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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE
06

Robert Reed • Alexander Danner • Ian Creasey • Beth Cato • Kurt Hunt
Erica L. Satifka • David Steffen • Jaymi Mizuno • Brynn MacNab

Fantasy Scroll Magazine
Speculative Fiction - Issue #6 – April 2015

**Featuring works by Alexander Danner, Beth Cato, Brynn MacNab, David Steffen,
Erica L. Satifka, Ian Creasey, Jaymi Mizuno, Kurt Hunt, Robert Reed**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Editorial, April 2015

Iulian Ionescu

Welcome to Issue #6 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

I'm happy to present you with what I believe might be our longest issue so far. No, it's not a double issue, it's a regular issue, but the first story in the fiction section is actually a novelette. This is something new that we are trying out (we have another novelette scheduled for Issue #7). Does this mean that we are now accepting longer pieces? Not exactly. The novelettes will be published exclusively on a request-only basis, and at this point it's not entirely sure if we will continue with them after Issue #7.

But let's get to the meat of things. The first story is "*Raven's Dream*," by award winning author Robert Reed. I've been a fan of Robert's works ever since I started reading *F&SF*, and this has been a favorite story of mine. I'm hoping Robert will write some more stories set in this world, because it is fascinating.

Outside of the novelette, the overwhelming theme of this issue is strong young girls. We kick off with "*Jenny is Killing Turtles Again*" by Alexander Danner, following with "*My Brother's Keeper*" by Beth Cato, and "*Fortune's Dance*" by Jaymi Mizuno.

All of them deal with a similar theme, but each character is unique and interesting, and even creepy, in Jenny's case.

Kurt Hunt's story "*The House of Ninety-Nine Secrets*," is a delightful rollercoaster that keeps you guessing through the end.

"*The Adventures of Captain Contempt in Mixed Media Installations*," by Ian Creasey follows. Besides having the longest story name yet, this take takes a unique look at the art scene in a bizarre futuristic world.

We have two more reprints in this issue, one is "*Hand of God*," by Erica Satifka, and the other one is "*Meat*," by David Steffen.

We close the fiction section with "*Nixie's Rival*," by Brynn MacNab, which reminds me to never trust non-humans.

In the non-fiction section we interviewed award winning author Robert Reed, author Erica Satifka, and award winning editor Ellen Datlow. In addition, we have our regular artist spotlight, featuring Franklin Chan, the artist who supplied this issue's cover art.

We then have two book reviews. Why two? Because one is for Ken Liu's first novel, "*The Grace of Kings*," published just a week or so ago, and the other is for Joe

Abercrombie's latest novel, "*Half The World*," published just a couple of months ago. It was just too damn tempting to include them both.

Finally, we close with a movie review for a classic s/f movie: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by Stanley Kubrick. If you haven't

seen this movie, you have one week to correct that. Tops.

That's it! I hope you enjoy this new issue, and we'll see you soon!

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Raven's Dream

Robert Reed

"Nothing but the world is real and true," Grandfather began. His voice was soft, whispery and wise. His eyes were as black as the darkness beneath the good ground. "Everything that does not belong to the world is false and untrue," he continued. "It is the stuff of spirits."

"It is a lie," Raven continued, knowing the lesson by heart. "Spirit stuff only looks like green grass and white sand."

Grandfather smiled at the boy. "Who rules in the spirit realm?"

"The demons rule it," Raven answered.

Then the old man waved his good hand, signifying each of the four winds. "And what do we know about the demons?"

"They should be feared," Raven replied.

Grandfather nodded and said nothing, a crooked smile revealing the last of his yellowed teeth.

The boy looked at the sky and across the darkened land. Quietly, he mentioned, "The spirit realm must be very large."

"It is large. Yes."

"And the world is small," Raven added.

"Oh, no," said Grandfather. "The world is plenty huge. It feeds our bellies and our senses, does it not? If a small boy wanders away from home, won't he lose his way in the world?" Then the old man laughed, adding, "The same as you swallow a grasshopper, the world can swallow you. If you wander off, you will get lost and die without a proper burial, and your miserable soul will never return to the earth."

Even smiling, Grandfather was a scary presence.

"As long as you are a boy," he continued, "you must remain home. You may not go farther than the river or the sky."

"Yes, Grandfather. I know what is allowed."

Their home was inside a great hill that stood beside the river. All the world's water flowed past their feet. The channel was too wide to leap across, and where the river cut against the hill, it swirled, making a deep, dangerous hole. Even the strongest man respected the water's power.

Raven liked to follow one of the narrow trails down to the river's lip, and there he would practice hiding as he watched the chill water slide past. Tangles of dead junipers let him vanish. Like any boy in his seventh year, he knew how to remain perfectly still, breathing in secret, blinking only when the pain in his eyes was unbearable. He knew how to watch the world with all of his senses. The sun would fall, pulling the night across the sky, and after a little while, Raven's brother and uncle and the other men would slip down the trails. They moved downstream, crossing where the river was straight and shallow. What noise they made was hidden by the water sounds. What footprints they made were washed away in moments. Like graceful threads of darkness, the hunters climbed up the far bank, and then Raven's brother, or maybe his uncle, would look back at him. The boy could hide in many places, but they always knew where he was. Raven didn't fool them, and they never pretended to be fooled, and for at least one more night, he was still very much the child.

