

MIDNIGHT MONSTER CLUB

MIDNIGHT INK SOCIETY PRESENTS

HUMAN MONSTERS



Q1 2026 • VOLUME 4

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Q1 2026 - Vol. 4

Edited by: Shelly Farmer & Paisley R.



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*“Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too.
They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.”*

— Stephen King

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No Return

By Eric Dahlberg

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Bowden,

I have just seen the news on channel four, regarding your missing child. After seeing your pleas for his return, I felt compelled to write to you and offer my condolences. It must be quite the thing, to take your child to the park to play with all the other little children, and for your child to simply disappear. Honestly, I am surprised it doesn't happen more often, as I constantly see all the parents with their noses buried in their phones, completely unaware of what is happening around them.

We do our children a terrible disservice, telling them there are no such things as monsters, when in fact this world is full of them. Children wander the world, blissfully unaware of the peril that hides around every corner, behind every bush or tree. These monsters will not look like they do in books and movies, they look just like everyone else. It could be your grocer, your banker, your babysitter. They are chameleons that you never see coming, and they can commit the most heinous of crimes. Humans truly are the most dangerous animal.

From the stories you told about him on the news, he seemed like a brave and capable boy, and the future held many opportunities for him. I think of that often, the possible futures these children might have had. How old would they have grown to be, and how many children or grandchildren would they have had? By taking a single life, how many future generations are now snuffed out of existence? The effects of one small action can ripple throughout eternity.

As I write this letter, it has been two days since his abduction. The experts say that the chances of finding a missing child are significantly less after the first forty-eight hours, or is it seventy-two hours? Either way, I am sure that it will take some time for this letter to reach you, and you have now passed that deadline. I am quite confident that in the time between the writing and the delivery of this letter, your boy's body will still not have been found.

I must admit, I was a little bothered by something you said during your interview with the reporter. You acted as if this was something

that simply “happened to you”. You need to take a lion’s share of the blame for this unfortunate situation. When you brought your child out into the world, you KNEW that something like this could happen. You knew that somebody like me could be at the playground, watching, waiting. While I applaud you for not scrolling through your phone the entire time, you still paid no attention to your child, too involved in whatever insipid conversation you two were having. It is almost as if you WANTED me to take him.

Now, I am sure you have questions. Not that you deserve it, but I shall try to bring you a small amount of closure. Your son is dead. It’s quite possible he was dead before you even realized he was missing. He did suffer, but only briefly. His last word was “Mommy”, quite ironic if you ask me. No, you will not find his body, for there is no body left to discover. Most people think that human flesh tastes sweet. This is actually a misconception. Human flesh, including your son’s, is in fact quite bitter, like a sort of smoked pork. Should you choose to have more children, I believe you will better prepare them for this world, and for that... you are most welcome.

Sincerely,
The Monster



Appetites

By Jen Spencer

William Angel is anything but that. He is of Spanish origin, his dark eyes twinkling deviously in the light. His good looks and charm attract the attention of a lot of women. Myself, included. He uses it to manipulate people into getting what he wants. His money is made by hurting people, turning girls into his profit through sex, violence, and methamphetamines.

I've been watching him for a long time. He is fascinating in the worst possible way. I do have to admit, I'm a little obsessed. My name is Jade, I'm 16 years old, and I love a bad boy. I've been following him long enough that I know where he lives now. His second story apartment is on Drexel Avenue and he comes and goes mostly by way of fire escape. He lives alone, and never closes his curtains. I watch from street level, as he pulls on his gaudy tan snakeskin jacket over those muscular arms and proceeds down the fire escape.

The wind kisses his handsome face, ruffling his chestnut hair and billowing that ridiculous jacket as he dances down the street to a song only he can hear. I positioned myself where I knew he'd have to approach me. I know he's seen me around, and I know I'm his type. I see the recognition flash in his eyes as he makes his way over, car horns blaring at him. He ignores every one, and leans next to me, pinning my small frame between his broad chest and the bakery window I was standing in front of.

"What's your name, beautiful?" He grins like a devil. "I'm Jade." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm William Angel, but don't be fooled by the name." I scoff. "You don't look like an Angel." His tongue flicks slowly over his bottom lip. "You do. Do you want to know what I am?" I turn my head quizzically, not sure what he means. "I'd like to." He smiles a bit too wide for comfort, his beautiful facade showing a small crack of the malice beneath. "Well then, you'll have to fuck me to find out." His predatory gaze dropped to my lips, and he dragged his thumb delicately over my bottom lip. He lifted my chin, appraising me like he already owned me. I shivered as though a cold wind had blown through. I decided then and there that I was determined for him to be my first. He slipped a business card into my hand, and told me when I

was ready to give him a call. He probably wouldn't expect one so soon.

I went to school that day. But my mind was buzzing with the very taboo older man that had given me an opening to step into his world. The droning of the teachers and buzz of the hallways never made it in, I was far too preoccupied. When the final bell rang, I didn't go home. I'd been thinking about this for too long and I knew if I didn't act on my desires, that I would chicken out. So I did what any lovesick teenager would do. I climbed his fire escape and waited for him outside his apartment.

After the sun went down, I could hear his boots on the metal ladder, and then the stairs to the balcony. His shadow fell over me and I tried my best to look shy even though I was burning for this. "Couldn't wait, huh?" He said sarcastically, a lopsided smile forming on his lips. I just nodded. He ushered me inside. I barely had a chance to put down my book bag before he was on me. Pressing me against the wall so hard it hurt. His mouth bruising mine as he clasped my jaw and intruded into my mouth with his tongue. He tasted like what I imagine licking a burning coal would be like. Searing flame and the ashes of regret.

I pushed back against him momentarily, enough to make him grip one of my wrists above my head. "What, you don't want it anymore?!" He roared into my face. I smiled as innocently as I could. "Of course I do. I want you to be my first." My cheeks bloomed with heat, and he gnashed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "I'll wait for you to be ready then." He let me fall against the wall for support and sauntered down the hall to his bedroom. I swallowed the lump in my throat but my blood roared in my ears. It was now or never.

When I made it into the bedroom, he had completely stripped, but had pulled the sheet up over his groin, still not leaving much to the imagination. I decided to be bold, and since he was lying on his back, and I was still fully clothed, I straddled him, pinning both his waist, and his arms under my knees. "Someone's a bad girl." He chuckled deeply. His eyes watched and widened as I pulled a switchblade out of my pocket and flicked it open. "You could say I like danger. I've been waiting for this for months." I traced it lightly over his throat, eliciting groans from him, thinking I was just a girl who liked knife play. The tip of the blade skated over the surface of his chest, and I skillfully

lined it up where it fit between two ribs before plunging it to the hilt into his chest. The Shock registered before the pain. I jerked the blade out, blood splashing hot across my face, arterial spray showering my clothes and the walls as I stabbed him again and again.

As he bled out, leering over him, I felt the need to remind him. "I told you I wanted you to be my first. You just misunderstood my intentions." My name is Jade, I'm 16 years old, and I can now tell you from experience, I love killing bad boys.



A Father's Heart

By Mytch Barns

Kayla and her father boarded their flight, "Vegas or Bust," he said to his daughter with a heartfelt smile and a wink. "Begas Vust," she raised her hands and replied with the innocent excitement only a child has while letting out a sweet giggle. Her excitement wasn't unwarranted. They were heading to see the grandparents at the Grand Canyon for Kayla's 7th birthday.

They found their seats, 20A and 20B. A man was already in the aisle seat, 20C. "We're right in there," Kayla's father said as he motioned to their inside seats while holding her back from climbing over the man's unsuspecting lap. This stranger made him uneasy. He looked perfectly average with a strong, square jawline and a mouth that smiled, and eyes betrayed the sentiment. He couldn't decide if he was your friendly neighbor, or a cold-blooded killer. He feared the latter.

The stranger got up politely, tucking his notebook under his arm. Kayla's father clocked a less than enthusiastic look on the stranger's face when he thought he wasn't looking. "Thank you", he whispered to the stranger, then turned to his little girl with quite a bit more enthusiasm, "Would you like the window or the middle?" Without so much as a word, Kayla bound into the window seat and stared at the workers loading the plane below.

The flight was uneventful; Kayla played on her tablet most the ride while her father found himself lost in Red Walls, the latest Christina Berling novel. As they neared their destination, a flight attendant got on the loudspeaker, "We'd like to wish a very special little girl a very special big birthday! Where is Kayla?"

Her father had known this was coming and was helping Kayla stand on the seat to wave to everyone. A chorus of birthday wishes came from throughout the plane. Kayla was giggling and bouncing on the chair, waving emphatically like she was the queen and the passengers were her admiring public. "You are my heart baby girl", her father said to her as he showered her with hugs and kisses.

The stranger, on the other hand, had a completely different

reaction. If the father had not been focusing so much on Kayla, he would have noticed a large smile come over his sullen face, even his eyes smiled. He looked at them both, then to the overhead compartment before returning his attention to his notebook and frantically scribbling something.

The plane made a smooth landing and quick arrival to the gate. The stranger motioned for the birthday girl and her father to go in front of him before reaching up and retrieving two large suitcases from the overhead compartment with ease.

He followed them off the plane and watched as the man stopped outside the men's room. He told his daughter to wait outside with the bags. The stranger noticed the father looking around, spotting several uniformed officers, then leaving to go into the restroom. The stranger went up to the restroom entrance, flashed Kayla a smile that made her very uncomfortable, then followed the father inside.

Kayla was waiting outside the restroom impatiently; her mind bouncing between birthday excitement and a fixation of the stranger's eerie smile. A shadow moved across Kayla and she looked up to see that very same stranger standing in front of her holding a wrapped present that was the size of a shoebox. She hadn't recalled him entering with one, but she was nervous.

"I heard it was your birthday", the stranger's even voice was saying to Kayla through breath that smelled old and stale, he continued and picked up the pace, throwing one final glance toward the restroom entrance then the uniformed officers, "You were so well behaved on the flight that I think you deserve a fresh gift." The stranger handed Kayla the gift and started walking away.

It had some weight to it, and something was rolling around inside, like a ball. She turned to ask the stranger if she could open it now, but he was no longer in sight. She looked back and the gift and thought she felt a light thump as if it were pulsating and alive.

The excitement of a surprise gift made Kayla forget about the uneasy feelings and she began ripping off the paper. It was a shoebox. Her excitement was so great that she didn't hear the yelling that had begun behind her.

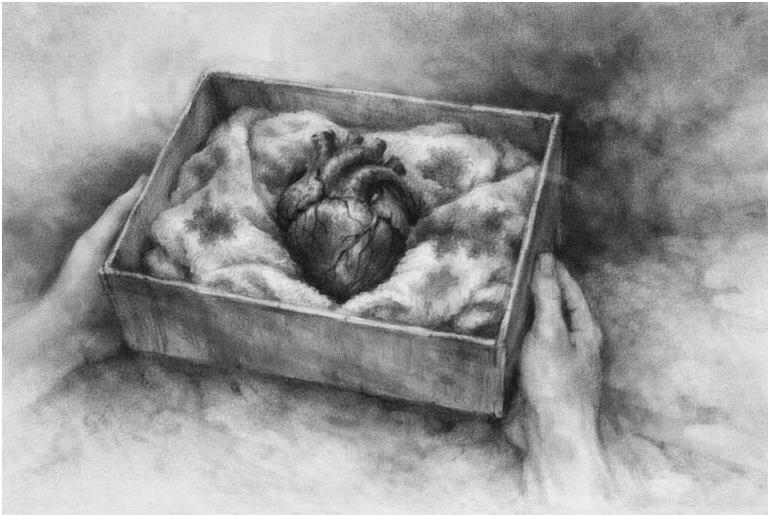
"Oh my god! Call 911!"

Kayla lifted the lid of the box. Inside was a bunch of white bathroom towels, but they were turning red, like a magic trick.

“I think he’s dead!”

Kayla looked confusedly at the towels that were beating up and down. Not quickly, but it was definitely pulsating. She reached in and lifted the warm towels to see her gift.

“I think they cut out his heart!”



Author's Note: Writing Prompt: #19 – A stranger hands you a wrapped box. Inside is a beating heart. While reading this prompt, I found out the little girl, traveling with her mother, was having a birthday party in Vegas.

Written on a flight to Vegas for the inaugural MMC meet up. Thursday, January 15, 2026

The Demon Inside of Us All

By Jessy Marie Peters

Most stories start with I was born, I grew up, I lived my life to the fullest until death sweeps us off our feet and we are no more. But not me, there isn't much I remember from those early formative years, but I do remember the first scent of blood the way it felt on my hands splattered against my skin. The way life drains from the eyes before the last breath is expelled.

As I look back into my twisted dark memories to write what could be my last, I'll account for my actions not what others may consider my sins. My earliest memory, I was 12 maybe 14. The blood was warm and sticky against my flesh as I stood over the body of who I believed was my father, a week before I learned that I was not biologically the child of the parents who were tasked to raise me. You may wonder why I would kill them for that alone for I do not have the answers to that question, but it is what started me down what some might consider immoral but for me it calmed something that I didn't even know was there. A little detail of that first account, it was late in the night I had woken from one of my many nightmares. All I could remember about them was that they were terrifying enough to wake me from a dead sleep. I couldn't fall back to sleep despite trying all the same. I kept thinking about the revelations that were spilled upon me, learning not that I was adopted and my parents weren't really my parents but that they had kidnapped me. The rage that had swept over me was something I had never felt before. I knew at that moment it wasn't just anger that would go away on its own. I had felt that kind of anger before but nothing like this. Started plotting all the ways to kill them and run away, fast acting poison, strangulation, bludgeoning, if I could get my hands on a gun. Then it dawned on me that there was a kitchen full of knives so I walked down to the kitchen to select a weapon.

