevalence since the 1960s, but it's too early to tell if all the events last night are related to one another, or even to cult activity."

"Do you expect more of this behavior?"

"I can't answer that," the man responded. "I simply don't know."

"Kirsten Gregory, reporting live from Baltimore," the woman said.

"What the hell's going on?" Randy wondered aloud.

"There you have it," the usual morning newscaster said. "Five bizarre mass suicides last night. In each case, the victims threw themselves into the ocean and drowned. The death toll right now stands at roughly two hundred as Coast Guard crews work to retrieve bodies from the Atlantic, Pacific and the Gulf coast. Stay tuned and we'll keep you up to date on this truly bizarre event."

Randy snapped the radio off and stared at it for a moment. Fucking weird. He backed his truck onto the dirt road and went back to lock the gate. He drove to another section of his land and repeated the check of his crop, this time not finding anything to shoot at, though there was evidence something had been gnawing on the base of several stalks.

At noon, he was in the town of Plymouth, sitting on a barstool, his elbows on the lunch counter of the drug store café, watching Michelle serve food to the people who had arrived ahead of him.

"Have you heard the news?" Michelle whispered when she put Randy's usual cheeseburger and fries with a Dr Pepper on the counter in front of him.

"You mean about those cult people drowning? Yeah, I heard."

"Isn't that the strangest thing?"

"Sure is," he said, biting into the sandwich. Michelle shook her head and moved away to wait on an elderly couple that had just sat down.

After lunch, Randy went home and spent the afternoon tinkering with farm equipment and reading up on the benefits of planting soybeans. Michelle and April arrived home at about the same time and they all went into the house. As Michelle began preparing dinner, Randy turned on the news.

"The death toll continues to rise in what many experts are calling the largest mass suicide in modern history," Dan Rather's current backup newsman said grimly. "Fourteen groups, nearly eight hundred people, drowning themselves in the oceans off the coasts of America. An unbelievable occurrence that is, strangely enough, not isolated to this nation. Nearly every coastal country on the globe has reported a similar incident today. There is no way we can gauge the exact number of dead as various agencies work to retrieve bodies from the water."

"Oh my God." Randy turned to find Michelle standing in the kitchen doorway, a grease-coated spatula in one hand, her other hand over her mouth. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, but you can forget about that vacation," Randy said.

"We are getting new reports from Virginia Beach," the newsman said. "As the evening tide comes in, hundreds of people are advancing on the shore and walking into the ocean. Cameron Mercer is live on the scene. Cameron?"

"Thanks Ted." A young man with dark hair came on the screen. His attention was torn between the camera and what was happening behind him. "As you can see over my shoulder here, people are literally just walking into the ocean, going as far as they can, then going under. This is so incredible. I don't know what to say. Local police were on the scene earlier, trying to hold people back, but then, one by one, the police officers also turned and walked into the tide. I don't —"

"Cameron, let me interrupt for just a moment," the older announcer cut in. The screen divided so that viewers could see the young man on the scene and the older man in a studio somewhere. "Did you say the police committed suicide, too?"

"Yes Ted, that's right. It's very... very strange, Ted. It's like... I don't know. The sea. It's like the sea is calling..."

The young man dropped his microphone and turned away from the camera. He began to walk away as Ted called after him. Cameron Mercer was soon lost in a crowd of bodies moving slowly toward the ocean that rolled in from the horizon.

"I cannot believe what I'm seeing here," Ted said. "Don't we have anybody else on the scene to stop him? Who's running that fucking camera? What the f—" Ted was abruptly replaced by a commercial.

"He said a bad word."

Randy and Michelle both were startled by April's comment. They pulled their attention away from the ad for cellular phone service and looked at their daughter.

"Yes, he sure did," Randy said. "I bet he gets in trouble for it, too." He turned off the television, flicking a glance toward Michelle to see if she'd object. She turned away and went back to the kitchen.

They had pork chops and fried potatoes for dinner. Then Randy helped April with her math homework while Michelle did the dishes. When the evening chores were finished, Michelle turned the television on again, hoping to watch the usual primetime shows, but every network station and all the cable news stations were showing coverage of more people walking into the oceans all over the world.

"Why are they doing it?" Michelle asked.

"I have no idea," Randy answered. "Turn it off. We don't want visitors tonight." He rolled his eyes toward April, who also was watching the live news footage. She scared easily, which meant she'd come to her parents' bed for comfort. The queen bed just wasn't big enough for three anymore.

"Let's play a game," Randy said. "Sunshine, why don't you run upstairs and get that Chutes and Ladders game I always beat you at?"

"I beat you," she said, jumping up from her spot on the floor and racing toward the stairs.

"How many people do you think are dead?"

"I don't know, Michelle. Looks like a lot. Thousands."

"I have a headache. It's been building all day."

"I've sort of had one, too," Randy admitted. "Came on while I was reading. Did you take anything?"

"Couple of Tylenol. You?"

"No. Figured it'd pass, but I guess I'll take something before I start sliding down those chutes." He got up from the couch and went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, where he shook a couple of aspirin into his palm and swallowed them with a handful of water from the sink. When he got back into the living room, April and Michelle had the board game set up. They played three games, Randy making sure he lost each time, then April took her bath and went to bed.

Randy turned on the television again, but before the picture had come on, Michelle said, "Don't. Please?"

Randy turned the set off.

"My headache's worse," she said. "And, I don't know, but I feel bloated or something."

"Uh-oh, that time of the month already? I thought you just did that a couple of weeks ago."

"I did. I'm going to go shower."

"Need any company?"

"I have a headache."