Afterward, when he couldn't see them anymore, Raven would put away his sadness and climb to the sky. The world had no higher place. Just past the windy crest, limbless dead trees stood in a perfect line stretching from dawn to dusk. Metal ropes, thin and bright, were strung between the trees. This was the end of the world; everything beyond only pretended to be real. Only a grown man could slip beneath the lowest rope. Only a brave man properly trained and purified could hope to survive that magical realm. Demons were demons, dangerous by any measure; but because they were demons, they also had treasures worth stealing. Two or three times every year, Raven's uncle—the bravest, holiest man in the world—journeyed alone into the spirit realm. He would be gone for days and days, returning home with a heavy pack jammed full of gifts. Then afterward, Uncle would keep to himself, pretending to be deaf while staring hard at nothing, moving his lips, talking to the demons that were plainly haunting his mind.

"Why is the world shaped as it is, Grandfather?"

"Because it is the world, Raven."

The boy and old man were sitting on the hilltop, inside a little bowl of packed sand. Raven watched the river move in the moonlight and listened to the constant chittering of insects. A wind was blowing straight from summer. The two of them wore demon clothes decorated with tufts of grass and smudges made with blackened coals. Neither moved, and neither spoke louder than a whisper.

"Does the world need a reason to have its shape?"

Raven hesitated, and then he said, "Yes, Grandfather."

The old man had a wrinkled face and long hair that had turned white years before Raven was born. When Grandfather was young, a demon had shattered his arm and left it crippled. His old legs were losing their strength. But he was wise. He had experience and a practical nature, and his answers were shaped to serve a purpose. He looked at the boy, and then he sighed and looked back over his shoulder, staring out into the spirit realm. "You are right. All things beg for a shape."

The boy nodded and smiled.

"And the world just happens to have its own shape. Is that too difficult to accept?"

"No, Grandfather." Raven used a finger, drawing in the sandy earth. He made a line and another line, marking the borders with winter and summer, and then he drew a curling line between them. He drew the river that he could see from above, and he added what he knew from stories. Each bend of the river had its name. Every waterfall and every rapid were famous. Grown trees had histories worth knowing by heart. Raven was barely in his seventh year, but he knew the world from the stories that were told in the cool dampness of the underground.

Grandfather watched him, and after a long moment, he took his good hand and finished the drawing. Two more straight lines marked dawn and dusk, cutting across the ends of the river.

He said, "This is the world."

"I know, Grandfather."

"You can never doubt its shape."

"I know."

But instead of dropping the subject, the old man asked, "What would be a better shape? If you were to choose."

Raven shrugged, admitting, "I do not know."

"Think about it. Think hard."

They sat in the darkness, neither speaking. Upriver, the short-hairs were mooing about nothing. One of the demon machines blinked and rumbled as it crossed the sky. Then a buck deer came out of the spirit realm, stopping before the metal ropes to sniff at the wind. When the deer felt safe, it leaped, an easy strength carrying it over the highest rope, black hooves landing in the grass inside the world. Then Raven moved, and the deer spooked, bounding off into the trees.

But Grandfather did not reprimand him. Instead, he watched the boy draw an enormous circle around the square world. Where they were sitting was the circle's center. Why that shape seemed right, Raven didn't know. But it felt right, and he said so.

Grandfather nodded, and after a moment, he said, "Yes."

He said, "This is the shape of the spirit realm," and he threw his good arm over his grandson. "It is a sign, I think. You knowing this already."

"Is it a good sign?" asked the boy.

"Unless it brings evil," Grandfather allowed. "Truthfully, it is too early even to guess about such things."



Demons looked much like people. They walked on two legs and spoke like real men and women, and they wore clothes and carried all manner of tools. But their walk was a noisy, graceless shamble, and their words came out too fast, twisted around a strange, inhuman tongue. Their clothes were made from stuff not found in the world, and their tools were magical things that could only come from the spirit realm.

A few demons had names.

There was Yellow Hair and Cold Stone; but most familiar to Raven was a large, round-faced creature named Blue Clad. Blue Clad was named for his blue trousers and various blue coats. He usually came from dawn, riding inside a noisy metal wagon that everyone knew by sound and sight. He usually kept his wagon on the open grass and the smaller hills. Sometimes he cut across what was real, traveling to some other part of the spirit realm. But on other days, Blue Clad brought Yellow Hair and Cold Stone. Working together, the three demons would lead a herd of short-hairs to where the world's sweet grass waited, or they would fix the metal ropes around the world, or they would take away their fat animals, leaving the grass to grow tall again.

Most demons didn't require names. They usually came in summer, riding down the river inside metal bowls. The bowls were long and narrow, gliding easily across the water. A person could hear them from three bends downriver. They were noisy creatures, spanking the water with flat pieces of wood, kicking at the bright metal, talking endlessly and loudly while laughing with their coarse voices, seeing nothing of the beautiful world sliding past their bright, blinded eyes.

Late one day, four demons appeared on the river.