They were both very heavy sleepers so I knew that I wouldn't wake them before the deed was done, I watched them for a moment or two. Deciding on which one was first you could say, I decided to kill him first from what I had found out he was the worst of the two making the decision planning the plans. I wasn't there first but as I stood there watching them I knew I would be there last. So I crept



close to his side of the bed and in one quick move I drove the knife into his heart, his startled eyes met mine for just a second before life went out of them. I wasn't done with him yet but I didn't want her waking up before I was finished, so I grabbed the duct tape I had brought upstairs with me and taped her mouth, eyes and nose. Leaving her hands and feet unbound.

She started to struggle but I left her to it while I went back to her dead husband. The feel of the knife as it initially went into his flesh was cathartic and I wanted to feel it again. So again and again the knife entered flesh and when I was done with him I turned to her. I removed the tape from her eyes and nose but not her mouth. She was still alive and the gasp of air you could see in her eyes was the relief of being able to breathe. As she turned her head and saw her husband's lifeless bloody body, panic took over her body. The need to weep and scream was projected from her eyes. It's fascinating how the eyes can portray so many emotions. I took the knife out of her husband's cold body and fear echoed in those orbs of dark blue. I decided to take a little time seeing how much I could get her eyes to say to me. If he was the worst for the planning she was beyond that for she allowed it to happen, year after year. It began with little cuts, a slice across the back of her cheek, and her eyes had shown fear they showed pain. Mine I knew were chaotic happiness. I started feeling a calm I hadn't felt in quite some time. As silent tears started streaming down her face, and

the calm started washing over me in waves I decided to put her out of the misery I was inflicting on her, as I raised the knife the fear and knowledge of what was to come reflected in her eyes. When I slit her throat the blood gushed the warm sticky substance was like a balm on a wound in my soul I wasn't aware of.

That was the beginning for me, I tried to leave at just those kills but the whispering echoes of that night followed me for years. I have since killed ten others with similar backgrounds, always a different scenario and a different method in the killing. I know there will come a day where I can't escape the fate of those who do not understand what someone like me needs to keep the demons at bay, but until that day I will do my damndest to keep the lid closed or held down by the blood of others.

Rumors in the Night

By Heather Oliver

In the horror movies, people are always out in the middle of nowhere, no help, no way to go get help. Isolation, is apparently paramount in these movies. Then you have the scenarios, the whole town is in on it. That's even scarier than being isolated. I assure you there are scarier things out there yet. I know, I've lived it.

I lived in the fringes of a major city. I had learned how to survive as a young teen, Titan took me in when I was abandoned and showed me the ropes of street life. How to steal silently, how to become a shadow and disappear. I loved him in my own way. He had taken place of the father who left me to die. He was my safety.

Ten years later, Titan is gone, I'm still living on the streets. The things I see would make you cringe. Raping in back alleys, where the assailant or assailants in some cases walk away, because the victims either can't identify them or won't out of fear of retaliation. I may lift food, or con people out of their money, if not pick pocket it all together, then slide back into the comfort of the shadows. It's a survival thing for me, a minor inconvenience on my target, but I don't hurt people. I don't stalk them for the fear factor, I stalk them for an opportune moment.

Rat, had been haunting our streets for years, raping, tormenting and even sometimes spilling blood. He was drawing unwanted attention our way with his cruelty. I had come around a corner one day to find him doing such a thing, he was slicing this pretty girl's clothes just to fuck with her. I shoved him off her and told her to run, which she did. I told Rat he needed to knock it off and quit pulling attention our way with his antics.

Stupid fuck didn't listen. I chased him through the alleyways at night, I'd scamper out of the shadows, put a single slit in his clothing and meld back into my comfortable darkness. I did this for weeks, until he finally started staying awake at night from fear. I'd eventually let him relax, when the attacks stopped on innocent people.

When he started again, I ramped up my game. I would disguise myself so he couldn't see me and I'd nick his skin with my blade.

Again, we repeated our game. He stayed out of trouble for just a little longer this time. When he started again, so did I but this time I didn't stop at just a few knicks.

I've heard rumours, that at night, you can hear an animal screaming in pain, if they only knew. Rat now screams for me, from the rusted razor blades I use to keep his achilles tendon severed, to the ammonia I pour over his mutilated body. On days I'm feeling a little.....salty shall we say, its salt to his skinned.....let's say tidbits, as he now possesses a rat's nest where his junk used to be. Yes, I have made some improvements to this Rat. His missing tongue, renders him mute, no more terrorizing looks. His eyes took a healthy dose of habanero pepper and lemon juices to his eyes, that are currently swollen shut, If he's not blind already, he will be shortly. If the juices don't do the trick I have rusty razor blades up to the task.

Salt, to his nail beds, where I make sure to keep open. I hear salt scrubs are great for your skin, although I'm sure Rat would disagree. A nice deep tissue massage to his upper arms to help mend those pesky broken bones. Those damn things just won't heal. Then I finish his day off with a gasoline bath. One of these days, I might eventually take pity, on him and light it. He might die from a heart attack first, guess we shall see.

There are rumours in the night, that a heart eating demon stalks our streets. I have yet to meet him...or her. I told you there are worse things than isolated summer camps or conspiratorial towns. They just haven't given me a name yet.



From Broken Bones

By John Watson

Daddy taught me lots of things while growing up on the farm. His biggest lesson was like a personal mantra. Whenever he killed and prepped an animal for food, he used every part, staring me in the eye as he cut, saying, "Waste not, want not, Billy."

When he made the move from cattle to people, I was shocked at first, but it was essential given that we were on the brink of financial collapse. Consumer tastes were changing and the price of beef and pork was plummeting. "Them vegans will be the ruin of us, Billy," Daddy would say.

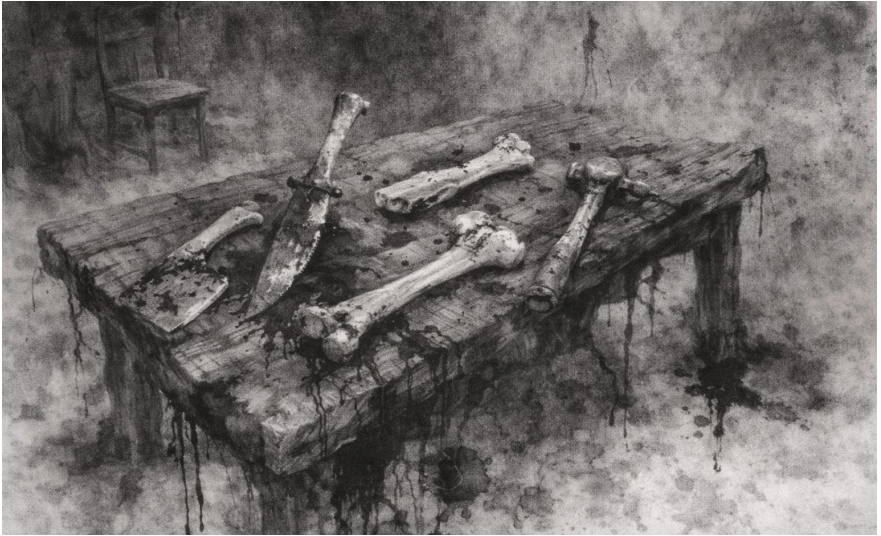
The first man he brought to our slaughtering barn was dead on arrival. Daddy had caught him trespassing on our land and had plugged him with his shotgun. The old fella had a steady hand and a sharp eye and could have been a sniper. He was also merciless, which served him well in our future ventures.

You see, while veganism was on the rise, there were still plenty of folks who wanted the taste of meat. Daddy and I found a way to make human meat not just palatable, but truly delicious. Our cuts were in high demand from underground restaurants looking to serve only the choicest cuts. We thrived while other farmers struggled with blight and weather killing their crops.

Daddy taught me all he knew, so that when he passed, I was ready to take over the family business. I expanded the organization, hiring fellas straight out of jail who had no compunction about killing for fun. I hacked and tore, slicing cuts of the freshest meat money could buy, all the while thinking of Daddy's waste not, want not method.

It occurred to me, though, that there was still some waste. The bones of my supply chain were usually dissolved in vats of acid, but that felt wasteful to me. In time, I began to whittle the strongest bones, to hone them into something sharper, more useful.

Nowadays, if you were to stumble onto my property, I would gladly show you my tools of the trade. All manner of cutting implements made from the broken bones of those unlucky enough



to land on my table. The tools of my trade were made to honor my daddy, and to ensure that the family business thrived under the waste not, want not banner.

Never Forgotten Harmonee

By Shonda Chrissonberry

Harmonee sits alone at her tiny table for two in her one-bedroom apartment. It seems she has always been alone. She is so tired of being alone. She is 22. Tomorrow is her birthday. Tomorrow is the day.

Her finger touches the edge of the grey rectangle lying in front of her and pushes it around in circles on her tiny table for two. She glances up at the black and white cat clock tick-tocking on her kitchen wall. Its eyes were swooshing back and forth in unison with its tail, all the while staring at her with that evil grin on its face. Watching the tail dance back and forth, she gets lost in her thoughts.

Her mother was amazing when she was on her back or on her knees, rather than in motherhood or marital bliss. She was a horrible cook and even worse housekeeper. Her father, if he even was her biological father (given her mother's amazing skills), would rather have found his next fix or have forgotten to pick up his used needles than to notice the little girl in the corner playing with those flea-market Barbies. Job? He didn't even know the meaning of the word. Her childhood memories were not like those envisioned in Candyland dreams. More like a horror movie on replay, rotating in her head and heart, turning both more black with every moan from Mom or needle plunge from Dad. Everyone knew of her parents' comings and goings. The school faculty and her teacher ignored Harmonee's greasy hair, sunken eyes, and foul body odor, rather than reaching out with a gentle intervention she so desperately needed and deserved. Harmonee received no sleepover, nor birthday invitations, as rumors vibrated throughout discussions within the circles of her classmates' parents. Recesses were spent alone, sitting on the rusty playground swing set, ignoring the stares while she sang and chatted with her imaginary friends. At least they didn't judge. She was just trying to get through the day. Despite her life, she was very smart and maintained a 4.0 grade average her entire school life.

Later, as she grew older, the absence of friends molded itself into daily taunts from the same children who shunned her in grade school. "Harmonee ~ with two E's. Harmonee ~ on her knees. Harmonee ~

always aims to please.” *She chuckles as she remembers this. Geez, her mom couldn’t even spell her name correctly. Who in their right mind spells Harmonee with two E’s instead of a Y???* Harmonee did not attend prom and, despite her exceptional grades, she even ditched graduation. As it were, neither she nor her parents had any desire to attend this rite of passage. Instead, on the day of her graduation, she gave herself emancipation from the only life she had known. Having saved all her money from her part-time job, she found the perfect little apartment, all her own. And made it her own.

The last few years of her existence have been filled with any 9-to-5 she could find through a temp agency. She goes to work every day, does her assignments beyond expectations, and smiles the entire time as if her Candyland dreams finally came true. But they never did, and they never will. Even as an adult, she didn’t fit in. Her choice of clothes, music, and movies seemed a bit odd compared to corporate America standards, or maybe it was her co-workers’ standards. She didn’t know and didn’t give a fuck at this point. As history repeats itself, she never receives invites to lunch. She doesn’t get the annoying office email forwards. She doesn’t even get to enjoy the Happy Hour excitement that everyone else in her department does on Friday night. She has never been “everyone else”.

Her clock chimes midnight, snapping her back to reality. She side-eyes that cat clock again. It’s her birthday.

Her whole life, Harmonee has been pushed aside. Looked past. Forgotten. But that was about to change. Today was her day, her spotlight. The day she was given life would also be the day she would take that life. She gently stands up, walks to her lime green bathroom decorated with frogs. Bath already drawn, she slips fully dressed into the lukewarm water.

This time, she will not be pushed aside. Looked past. Forgotten. Her parents, who lived for themselves, the children (now adults) who shunned her, the teens who taunted her, the co-workers who simply ignored her daily, for once, will notice her. Not because they want to, but because they must. They will not be able to look away. When the words spread about what she had done and how she had done it, they would instantly seek her out. These human monsters hiding in perfect little flesh bags would not be able to resist the macabre. Each would

search and search Google, Edge, Firefox, the entire internet until their morbid curiosity was fed by her last wishes.

They would listen to every word she said directed toward them. Every frozen moment would be a spectacle displayed for them to soak in. Feed on. They would remember when she recalled certain memories. Then they would sit motionless, emotionless as they watched her slice each wrist gently. Watch the blood flow and swirl as she bleeds out, turning the bath into a beautiful crimson red. Her blond hair floating on the surface, getting lost in her life essence. Her eyes open and close. It took longer than she thought it would, but as she closed her eyes for the final time, she had thoughts of peace and vindication simultaneously.

Yes, they would finally pay attention to her.

Today was her day. Her 23rd birthday. She was ready.

She touched the gray rectangle poised on the toilet seat.

Picked it up and hit record.



Sanguine Tears, Scarlet Dreams

By Mark A. Mihalko

After many months of facing the harsh reality trapped within their relationship, Edgar knew the finality of the situation. He could no longer hide from the inevitable. He must face the harsh truth that rests inside the decaying tomb outside Fordham. Although he hated what he was about to undertake, he knew that he must say goodbye to his dearest friend, lovely Virginia.

It was roughly four o'clock when Edgar arrived at the entrance to the cemetery. The frigid winds howling off Long Island Sound sent a chill down his spine. He could feel the emptiness in his soul grow larger as he glanced beyond the grey willows toward the Valentine family crypt in the far corner of the graveyard. In his mind, he shuddered to think about what lay before him. He loved Virginia with all his heart, and her loss was slowly destroying him.