Randy watched her go up the stairs. When she was locked away in the bathroom, he turned on the television again. He found a panel discussion on CNN and paused to watch it. A balding man with a thick nose was talking. The station identified him as Dr. Phil Rosenthal, author of a book called *Body of Water*.

"The human body evolved from a species that was given life in the water," the professor was saying vehemently. "The role water plays in the body of every living species, including man, has not changed in hundreds of thousands of years. It is integral to our cell function."

"This is preposterous," another panel member, a woman identified as Tanya Robi, press secretary for the department of homeland security, argued. "Just what are you saying, Doctor?"

"Humanity, like all life, crawled onto land from the sea," the professor said, rubbing one liver-spotted hand from his nose up to his forehead and over his shiny scalp. "Our blood is eighty-three percent water. Our heart is over seventy-nine percent water. Our very brains are seventy-four-point-eight percent water. Even the makeup of our bones is almost one-quarter water. The body of a man is about sixty percent water and your average woman is roughly fifty percent water. A child can be up to seventy-five percent water."

"She's calling us home," the third and final panel member said. "She wants us to come back to her. Back to her bosom. The sea is her breast." The TV text said the dreamy-eyed speaker was Lisa Adams, high priestess of Astarte's Temple, based in Detroit. "The Great Mother wants her children to come home."

"Doctor, how do you respond to that?" the moderator, a middle-aged male news anchor, asked.

"You're not giving her any credibility, are you?" Robi nearly shrieked.

"I don't profess any believe in Astarte," Rosenthal said. "I've been a devout atheist since 1971. But something is drawing us toward the sea. I feel it right now, as I'm sure all of you do, as well. An overwhelming urge to drop everything and go to salt water. Something is calling us back to our essence."

"Ms. Adams, who is Astarte?" the moderator asked.

"She is the goddess. The Enduring Star, sometimes called Astarte, sometimes Ishtar, Irdrani, Hathor and other names. She is the most ancient, most powerful of all the gods and goddesses, the Lady of Byblos, Queen of the Stars. She – "

"If I may interrupt," Rosenthal cut in. "Astarte was a goddess worshipped by many people under different names in the ancient Middle East. She was a moon goddess, patroness of Byblos, a thriving port city. Her name changed as her worshippers were conquered. She was last known as Venus by the Romans. It's all bunk. The composition of our bodies is what's drawing us back to the sea, not some ancient goddess. We are like tiny puddles running toward the source from which we splashed."

"Doctor, is there anything that can be done to stop what's happening?"

"Lock yourselves in somewhere you can't escape. I'm not even sure that would work. Can we do that to ourselves? Do we want to?"

"Are you saying – "

Randy turned off the television as the bathroom door upstairs opened and Michelle stepped out, drying her hair in a towel. Randy called that he was coming up, turned off the downstairs lights and went upstairs to take his own shower as Michelle went on to bed. Randy found himself standing in the tub, watching the water run off his body and down the drain. Where is it going? He shut off the faucet, dried himself and went to bed.

Two hours later he was awakened by April pulling the blankets off his bed. Michelle sat up first. "What is it? What's wrong?" she asked.

"We have to go," April answered.

Randy sat up. His head throbbed. His heart seemed to be beating too fast and his vision swam. "Yes,

we have to go," he said.

"What? Where?" Michelle demanded.

"Let's go," Randy said. He took Michelle by an arm and pulled her up from the bed. April had his other hand and dragged her parents toward the bedroom door. Randy slipped into his boots, still wearing his pajamas, and snatched his keys from the dresser as he pushed Michelle gently in front of him. "We'll take the truck."

In the pickup, Randy pulled onto the highway and headed west, driving fast. Now that they were moving, his headache seemed to have subsided a little and he was able to breathe easier; his heart rate wasn't noticeable, so he guessed it had returned to normal.

"We're going to the ocean, aren't we?" Michelle asked.

Randy only looked at her. His mouth worked, but he couldn't answer. He hadn't known where they were going when he ushered them into the cab of the Ford, but now that it was spoken, he knew she was right. They were headed for the Pacific.

Michelle soon fell asleep, her head rested against the closed window of the passenger-side door. Randy pushed a compact disc into the player and Charlie Daniels filled the cab with the sound of fiddle music. April fidgeted in the seat between Randy and his sleeping wife, alternately trying to sleep or peer over the dashboard at the road unraveling in the truck's headlights.

"Daddy, what's this?"

Randy turned down the stereo volume and looked at April's left arm, which she was holding out before her, pointing at something with her right. At first, Randy didn't see anything, so he turned on the cab's dome light and looked again. Two lumps, like cysts, had risen on April's arm, the first about a half-inch above her wrist and the other about an inch higher and just a little more toward the inside of the arm.

"I don't know, sunshine. Do they hurt?"

"No. They just feel all squishy." She pushed on one, making an indentation in the crown. Randy watched as the lump reformed to its original shape as if being re-inflated. He reached over and gently felt the lumps. Like April had said, they felt spongy... hard, but giving, like an overfilled waterbed.

"When we get to where we're going, we'll visit a doctor," Randy told her. He turned off the dome

light.

An hour later, Randy noticed the first lumps on his own arms. There were three of them showing on his wrists where they came out of the cuffs of his flannel shirt. He gently felt them and they were exactly like April's. He glanced over at his daughter. She was sitting straight up, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes wide and staring intently forward.

"We have to hurry, Daddy. Hurry." She never looked at him as she spoke.

Even in the dimness of the pickup's cab, Randy could see the lumps that had risen on her throat and beneath her left ear. "We're hurrying, sunshine," he said.

"I can't sit still, Daddy," April whined. "We're not going fast enough."