It was that next summer. Raven was in his eighth year, almost a man. When Uncle brought word of intruders, the boy set to work with the adults, brushing away footprints and picking up the occasional bit of trash. Then together, the people moved underground. Doors were dragged into place and lowered and sealed. The only light fell through the air holes, and then one of the old demon torches was lit, and people sat in its tired light and waited.

Only Uncle and Grandfather were outside. When the demons had passed, they would give the signal by pounding their feet.

A long while passed. Then when the pounding came, it was the wrong signal. Twice and then twice again, someone struck the main door. Raven's mother helped pull the door open. The darkness outside was bright compared to the darkness underground. Grandfather crawled through, his narrow face smiling but his voice sad and worried. "They are not leaving," he admitted. "The demons made camp on the far bank."

Raven wanted to climb outside and look. But he didn't move or breathe, watching the old man shuffle down the narrow passageway. Straightening his back, Grandfather said, "The demons are using our river and our firewood. Your uncle had to leave for a time. I want you to go down there in place of him. Go down and steal a treasure or two. Would you do that for me?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

The old man was speaking to Raven's brother. Snow-On-Snow was in his twelfth year, which made him a full man. He was taller than his brother, but not by much, and he was famous for his endless caution.

"Use your night clothes," Grandfather suggested. "And I have a charm that will help you."

"Thank you, Grandfather."

Raven said nothing, but a sound leaked from his lips.

Grandfather turned. He wasn't even pretending to smile. In the weak light of the demon lamp, he looked angry. But with his calmest voice, he said, "I was going to send you with your brother. But if you can't control your tongue here, how can we trust you down there?"

"You can trust me, Grandfather." Raven dipped his head, and in every way possible, he made no sound.

A leathery hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Night clothes," Grandfather said to him. "And since you are not ready for this duty, I will give you a very powerful charm."

But Raven was ready. He slipped back into the little chamber where he kept his few possessions, and in the blackness, by feel alone, he found the black demon clothes and black mask that would cover him completely. They were old clothes that still smelled of their long-ago owners. That enhanced their power. When Raven was dressed, he came into the main tunnel. Everyone was waiting for him. Snow-On-Snow was speaking to the charm around his neck, begging for its help. Grandfather handed Raven an owl foot with owl feathers tied to the bone, the wing of a bat wrapped around everything. Raven pretended to speak to the charm, but only because the others were watching. Then he tucked it inside his black shirt and looked at the staring faces.

"Take treasures," said Grandfather. "But not too much."

"We will and we won't," Snow-On-Snow promised.

The brothers climbed outside, bare feet making no sound on the hard summer earth. The door was sealed behind them. Suddenly there was nobody in the world but them. The demons were chattering and laughing. Raven saw the flickering fire between the trees. The fire was enormous, throwing shadows in all directions. It was summer, but a cool wind was blowing from the winter. Raven smelled smoke and something else. What was that smell? He nearly asked, but then his brother put his mouth to Raven's ear. "We wait until they sleep," he whispered.

"Wait where?" Raven asked.

"Here."

But they were still high above the river. Raven shook his head, whispering, "We can move closer. I know where."

Snow-On-Snow thought he meant those tangles of old junipers.

"But I have a better place to hide," said Raven. "All summer, whenever you go hunting, you and Uncle and the rest of the men walk past me."

"We do not."

"And you never notice me," Raven promised.

"Where is that?" his brother asked.

"On the far shore," Raven confessed.

"You're too young to cross the river," Snow-On-Snow reminded him. But he was impressed, and a little curious, too. "All right then. Show me where you mean."



An old ash tree named Two-Hawk-Perch collapsed last winter, and a feast of nettles had grown up around its shattered body. It made a wonderful hiding place. The brothers crept inside the ring of nettles, ignoring the itching of their bare hands, confident that no demon would dare look here. The bottomland was thick with ash trees and cottonwoods. The sandy ground beneath the trees had been stripped of its grass by the hungry short-hairs. Four demons stood with their backs to the night, laughing and talking in their harsh, quick language. In a breath, Raven heard more demon-talk than ever before in his life. And he recognized some of it. "Machine," he heard. And "Stupid." And one demon said, "Fuck," both that word and its angry tone very familiar.

The demons had a bottle. Passing it from one hand to the next, each took a long sip and held it in his mouth, and after the last demon had his fill, they spat out what looked like water. Except this water caused the fire to blossom and roar, singeing the branches high in the surrounding trees.

Demons liked poisons. They drank them and ate them, and that was one reason that they were demons.

Raven wondered how it would taste, having that false water in your mouth?

A demon turned abruptly, shuffling toward their hiding place. He was small and clumsy. With both hands, he opened his pants, and he stopped at the edge of the nettles, taking a long, slow pee. His prick was small and wrong-looking. His face had a wild hairiness, and his eyes were stupid and slow. But nothing about the demon was genuinely unpleasant. That was what Raven was thinking, watching the creature pee and shake its prick and laugh in a joyous, honest way.

The bottle was emptied, and another bottle was opened and drained. Then the four demons crawled inside a pair of shelters, and in another breath or two, the night was filled with the sounds of deep, wet snoring.

The brothers crept forward.

"Demons sleep hard," Uncle liked to say. "They sleep so hard, you could steal their arms, and they wouldn't even feel your knife."

Remembering the phrase, Raven laughed.

"Quiet," Snow-On-Snow warned.