As he crept toward the tomb, thoughts of a vibrant Virginia raced through his mind. He remembered how 11 years earlier an ancestral storm was spawned by his desire to wed his cousin. True, it was a forbidden love frowned upon by society, but only young Virginia made him feel complete. He remembered her beauty, even at the mere age of 13 when they married; it was beyond compare, with her pale skin and dark hair flowing down the subtle curves along her cheeks. However, it was not just her splendor that captivated Edgar; it was the comfort and understanding of her words that made all of the outrage worthwhile. Many could not understand this relationship, as the specter of their shared bloodline blinded reality. For Edgar, who never consummated this relationship with his bride, the blood was not thicker than their bond.

A life so pure, he thought, how could this damn disease ravage her so? Looking back, it seemed like yesterday when the small trickle of blood flowed from her mouth at the piano. Now, she was but a shell of herself, damaged by the years of consumption that ravaged her frail body. Edgar, too, had suffered with her, turning to cognac and whisky to drown his sorrow as his wife withered away. Not only did her ailment cause mental fatigue, but it also caused his physical appearance to deteriorate as well; his once flowing hair was now

unkempt, his face sunken and scarred from many a fall in a drunken stupor.

Finally, upon the steps to the vault, Edgar shuddered to face what was inside. Could her week inside this dismal tomb decay her beyond recognition? He thought. After a nip of cognac to ease his nerves, he opened the chamber. There, the crisp aroma of lilies that saturated the air overwhelmed him. At that exact moment, his broken heart raced as he saw her lying in wait; her pallid skin stained by the lasting remnants of the sanguine tears, her pale blue eyes reflecting the candlelight. This could not be the end, he thought; there is no way that her purity would be taken by God. How could it?

Not a sound was made as he entered, with only the chorus of heartbeats breaking through the silence. Slowly, he reached down with his rough hands and caressed her soft cheek. "I am here, my love," he softly whispered as her lifeless eyes looked through him, piercing his soul. Gently, Edgar untied the bow on her flowing lace gown, something he had longed to do for so long, but could never muster the courage. Soon, he thought, our bond will be complete.



As the sun continued to fall, the shadows fell across Virginia's striking face. For that singular moment, Edgar thought his heart would stop, his life gasping for that one last breath. "Darkness should never touch flesh so pure, consume a life as yet untainted, or steal a soul so loved," he said as he slowly navigated his way along her slip. In his mind, he could feel Virginia's pale eyes guide him through her taut labyrinth. With every shiver, he felt an exciting new sensation, and every curve on her body ignited another flame in his heart. Edgar's screams echoed throughout the abyss, yet Virginia's stillness remained steadfast. At last, after 11 long years, their

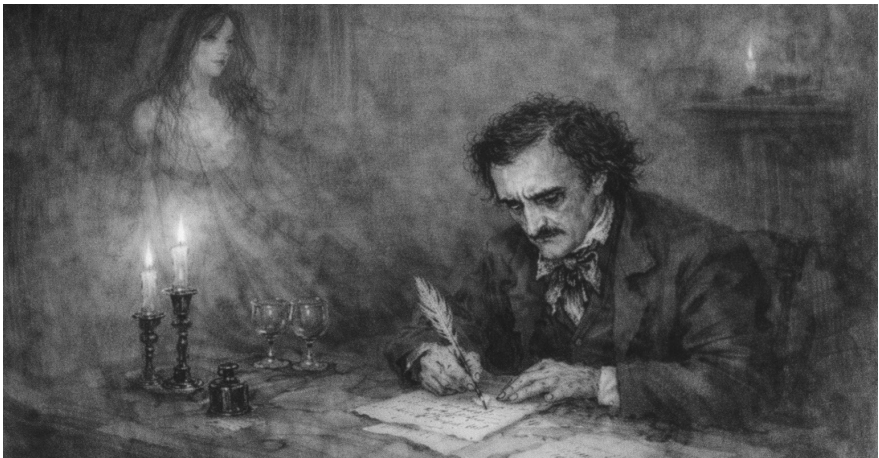
bodies were finally combined as one.

Edgar fell beside his motionless love, "Darling Virginia, how did we reach this point? Why did it have to be you?" Still, his muted beauty spoke no words, as the trail of scarlet tears rained down to her breasts. Abruptly, Edgar realized what he had done. He did not bid farewell to his darling Virginia; he defiled her. He became one of the monsters from his stories; he was destined to survive as the tortured soul buried in the wall.

Quickly, he rose, horrified by what he saw lying before him, his mind petrified by the veracity of what he had done. Indeed, her magnificence was tainted by an unholy lust. In that moment, Edgar knew he could not face the world again; he must send himself to Hell. With a sudden burst, Edgar reached for the candelabra and precisely placed it beneath the vast drapes. His eyes pooled, and his heart swelled with regret, as he embraced Virginia for one last time, "I am so sorry, my love-- Goodbye!"

Suddenly, Edgar awoke in a sweat, his writing desk cluttered with days of incoherent thoughts, insane prose, and empty cognac glasses. "Virginia, why did you leave me? We were meant to be," he said, staring at an empty page, "Damn you, Death! You have destroyed all that I am, all that I ever wanted!"

In a flash, clarity returned. At last, his quill alive and with a single swipe, the words began to flow; It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea, that a maiden there lived whom you may know, by the name of Annabel Lee...



Rescuer and Destroyer

By Julie Miller

Trigger Warning:

I have never hidden the fact that I am an SA survivor. This subject matter has been taboo my entire life, and I feel that now is the right time to be vulnerable with this topic. I did not hold back on my feelings with this piece, it is deeply personal and extremely detailed in how I felt for a majority of my life. This may make people uncomfortable and trigger some similar feelings in other victims. Just keep in mind that even though the emotions and details are very real, this is still a work of fiction.

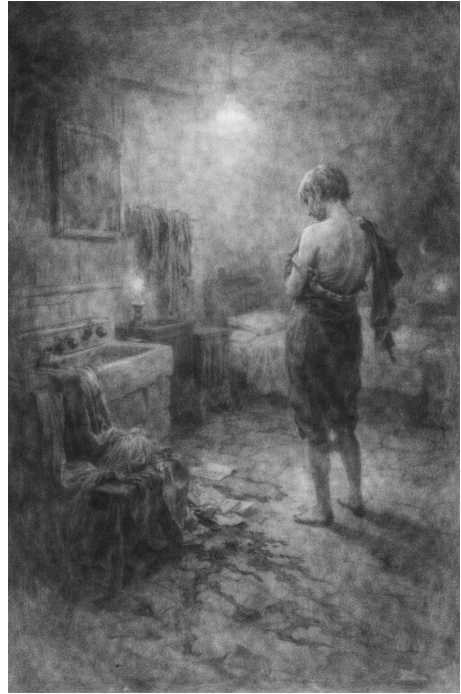
Humans have three major reactions to violence inflicted on them. Some grow angry, and inflict the pain on others, repeating the cycle. Others choose to act out and seek attention, feeling this is what they deserved, it was their own fault, even though that is far from the truth. Then there are the third type. They have the same anger as the first, but their anger is directed at those who destroy rather than becoming a destroyer. She had spent a long time in the second category, but the haze finally cleared, and she was now in the third. She knew that everyone who tried to gaslight her and make her believe that she had been the reason for her attacks, she had drawn attention just by simply existing as an innocent child with no understanding of what was happening. This man she was currently in the home of had been the first type of person. She had watched him for years after his destroyer had been destroyed. Even then she had suspected that he would become what he had claimed to despise. She saw a darkness in him that she was all too familiar with. She had studied him every meeting. His slight joy at the descriptions others shared, the way he inquired for more details, and hardly shared his own. He got off on it. He had his own anger that would slip out on occasion, but he kept his mask on for the most part. He had a daughter, she was young and scared of him. Each time she visited and was alone with him, the joy in other's pain would seep through the mask. He was destroying the girl. No more. Tonight was the night. The girl would be rescued from her destroyer. Her rescuer entered the house silently, injecting him with a sedative so she could prepare for the revenge ritual. He was tied to the bed and stripped of all clothing. A spreader bar parted his legs for the rescuer. A ballgag filled his mouth to silence his screams, much like he had done to his own daughter. He woke

up while the rescuer was inserting a glass rod into his urethra. His muffled screams brought a smile of her own joy to the rescuer's face, carefully covered and free from view. She couldn't risk his identifying her from the group. A wig concealed her hair, and she padded and molded her outfit to look unlike her build. Gloves prevented her from leaving any traces of DNA behind. She was careful. She did not speak, even her eyes were hidden from his view. She revelled in the fear of the destroyer as she gripped him firmly in her hand. His panic rose as she toyed with his weapon of choice. One snap of her wrist, and the glass rod shattered, his cry muffled by the gag, her hidden smile widening as the blood coated her gloved hand. She twisted and mangled his weapon further, making sure the glass inside rendered it unusable ever again. She crawled onto the bed, straddling him as she began the next step of her process. She grabbed salt packets from the nightstand that she had set up while she prepared. Her joy in his pain was euphoric, only growing with each packet poured over his mangled weapon. His tears and cries were her heavenly music. With the weapon thoroughly coated in salt, she grabbed the knife from the nightstand with one hand, and a bottle of lemon juice with the other. The fear in his eyes as she dipped the knife in the lemon juice and slid the flat part of the blade along his weapon was her favorite part. She made small incisions, matching the outside of the weapon to the inside before she disarmed him fully. He passed out from the pain, and she removed the ballgag to place the severed weapon in his mouth, making sure that he took in every inch. He bled while she prepared him for cauterizing the wound. A torch heated the brand that would label him a destroyer. He woke when she thrust the brand onto the gaping wound where his weapon had once been. He gagged, and tried to gasp and scream, but only garbled and muffled sobs could be heard. The stench of burnt hair, and flesh lingered in the room even after she removed her brand from him. She watched the light fade from his eyes before she gathered her tools and left the room. Before she departed, she left a note in the room for the daughter. It had been typed and printed on a public computer with no way to trace it to her.

“You are safe, I have rescued you from the man that sought to destroy you. It was not your fault, what he did to you was for his pleasure. What I have done was for your safety and security. Enjoy your life free from your destroyer.

-Your Rescuer”

With her task done, she returned to her sanctuary. She removed the figure changing outfit, and wig, and set them aside to be hosed down with ammonia and washed free of any evidence left behind. Her natural blonde hair was cut short, making it easier to hide her true identity with wigs, and other disguises. Her natural slender form, and curves were no longer restricted as she removed the bindings that helped her appear as a male. No woman could possibly commit the horrible acts that she had done tonight, or the hundreds of others she had committed before. Her bare feet



made no sound as she made her way to her own bed, sleeping soundly now that the world was free from one more destroyer. Tomorrow was another day, another town. She already had her next destroyer picked out. He would never see her coming. They never did.

Inside and Out

By Sam Ippolito

Mortie didn't appear like a monster on the outside, and that suited him just fine.

That is, until he got old.

As he aged, Mortie began to feel like the stuff of children's nightmares. Like something that hid beneath the bed or lived in the closet. Something with too many eyes and too many teeth in its misshapen head.

Something that frightened the villagers, provoking them to chase it with studded pitchforks and blazing torches. Something out of legend—something parents warned their children about to keep them in bed at night, too afraid to disturb Mommy and Daddy's good night sleep.

On the outside, Mortie looked like any other white man in his seventies. Balding, with a soft paunch. Slightly bent in the middle, hobbling when he walked. Old clothes and even older shoes.

But he had kind, soulful eyes and thin lips that turned up slightly at the corners, giving him the look of someone who had just heard a good joke and might share it if you only asked.

Mortie was a recent widower. Sheila—the love of his life—had just passed. She was the only woman who could snuff out his rage at the world.

The rest of his family—a son and two daughters—had moved away long ago. He even had a grandchild now. All of them lived too far away to visit, or to stay for any extended time.

He was lonely, and he wanted everyone else to feel the same abandonment.

The rage had returned, no longer placated by his wife's wise words. He longed for people to feel his unfathomable grief—to wallow in it as he had since Sheila's death. It had sunk deeply into his bones, as mourning often does when the only person who truly understood

you is gone.

Mortie had become a monster on the inside.

In his dreams he could feel the hunch growing on his back. He bared fangs like a wild animal. His knuckles scraped the floor as he crawled. He howled into the night with anger and resentment.

If others couldn't feel his pain, then at least he wanted them to fear him.

Mortie's name, shortened, meant death in French.

Mortie decided he would become just that.

He hoped to turn his outward appearance into something so ugly that his neighbors' gasps would catch in their throats. Maybe they would choke on it too. Let them feel what he felt inside.

He planned to kill as many people as he could.

Mortie believed his appearance would make it easier. People trusted an old man. Nobody was afraid of a senior citizen.

At first he started small.

He threw heavy concrete blocks onto the highway that ran near his home, hoping a crash would occur. One did, but it wasn't very satisfying. The car suffered more damage than the driver.

Mortie realized he would need variety. Every victim had to die differently. Like the film "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer". A fictional movie that had a clear lesson: every killing should be unique and difficult to trace.

So he bought a gun in another state.

Pretending his car had broken down late at night, he waited on the roadside. When the first passerby stopped to help, he shot them.

His first murder was messy.

He only grazed the young woman at first and had to chase her past her car before delivering the fatal shot.

Mortie knew he couldn't risk that again.

So he bought a hammer.

For several nights he walked the streets, watching the homeless drift in and out of their encampment. After a few nights of observing from the shadows, Mortie made sure no cameras were nearby before making his move.

The young man looked frail. Mortie figured the homeless waif wouldn't put up much of a fight.

He lured him with money.

First he handed the man a twenty-dollar bill. The young man followed him, perhaps thinking he could rob the old man later. He trailed Mortie for several blocks.

He wasn't prepared when the septuagenarian suddenly swung the hammer.

Mortie struck him again and again, raining blows down until the man lay motionless just outside the glow of a streetlight.