"We're going as fast as I can," Randy said, noticing for the first time that he had the Ford up to eighty-five miles an hour. He, too, felt restless, as if the very molecules of his being were surging within him, driving him like he was driving the pickup.

The low-fuel light flickered and began to shine on the pickup's dashboard. Randy drove for a couple more miles until he found an exit with a gas station. He pulled to the bank of pumps and killed the engine. Michelle woke up when the movement of the vehicle stopped. Randy pulled his wallet from his pocket and passed three twenty-dollar bills toward his wife. "You want to go pay while I pump? That should fill us up."

"I'm scared," Michelle whispered. "I was dreaming. I'm scared. We should go back."

Something within him rebelled at the thought of turning back inland. "Go back?" Randy shouted. "We can't go back. We have to go on. Now get your ass in there and pay for the damn gas!"

"Hurry up, Mommy," April begged.

"This is wrong," Michelle said, opening her door and looking back at them as if her family had become a couple of dangerous aliens. "I feel it, too, but I know it's wrong." She turned and hurried toward the store when Randy opened his mouth to shout again.

Randy found he couldn't stand still as he pumped gas into the truck's dual twenty-five-gallon tanks. He rocked where he stood, put his hands in his pockets, pulled them out, paced in tight circles, and finally got back into the truck. He started the engine and dropped the gearshift into drive, pulling away from the gas station, ripping the hose and nozzle from the gas pump and sending a stream of fuel

glistening under the lights of the station.

"What about Mommy?" April asked as Randy maneuvered back onto the highway.

"She'll find her own way. Everyone will find their own way," Randy said.

They drove. April fidgeted more and more by the minute, finally unlatching her seatbelt and leaning forward so that her hands were pressed against the windshield, her face inches from the glass as they sped along the highway. Behind them, the sun came over the horizon, throwing soft light into the cab of the truck.

"Daddy, I don't think I can wait," April said.

Randy turned to look at his daughter. He felt strung out, as if he had a horrible hangover. His head throbbed and he felt sluggish. His senses cleared somewhat at the sight of his little girl's face. She looked like a white raspberry. Her delicate face was a cluster of those cyst-like lumps Randy had seen on both their arms. Her throat and neck were covered with the knobs. He looked to her arms and saw that they, too, were covered in bumps.

"Oh sunshine. We have to – "

"Daaaaaaddeee!"

She burst before his eyes. One moment she was there, her face contorted in terrible pain as she screamed for him, then, for a brief moment she was a spray of pink fluid before becoming nothing but blotches and stains spread throughout the cab of the pickup.

"April! April! April." Randy said her name over and over, as if the repetition would make the runny globs reform into his daughter. "I'll get you there, sunshine. We'll get there."

The sun rose high over Randy as he raced along the highway, and came down in front of him as the day wore on, bathing the horizon in orange. He stared doggedly forward, taking no note of the pedestrians that were lining the interstate now, their swollen, lumpy thumbs held toward him. His own hands were masses of bulges gripping the truck's steering wheel. He'd watched many of the knobs rise on his flesh; they didn't hurt, though they had begun to itch. As the sun sank and the moon rose, the lumps began to throb and pulse, driving him on.

Halfway across Oregon the interstate became choked with abandoned cars and trucks. Randy veered off the road, ran down a fence and kept heading west. Eventually, the terrain became too rough, the

deserted vehicles of those who had lived closer to the shore too numerous to get around, and Randy had to stop. He got out of his Ford and started to walk away, but some tiny piece of his mind that was still his own pulled him back. He reached out with one hand that was so bloated the fingers were almost indeterminate. He scooped up a wad of the goo that had been April and clenched it as tightly as his deformed hand would allow. Then he continued west on foot.

The smell of salt water reached inland and drove him faster. Randy's boots were very tight and hurt his feet. He knew they hurt because they, like his hands, had become much larger due to the swelling. He couldn't stop long enough to take off the boots. He hurried on. Finally, he climbed a small hill and the black ocean stretched out before him as far as his swollen eyes could see. The tide was in, but even Randy, who had lived all his life in Nebraska, could tell something was wrong. He moved forward, and finally realized the sound of the water was muffled because the sea was full of bodies.

The corpses of those who had arrived before him shifted and rolled gently as the tide pushed toward the shore. Randy stepped among them, pushing them aside, moving toward the sea, finally clambering over the dead, crawling forward over a solid mass of bodies, the bit of April he carried sticking to his hand like so much mucus as he fought to get over the corpses and into the ocean. As he got further from the shore, the bodies were fewer and moved away when he pushed at them. He slid back into the water.

"I'm here. I've come," he called out, not knowing to whom he called. Around him, other people did the same, while behind them more people came over the bodies of the dead. "I made it. I'm here! I brought April with me." Randy held up his swollen hand with the pink jelly plastered to the bumpy skin. All the while, his feet kept moving him deeper into the water.

Without warning, the darkness before him seemed to shimmer and become very warm. A figure he could not see but could feel like a blast from a furnace rose up from the depths of the sea. Up and up, pulling Randy's eyes with it until he was looking almost straight above himself. A translucent outline towered above him, gigantic, feminine, crowned with the crescent moon and robed in the starry night sky. Randy suddenly felt safe and comfortable, more so than he could ever remember feeling before. The ocean around him became the fluid of his mother's womb, protecting him, nurturing him, calling him home, home where life began.

He clutched the sticky mess that was his daughter to his chest and sank into the serenity of the sea.

Old Debts

David Bowlin

I remember when the first body washed up on the beach. How could I forget? I almost stepped on the bloated little thing before I realized what it was. The foggy darkness combined with my alcohol-induced daze had put a veil deep enough over my eyes to hide a passing elephant herd

This night had started like any other of a thousand nights, with me sitting in my car after a long, futile day at work, wondering where I could go besides home.