The Moon had fallen behind the hills. The brothers picked their way through slick bags and bulging packs. A metal box was set near the dying fire, held shut with a metal clamp.

Snow-On-Snow tried to open the box, then gave up. Seeing the opportunity to better his brother, Raven stared at the clamp until he saw it perfectly, and he quietly twisted it, releasing the lid, a breath of damp cold air leaking out.

Inside the box was a marvel. Ice. The ice was in pieces, floating in icy water, and with it were metal bottles and glass bottles and a great plastic tube filled with what looked like meat.

Meat was a treasure worth stealing.

Raven claimed the tube and sucked on chunks of ice. Snow-On-Snow went down by the water, looking at the long metal bowls. Raven eased up alongside the demons' shelters. One shelter was yellow, the other orange. He touched the taut fabric and ropes, and he picked up a soggy boot and turned it over. Something small and yellow tried to fall free. He caught it and held it up to the firelight. A narrow rope clung to the treasure, and there was a curl of metal at the rope's far end. A soft button waited beneath his thumb. He touched the button, and sounds began to leak from the curled metal. Raven heard voices. Putting the curled metal to his ear, he made the voices become louder. For an instant, he nearly panicked. But Snow-On-Snow heard nothing. He was bending over another pack, tugging at a little zipper. Did anyone notice him? Grandfather might be watching, but from a distance. Raven decided that he didn't care. He pressed the button again, and the voices stopped. Then he moved to a brush pile, fitting his dangerous treasure beneath a slab of rotted wood.

Snow-On-Snow noticed Raven and began walking toward him, wearing a curious face; but then a demon cried out, and the orange shelter twisted as legs and arms flailed wildly.

The brothers ran back to their hiding place, each carrying a single treasure. Raven had the meat, and Snow-On-Snow had a pair of odd moccasins. The young men had barely hidden when the screaming demon crawled into the open, followed by his shelter mate. Then a third demon looked out of the other shelter, asking a question, and the scared demon answered him.

Raven heard another word that he recognized.

"Dream," he heard.

The first two demons threw wood on the fire. Soon the bottomland was lit up like day. The dreaming demon was the same creature that had pissed in front of them. He sat on the metal box, wearing almost nothing. His face was sad and bothered. Whatever the dream, it had been terrible. The other demon said soft words and looked at his friend and said more words. That was what they were doing when Blue Clad came out of the darkness.

He rode up inside his metal wagon. The demons never noticed him, hearing nothing but the crackling sputter of their own fire. A pair of twin lights ignited, slicing across the campsite. The two demons climbed to their feet. Wagon doors swung open. A familiar voice, rough and loud, shouted at the invaders. Then came the sharp clean sound of metal against metal, and a second voice, younger and a little scared, called out, "Hands up! Do it!"

Yellow Hair was with his father. He was a small demon, like his mother. His hands held a shotgun. Blue Clad pointed a rifle at the sky. He looked huge and furious, his brown skin shiny with sweat, his blue trousers dirty at the knees, thick arms shaking and his breath coming hard until he found his voice.

He said "Who," followed by more words.

The nameless demons answered, their voices sloppy and quick. Then the other demons crawled from their shelter, looking angry and confused.

Blue Clad said, "Shut up!"

Then he spat out more words.

The demons glanced at each other, their mouths hanging open.

"Now!" Yellow Hair shouted, drawing a circle with the barrel of his shotgun.

The invaders grabbed their packs. They turned over their long bowls and threw in their packs. But when they came back for the icebox, Blue Clad said, "No." Then he said something else. And the half-dressed demons left it and the shelters on the ground. They pushed the long bowls out into the river and climbed in, slashing at the water with those flat pieces of wood. It would remain night for a long while. The Moon was down, and there were rapids after the next bend. But the demons were terrified and brave because of it, pushing at the water under them, outracing the current as it slipped across the dirty white sandbars.

Blue Clad and his son walked slowly through the campsite. Yellow Hair saw something and pointed, and his father looked at the ground, nodding and offering a few words. And then together, they looked back across the open ground, watching the shadows, watching hard for something.

Raven had walked on that ground.

They must have noticed one of his little footprints, and now they would find him and his brother. Raven knew it. Then they would find Mother and Grandfather, and because they were demons, they would shoot them dead—all because of the carelessness of one boy.

Raven wished that he were dead.

But then Blue Clad used his boots, smoothing the sandy ground, and he climbed into his wagon with little Yellow Hair beside him, and they rode away together, the wagon's bright lights showing the way down the long, long length of the world.



The People stood on the riverbank. Uncle returned from his unmentioned errand, and now there were seventeen faces. Snow-On-Snow happily described their adventures, while Raven took his share of the salted red meat, sitting near the fire, slicing off pieces with an old demon knife and eating them slowly, tasting none of the salt or sweet fat.

Grandfather came over and looked at him. Then he looked back at the others, thinking to himself.

Raven said nothing.

The old man sat on the ground before him. "The world was once a better place," he began. "The People were abundant and happy, and if they were not perfect, at least they were on the path to an ideal life. But then the demons came. Like a flood, they came. They drowned our lands and killed the buffalo and made us live on evil ground where the children and old ones died away. That is why—"

"I know that story, Grandfather."