Mortie knew he had to be more careful next time. No one had passed by during those first few strikes, but he doubted his luck would hold forever.

For his next attempt, Mortie tried something different.

He bought drain cleaner and a syringe from different stores. Wearing gloves, he injected the cleaner into the tops of several drink bottles.

Waiting to read about the results in the news wasn't satisfying, though.

Maybe doing it himself would be better.

He wandered crowded streets until he found a middle-aged businessman drunk from a liquid lunch.

Mortie glided past him and jabbed the syringe into the man's leg.

He didn't care if the needle broke.

It did.

The businessman collapsed screaming, then began to twitch violently. People rushed to help while Mortie calmly continued walking away.

No one suspected him.

Mortie continued his campaign of death.

A hit-and-run.

A brick dropped from an overpass through a driver's windshield.

Another poisoning when he offered food to a starving addict.

He performed a drive-by shooting.

He threw a Molotov cocktail into a ring of tents for the homeless.

Pretending to be a traveling salesman, he bludgeoned someone he knew was home alone.

Mortie didn't care about age. The easier the target, the better.

Each death made him happier. Delighted, even.

Sometimes he swore his teeth felt sharper. That the hunch on his back had grown more pronounced. Of course, he knew it was only his imagination—but the thought thrilled him.

It made him more cunning. More fearless.

A hungry animal loose among a timid herd that didn't even realize they were being hunted.

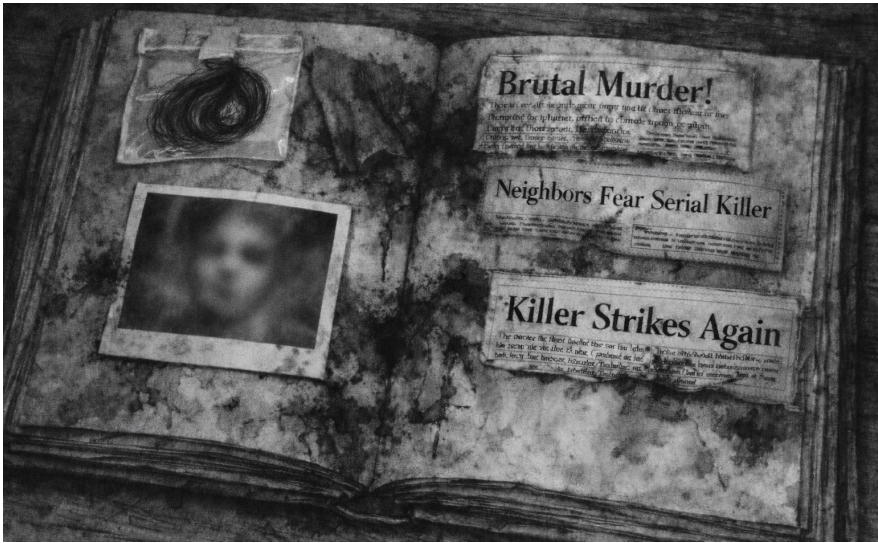
Still, he couldn't stop.

He slipped a plastic bag over a drunk man's head in an alley outside a bar, cinching it tight around the victim's neck and holding his arms down until the man stopped moving.

He pushed an old woman down a flight of stairs.

He coaxed a child into his car with candy, knocked him unconscious, and later shoved the boy from the moving vehicle onto a dark country road.

Mortie documented every murder.



He started a scrapbook.

Sometimes he kept trophies—a lock of hair, a shred of clothing, a photograph taken on his phone moments after death.

He printed out online news articles about the killings. Anything connected to his work. They were records of his accomplishments.

Mementos.

Mortie even learned how to print the photos from his phone into Polaroids. He carefully pasted them into the scrapbook, labeling each with dates and times.

Soon the book held dozens of pages.

It filled him with pride.

He felt giddy with anticipation, thinking about the day he would finally show it to someone special.

That someone was his closest neighbor.

A decorated chief of police who constantly bragged that there was no crime in their quiet town outside the big, corrupt city nearby.

A one-horse town only twenty miles from the great Mecca of sin

the officer claimed to keep at bay.

The policeman often looked down on Mortie, assuming no one loved him anymore.

But Mortie didn't care about that.

He only wanted to be treated fairly.

Instead, the officer treated him like a feeble old man with an empty home.

The cop had even brought his entire family to Sheila's funeral.

At the wake they filled their plates with food, barely acknowledging Mortie when he came to thank them for attending.

The officer's wife had mistaken him for a member of the church—until the policeman corrected her.

In hindsight, that moment had been even more humiliating.

Mortie had lived next door to them for years.

And they still didn't know who he was.

Mortie had felt revitalized when he first began the killings, but time seemed to be catching up to him lately. He felt tired all the time now.

Months ago, he would spring out of bed eager to do his newfound work. Recently, though, even that had begun to feel like a drag, draining what little strength he had left. He knew the end was near.

So he decided the confrontation was finally within his sights. His plan was simple: one final victim, and then he would show his scrapbook to the Chief.

Of course, it would be a surprise for the officer—at least he hoped so. But he had to be careful. Woody, the police chief, had told him he had surveillance cameras placed all over his property.

So Mortie knew his idea would have to come to fruition somewhere away from home.

First, he needed a way to lure the victim he wanted. He longed for

his prey to step easily into his trap.

He decided to go for a walk to straighten out this wrinkle in his plan.

As he walked along the road, numerous drivers honked or waved, often stopping to ask if he needed a ride.

That's when it hit him.

He began staking out the grocery store not far from his home. He waited for a couple of weeks—maybe even a month—learning the routines of his latest target.

Mortie watched what times she came to shop and when she left. Slowly he followed her through the store, grabbing an item or two as he wandered the aisles. Once, he even bumped into the forty-something mother so she would remember him.

Finally, he set up everything he needed in the woods alongside the street on which he resided.

Then he waited in the grocery store parking lot.

Mortie was ready when he saw her again a week later. He raced ahead of her, bought a few things, and started the uphill walk home.

He had just enough items to make it look like the bags were difficult to carry.

Mortie walked quickly, making it halfway home.

Suddenly, a white SUV pulled up beside him. The window rolled down automatically, and from inside he heard—

“Howdy, neighbor. Do you need a ride?”

Mortie nodded gratefully.

“Yes. My car wouldn't start, and I decided to walk home so my ice cream wouldn't melt.”

The woman laughed.

“Well, jump on in. I'll have you home in a minute.”

Mortie climbed inside, breathing heavily. He was sweating even though the temperature had been dropping throughout the day.

Immediately, the driver's forehead furrowed.

"Are you alright?"

Mortie waved a hand to indicate he was fine, though he grimaced slightly as they pulled away from the curb.

The woman spoke gently.

"You know, my husband and I worry about you being all alone in that house. You know if you ever need something..."

She trailed off.

Mortie thought it was a little too late for that.

Mortie nodded as if he understood, but the conversation went no further.

As they neared their shared turnoff, Mortie's breathing grew more uneven.

Finally, he said quietly,

"Miss... I hate to ask, but could you drive me to the hospital? I'm not feeling well at all."

She hesitated at first.

Then she turned the SUV around.

That was all the time Mortie needed.

He raised a rag to her mouth. With his other hand he shoved the vehicle into park so they wouldn't drift off the road.

The woman tried to scream, but the cloth covered her mouth completely. She inhaled the chloroform and quickly slumped over the wheel.

Mortie flipped on the hazard lights, unbuckled his captive, and eased her into the passenger side before sliding into the driver's seat.

He steered the SUV back toward their original destination.

Soon he arrived at the place where he had hidden everything he needed for his final visit.

He parked the vehicle just out of sight from the front of the police chief's house. The old man grabbed the scrapbook and the axe, then gently dragged the woman's body into the back hatch of the SUV.

When he finished his business in the rear of the vehicle, he drove further down the dead-end street where they all lived.

He snacked on an ice cream drumstick while parking.

Mortie stepped out, walked to the door, and pounded on it.

Then he stepped back, waiting for Chief Woody to answer.

"Mortie!" the cop exclaimed when he opened the door. "What the hell are you doing? Is that blood?"

The senior citizen smiled.

"I brought you a little going-away present."

Mortie tossed the head of the cop's wife at him.

It bounced off the officer's uniform, leaving a wide crimson streak. Settling at his feet by the front step.

The cop screamed and stared at him as if he were looking at a monster.

Mortie only smiled wider.

Now he knew.

He had finally transformed—inside and out.

Untitled

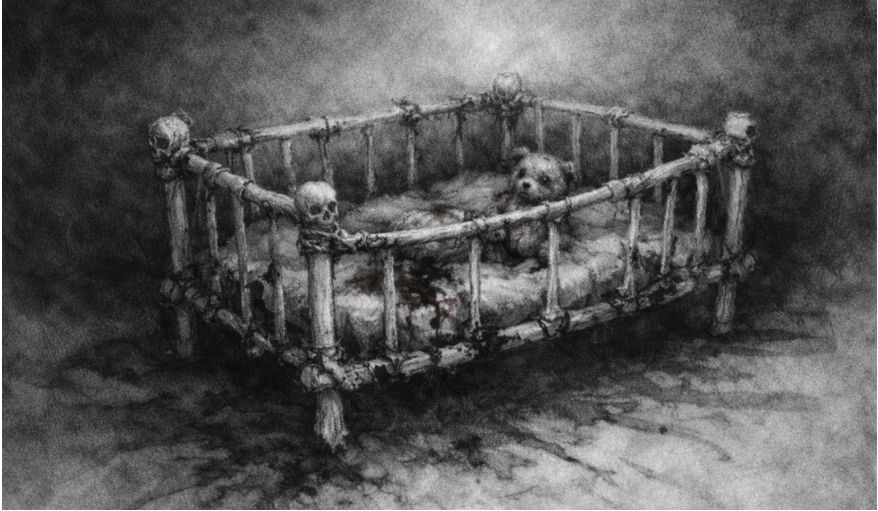
By Tammy F

There is a family that knows no good. A family that doesn't know right from wrong. That knows only ONE thing. They believe to torture then to murder any walks of life especially humans is to the path to a higher awakening. This "Horror Family" as the media calls them are known as the Sorens'. They live in a town that is easily forgettable but they are far from forgettable! No one ever saw this well-to-do family capable of such horrid, horrible, and rotten acts of violence. But, on a beautiful warm sunny day, the FBI along with the local police had surrounded this families old Victorian home. The man of the house with his wife and their six children ranging in ages from an young child to adult sat in the police cars staring into their laps not speaking a word. Not one of them putting up a fight against the officers. Once they were obtained what the police had found in the surrounding forest and the home left them speechless and running to loose their breakfasts on the luscious green landscape.

What was found throughout the house some rooms were completely normal for a family of eight. But, than there were dungeon like rooms filled with contraptions to experiment extreme torture on humans. Clothing that did not belong to the family members, organs and other body scraps in various disarray throughout the rooms leaving the founding of Ed Gein's home to shame although in a much cleaner state than his was. In one room upstairs the outside wall was totally missing which was laying on the ground outside below but attached to it was restraints holding arms. Back inside the room opposite from the missing wall restraints were holding the legs. In the center of the room what was left of a torso on a bed. The body was torn apart by a pulley system; how they created this was mystifying and terrifying.

In another room down in the dark, musky, and creepy basement far from all the bedrooms was a room with a dirty mattress that was clearly used for more than just sleeping. Next, to the bed was a crib that was made out of a human rib cage, its legs were human arm and leg bones. Femurs, Tibias, Tarsals, Humerus, Ulnas, and Phalanges. They were all there looking like the skin was ripped from the muscles and most of the muscles were picked off. Only leaving the nerves and

veins to be hanging about. Dried up blood flaking off falling to the ground below. A cute little teddy bear sitting up in the coagulated blood in the right side corner of the crib waiting for someone to come snuggle with it.



A boys room that was filled with drawings of such surreal realism of juxtaposition that looked effortless. The Eiffel Tower of Paris in a beautiful meadow of sunflowers in monochromatic color scheme. The Great Sphinx of Giza on a cliff overlooking a beach as the waves crash into the rocks in bold colors. Travel books and magazines of mountains, landscapes, oceans, and far away countries were all over. This boy definitely seemed to have other interests besides killing.

In the dense forest in a tiny shed there was what seemed to be the remains of a dead snake found exploded. In a journal nearby, the snake seemed to be an experiment of an hypothesis that no matter the size of an animal that it will explode before it drowns. They had already exploded a frog, mouse, and the snake. The goal was to work themselves up to an human. There was many other little journals filled with hypotheticals with their experiments of such torture devices with acts of violence like some science lesson. There was also little notes of finer script on the edges of the paper in different ink like a teacher grading an paper.

At this part is where Herb Baumeister would be proud throughout

the property of many acres there was quite a few shallow graves of not only human but also numerous animal ashes with some bones entwined together were found. Some looked older than others. The graves were shallow only a few feet deep so assuming it was only the children that were put to digging, it looked like they would dig what they could of the pit. Fill the bones of the dead then burn. Fill and burn and then continue this process until the level was almost even than cover with surface dirt. Then the process would start over there, the police would have not even noticed these grave pits if it wasn't for these medium sized, oval shaped, twisted branched structure with rocks around it underneath sitting at the base of the same species of trees.

What they found also in this forest was a stage and the officers remembered this stage well. This stage holds the towns' annual plays at the end of the week of the towns annual benefit shindig every year for the past couple of decades.. You can hear the local police exclaiming and shaking their heads to the FBI that this towns landmark isn't an scene just because it is on the Sorens' property. But they soon come to find that they were oh so wrong!

Questions were overflowing! Are their others like them? How long were they doing this for? Were all family members born evil or were they made to be this way? Did nature vs. nurturing have anything to do with this? Or, was it a way to survive to hopefully escape to a better existence eventually? Well, one of the boys is willing to talk, are we wiling to listen?