As usual, I ended up at Larry's, an ill-lighted little pub about two miles from work and - more importantly - in exactly the opposite direction of my house. I had an enormous round of drinks with my best friend of the past four years, Mr. Jack Daniels. Straight, with a slice of lemon, another for a chaser. My usual. Larry, the owner, began pouring them as soon as I walked in, and didn't stop until I had sixteen of them down my throat. He always knows how many I'll have, which is always sixteen. No special reason for this, its just enough to make things simple for me and Larry, and equally enough to make sure that I will sleep through the night without the dreams. Well, usually.

On this night particular night, I had left Larry's in the usual way, which is pretty drunk and out the front door. This time, however, my car wasn't there waiting on me. Hmmm, should've paid the collection of parking tickets I had managed to collect over the past few years.

I thought about calling my wife. She'd give me a ride home. She had done it more than once, but she really didn't deserve this again. I thought about waiting for a cab, figured I would just get sick in the back seat, and end up paying for a good cleaning along with the inflated cab fee, and so decided that the night air and a long walk was probably what I really needed after all.

I stumbled behind Larry's shack and into the foggy gloom beyond. The tide was higher than usual tonight, a testament of the recent storms that we'd had. Almost immediately slimy seaweed coated my shoes, soaked into my feet. Larry's Pub wasn't the classiest place in town, but you sure couldn't get any closer to the water without getting wet.

The moon was surrounded by a cushy halo of fog and clouds, and it gave an eerie glow to the waves crashing violently against the beach. With each thunderous crash of the waves, the ocean greedily sucked the water and sand back into its thirsty, greedy self. Crash, slam, crash... suuuuck. Crash, slam, crash... suuuuck. Crash, slam...

You'd think I would get used to that sound after living here all my life, but I swear I never will. The

ocean is alive, a living, breathing demon that is forever trying to pull us into its gaping maw, eating away at our safety zone, our dry land, inch by inch. You can almost feel the hatred and hunger it gives off. If you don't believe me, go for a walk along the water's edge at night, alone. You'll hear what I mean, and you'll agree with me. No, not in the open, but in your soul you'll agree. The ocean is forever hungry, and after it eats its prey, sometimes it throws the leftovers back up, just to make sure we get the picture.

Like it did this time.

Like I said, I almost stepped on the body before I saw it. My mind was about sixteen thousand miles away, somewhere in the mountains of Fiji, in a dark, dry cave with a small fire and a cooler full of any type of eighty-proof alcoholic beverage and a good book. It would be raining there outside my humble cave, thunder smashing the clouds into the ground, the lightning tormenting the sky with its electric fingers. My escape, my fantasy. Huh, maybe I'd even write a book myself.

I stumbled over a piece of driftwood that was half in, half out of the water, managed to get my balance, and looked down just in time to sidestep away from what I thought was another piece of the storm's fury making its way back to the dry land. I cursed, started to kick the rotted ol' thing out of my way, and saw two wide white eyes staring at me.

Nothing will sober a drunken man faster than a ghost from the past come to collect on old debts.

I knew the face that was staring up at me, knew it better than I knew my own. Daniel Stevens. Little nine-year-old Daniel Stevens. His dark hair was matted to his round, brown face, his mouth open and full of water. His almost-naked body had chunks of flesh missing from it in some places, bloated in others, but his face was perfectly intact. Not a hair was missing, I'd swear to it. One arm was gone from the elbow down, the other stripped of all flesh down to the bone, his stomach ripped to shreds, but his face, my god, his face was perfect, angelic, sickly beautiful.

I don't know how long I stood there with my leg cocked back, ready to kick what at I first thought was driftwood, but when I was able to breathe again, I turned, took three steps back toward Larry's, and passed out, landing face first in my own vomit.

I came to seconds later, weakly looked back over my shoulder to make sure I hadn't dreamed or imagined little Danny Stevens, and as quickly as I could I crawled up the beach to Larry's Pub, praying to God and cursing Him at the same time.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that the patrons of Larry's has seen me on all fours more than once in the past few years, but as I stumbled through the door on hands and knees this time every head turned, every chair emptied, and twenty pairs of legs ran straight toward me.

I guess I must have looked worse than I felt, if that was possible. Either way, a few strong men carried me the rest of the way inside, and managed to lay me across the bar, wiping the tears, vomit and sweat from my face with their own shirtsleeves.

"Brian, dear God, what happened?" The voice of Pete Tomble, seeming to come from somewhere around Oz, hey how's the wizard doin', seen Toto lately?

"That ain't no reg'lar drunk sickness, y'all," whined Bret Cravens, looking anxiously around the room, then back at me. "Git a doctor in here, Larry. Man's bad, he's bad sick. Maybe he gonna die, you think?"

The room was suddenly too crowded, too hot. I tried to rip my shirt open, to kick off my waterlogged shoes, and the faithful patrons of Larry's Pub mistook all this for a convulsion. Pete grabbed my head, shoved his face against mine, and blew stinking onion-and-ham infested breath into my mouth, making me immediately cough and gag. I stopped trying to get my shoes off, and had the sudden urge to just leave my shirt just the way it was.

"Beach," I wheezed, coughing and gagging on the last of Pete's roadkill breath. "Beach, oh god..." I doubled over, remembering the way those perfect little eyes stared up at me, accusingly, knowingly.

The tears were streaming down my face again, but this time I wasn't sure if it was from fear and shock, or the horrid taste of partially digested onions and ham still burning in my lungs.