Raven had never interrupted before, but the rudeness went unmentioned. Instead, Grandfather spoke about people long dead. "My grandfather's grandfather was a strong medicine man. He had a vision. In his vision, he was shown a valley free of demons. And it would remain pure, if good people would live there. So he and a few believers slipped away, and they became us, and we found grass and fresh water and a few elk and buffalo still hiding in these draws. We learned to hide by day—"

"And hunt by night," Raven interrupted. "Yes, I know all that."

Grandfather looked at him. "What do you know, little boy?"

"I am not a little boy," said Raven.

"What are you?" asked Grandfather.

Raven closed his eyes, telling the old man, "Blue Clad knows about us. Somehow he knows that we are here."

For an instant, it felt as if anything might happen. But then Grandfather broke into a low laugh, balancing his share of the stolen meat on his trouser leg, using his good hand to

break off slivers that he could swallow whole. "Of course he knows about us," Grandfather admitted. "He knows and his father knew before him, and his grandfather before them."

What was stranger? Was it Grandfather's confession or the ease in his voice?

"Demons are demons," the old man added. "But if you can charm a few of them, then you'll have powerful allies."

The sun was trying to rise. Raven watched the women and children picking through the demons' lost belongings. Uncle was standing with the other grown men, sucking at the ice and smiling, one hand playing with his long black hair. Quietly, Raven said, "I know who brought Blue Clad here."

Grandfather nodded soberly. "I didn't approve. There was no reason to involve Blue Clad. But your mother's brother is a grown man, and grown men do what they wish."

Raven smiled, playing with the idea of being that free.

Then the old man grabbed him by the knee, his good hand squeezing while a hard, certain voice said, "Men can do as they wish. But because they are men, the consequences will do the same to them."



Raven left the voice-making machine in the woodpile, claiming it only when he was sure that nobody was watching him. Then in secret, he listened to the tiny voices. He heard demons speaking and singing. With the ends of the curled metal stuck in his ears, it was as if they were singing inside his own head. The machine worked best near the sky, which was where he kept it, sneaking away at night to listen for a few delicious moments. A little wheel could be turned, moving him from voice to voice, nothing between but a sputtering sound like fat on a fire. A second wheel made every sound louder or softer. And there was a hard black button that could be moved, causing a new flock of voices and songs to fall out of the increasingly cold night air.

Raven felt half-deaf when he used the machine, and when it was put away, he still heard the buzzing of voices. That was their magic and their danger. To let the buzzing fade, he remained sitting for a time, staring out between the metal ropes, watching the spirit realm with its own grass and rolling hills and the mooing short-hairs. Everything out there looked like the real world, except for the differences. There was no river out there, and no trees. And on the clear nights, in the direction of summer, towers of shimmering white light rose into the air. Each tower marked a demon village. Uncle had explained this to Raven. Those villages

were huge and noisy, and even when demons slept, everything was kept brightly lit. Each village had its own peculiar name. Uncle could point to a tower, repeating a senseless name. Then with the next breath, he would say, "I am not suppose to tell you this. Do you understand? You are too young to use what I say."

"Yes, Uncle."

"This is our secret."

Raven smiled agreeably. "Yes. Our secret."

It was the rare night when Uncle sat with him. The man preferred to be hunting, even in fat times. A strong man with busy hands and legs, he was always moving in one fashion or another. More than anyone, Uncle hated being underground, and he used any excuse to escape. The women gossiped about his moods, and Mother teased him. "Where is your mind walking, brother?" she would ask, laughing but not laughing. "What scares you so badly when you look at the darkness?"

Uncle would understand the yellow machine. That was why Raven dropped it into his hands, saying, "I found this."

"When did you find this?" Uncle asked.

"Not long ago." It wasn't a lie. Not really. "This button wakes it. And this wheel makes it louder—"

"I know how the bastard works!"

Raven fell silent.

Uncle listened to the voices. Then he put the machine to sleep again, and he flipped it in his hand and pulled off its back, thick fingers yanking free two silver cylinders.

"Your batteries are old," Uncle muttered.

"Batteries" was a demon word. Their demon torches used bigger, fatter batteries than these.

"The next time I wander," said Uncle, "maybe I will bring you some fresh batteries. Would you like that?"

Raven hesitated, and then said, "Yes. Please."

"I thought so." Uncle stood and cocked his arm, flinging the machine far out into the spirit realm. Its back and body vanished into the tired autumn grass, and each battery hit the sand with a soft little thump.

"Why did you do that?" Raven whispered.

Uncle looked at him. Then he gazed up at the softly shimmering towers of light, shaking his head while asking, "Really, what did you think I would do? When you showed that thing to me, what did you think?"



Winter was early and angry. Grandfather claimed to have lived through worse, but nobody else had seen such cold. A hard rain turned to ice, and a two-day snow fell afterward, the winds piling the snow into drifts as big as hills. The precious grass was trapped beneath the winter. Without a thaw, the deer and antelope would starve before spring. There was whispered talk of famine. There were meetings in the main room. Raven sat with the adults, listening to every word. Counts were made of their food. People volunteered to eat less and less often. Uncle wanted to butcher several of the short-hairs, but Mother didn't approve. "We've killed three since spring," she reminded everyone. "Blue Clad won't like losing a fourth."