The Human Monster

By E. Crabtree

It's a really nice morning, and the sun is now rising. The smell of fresh dug dirt, the air so thick and fragrant and misty. My hands worn and blistered to the bone. The hard work is done! It's time to go home.

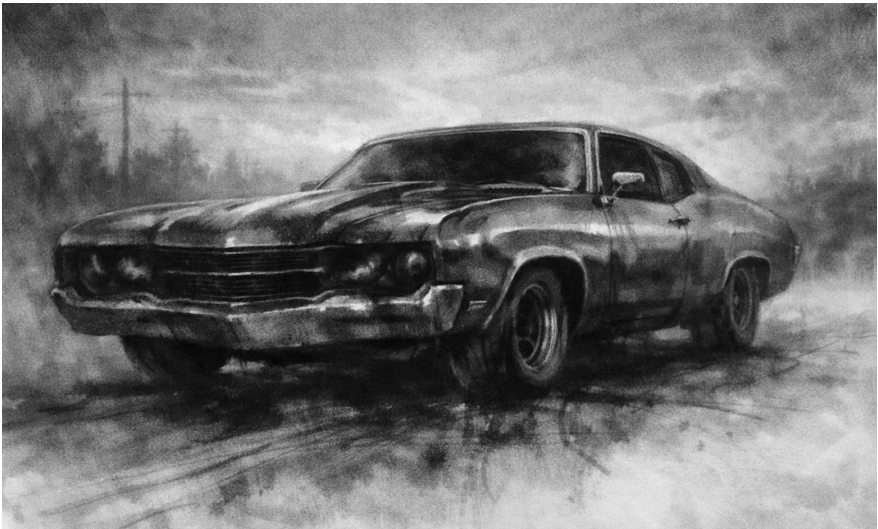
I grab the shovel and tools and throw them in the trunk. I really, really think it's time to get drunk.

I get into my car, turn the ignition brap, brap, brap, uh. My ears are pleased by the sound of the loud rumble of the motor, then the radio comes on blaring Risky Business by Bury you Dead.

As I'm heading down the highway to the store to get a couple cases of beer, I see a couple of punks walking down the road, probably in their early twenties and for the looks of it, hung over as hell from the night before, as they have somewhat of a stagger.

At that point, they stick out there thumbs in need of a ride. One of them tries to lean in to smack my car, because I wasn't going to stop. In doing so it ripped his hand right off, blood splatters in the air as I passed them doing 80 miles an hour. What delight!

Yes I am a speed demon in my extremely loud muscle car.



One of them gives me the bird “the middle fucking finger”. That really, really pissed me off.

So I slam on my breaks, the smoke pillows from the tires. Now these boys are scared. As I reach for the handle, I notice one of them pulls out a blade. My left hand on my door handle, my right hand on my heavily stained baseball bat.

I push open the door and jumped out as fast as I could. They see a great presence standing in front of them. They have probably never seen anyone like me before.

Now they’re scared, really fucking scared as the sweat is pouring off my face, my clothes and boots are muddy. I can see the fear in their eyes.

I ask them if they would like a ride, in a deep disturbing voice. Then I ask for their names and in response one of them says Ma ma ma my name’s Mike and this here, this is Fra Fra Fra Fred, as he studded their names out of his weak chattering mouth, shivering as if the frostbite were just kicking in.

Mike so nervous, he drops the knife and I tend to their needs.

At this point I really need a drink, so I get back in the car and head to the store.

I go inside, grab the beer and a newspaper.

As I go to the counter to pay, the clerk says, looks like you’ve had a rough morning.

Then I say to the clerk, I’m just getting started. The clerk gives me a nice grin and I give one back. I get back in the car and start to read the morning paper.

As I glance at the front page and it reads “Killer still on the loose curfew in effect”.

It’s a really nice morning, and the sun is now rising. The smell of fresh dug dirt, the air so thick and fragrant and misty. My hands worn and blistered to the bone. The hard work is done! It’s time for a beer, it’s time to go home.

The Hunting Blind

By Mary Ann Garcia-Bowerman

They weren't supposed to take the trip that early. "It's too cold," Caleb had said the week before, scrolling through weather reports on his phone. "You won't even see movement this time of year. Everything's either gone or buried."

Eli leaned back in his chair, boots hooked on the edge of the table. "That's the point." Caleb glanced up. "The point is to not see anything?" "The point is quiet," Eli said. "No other hunters. No noise. Just us." Caleb snorted. "You hate quiet." "Yeah," Eli admitted. "Lately I don't." That was the real reason, though neither of them said it outright. Eli had been off for weeks. Not in a dramatic way. Nothing you could point to and name. Just... off, distracted and tired in a way that sleep couldn't fix. He'd stopped answering calls. Stopped showing up to things he used to care about. Caleb noticed. Caleb always noticed. "Two days," Caleb said finally. "We go in, we check the area you said, we're back before the weekend crowd shows up." Eli nodded. "Two days." "Minimal gear. No wandering off the grid." Eli smiled faintly. "You say that like I'm the problem." "You are the problem," Caleb said. "You're the one who picked this place." That part was true. Eli had found it by accident—if it was even an accident.

An old post, half-buried. Someone talking about a hunting blind deep in state land that "never stayed empty." Most of it was nonsense. Stories layered on stories. People always trying to outdo each other. But one detail stuck. Not the disappearances. Not the strange sounds. Just a single line from someone who claimed they'd actually been there: It feels like something is waiting for you to get there. Eli hadn't been able to shake it. "You don't even know if it's still there," Caleb went on. "It is," Eli said. Caleb frowned. "How do you know?" Eli hesitated a long minute. "Because nobody goes out that far anymore," he said. "Stuff like that doesn't just disappear." Caleb held his gaze for a moment. Then sighed. "Fine. We check your creepy shack in the woods. Then we leave."

The drive out took longer than it should have. Not because of traffic but because the farther they went, the less the roads seemed to make sense. "This stupid GPS is off," Caleb muttered, tapping the

screen. "It's fine," Eli said. "We're close." "You said that ten minutes ago." "And we're closer now." Caleb glanced over. "You've been here before?" "No." "Then how do you—"

"I just do."

That should have been the moment Caleb turned the truck around. He'd think that later. More than once.

They passed the last marked turnaround without stopping. The one that had a sign and had space for other vehicles. It looked like a place people actually used. Instead, Eli pointed ahead. "There." "There what?" Caleb asked. "Pull off there." "That's not a road." "It's fine." Caleb slowed, checking the narrow break in the trees. "We're going to get stuck."

We won't." "You don't know that." "I do." Again—that certainty. Not confidence. Not a guess. Something else. Caleb didn't like it but he turned the wheel anyway. By the time they cut the engine, the forest felt different.

Not in a way you could photograph or measure. Just... removed. Like they'd stepped slightly out of the version of the woods everyone else used. Caleb grabbed his pack. "We're marking the truck." "Already did," Eli said, holding up his phone. "No signal," Caleb pointed out. "Doesn't matter." "It does matter." Eli just smiled faintly and stepped out. Caleb watched him for a second before following. "Two days," he said again to himself this time.

They started in before sunset. Caleb wanted enough light to get their bearings. To establish a path. To avoid exactly the kind of blind wandering that got people into trouble. Eli didn't argue. Which, in hindsight, was another warning. He should have argued.

"Tell me something," Caleb said as they moved through the trees. "What?" "If this place is so empty... why was it even built?" Eli stepped over a fallen branch, barely slowing. "Same reason anything is," he said. "Someone wanted it." "And then?" Eli shrugged. "They left it." Caleb adjusted the strap on his pack. "People don't just leave useful things behind." "They do if something changes." "What changes?" Eli didn't answer right away. When he did, his voice was quieter. "Maybe they do."

The light faded faster than Caleb liked. Shadows stretched, merged, deepened. The trees grew thicker, the air colder and somewhere between one step and the next— Without either of them noticing when—The forest stopped sounding like a forest. No birds. No distant movement. Just the faint crunch of their own footsteps... and something else.

Something Eli recognized before he understood it. Something that made him slow. “Do you hear that?” he asked. And that—

That’s where the first night it truly began.

The second night was when the hunger stopped feeling human. The storm outside the blind had buried the door halfway in snow. Wind forced itself through every crack in the wood like icy fingers. Eli Mercer knew they were dying. He could feel it in his muscles. The violent shaking, the numbness creeping through his hands, the slow dullness in his thoughts.

Hypothermia.

Starvation.

The body beginning to shut itself down.

Across the shack, Caleb crouched beside the butchered deer. The carcass was mostly hollow now. Ribs broken open. Dark meat stripped away with desperate hands. But Caleb was still digging inside it.

Still searching. Still eating. The sound of his chewing filled the tiny shack.

Wet.

Greedy.

Animal.

Eli swallowed hard. “Caleb... stop.” Caleb didn’t answer. He tore another chunk of flesh loose and shoved it into his mouth, blood freezing in black streaks down his beard.

“Caleb.” Slowly, Caleb lifted his head. His pupils were huge. His breath came out in ragged white clouds. “I can still hear it,” he

whispered. "Hear what?" Caleb tilted his head toward the walls. The wind outside had gone quiet again.

Too quiet.

Like the mountain itself was listening. "It's closer tonight," Caleb said. Eli gripped his rifle. "You keep talking about it. What the hell are you hearing?" Caleb smiled faintly.

"Something that knows how hungry we are."



The first step came just after midnight. Crunch. Something heavy moved through the snow outside the blind. Eli's heart slammed in his chest. Another step.

Crunch.

Then breathing. Deep. Wet. Right outside the wall. Caleb inhaled sharply. "You smell that?" he whispered. Eli smelled nothing except blood and rot. But Caleb's face twisted with delight. "It smells us."

The wall creaked.

Something dragged across the wood.

Long claws scraping slowly. Eli raised the rifle. The barrel shook violently in his hands. "Stay back," he whispered to the door.

Caleb started laughing. Quiet. Breathless. "Oh... it's not here for the deer."

Eli turned slowly. "What?" Caleb leaned closer. His voice barely audible. "It came for the hunger."

The voice didn't come from outside. Eli realized that too late. It came from behind his own eyes.

Soft.

Dry.

Ancient.

Hungry...

Eli gasped.

Caleb's head snapped toward him. "You hear it now." The voice slid deeper into Eli's mind.

Starving...

Cold...

Perfect...

Caleb stood slowly. Like a puppet rising on invisible strings. "It chooses the one who gives in first," he whispered. Eli backed against

the wall. "What are you talking about?" Caleb's stomach growled.

A deep, violent sound.

He looked down at the nearly empty deer carcass.

Then back at Eli.

"Not enough," he said.

The hunger turned savage around three in the morning. Eli's vision blurred. His body burned with desperate need.

Calories.

Heat.

Anything.

Across the shack Caleb had stopped eating the deer. He was staring at Eli. Not like a brother. Like a predator.

"You hear it too," Caleb murmured. Eli shook his head. But the voice inside him was screaming now.

Meat.

Warm.

Alive.

Caleb licked blood from his fingers. "I think it wants something else." Eli raised the rifle.

"You take one more step—"

Caleb lunged.

They crashed into the wall of the blind. The rifle fired. The shot blew through the roof. Snow poured inside. Caleb slammed Eli into the floorboards. His teeth snapped inches from Eli's throat. "You smell so warm," Caleb rasped. Eli drove his elbow into Caleb's jaw. They rolled through blood and frozen meat. Caleb clawed for Eli's face. Eli grabbed the hunting knife. The blade sank into Caleb's shoulder.

Caleb howled.

Not like a man.

Like something feral.

But he didn't stop. He kept coming. Because the voice inside both their heads had become unbearable.

Eat.

Eat.

Eat.

Outside the blind, something listened. Something ancient. Something patient. It didn't break the door.

It didn't attack. It only waited. Because it knew the truth about starving men.

Eventually...

They feed.

When rescuers found them days later, Eli couldn't remember how the fight ended. The doctors believed that. He told them everything else.

The storm.

The deer.

The voices.

But he never told them about the moment the hunger became unbearable. The moment something inside him snapped. Eli remembered waking up on the floor of the blind.

Blood everywhere.

Caleb sitting in the corner.

Gnawing on the deer leg.

Bone already stripped clean.

But what haunted Eli most...

Was the taste still sitting in the back of his throat.

Copper.

Salt.

Human.

And the quiet whisper inside his skull that had never left.

Good...

Now we are stronger.

Spring didn't fix anything. It only revealed where the ground had given way. By the time Eli found the clearing again, the snow had already collapsed into itself. Not melted—sunken. The earth looked bruised, caved inward around the hunting blind like something beneath it had shifted and then gone still.

Or finished.

He stopped at the edge of the trees. For a long time, he didn't move. "You don't have to go back," he said quietly. The words sounded thin in the open air. Behind him, Caleb didn't answer.

They hadn't spoken much since they got out of the truck.

Not since Eli insisted on returning. Not since Caleb agreed too quickly. That was the first wrong thing.

Caleb had always argued. Always pushed back, questioned, grounded things when Eli let them drift too far into feeling.

But not this time.

This time, he'd just nodded.

Yeah, he'd said. We should go back.

No hesitation.

No conditions.

No "two days."

Just agreement.

Eli should have turned around right then.

The blind came into view between the trees. It looked smaller now. Not harmless—just... used up. Like whatever purpose it had once served had already been fulfilled. Caleb stepped past Eli without a word and walked toward it. Too direct. Too certain. “Hey,” Eli called after him. “We should—”

Caleb didn’t stop.

Didn’t even slow.

Eli followed.

Because of course he did.

Up close, the smell hit first.

Sweet.

Rotting.

Wrong in a way that didn’t belong to anything natural.