Larry shoved his way through the crowd of quiet onlookers, using his massively powerful arms to effectively displace anyone who was foolish enough not to move fast enough.

"What about the beach, Brian? You get hurt on the beach? Someone smash yer face out back?"

Immediately the rumors started to fly through the room. "Brian got mugged on the beach!" "Hey didja hear that, someone robbed Brian out back, jus' took his money and beat his face in!"

With a roar that sounded like Gabriel's trumpet on the Last Day, Larry returned the bar to the silence of a crypt. "Shut up, you fools!"

He leaned over me once again, and, incredibly, whispered. "Brian, what happened? Tell me what happened. You need a doctor?"

"Oh god, Larry, oh god." I hung my head over the bar and emptied the last of the liquor and lemons on Larry's spotless hardwood floor. I began shaking involuntarily, and felt Larry's massive arms fold

around me. After a minute or more, I was able to talk again without my teeth chattering.

"The b-beach, oh god, he's there on the beach. Down by the t-t-track. Dead. God, oh god he's dead, he's dead."

With these words, the bar emptied out, everyone heading down to the little spot of pavement close to the beach that we locals call the track, but which the maps say is the beginning of Route 9.

I was left alone, a grown man lying on a mahogany bar, crying, bleeding and shaking, soiled underwear and all.

Later that night the coroner positively, albeit hesitantly, identified the bloated, half-rotted corpse that had washed up on the beach to be that of nine-year-old Daniel Wayne Stevens.

Daniel's parents were horrified, the full weight of their loss instantly returning, the pain an avalanche, devastating the thin masquerade of normal life that they had tried so hard to create since the death and disappearance of their only son four years ago. In the twenty minutes that Mrs. Stevens stared and screamed into her dead son's face she aged at least ten years.

No one in the coroner's office looked me in the eyes, and not a soul spoke of how ironic it was that it was I, the person who had caused the death of this and fifteen other children, should be the one to find the body four years later. No one had to; I could read it on all their faces.

The sheriff took my official statement, patted me on the shoulder, and quietly led Mr. and Mrs. Stevens out, not allowing them to look back at the stinking, sea stained remains of their only child.

I rode home with my wife, her driving and me leaning against the Buick's big door, the glass blessedly cool to my face, neither of us speaking the whole way. After all, what was there to say?

The news of death spreads quick in a small town, and the only thing that spreads faster than the news of death is the news of a four-year-missing corpse turning up on the beach.

The day after little Daniel Stevens body unexpectedly made its sudden, sodden appearance the beach was crowded with tourists and townspeople alike, waiting to see if another dead child would float up and ask for directions to the nearest Dairy Treat.

With all the alcohol purged from my system the night before, I didn't sleep at all. Joanne called the office for me to let them know I wouldn't be in for a few days, but they had already heard the news, and were not expecting me.

Jo went on to work, opening her little antique shop on Fifth Street right on schedule at nine. A quick kiss on the cheek, and she was out the door. She didn't speak, didn't say I love you, nothing at all. Of course, I hadn't heard those words in four years, not since the day of the worst tragedy in our town's history, the last day that I was truly alive.

Sixteen kids had died, and though everyone says differently, it was my fault.

It was my fault, and I have to live with it every day, knowing that some day, some day I'll have to pay for their blood, the innocent blood of children. No matter what the cost, I just wish it was over, god, how I wish I could just sleep one night without depending on alcohol to suppress the tormenting, nightmarish screams of drowning children, children being eaten alive by the ocean.

At eleven o'clock Joanne called to check on me, and even asked if I wanted to have lunch with her down at Al's Deli. She sounded worried about me, genuinely worried, which surprised me. I politely refused, hung up the phone, and stretched out on the sofa once more, not daring to close my eyes for fear of seeing little Danny staring up at me from his waterlogged head.

No sooner had I unexpectedly faded off to sleep than the phone rang again. My heart pumping at least four hundred beats per minute, I jumped up and grabbed it, breathing so hard that I couldn't even say hello.

"Brian? Brian, its Sheriff Dawson."

"H, h, hi, Sheriff. What can I d-do for you?"

The sheriff coughed into the phone, clearing his throat and buying some time. "Well, we got another one, Brian. Another body on the beach, about three hundred yards from the track where you found the Stevens kid. Uh, Brian, umm, this one is Betty Taylor's girl. You know, the little redheaded kid used to call you her sweetheart all the time?"

Oh god. Oh sweet god, no.

The phone hit the carpet, and so did my knees. Dear god, please no, please please please no, I can't take it, I can't. Not her. God, if you're there, please please not her.

From the phone: "Brian? You there, Brian? Hey, Brian, you alright? Tom, get to Brian's house, he's a-passed out'r something! Hurry!"

The line went dead, and in the sudden silence the buzzing of the open phone line filled my world, taking on meaning and understanding. This was what being dead was, yeah, I was in Hell, somehow I had died, and this was Hell. Ha! And they said it would be hot in Hell! I'd never felt so cold in my life.

Of course, the body that was discovered on the beach did turn out to be Annie Taylor, the prettiest little redhead in the world, and I turned out not to be in Hell after all. Not yet, anyway.

Though her hair was no longer red, there was no mistaking that the thing with the torn flesh and seaweed-tangled body was Annie. Her face was as unmarked and clear as Daniel Stevens' had been.

Dear god, its like the ocean allowed all the creatures of the sea to feast and explore each part of the small delicacies it had captured except for the face. Take whatever you want, the ocean must have said, but don't touch the faces. Brian needs to see the faces of the kids he murdered.