There were strict, ancient rules about the short-hairs.

"We will have to staunch Blue Clad's anger," Uncle allowed. "I will go out and talk to the wind and see what a short-hair is worth."

Raven knew what he meant. But when the children asked where Uncle was going, he repeated the lie. "Shadow-Below is chatting with the wind," he said, using a stern, believable voice.

Uncle returned and shook his head. "Blue Clad demands much. Very much." Then he said a number.

Raven didn't understand the number.

Grandfather reached into his medicine bag, removing slips of thin green fabric. "This is not enough," he admitted. "We need more."

Uncle went to his chamber to make ready. He had visited the spirit realm many times, but it was never an easy journey. There were cleansing rituals and special demon clothes kept for these times, and Uncle needed to practice speaking demon words until he could say them easily.

"Where will you go?" Raven asked, watching Uncle make ready.

Uncle didn't answer. He was staring at the earthen wall, his face long and his eyes empty. Then he suddenly looked at his nephew, explaining, "I will take a long walk."

"How long?"

Uncle looked away. "I have work, Raven. Leave me."

Wounded, the young man returned to the main room. He sat apart from the others, watching the flickering flames of the tallow candles. Then Uncle appeared, and everyone called him, "Samuel." That was his demon name. "Good luck to you, Samuel," said Grandfather, watching as his son kicked loose the tree limbs holding the door in place.

Uncle barely looked back. He climbed out into the roaring cold of the night, and the door was shut again, and Raven imagined his hero walking across the empty snow, aiming for one of those great towers of light.

Uncle would be gone for ten or twelve days.

"We have friends among the demons," Grandfather explained to Raven, speaking man-to-man. "They used to belong to The People. They will give us whatever we need."

"What do we need?" Raven asked.

"This," said the old man. He brought out those little green hides. "These are charms. Powerful demon charms."

Every charm wore a face. The top face looked wise and kind; it was hard to think of this face as belonging to an enemy.

"What are you thinking, Raven?"

"Nothing." But that was a lie. He was imagining himself marching across the spirit realm, covering great stretches of dangerous and strange country. In his mind, he was walking beside Uncle, holding the pace despite deep snow and the bitter, killing winds.

Grandfather heard the lie in his voice.

Quietly and firmly, he said, "Ask your uncle about his adventures. When it is just the two of you, ask for a story."

"May I, Grandfather?"

"This once," said the old man. "Just this once."

But Uncle didn't return. Ten days became twenty days. Winter still lay over everything, the true world white and dangerous. Raven and the older men hunted on the mildest nights, but game was scarce and wary, and without Uncle's skills, it was difficult to kill enough to feed the only sixteen People left in the world.

After thirty days, Grandfather made a decision. He put on old demon clothes that rode loose on his withered frame. A piece of slick brown cloth was tied like a noose around his neck. Then he put a heavy demon coat over those clothes and stuffed some of the green charms into a pocket, and with a grave voice, he said, "Nothing is wrong. I am sure of it."

Mother and the other women wept as the old man staggered off into the darkness. And the last of the men held the women, wiping at their own wet eyes.

Another ten days passed.

After five more days of waiting, just as hope was flickering out, a foot pounded weakly on the main door. Twice and then twice again, the signal was given. Then Grandfather fell inside, half-frozen and his fingers burned by the cold. He was stripped and wrapped in deer fur, and everyone sat close to him, sharing heat. Weaker men would have died. Grandfather nearly died, but in the end, he lost only a pair of toes.

"Did you find him?" asked Mother. "Did you find my brother? Is he coming home soon?"

Grandfather was alive, but he was different. His mouth didn't pretend to smile, and his old eyes held a coldness worse than any winter wind. Quietly and angrily, he said, "Samuel is lost."

That was his only answer.

"Samuel is lost," he repeated.

Nobody asked what he meant. The adults seemed to know, and Raven sensed it from their miserable silence. His uncle had gone amongst the demons, and his soul had been stolen away.

Rolled up inside Grandfather's coat pocket was a great handful of green charms. He never mentioned them, but as soon as he was strong enough, he said, "Come with me, Raven. I need your help."

It was a clear, cold night. Just the two of them went to the river, crossing where the ice lay on the sandbars. Then they walked with the river, keeping to where the ground was blown clean of snow, eventually reaching the end of the world. Raven had never been this far. He saw dead trees standing in the hard ground, and the metal ropes strung between them, and beyond, he saw lights. One light was hung on a tall limbless tree, and more lights glowed inside a heavy wooden shelter. The shelter stood in a grove of old trees just inside the spirit realm. Grandfather knelt in front of the metal ropes and began pulling objects from his medicine sack. Raven stepped up next to him, and he put out his hand, letting his fingers slip into a realm that was neither real nor true.

"Stop that," Grandfather whispered.

Raven stepped back. Grandfather had tied the green charms together, and on the snow around them stood little figurines made from twigs and twine. There were four short-hairs, each with a dab of blood on its neck. And there were tiny, tiny people with sad faces.

Grandfather chanted to the spirits and to Blue Clad, and when he was done with his magic, he pulled a bright sunset-colored rag from his pocket, tying it to the highest of the metal ropes.