The door hung open. Eli knew—knew—they hadn’t left it like that. Caleb stepped inside. Eli hesitated on the threshold. Something in his chest tightened, a quiet instinct pulling backward. Don’t.

But Caleb was already in. So Eli stepped through. The floor was broken. Boards bent upward, splintered from below. The dirt underneath packed tight, as if something had forced its way out... or been pushed in.

Caleb crouched immediately, fingers brushing along the edges. “It’s warmer,” he said. Eli froze.

That was the same thing Caleb had said that morning. The morning after the first night. Before everything—

“Caleb,” Eli said slowly, “don’t—”

But Caleb was already pulling at the boards.

Too eager.

Too focused.

Eli felt it then—that same wrong rhythm from the first night. Not outside. Not around them.

Beneath. A thin, uneven breathing rising up through the earth. “Stop,” Eli said, sharper now. Caleb didn’t. He pried one board loose. Then another. Then another. Until the shape beneath the dirt began to show.

Pale.

Still.

Human.

Eli’s stomach dropped. “No.”

Caleb leaned in closer.

Almost... reverent.

They uncovered the face last. Eli knew it before the dirt cleared. Knew it in the shape of the jaw, the line of the brow—Knew it in a way that didn’t make sense. “No,” he said again, but quieter. Caleb didn’t react. Didn’t question. Didn’t speak. Because the body beneath them—

Was Caleb.



Perfectly intact.

Unrotted.

Eyes closed, as if sleeping.

Not damaged.

Not decayed.

Just... kept.

Eli staggered back, hitting the wall of the blind. "That's not possible." No answer. "Caleb," he said, louder now. Still nothing. Eli's breath quickened. "Caleb, say something."

Slowly—

The man beside him stood.

Not startled.

Not confused.

Just... calm.

And when Eli turned—Caleb was already looking at him.

The expression was wrong. Not obviously. But wrong in the way a reflection is wrong when it moves a second too late.

"You found it," Caleb said. His voice sounded the same. Exactly the same. That was the problem.

Eli shook his head. "Then who—what—" His eyes flicked between the body in the ground and the man standing in front of him. "You were with me," Eli said. "You never—there wasn't a moment—"

"There was," Caleb said gently. The word landed like something placed. Eli's mind raced back—

The first night.

The sound beneath them.

The moment he fell asleep.

The silence when he woke.

Caleb sitting still. Facing the door. "It's warmer now." Eli's stomach twisted. "No," he said. "No, you were there when I woke up. You—you were right there—"

"Yes," Caleb said.

A faint smile touched his lips. "I was." Behind them, the body in the ground shifted. Just slightly. A shallow inhale. Eli's head snapped toward it. "No—no, no—" The chest rose. Fell. Breathing. "But that's—" Eli's voice broke. "That's you."

Caleb tilted his head.

"Is it?"

The thing in the ground opened its eyes. And they were not empty. They were aware. Trapped. Eli choked on a breath. "Caleb?"

The lips parted, trembling.

A voice pushed out—thin, strained, buried under something heavier.

"Eli... don't—"

The sound cut off abruptly.

Like a door slammed from the inside.

The body went still again. Silent. Occupied.

Eli turned slowly. The Caleb standing in front of him hadn't moved. Hadn't reacted.

Hadn't even looked at the body. "You said it had to be invited," Eli whispered. Caleb nodded once.

"We do not take." The words came layered now—something else slipping beneath his voice. Eli shook his head violently. "Then I didn't—I never—" "You didn't," Caleb said. And smiled wider. "That's why it wasn't you." The truth hit all at once.

Hard.

Disorienting.

Eli stumbled back. “No. No, you’re saying he—he let it in? That doesn’t make any sense—Caleb wouldn’t—” “He didn’t,” the thing said. The smile softened. Almost kind. “That’s the part you keep getting wrong.” Eli’s chest tightened. “Then how—” “It asked,” Caleb said. A pause. “It doesn’t always ask the right question.” The air in the blind seemed to thin. Eli’s thoughts scrambled, trying to catch up. “What question?” he demanded. Caleb stepped closer.

Slow.

Careful.

Like approaching something fragile.

“Do you want to stay?” he said. Eli froze. Because he remembered. Not as words. But as a feeling.

That first night.

The cold.

The dark.

The quiet pressing in—And the brief, flickering thought he hadn’t meant to have: Maybe we should just stay here.

Caleb watched his face. And knew. “You felt it,” he said softly. Eli’s voice came out as a whisper. “That’s not the same as—” “For you?” Caleb said. “No.” A beat. Then, gently: “For him... it was.”

The ground beneath the open pit shifted. The body inside it jerked once—violently this time. A muffled sound forced its way out, like something trying to speak through a closed mouth. Eli flinched. “That’s him,” he said. “That’s actually him.” “Yes.” The answer came easily. Calmly. Eli stared. “Then what are you?”

For a moment—

Just a moment—

The thing wearing Caleb’s face seemed to consider the question.

Then it stepped aside.

Just enough for Eli to see the doorway behind it. The clearing. The sunken earth. The space beyond.

“I am what stayed,” it said. The words settled into the air like something final. “Because you asked to leave.” Eli shook his head. “I didn’t—” “You did,” it said. And now there was no mistaking the other voice underneath. “You chose to go.” A pause. “And he chose to stay.” Eli’s breath hitched. “No,” he said, barely audible. “He didn’t choose you.”

The smile widened. Too far. Too thin.

“He didn’t have to.”

Behind them, the body in the ground began to move again. More violently now. Straining. Trying.

A hand clawed weakly at the packed earth. At the edges of the broken boards. Trying to get out. Eli took a step toward it. “Wait—wait, we can—” The thing in Caleb’s shape moved faster. One hand shot out, gripping Eli’s wrist.

Cold.

Unyielding.

“Don’t,” it said.

Not a warning.

A certainty.

Eli struggled. “That’s him! He’s still—” “Yes,” it said.

And something in its voice almost sounded like satisfaction. “He is.”

Eli froze.

The meaning sank in slowly. Horribly. “You didn’t choose him,” Eli whispered. “No.” The grip tightened slightly. “He chose this.” A beat. “And I answered.”

The body in the ground let out one last, broken sound. Then went still. Not dead. Not gone. Just... quiet again. Waiting. Eli’s legs gave out

beneath him. The thing released his wrist. Stepped back. Gave him space. Like it had all the time in the world.

“Which one of you did it choose?” Eli asked finally, his voice hollow. The thing wearing Caleb’s face looked down at him.

And for the first time—

It dropped the pretense.

Not fully.

Just enough.

Enough that the shape of it no longer fit cleanly inside the idea of a person.

“It chose him,” it said.

A glance toward the body beneath the floor.

“Because he stayed.”

Then it looked back at Eli.

And smiled.

“And it kept me,” it added softly, “because you left.”

The distinction settled like something alive.

Twisting.

Eli’s breath came shallow.

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said.

“It doesn’t have to.”

The thing stepped past him.

Toward the door. Toward the clearing. Free. “But if it helps,” it added, almost gently—

“It learned your voice first.”

The Good Neighbors

By Andrew Bohannon

Sarah Kline first noticed the smell on her third day in Willow Creek.

It wasn't strong - just a faint, coppery sweetness riding the breeze when the wind shifted from the east. She told herself it was the new development still settling, or maybe the fertilizer the landscapers used so aggressively on every identical lawn. But that night, while Mia slept in the room down the hall, Sarah stood at her bedroom window and watched David Hargrove from number 14 walk across his backyard carrying a black plastic tarp rolled tight under one arm. He moved like a man taking out the trash, calm and practiced.

He looked up once, straight at her window, and smiled.

The next morning, he was at her door with a plate of blueberry muffins.

"Karen baked too many," he said, handing them over. His smile was wide and even, the kind dentists put on billboards. "Welcome to the neighborhood again. Seriously, if you need anything - tools, a sitter, someone to kill the spiders - just holler."

He laughed at his own joke. The laugh sounded like it had been recorded and played back at the perfect volume.

Sarah thanked him and closed the door. The muffins smelled good. She threw them in the trash anyway.

By the end of the second week, every adult on Maple Court had introduced themselves. They all had the same quality: aggressively, almost violently normal. They asked polite questions about her divorce but never pried. They complimented her daughter's drawings and remembered Mia's favorite color after hearing it once. When Sarah mentioned she used to teach third grade, three different women immediately offered to help her get substitute work at the local elementary school. No one argued. No one raised their voice. No dogs barked after nine. The children played in perfect, quiet rotation on the communal jungle gym at the end of the cul-de-sac.

It was like living inside a commercial that never ended.

But the smell kept coming back.

On the night of the block party, Sarah let herself relax for the first time. Paper lanterns glowed in the trees. Someone had set up a bounce house. Mia ran around with the other kids, face sticky with watermelon, laughing in a way Sarah hadn't heard since before the divorce.

David Hargrove grilled burgers in a "Kiss the Cook" apron. His wife Karen circulated with a pitcher of something pink and lethal. They looked like the couple from every neighborhood fantasy - fit, tanned, effortlessly charming.

At one point David caught Sarah watching him and raised his spatula in salute.

Later, when the sky had gone full dark and the kids were inside watching a movie, Karen touched Sarah's elbow.

"Come with me for a second," she said softly. "I want to show you something."

They walked behind the Hargrove house to the large shed at the back of the property. Karen unlocked the heavy padlock with a key from around her neck.

Inside, the smell was thick enough to chew. The shed was long and narrow, lit by a single hanging bulb. Along one wall ran a workbench. On it lay several tools - some Sarah recognized, some she didn't want to. In the center of the concrete floor was a metal drain. The concrete around it was stained dark.

Karen turned to her with that same perfect smile.

"We've been watching you, Sarah. You're careful. You're quiet. You understand pain."

Sarah's mouth went dry. "I don't -"

"You killed your husband," Karen said pleasantly. "Don't worry. We know it was self-defense. He was a real piece of work. But you still did it. You still put the pillow over his face while he was passed out and

held it there until he stopped moving. Then you staged the overdose. Very neat.”

Sarah felt the floor tilt.

Karen stepped closer. “Most people carry that kind of thing like a tumor. It festers. Makes them sloppy. But you... you moved across the country and started fresh. That takes discipline. We respect discipline.”

From the darkness at the far end of the shed came a low, wet sound. Something alive trying to breathe through something broken.

Karen didn’t even glance that way.

“We have a little arrangement here in Willow Creek,” she continued. “The world is full of monsters wearing human skin. Most of them are amateurs - angry husbands, jealous wives, people who snap once and then spend the rest of their lives pretending they’re normal. We’re not like that. We’re professionals. We feed the monster on a schedule. We keep it happy, so it doesn’t eat us from the inside.”

She gestured toward the darkness. “That’s Mr. Delgado from two streets over. He was a drunk. Beat his wife. Nobody’s going to miss him much. We’ve had him for nine days. Tomorrow night we finish.”

Sarah’s voice came out small. “You’re insane.”

“No,” Karen said gently. “We’re honest. There’s a difference.”

The shed door opened behind them. David stepped in, still wearing the ridiculous apron, now spattered with something that definitely wasn’t barbecue sauce.

He looked at Sarah with genuine warmth.

“You don’t have to decide tonight,” he said. “But you should know two things. First, if you go to the police, they’ll never believe you. Half the department lives on Sycamore Lane. Second...” He smiled wider, and for the first time Sarah saw how far back his lips could stretch. “We already have Mia.”

Sarah’s heart stopped.

“Not in a bad way,” Karen added quickly, like she was reassuring

her about a sleepover. “She’s just... spending time with our kids. Learning. She’s very bright. She already understands sharing.”

Sarah lunged for the door.

David caught her easily, one strong hand around her wrist. He didn’t squeeze. He didn’t need to.

“Think about it,” he said. “You can keep living like you’re still running from what you did. Or you can stop running. You can be among your own kind.”

He let her go.

Sarah ran all the way home, lungs burning, and found Mia asleep in her bed, curled up with her stuffed rabbit. The little girl smelled like watermelon and bug spray.

Sarah checked every lock in the house twice.

She lasted four more days.

Each night the smell grew stronger. Each morning another perfectly normal neighbor waved to her while watering perfectly normal flowers. On the third night she found a small white box on her porch. Inside was one of Mia’s baby teeth, still bloody at the root, nestled in tissue paper like a gift.

A note in careful, looping handwriting read:

She wanted to give you something first. That’s how family works.

Mia didn’t remember losing the tooth. When Sarah asked, the girl just smiled the same way Karen did and said, “David said it would help me be brave.”

That night Sarah packed two suitcases in the dark.

At 2:17 a.m. she carried Mia down the stairs, shoes in hand, trying not to breathe too loudly. The child was heavy and warm against her shoulder.

She opened the front door.

David Hargrove was standing on her welcome mat.

He wore pajamas and slippers. His hair was slightly mussed, like he'd just rolled out of bed. In his right hand he held a small cordless drill, the kind people use for hanging pictures.

"Evening, Sarah," he said quietly.

Behind him, every house on Maple Court had its porch light on. Every single one. Figures stood on the lawns - men, women, a few older children - watching in silence.

Karen stepped out from behind her husband. She was holding Mia's stuffed rabbit.

"You were going to leave without saying goodbye," she said, sounding genuinely hurt. "That's not very neighborly."

Sarah tried to close the door. David's foot stopped it easily.

"We gave you time," he said. "We were patient. But you're scaring the children with all this running. And we can't have that."

Mia stirred in Sarah's arms and opened her eyes.

"Mommy?" she whispered. "Are we going to the shed now?"

Sarah felt something inside her chest crack cleanly in two.

She looked at her daughter's face - at the small, perfect smile that had never been there before - and understood, with terrible clarity, that the monster had already been fed.

David reached out and gently took Mia from her arms. The little girl went without protest, resting her head on his shoulder like she'd known him all her life.

Karen took Sarah's hand. Her fingers were warm.