Did it hurt to look at little Annie lying there in the coroner's office? Honestly, I'm not sure. I think I was in too much shock to feel pain. What I do remember feeling, however, was a deep, deep loss. Not exactly like losing a loved one or a friend to death, but like losing your soul. As Annie stared up at me with those dead-yet-alive eyes, eyes so green they were almost emerald, I knew my soul was damned, forever lost.

The body was wrapped in a small bag, zipped up, and placed in a sliding drawer in the wall, waiting on a full autopsy. Betty, Annie's mom, didn't make it to the coroner's office; she had collapsed outside the door of her home when the sheriff and her minister had told her that her long lost daughter had been found, dead of course, mutilated and molested by the sea. Therefore, it was my duty, my solemn duty as Annie's godfather to positively identify her.

If there is a god above that I shall someday meet, I will only have one question to ask: How dare You?

Jo and I attended the formal funeral ceremonies of both Daniel and Annie, along with eight other kids who washed up, mangled and shredded, on the beach out by the track over the next five days. I went to every funeral, but not one tear fell from my eyes. I wish I could explain why, but I can't; all I can say is that when you lose your soul, I guess you also lose your tears.

It hurt, oh god it hurt to see those ruined little bodies lying in those white, blue, pink, and golden little

caskets, hurt worse than ever I thought it could, but somehow I survived. Somehow, I didn't lose my mind. Or at least I don't think I did. Its hard to tell these days.

I watched as each of those ten kids was placed, belatedly, into the ground, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. With each beautiful, innocent child that was given to Mother Earth at last a part of me went with them, down into the utter blackness of death and the grave. There isn't much left; mostly just a walking corpse, a damned soul searching for the perfect dark blackness of oblivion, the grave.

When news came around that yet another body washed up on the beach, with another right behind it, I knew then what I would have to do. I knew how I would have to pay for the death of these kids. The ocean was hungry, but it needed bigger prey.

It hungered for the blood of the damned.

It has been nine days since the last of the kids washed up on the beach, three at once on that last day, washed up right in the middle of the day and all but leaped onto the dry shore. I heard the screams from the beachgoers all the way here at my house, locked in my small, until now unused study. I didn't have to go out to see which kids had washed up. There is only one that hasn't, and she never will.

She wanted a boat party, just a simple boat ride for her and all her friends for her birthday, and of course I had said yes. My little angel loved the water, and even at eight she was by far a better swimmer than either me or her mother. She spent all her time in the water, and had always dreamed of winning a gold medal in the Olympics.

"Gonna give it to you, Dad, gonna win a gold medal for you, 'cause you're my best friend!" God, the times I have heard her say that! Each time I would hug her oh so tight, kiss the top of her head until we both toppled over and laughed and fought and wrestled until we were both worn out.

God. Never in all my life have I missed my little Samantha like I do now. Its almost time, I can feel it. Its almost time.

On her eighth birthday all her friends had come over, fifteen kids that she had known from school and church all her life, fifteen kids who lived close to us, most of them on the same street. Kids that I had watched grow up, even coaching pee-wee league baseball for most of them that whole summer.

I took them out on the boat, the parents all gathered around the grill and picnic tables with Jo on the beach. Sixteen kids and me headed out to sea, cruising slowly, being careful not to run against the waves.

Soon enough the kids started yelling for me to "Go faster, uncle Brian, go faster! Jump the waves!" And, after a few unhearty "no's", we did. The kids were delighted, ecstatic even, when the waves would crash over the front of the boat, drenching all of us to the bone. Round and round we went, causing the waves to get higher and higher, splashing, laughing and holding on, having a great time. My little Samantha standing right beside me, helping me steer the boat.

"Again, Daddy, faster!"

I smashed the accelerator all the way forward, and the waves were really pouring into the boat this time, causing the kids to laugh harder, cheer louder than ever.

Just as I was about to bring the accelerator back down and head for the shore, the boat came down from an extremely high wave, seemingly straight down. I saw the log in the water half a second before we hit, didn't even have time to yell at the kids to hold on.

The bow of the boat struck the half-submerged log head on, and the boat flipped straight over, end over end, and came crashing down on top of us all. We were all trapped under the upside down boat, kids popping up all around me for seconds at a time, but the waves, the waves were just too much. The boat banged against us, flipped back over, and started to float away, going with the current, out to sea.

Kids were screaming, and at first I thought that it was just the fright from the crash – God knew it scared me bad enough to scream. Then I saw: the life jackets were keeping the kids afloat, but the undercurrent combined with the waves was taking them out to sea, and faster than should have been possible.

Screams, god the screams of those kids! I didn't have a life vest on, and I tried, god believe me, I tried to swim to them, but I couldn't seem to get any speed. It felt as if something had hold of both my legs, pulling me back, dragging me back away from the kids. God, I kicked harder and harder, but the more I struggled to get to the screaming, panic-stricken kids, the further away they seemed to get.

My feet got tangled around something slimy, and I knew at once I was in serious trouble. Seaweed. I was tangled up in patch of seaweed, and the more I pulled, the tighter it got. I dove under the surface to try and get myself untangled, and for just a second I saw Samantha's face, her shocked, breathless face under the water, saw her silently scream for me, and then there was nothing but blackness.

I'm not sure what happened immediately after this, but the people on the beach saw the accident, and wasted no time in getting into boats and some just flat-out running into the water, trying desperately to get to the kids. Each of them later swore, swore to the God they serve and worship each Sunday morning that the kids just went under the surface, went under all at once. Of course people dove in to

look for them, but not a trace was ever found. No clothing, no shoes, no bodies, not even a life vest. Nothing, that is, until two weeks ago when little Daniel Stephens drifted ashore to accuse me of killing him.