Raven understood most of the magic, but not the rag.

"Demons are half-blind," the old man explained. "You can weave your best spell, but if he ignores your work, nothing will change."

A few days later, the hunters found a toboggan stacked high with demon clothes and knives, torches and bright new batteries, plus other treasures. "Blue Clad has been charmed," Grandfather announced. Finally, he was smiling again. "Now go find us four fat short-hairs."

Raven happily joined the men, helping to kill and butcher the first short-hair. Sitting with the children, he ate bellies full of sweet meat and the rich liver and the long, long guts. Then three more short-hairs were killed, everyone happy and fat. And two moons later, when the spring thaw found them, Raven had grown a full hand taller-much more of a man now, if still many years away from his full height and a man's important voice.



The brothers were hunting between Widow Falls and the Last Rapids. It was late spring, warm and dry. Snow-On-Snow felt a taste for night rats, and Raven didn't. He shook his head. "I want a deer," he said. Then for emphasis, he threw his spear into the trunk of a nearby cottonwood.

His older brother laughed, saying, "Go on. Waste your night."

"I will. Yes." Raven pulled the spear free and waited, and when Snow-On-Snow had vanished, he crept down past the Last Rapids. He was carrying his spear and a pair of demon eyes. The eyes were metal and glass, a leather strap holding them around his neck. Uncle had left the eyes behind. Snow-On-Snow had teased Raven, claiming that he couldn't see anything in the dark. But for what Raven wanted, they would work just fine.

The river flattened and swirled, making a deep hole before it left the world. An old cottonwood stood on the bank just inside the world. Raven put down his spear and grabbed the lumpy bark with his fingers and toes, scrambling up a little ways and falling back to Earth with a soft grunt. Then he picked himself up and climbed again, reaching the first fat branch. For a little while, he gasped and held tight. Then he put the demon eyes to his own eyes, working with the wheel that brought the distant world into focus.

The demons' shelter was brightly lit, as always. There was an opening that wasn't an opening—a great sheet of glass letting the light escape. Raven peered inside the chamber. Blue Clad was sitting. Stone Face was sitting beside him. Yellow Hair strolled into the chamber twice, saying a few words before vanishing again. His parents were busy watching a box with its own sheet of glass and its own bright light leaking free. Inside that box, Raven saw swirling colors and demon faces and strange demon bodies, and endless machines moved rapidly across scenes that made absolutely no sense to him.

Raven couldn't stop watching. Nothing made sense; everything was strange and wonderful. And then Blue Clad stood up and touched the box, and the box went dark and dead.

The two demons vanished into another chamber.

Raven told himself to stop. He made himself put the demon eyes back around his neck, and he stared down at the black swirling water. This part scared him. Climbing down always took too long, which was why he jumped. But the water wasn't deep everywhere, and in the moonless dark, he had to aim by memory.

Raven took a breath and a long step, bare feet leading the way. The water was cold and hard, and just beneath the surface was a mossy log that had floated downstream in the last few days. There was no warning. He hit the wood with both feet, legs crumbling under him, and then he woke again, finding himself deep under the coldest, blackest water.

Raven kicked, and kicked.

He screamed and swallowed water and burst to the surface, coughing badly. Then the current threw him up on the far shore, saving him. He climbed out on shaky legs, pulled off the eyes and finally managed to breathe. Then he saw where he was, and in a panic, he crawled back under the metal ropes, escaping the spirit realm before anything awful came roaring up out of the darkness.

For a long while, Raven stood on the edge of the world.

When he was sure nobody was watching, he crawled under the ropes and searched the bank, finding the demon eyes where he had dropped them. Then he stood on that sandy bank, turning over a slab of driftwood, studying the bugs living under it, and he ate them, one at a time and tasting them for what they were.



"Silence is a good thing," Grandfather observed, climbing the last little ways to the top of the hill. "And silence is very rare to find in such a young man."

Raven felt the first warmth of the compliment. A smile began to build, but then he looked up at the old man, his half-born smile collapsing into an embarrassed grimace.

Grandfather gave a little laugh, sitting beside him. "We must talk," he said. "Man to man."

Raven had been found out. Maybe Snow-On-Snow saw him standing outside the world, or maybe Grandfather had seen his thoughts. Whatever the reason, the secret was lost, and he was glad about it. Now a few hard words would be offered, and Raven would pretend not to cry, absorbing his punishment like a good boy, Grandfather putting him back on the path to manhood.

Except the old man didn't know. He just looked at Raven, and he said, "Born-Twice."

Born-Twice was a person. In her fifth year, she was Raven's second cousin, her bloodline divided from his by a goodly distance.

"Do you like her?" Grandfather asked.

Raven said, "Yes," while thinking, "No."

Grandfather only noticed the "Yes" answer. Nodding and smiling, he told him, "She likes you, I think."

Raven said nothing.

"Again, silence." Grandfather laughed.

A wind blew across the spirit realm, rippling the grass until its warm breath struck Raven in the face.

"It is too soon for you," the old man offered. "But not for others. Your brother, in another year or two, and maybe your mother again."

"My mother—?"

"She is young enough still. And pretty enough, too." Grandfather shook him with his good arm, saying, "This is something worth considering."

Raven tried to shrink away and vanish.