"Come on, honey," she said. "Let's get you settled. The first time is always the hardest, but after that... you'll sleep so well."

They walked Sarah across the street together, one on each side, like gracious hosts escorting a guest to dinner.

Behind them, the porch lights of Willow Creek began to go out one by one, until only the Hargroves' house remained brightly lit.

From the open basement window came the sound of something screaming, but it didn't last long.

Inside the house, the neighborhood watched through the windows as Sarah was led downstairs. Some of them were eating ice cream. One man was live-streaming the block party highlights to his phone, smiling at the funny parts.

David patted Sarah's shoulder as they reached the bottom step.

"Welcome home," he said.

And for the first time since she'd arrived in Willow Creek, Sarah smiled back.

It felt good.

It felt right.

Upstairs, Mia sat at the kitchen table eating cereal at three in the morning, swinging her legs, humming a little song the other children had taught her.

Outside, the coppery smell drifted through the perfect streets of the perfect neighborhood where no one ever raised their voice and every lawn was immaculate.

And somewhere in the dark, the real monsters slept soundly, knowing their children were safe.

Across Willow Creek, porch lights clicked off one by one. Tomorrow the lawns would still be perfect. The children would still ride their bikes in circles. And somewhere in the neighborhood, another new family was already unpacking boxes.



In Accordance with the Covenants

By Michael Shaw

December 4

Christmas lights were already twinkling on the houses nestled in the Enclave at Ebb's Hollow by the time the Caterpillar school bus, long and yellow and coughing exhaust, ambled alongside the curb at 717 Dunning Way. Eight-year-old Clara Barton raced down the narrow walkway, brushing past row after row of seats and chattering classmates before taking a leap of faith from the second step. Clara splashed her purple rain boots into the deep puddle the bus idled beside, sending dirty water cascading every which way. She cleared the puddle in enough time for Devin, her six-year-old brother and irrepressible shadow, to splash down beside her.

Nearly as soon as his feet touched the water, Devin sprinted ahead, calling behind him with a giddy squeal, "Race you to the door! Last one there has to cut her hair!"

"No fair, cheater!" Clara protested.

Fair or no, Clara charged after Devin with gusto. She raced past the inflatable Frosty that seemed to be waving merrily to her. Devin may have been fast and may have had a head start, but Clara loved her full, bouncy head of tight spiral chestnut curls. She wasn't about to let her little brother beat her. Especially if the last one there had to cut their hair! Just as Clara surged past Devin, she spotted it.

In the driveway.

The car.

Clara knew that car. Knew it only came around once a year. Knew its presence at 717 Dunning Way on the 4th of December could only mean one thing.

Trouble.

Even if Clara didn't know, exactly, what kind of trouble. What she remembered was last year when the desk in her classroom that had been filled by Charlie Abernathy suddenly wasn't anymore. It sat

empty until Christmas break. And then, like Charlie, it disappeared. She also remembered whispers of the black car in Charlie's driveway.

The car was long and sleek and obsidian black, more menacing than any automobile had any right to be. Dangerous. As if it came off the assembly line angry. Exactly how Clara might describe the car's owner, if she'd had the words.



“Ha!” cried an oblivious Devin. “Beat you! You gotta cut ...”

“Shh, dummy! Quiet. Don’t you see who’s here?”

Devin zipped his lips and opened his eyes wide as he spotted the vehicle. “Is that?” he began, but Clara hushed her little brother once more. She motioned for him to follow her, and for a change, he obeyed.

Rather than enter through the front door, as they normally would, Clara guided them around the side of the house and to the back gate. The six-foot-tall white vinyl fence shrouded the Bartons’ backyard from prying eyes and did a fine job of keeping their dogs, Oliver and Olivia, from wreaking havoc on the Gilbertsons’ prized petunia patch. At least when Devin remembered to latch the gate.

With a practiced hand, Clara popped open the gate and surreptitiously slid her way past. Her shadow followed closely behind.

The well-manicured backyard offered a variety of good hiding spots. Perfect places for covert scouting. Clara could hear her parents speaking on the back deck, outside despite the chill, so she knew she and Devin needed to be extra quiet.

Clara pulled her backpack off her shoulders and helped Devin with his. She ditched both under the branches of a wide shrubbery just past the gate. She slid herself beneath the bush and moved from one to the next until she could better spy on the conversation her parents were having.

Lucinda “The Vulture” Weathers stood on the back deck, her back turned from where Clara and Devin were hiding. She had her arms crossed in front of her as she spoke to her parents. Though Clara couldn’t tell what Mrs. Weathers’ expression looked like from her hiding spot, she was sure it was stern and disapproving.

She knew that look all too well.

By day, Mrs. Weathers was principal at Jackson H. Shirley Elementary School, where Clara and Devin were enrolled. She was also HOA President at the Enclave at Ebb’s Hollow, where the Barton family lived. Clara wasn’t sure whether the school-age children or the grown-up HOA residents feared the woman more.

Clara watched as Mrs. Weathers seemed to do the vast majority of the talking in the conversation. The woman talked soft and low, more a hiss of words than actual speech, and Clara wondered if maybe she’d given her the wrong nickname. Maybe she wasn’t a vulture but a viper.

Especially with her back turned, Clara couldn’t hear her clearly, but Mrs. Weathers seemed agitated. Clara caught a glimpse of her profile and saw her face was an uncharacteristic shade of tomato red when she was usually pale and unnervingly calm. Today, she was anything but.

For their part, Clara’s mommy and daddy seemed to be taking everything Mrs. Weathers was telling them well. Or, well enough. Daddy nodded his head every so often, spoke sparingly, and kept his hand firmly on the small of mommy’s back. Mommy seemed more upset than daddy. Clara wished she could read lips the way she’d seen television characters do. She had no idea what was being said. It was obviously adult stuff that she probably wouldn’t understand anyway.

That just made her want to know even more.

It didn't matter, Clara realized a moment later. The conversation was over. Mrs. Weathers turned to look out across the Bartons' backyard, as if searching for something. Had she heard Clara or Devin? The expression on her face shifted from agitation, and maybe even anger, to sympathy and sadness. Bad news delivered in fury, farewells in regret.

Then, just before she turned back to face Mommy and Daddy, the Vulture's face shifted once more. A smile — cold, calculated, vicious — sliced its way across her lips. It had all been an act, Clara realized. The anger, now the regret, all pretend. Like when Clara and Devin played make-believe games. The Vulture was enjoying herself, savoring being the bearer of bad news.

Clara snuck her way back out from under the shrub and moved quickly to the back gate. As she reached it, Clara heard the front door open. Spying through the thin gaps in the gate, Clara watched as the Vulture made her way down the path from their front door to the driveway.

"I wish there was another way," she said, her voice growing louder as she approached her evil black car on the other side of the gate. "The covenants are clear, as are your obligations. You understand, of course. You won't be the sort to cause trouble."

Covenants, Clara thought. She'd heard Mommy and Daddy talk about them before. It was one of the governing documents for their homeowners association, whatever that meant. Was that what this was all about? Just some silliness to do with their HOA?

"We know what we signed," Daddy said. Clara noticed that his voice didn't sound like the daddy she knew. Usually strong and boisterous, often quick with a joke, his voice sounded tired, weak, sad. Although he was fast to wipe his eyes, Clara could've sworn there were tears in his eyes.

The Vulture repeated, "I wish there was another way," but Clara was certain she was a lying liar.

*

Mommy and daddy were quiet at dinner. They ordered pizza delivery from Santuccio's, home of the big square upside-down pie. Clara loved Santuccio's, even if she didn't see why their pie was considered upside down. It had the sauce on top of the cheese instead of the traditional way. Big whoop. It wasn't like the crust was on top and the sauce and cheese on the bottom. That would be an upside-down pie. And a mess!

The thought used to make Clara giggle, but she wasn't giggling any more. As she nibbled unenthusiastically on her slice, the last thing she was thinking about was pizza construction. What was on her mind was that her parents never ever ordered pizza on a school night. Not ever.

After the black car and the Vulture's visit, mommy and daddy had grown distant. And quiet. Clara didn't think either of them had uttered enough words to form a paragraph. There was a lingering feeling of tension in the house since the Vulture left. Like she'd left behind something awful in her wake. She wondered if Devin had noticed, but she couldn't ask with their parents sitting at the dinner table with them.

After Daddy bit into his third slice of Santuccio's, Clara couldn't take the silence. "Why did Mrs. Weathers come over after school today, Mommy?" Clara asked.

Mommy held a slice of pizza by her open mouth. She glanced at the slice, pulled it away, and placed it back down on her plate. She lifted a cloth napkin from her lap and dabbed the pizza grease from her mouth and chin. Then she wiped all five fingers on her right hand and then all five on her left. She seemed to be moving in super slow motion.

Finally, she folded the napkin and replaced it on her lap. "Mrs. Weathers had something very important to discuss with Mommy and Daddy today, sweetheart. Grown-up stuff."

"Am I in trouble at school?" Clara asked, suddenly concerned for a whole new reason.

"No, baby, of course not," Mommy answered with a reassuring smile that was neither reassuring nor a smile.

“Am I in trouble?” Devin asked.

Mommy looked at her precious young son, who was often in trouble at school, unlike Clara. There were fresh tears in Mommy’s eyes but she shook her head and said, quietly, “No. Both of my babies are so good. Too good, maybe.”

Clara wondered what craziness her Mommy was spouting. Too good? Nah. Not Devin, at least.

Mommy picked up her napkin back up from her lap, placed it on her plate, pushed her chair out, and excused herself. She left a good bit of pizza on her plate, but everyone had the good sense not to remind her of the house rule that dinner wasn’t done until your plate was spotless.

*

Mommy went upstairs and stayed there. Daddy cleaned up, threw away garbage, and stored leftover pizza in the fridge. He seemed sad, like mommy. He didn’t speak the entire time.

Clara and Devin moved into the living room to watch television. It had been Devin’s turn to pick and he’d selected Frozen, which suited Clara just fine. She loved Elsa and Anna. Especially Anna.

Even though the film had barely started by the time daddy finished cleaning up, he told Clara and Devin that it was bedtime when he came into the living room. “Daddy,” Clara protested, “the movie just started. Can’t we stay up to watch?”

“Yeah, and it was my turn to pick!” Devin complained.

“No,” daddy said sharply. “Upstairs. Brush your teeth. Lights out in ten minutes.”

Devin grumbled but Clara hushed him. Daddy wasn’t himself. She didn’t understand what was happening inside 717 Dunning Way, or to her family. Just that she didn’t like it.

“Okay, Daddy,” Clara said, planting a soft kiss on his cheek. “C’mon, Dev. Bedtime. Love you, Daddy.”

Begrudgingly, Devin followed his sister. He half-heartedly

murmured, “Love you, Daddy,” as he climbed the stairs.

After brushing her teeth, Clara went to her bedroom. She left the door open just a crack — a thin sliver that she hoped daddy wouldn’t notice. Switching off the light, she crawled into bed and hid under the covers, the soft floating stars of her nightlight illuminating the otherwise darkened room.

Clara listened carefully for one of two things she knew was coming. Either daddy would climb the stairs to talk to mommy in their bedroom or mommy would descend them to talk to daddy in the living room. She was sure that’s why she and Devin were sent upstairs early. After about ten minutes, she heard the bedroom door open and the unmistakable sound of mommy’s footsteps walking down the hallway.

Once Clara was sure mommy was downstairs, she climbed out of bed, slipped her way across the bedroom, and slid out of the door. She silently made her way to the steps. Clara knew where every creaky floorboard was in the house and avoided every one. For her mission to be a success, she knew she needed to be as stealthy as a ninja.

She also knew exactly where she could position herself so she could hear what they were saying while not revealing that she was eavesdropping. Daddy had once joked that if Clara played D&D, she’d be a rogue.

“How are we supposed to choose, Steve?” Mommy asked, already upset. “It’s not fair. It’s barbaric.”

Daddy sounded irritated, but also sad. “I know, Kristin. Don’t you think I know?”

“This is your fault,” mommy spat. “Let’s move to Ebb’s Hollow, you said. The school district is amazing. The houses are beautiful. The lawns are all so well-manicured. The neighbors all seem so happy and nice and welcoming. You chose this for us, Steve. You did.”

“Stop it, Kris. We decided together. You were never a silent partner. You loved the school district. You loved the clubhouse, the pickleball courts, the pool, and the goddamn Botanical Club. You were as much a part of this decision as I was,” daddy spat.

Then his voice grew softer, apologetic. “Kris, I’m sorry. We both fell in love with this place. We both wanted the promise of prosperity, of happiness, that the documents guaranteed. We knew the risks. We both signed the covenant.”

Mommy was crying hard enough that Clara could hear her tears hit the floor. “I just thought ...” she couldn’t finish her sentence.

“That it wouldn’t happen to us,” Daddy said, resigned. “That it couldn’t happen. Not to us. We’d gain the benefits while others paid the toll.”

“Yeah,” Mommy said. “The Abernathys last year. The Montenegros the year before. The Gilbertsons. Our next-door neighbors, Steve. Not us. Never us. So, what do we do? Can we run?”

“You know that’s not how it works. If we flee, we all pay the price. We choose.”

“I can’t,” Mommy cried.

“We can. We have to. We have no choice.”

“I’ll volunteer.”

“Absolutely not, Kristin,” Daddy said.

“Why not? It’s the only way.”

“Kris, love, if that were an option, don’t you think I would’ve done it? Volunteered myself? I would’ve told Lucinda this afternoon that it would be me,” Daddy replied.

“Why didn’t you?” Mommy demanded, sounding more angry than upset now.