Of the sixteen kids that died that day, all but one has now reappeared, bright, shining eyes, mangled bodies with perfect, unhurt little angel faces and all. All but one.

Samantha is waiting on me down there, just under the surface of the water, about a hundred yards north of the track, right behind our house.

She's there, waiting on her daddy, on her best friend to come and join her, because sooner or later we have to pay our old debts, and sometimes we have to pay with our souls.

I'm going out the back door soon, just as soon as I finish writing this confession, this testament, call it what you will. Out the back door, my bare feet sliding silkily through the sand, into the waiting, thirsty mouth of the ocean.

I know Samantha is there waiting on me, that she will be with me as the ocean starts tearing the flesh from my body, devouring every part of me, even my face. She will hold my hand, and kiss my cheek as I feel the first deathly claw of the sea stab into my flesh, trying to reach my soul.

And for this I am thankful. My little angel, my Samantha waited on me out there, waited on me. She sent the others to let me know that its time, and that it has to be this way. She waited on me.

Daddy's girl.

About the Authors:

G.W. Thomas

Lives in the Cariboo region of British Columbia. His work has appeared in over 170 different books and magazines including WRITER'S DIGEST, THE ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE and GOTHIC.NET He is an active member of the HWA. His website is:<http://gwauthor21.tripod.com/index.html> . His latest collection of poetry is BROTHERS OF DARKNESS with William P. Robertson.

David Bowlin

has been actively seeking safe and profitable passage to other dimensions since he was old enough to drink milk. Since this has proven nonproductive, he has turned his talents to other areas, including writing, which have proved even less profitable. Regardless of the long dark teatime of the soul that has become the norm, David still produces one work of fiction after another.

Peggy Jo Shumate (a.k.a. Brutal Dreamer)

is a movie reviewer for DVD Empire. Market Manager/Staff Reviewer for Double Dragon Publishing. Her fiction can be found at more than 20-30 different E-zines and small press markets, and has appeared both print and electronic. Peggy Jo is a Terror Tale Scribe member, and a 2000 graduate of the Institute of Children's Literature (although, she scribes mostly in the horror vein). She is known by her psuedo: Brutal Dreamer. She lives in the Midwest of the U.S.A. with her husband of 18 years and two children: Isaac and Elizabeth and her cat, Shakira (Shackie Taques). She was Paul Kane's March 2002 Guest Writer and appeared in "Shadow-Writer's Anthology" by BJM Press June 2002. "Cemetery Poets: Grave Offerings" February 2003 Hardback release/ebook March 2003 release, and "Scary! Holiday Tales To Make You Scream Anthology" paperback & ebook: September 2003, all by Double Dragon Publishing. Visit Peggy Jo at:<http://www.singrigue.org/users/dream> or<http://brutaldreamer.tripod.com> .

Email:Peggy.Shumate@Double-Dragon-eBooks.com

L. J. Blount (a.k.a. Myth Spinner)

has been writing for a little over two-years. His work has appeared at numerous houses, both in print and online. This includes the appearance in the Cold Storage Anthology. But, it is the future that is more in turn. Aside from his work in Atrocitas Aqua Anthology, he has several projects on tap for 2003. These included the publication of his first short story collection entitled: Dark Vigil (which will be released as an ebook (02/03) and a TPB (06/03). His first novel will be released later in 2003 (entitled: Augur of Armageddon). Also, he has two other stories to be released in separate DDP anthologies later 2003.

To visit L.J. Blount: drop by his website:http://www.geocities.com/myth_spinner/

Megan Powell

Megan Powell lives in suburban Philadelphia with her husband Larry and two very large cats. The drainage ditch outside her house does not, alas, seem to contain any supernatural creatures. To make up for this shameful lack of the bizarre, she writes a lot of speculative fiction. She has been published in various magazines and anthologies, including The Eternal Night, Underworlds, Ideomancer, Aoife's Kiss, Kinships, Bullet Points and Femmes de la Brume, and her fantasy novel Vocation is available from Double Dragon eBooks. Her editorial fingerprints can be seen on the webzines Fables (www.fables.org) and Shred of Evidence (www.shredofevidence.com), and her reading tastes are outlined in SDO Fantasy book reviews (www.sintrigue.org). She maintains a personal homepage at www.meganpowell.net.

Susanne S. Brydenbaugh

has had over 50 publications appear, or slated to appear, in both web and print venues such as: Would That It Were, Black Petals, Dark Angel Rising (UK), The City Morgue Magazine, Rustlings of the Wind, Rogue Worlds, Twilight Times, Shadowkeep, The Murder Hole, and Short Stories Magazine. Her short stories are slated to appear in the anthologies: "Atrocitas Aqua" ("Horror from the Water"), "Femmes de la Brume" ("Women of the Mist"), "Spooky! Holiday Tales to Make You Scream", and a collection of poetry in the multi-authored anthology, "Cemetery Poets: Grave Offerings", (Hardback and ebook, Feb 2003) all from Double Dragon Publishing. She is a member of SFWA, and lives in Birmingham, Alabama. She welcomes visits to her website:www.mywriterstooth.com

Steven L. Shrewsbury

34, is the author of over 120 tales online or in print plus nearly 160 poems of his have appeared in print magazines. He has appeared in many anthologies, most recently the high fantasy epic GRIMOIRE DE SOLACE from iUniverse and SCARY! HOLIDAY TALES TO MAKE YOU SCREAM anthology from DDP. His collection of barbarian tales DEPTHS OF SAVAGERY will be released from DOUBLE-DRAGON Publishing in the summer of 2003. He resides in Central Illinois with his wife, Stacey and son, John, and searches for a brighter world, often.

HORNS

Residing in Norwood, Ohio, he's been a horror fanatic for almost as long as he's been taking in oxygen. His writing has rent and ravaged the Internet zine scene over the past few years, leaving behind delighted readers craving more. Notable e-zine appearances include: Horrorfind; The Wild Clown Chronicle; Short, Scary Tales; DeathGrip; House of Pain; Dreadful Dreams and Infernal.

His story "Angel Killer" appears in the paperback COLD STORAGE: anthology of the undead. COLD STORAGE includes an introduction by horror professional Graham Masterton, author of THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT. Horns has writing featured in PEEP SHOW issue 2, and THE TRIDENT: The Journal of The Legion of Loki-both of which are print publications. Future projects include the proposed series of EXIT THE LIGHT books with author and friend Walt Hicks.

<http://members.tripod.com/~hornshorror/mainscreen.html>

<http://www.exitthelight.com> or <http://members.tripod.com/~hornshorror/diabolic.html>

Steven E. Wedel

was born in Stillwater, Okla. on April 8, 1966. He graduated from Enid High School (Oklahoma) in 1984 and took a real-life detour before entering college, finally earning a BA in journalism from the University of Central Oklahoma in 1999. A glutton for punishment, he's now working toward a master of liberal studies degree with a creative writing emphasis from the University of Oklahoma.

As a journalist, Wedel has won several awards and has worked as reporter, columnist, photographer and editor for several newspapers, including The Daily Oklahoman, and has been a corporate writer for a major energy company.

Bob L. Morgan Jr.

lives in a suburb of Seattle Washington with his wonderful wife Judi, stepdaughter Natalie and their insane cats Patty and Fritz. In the late 1980's and early 1990's he went to college In Victoria Texas and saw print in several college publications. He then didn't write for publication for the next 10 years. Bob's wife talked him into giving fiction writing another shot after she read some of his old stories and was impressed. His short fiction has been featured in House Of Pain, The Writers Hood, Splatter Punk, Short Scary Tales, The Murder Hole, and Savage Night. He currently is a staff writer at SavageNight.com where he reviews books, and movies.

Current projects include the novel, Blood For The Masses as John Dark and as always several short stories are being worked on at the same time. He welcomes any comments and questions and can be contacted by e-mail at atboblmorganjr@hotmail.com .

Shawn P. Madison

Shawn P. Madison lives in a new house in Suffolk, Virginia, where the grass has grown in nicely and all of the books he has collected through the years now fit. He has written in the genres of action, children's, contemporary, fantasy, horror, mystery, non-fiction and science fiction. He has published more than fifty short stories in over twenty different magazines, both electronic and print.

Shawn and his wife share their house with two old friends, a larger than normal cat and a dog who thinks he's human, and, together, they all hope to make Virginia their permanent home. Feel free to contact Shawn via e-mail at: asm89@aol.com

Justin Stanchfield

is a full-time rancher, part-time snowplow driver, occasional musician and struggling writer. His fiction has appeared in various publications including Boys' Life, Sintrigue, Extremes 4, Darkest Africa and two of the SFF.Net Darkfire anthologies. He lives with his wife and kids on a Montana cattle ranch a stone's throw from the Continental Divide and is a member of SFWA.'

Christopher Fulbright

is a former journalist turned technical writer with stories appearing in over 40 venues including Haunts, Dark Tome, Peep Show, Outer Darkness, Whispers from the Shattered Forum, Horrorfind, The Late Late Show, Dreadful Dreams, The House of Pain, Something Wicked, and more. He is the author of the dark sci-fi novelette SOMETIMES WOMEN ARE SO COLD, and editor of the horror e-zine Savage Night. Readers may visit his website at

<http://www.mindovermedium.com/chfulbright>.

Jason Brannon

cut his literary teeth on Spider-Man comics, Ray Bradbury short stories, and Richard Laymon novels. His stories have appeared in over 90 publications including Twilight Showcase, The Edge: Tales of Suspense, Dark Realms, and Horrorfind.com. He is also the author of four short story collections, two novels, and various collaborations. His second book of short stories, Five Days on the Banks of the Acheron, has recently been issued in paperback by Double Dragon Publishing. When not writing or attending to his duties as editor of The Haunted or as a book reviewer for SpecFicWorld, Jason can sometimes be found lurking in one of the dark corners of his webpage at www.angelfire.com/rant/puzzles/

E-mail him any time at bulldogz@intop.net to talk shop or to let him know what you think about his work.

Walt Hicks

Originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, Walt Hicks now resides in Florida with his wife and family. A horror writer since he was a child and could set pen to paper, Walt has been published widely on the internet in such venues as: Short Scary Tales, Dreadful Dreams, Pegasus Online, DeathGrip (editor), The Bloody Muse, House of Pain, Lurid Fiction, Halloween Ghost Stories, The Kovacs Files, and others. In print, he has a newly released collection of short horror fiction with fellow author Terry 'Horns' Erwin entitled Exit The Light. His short story "Parts" was included in the Cold Storage anthology and the short erotic horror piece "Peep Show" appears in Peep Show #4. Look for appearances in the anthologies Blasphemy and The Ghostbreakers, as well as his short story collection DeathGrip in 2003. His suspense novel Vigilance & Valor with J F Juzwik is expected in early 2004.

Paul Melniczek

started writing in 2000 with over 100 works published or sold. Some markets include Fangoria, Dark Realms, Deep Outside, Night Has Teeth, and more. Two of his stories received Honorable Mention in the Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. Released in trade paperback from Double Dragon Books are two collections, "Restless Shades" and "Frightful October."