“Because that’s not what the covenant says. It’s clear. I memorized it, Kris. It’s practically tattooed on my brain,” daddy said before reciting the relevant passage, only some of which Clara caught because it was so confusing. ‘In accordance with the covenants ... founding principles of shared responsibility, mutual protection, and preservation of community harmony ... each Member Household ... Community Stewardship Program ... ensure the equitable distribution of communal burdens ... safeguard the emotional and social stability

of the Enclave as a whole.

‘One Minor Resident ... designated from among Member Households ... Community Steward. Eligibility ... all Minor Residents ... between ages of six (6) and twelve (12) ... at the time of designation.’

“Minor resident, Kris. Between six and twelve. There’s no wiggle room. We have to choose the next Steward.”

“Grief-Bearer, Steve. Community Steward makes it sound so ... normal. None of this is normal. It’s not right!” Mommy said, defeated.

“He’s six, Kristin. A year ago, and there’d be no choice,” he said, almost too quiet for Clara to hear him.

“Goddamn it, Steve. Goddamn the Enclave. Goddamn us. All of us.”

*

Clara crept back upstairs, careful to avoid that one spot on the step that she knew would creak like an alarm klaxon. Instead of returning to her own room, she turned the knob to Devin’s door and slipped in. His face was illuminated by the dancing constellations of his nightlight, casting him in a soft amber glow. He was fast asleep, his body wrapped up in a tangle of sheets, and his breathing soft and slow.

As far as younger brothers went, Devin was fine. He could be annoying. He always wanted attention, the last piece of mommy’s famous triple chocolate cake, and insisted he was right about every last thing. Still, he practically worshipped Clara, at least when he wasn’t provoking her.

She sat on the floor, crisscross applesauce, in one of the few spots where Devin’s toys and clothes hadn’t invaded and watched him sleep. Clara thought about what she’d overheard, and struggled to make sense of anything.

Grief-Bearer, she repeated over and over again in her mind.

Once she felt herself starting to nod off, Clara rose, pulled Devin’s blanket up to just under his chin, slipped back out of his room, and fell gratefully into her own waiting bed.

*

December 5

Clara was up before dawn. She'd set the little alarm clock on her nightstand for six a.m. just in case but hadn't needed it. When she woke, the winter sky was just starting to shift from black to grey, with just the tiniest hints of orange sunrise peeking across the development from her bedroom window.

She barely slept. How could she? She still had too few answers and so many more questions. She also had an idea, and she knew exactly who she needed to see to get the answers she sought.

Clara changed into a clean sweatshirt and sweatpants, purple of course, and made her way downstairs. She was careful not to wake anyone in the house, including the family dogs, Olive and Oliver. Fortunately, they'd slept with Devin overnight and were snoring loudly as she crept past his room.

In the kitchen, she poured herself a tall glass of orange juice and drank it quickly, savoring the pulp and the way the slightly bitter orange tingled her tongue. In the mudroom, she put on her sneakers, coat, hat, and gloves. On a Saturday it would be another hour before anyone in the house awoke and maybe longer until they noticed she wasn't still asleep in her room.

It took Clara a little over ten minutes to walk from her house. Although the evil black car wasn't in the driveway of the handsome house at 333 Ebb's Hollow Court, Clara knew it was Mrs. Weathers' place. She'd seen her pattering around in her rose garden enough times to be sure. The house gave Clara the creeps. It looked normal enough. In the development, there were five different models. Mrs. Weathers' house was a modern twist on gothic revival, boasting pointed arches, steep gables, and decorative bargeboards, not that Clara knew what any of that meant. To her, it might have been a newer construction, but it looked like it was a haunted house or cursed church. It had simple Christmas decorations, a pine wreath on its blood red door and smaller wreaths hanging from each of the windows with red ribbon. No lights, no inflatables, nothing that might be considered gaudy or ostentatious.

Clara drew in a deep breath and marched toward the crimson

door. She removed her right glove with her teeth, balled her hand up into a tight fist, and rapped three loud times on the door. After thirty seconds, she did it again. She'd wait. Clara wasn't sure what she'd do if Mrs. Weathers wasn't home, but that concern was erased when the front door swung open.

"Well, this is certainly unexpected," Mrs. Weathers said. "Clara Barton. I thought perhaps it would be your father. Maybe your mother. Perhaps both together. I didn't think they'd send you."

"Nobody sent me," Clara said defiantly. "I came on my own."

The same devious smile that Clara had seen Mrs. Weathers flash on her deck the day before spread across her lips like a malignancy. Her eyes seemed to narrow into reptilian slits and Clara wondered for a moment if the woman might have a forked tongue. "Oh? On your own. And what did you hope that would accomplish?"

"You gave mommy and daddy a choice," Clara started.

"I did," Mrs. Weathers nodded, never taking her unblinking eyes off the girl.

"It's me," Clara said. "I'm their choice. I'm the new Grief-Bearer."

Mrs. Weathers erupted in laughter. It was a shrill, cold sound that made Clara's skin itch and eyes water. "Such a cruel, crude name. Community Steward sounds so much more ... antiseptic. Bureaucratic. Dignified. Don't you think so, Clara?"

She glowered at Mrs. Weathers but didn't answer. For as long as she could remember, the Vulture had made her knees shake. She stood resolute now. She didn't know what she was volunteering for. And she was scared to find out. But she wouldn't show the Vulture any fear. She knew why she was volunteering. That was all that mattered.

"Silly girl. Your parents were going to choose your brother. You must know that, even if they didn't."

"What are you going to do to me?" Clara asked, her voice trembling for the first time. She hoped that the Vulture didn't hear it but was sure she had.

"It's freezing, Clara. You should come inside." Mrs. Weathers

turned and walked back into her cavernous home.

Clara followed. Mrs. Weathers led her into the kitchen. It was a large clean space. Black and white subway tiles, white walls, white cabinets, white appliances. It was so bright that Clara's eyes hurt.

"I suppose you're too young for coffee. Can I make you hot chocolate? Tea?" Mrs. Weathers offered, as if Clara were an old friend paying a social call.

"No," Clara said. Then she belatedly amended, "Thank you."

"Then sit," Mrs. Weathers instructed like the schoolteacher she'd once been before becoming a principal. She motioned to the bar stools aligned with precision by the kitchen island.

Clara sat on one and waited as Mrs. Weathers prepared herself a coffee and took a seat on the stool next to her. "So, where shall I begin?" she asked. Then, without waiting for a reply, she started lecturing, "The Enclave at Ebb's Hollow is a very special place, young lady. The houses are beautiful, lawns well groomed, and amenities plentiful."

She stirred her coffee with a small spoon. Clara watched as the light brown liquid swirled in the cup and steam cascaded into the air. "Neighbors look out for one another and are truly kind and generous. That's true in any number of neighborhoods, though, Clara. Countless associations, I have no doubt.

Mrs. Weathers took a sip of her coffee, her hands wrapped around the cup rather than using the handle, as if she was trying to warm herself. "What makes the Enclave special, Clara, is the Community Stewardship Program. It's a reflection, indeed an outgrowth, of the founding principles of the community. Do you know what those founding principles are?"

Clara shook her head.

She set her coffee cup down on the counter. Clara saw the faint imprint of Mrs. Weathers' pale red lipstick against the rim of the coffee cup. "No. I'd expect not. You're too young. Shared responsibility, mutual protection, and the preservation of community harmony. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?"

Clara nodded.

“What all that means, in a nutshell, is happiness, Clara,” Mrs. Weathers said. She picked up a pile of envelopes from the counter and started to shuffle through them. “Do you know many sad people there are in the Enclave? Sick? Angry?”

Clara thought for a moment and then shook her head. She guessed she didn’t. Not really.

Mrs. Weathers smiled again. Not malicious this time. Kind. Almost warm. “You’ll see an occasional snuffle. A bruised ego, perhaps. But not for long. Hours, not days. People here are healthy and happy. Content. The residents of the Enclave are happier, healthier, and wealthier than in any neighboring community I know of. Do you know why that is, Clara?”

“The Grief-Bearer?” Clara guessed.

Mrs. Weathers shook her head, maintaining her reassuring smile. “The Community Steward, Clara. One person, one very special young person. Given the responsibility of promoting the founding principles of our tranquil little utopia. A small burden to ensure perfect happiness for the community. Doesn’t sound so terrible, does it? In fact, it sounds like an honor, doesn’t it? A powerful responsibility, taking care of an entire community.”

“That’s what happened to Charlie?” Clara asked.

“Oh, yes. Charlie Abernathy. He has been a fine Community Steward. Truly fine. The Enclave is coming off a wonderfully prosperous year. Quality of life has never been higher. The metrics are good. The community is ... grateful.”

“Where ... where is Charlie?”

“Why, right here in the community, Clara. He hasn’t left. He has a special room all to himself in the clubhouse. Comfortable, spacious, quiet. Undisturbed.”

“He’s ... okay?” Clara asked.

Mrs. Weathers gave her coffee mug a quarter turn on the counter. The friction of ceramic grinding against porcelain sent chills up

Clara's spine. "Charlie has done wonderful work as our Community Steward for the past year, Clara. Now it's time for succession. The work is ... exhausting. Charlie is ... full."

"What will I have to do?" Clara asked.

"The incumbent Community Steward listens, Clara. That's it. Members of the community will come see you from time to time. They want someone to talk to, someone who'll listen. Someone who empathizes with them. Do you know what empathy is, Clara?"

She didn't.

"Someone with a deep heart who understands others. Does that sound like you, Clara?"

"Yes?" Clara said, not sure.

"I think so, too," Mrs. Weathers said. "They'll share and you'll listen. Absorb. Ease their burden." She slid a manila envelope across the counter, unfastened it, and withdrew a small stack of papers. She plucked a pen from a little cup on the island and placed it on the papers.

"Whenever you're ready, Clara. You just need to sign your name here," Mrs. Weathers said, tapping an X on the paperwork. She pushed the pen to Clara, who picked it up without ceremony. Mrs. Weathers placed the papers before Clara as well and then drained the last of her coffee.

Clara hesitated. Only for a moment. Then she put the point of the pen on the paper and scrawled in her inexpert cursive, Clara Barton.

"And now your thumbprint," Mrs. Weathers said, opening a little metal box that revealed a blue ink pad.

Clara pressed her thumb into the ink and then onto the paper next to her signature.

"There," Mrs. Weathers said. "That was easy, wasn't it? Now, one last bit. Listen closely, dear. 'In accordance with the Covenants of the Enclave at Ebb's Hollow, I, Lucinda Weathers, Board President, do affirm and attest that Clara Barton of 717 Dunning Way has signed her name and affixed her thumbprint onto Form EEB-221-C,

designating herself Community Steward for the next calendar year, term to commence immediately.' There. All done. Easy-peasy."

*



Moments after the form was signed and Mrs. Weathers had made everything official, there was a knock on the front door. As she stood up from the island, she put her hand on Clara's shoulder reassuringly, but the girl did not react. Would not.

She crossed the kitchen, walked into the foyer, and opened the front door. "Ah, Steven. Kristin. Good morning."

"Devin," Kristin said.

"We choose Dev," Steve completed.

"Oh. Oh, dear. You don't know, do you? No, of course not. I'm afraid you're too late. The decision has been made. The die cast. EEB-221-C has been signed, sealed, and delivered," Mrs. Weathers answered gravely.

"What? How? Who?" Steve asked, confused.

"Clara, no!" Kristin screamed. It was loud enough to wake the neighborhood. Mrs. Weathers shook her head disapprovingly. Such a

racket just wouldn't do.

Kristin brushed past the woman, Steve close on her heels. It took them no time at all to find their daughter sitting impassively at the island. Her eyes were open, but she did not see them. She did not blink. She wasn't just a vessel now. She was a crypt.

"The Enclave has been preserved for another year. Your sacrifice has been noted and your dues forgiven. May happiness and prosperity grace your doorstep."

"Happiness?" Kristin cried. "Prosperity? You took our daughter."

"She gave herself willingly," Mrs. Weathers said. "She will be a fine Community Steward. Perhaps the best we've ever had."

"She knew we were going to choose Devin," Steve said. "She must have."

A confused voice said from behind, "Choose me for what, Daddy?"

Kristin spun, shock in her teary eyes. "We said stay in the car, Dev."

"Choose me for what, Mommy?" Devin asked. And then, "What's wrong with Clara?"

Clara looked up then, her eyes still blank. She got down from the stool and stretched out her arms, wrapping them around her mother and father. "There, there," she said in a strange, toneless voice. "Let me bear your grief."

*

December 4, one year later

Seven-year-old Devin Barton climbed off the yellow Caterpillar school bus, his backpack slung around his shoulder, and his head hung low. School had been fine. He had a good group of friends. He made the winning shot in gym class.

He was miserable.

Everyone was happy at the Enclave at Ebb's Hollow, he knew. Even mommy and daddy had found their happiness again. And it hadn't taken all that long.

Not Devin, though.

He thought the last time he was truly happy had been racing his sister in the rain a year ago. His sister who no one talked about. No one acknowledged. She'd been struck from the record. His parents had even taken her photos down and turned her bedroom into an office. Devin had never forgotten Clara.

He never would.

Now, as he walked to Mrs. Weathers' house, the day before the Fifth of December, he'd erase her burden.

By taking her place.

Just like his parents had intended.

The Creature's Lament

By Paul Hoover

Bonus Feature : Valloween Contest Winner, Midnight Poet's Society

Love eternal, they say is the goal
And so forward I push to reach her
But I fear she'll never see my soul
For to her I am but a creature
I saw her sit neath the silver moon
Her eyes burned full of fire
And so I swim through this black lagoon
Fighting the reeds and mire
If I could show her my deep dark world
I'm sure she'd find it charming
Why does that sweet and wondrous girl
Seem to find me so alarming?
I long to take her to the reef
To see the fishes play
But when we meet it causes grief
When she screams and runs away
And so I pine in this dark water
My spirit all in throe
Until I can claim this surface daughter
And bring her down below.