"Or I could take a man with me. Travel out into the spirit realm with someone, and I will teach him the magic spells and the right words, and we will fool all of the demons we meet."

"Fool them?" Raven echoed.

"Long enough to steal away one of their babies." That withered face couldn't have smiled any harder, black eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "This is something we do from time

to time. When we need fresh blood, we take a baby demon and purify it with a special ceremony."

Raven closed his eyes.

"Who was my father?" he blurted.

The clinging arm dropped away, and Grandfather stared at him, using his own silence now.

With a tight, hard voice, Raven said, "I want to know my father."

"Ask something else," Grandfather suggested.

"But this is what I want to know."

"And I won't tell you," the old man replied. Then with a patient, slow voice, he said, "Ask anything else. This one time, I will tell you whatever you want to know."

Raven said nothing.

Grandfather looked at the sky. "Did you know? Demons once walked across the moon."

"I don't care," Raven lied.

"I guess you do not," Grandfather muttered, shaking his head slowly. "I see that I was wrong."



There was a soft thump, and Raven looked up. Two demons sat inside a long metal bowl, floating around Bull's Bend. Raven was standing in the open, knee-deep in water, holding an enormous turtle by its tail. The turtle hissed at him. Raven held tight. If he dropped the animal or ran, he would splash and be seen. But if he stood where he was, even the blind demons would notice him.

Slowly, slowly, he walked up to the bank and hunkered down beside some silvery willows, letting his face drop. Like men, demons saw faces before anything. Through the tops of his eyes, he watched them drift past. Then a second metal bowl rounded the bend, another pair of demons coming close. One of the demons coughed. Otherwise they made no sound, sitting up straight, their eyes big enough to be worn by owls.

When the demons were passed, Raven stepped back into the shadows and cut off the turtle's head, and he buried the biting head in the wet sand, and he ran home, carrying the

turtle in one hand, then the other, climbing the bluffs and cutting across the prairie, skipping the next two bends in the river.

Raven gave the first warning, and he helped the women and children hide. Then with the men, he stayed outside. "It is only midday," Grandfather pointed out. "They will float past, and it will still be midday."

But the demons pulled up against the far shore, dragging their bowls into the trees. Silently, the men watched as two shelters were set up and wood was stacked high, making ready for a fire. Raven went underground and came back with Uncle's demon eyes. Another man took the eyes. Raven waited. A second man used them. Finally Raven got them and stared at the demons, and after a long moment, he said, "They are the same. The ones who came last year."

Snow-On-Snow glared at him. "You can't know that."

Raven said nothing.

"I believe you," said Grandfather.

Raven let himself smile, just a little.

The men sat watching, whispering among themselves, and then they were quiet for a long while. Midday turned to dusk. The demons sat around the woodpile, talking quietly. "I do not like this," said Grandfather. "They want something, I think." He went underground, returning with a medicine sack. Inside it was the bright rag and a special charm. The charm was carved from ash wood, and it looked like a long bowl meant to ride on the water, demons sitting inside it. Speaking only to Raven, Grandfather asked, "Do you want to come talk to the wind with me?"

"No," said Raven.

The old man stared at him.

Snow-On-Snow said, "I'd like to go with you, Grandfather."

"Good then," said Grandfather. "Good."

When the sun dropped, the demons lit their campfire. They fed the blaze until it was enormous, and one of them brought out a long black box that let loose a strange wailing. The men had to laugh at these demons. Weren't they the strangest, sickest creatures?

Raven was scared, and he didn't know why.

"I want to eat," he announced, walking toward home. But he slipped past the main door and down to the river, crossing it on the sandbars. The demons were burning the dead ash tree where he hid last year. Even at a distance, Raven could feel the flickering heat. Kneeling, he watched two of them drag fat branches to the fire. Where were the others? The

little demon was missing—the one with bad dreams—and his good friend, too. Were they inside the shelters? With a practiced eye, Raven stared across the open ground. On the far side of the fire stood a giant cottonwood named Forever. Sitting beneath that tree were the missing demons, waiting now, each holding some kind of rifle.

Raven started to rise, and then thought better of it.

He kneeled again, and waited. The wailing songs grew even louder. The great fire hissed and popped, throwing its light up into the clear skies. Then the fire began to collapse and die, and that was when Blue Clad rode up in his wagon and turned on its bright torches and leaped out.

Yellow Hair held the shotgun, like last year. And Blue Clad lifted his rifle high, shouting now, his deep voice swallowed up by the wailing songs.

The demons at the fire stepped forward, smiling grimly.

Blue Clad yelled again.

There were pops, loud and sharp, and his wagon jumped as if kicked. Then the fat wheels collapsed beneath it, and the demons at the fire were stepping forward, shouting angrily at Blue Clad.

Raven quit breathing, melting down into the ground.

Blue Clad set his rifle on the ground, and then he said something to his son. And he repeated himself. And finally, Yellow Hair set his shotgun on the ground, straightening his back now and stepping away.

The hiding demons walked into the firelight.

Raven breathed again, with a tight little gasp.

The four demons were shouting and laughing. They herded Blue Clad and his son over to their fire and made them sit together. The little demon walked up behind Blue Clad. He said a few words and put his rifle against the man's head, just above the thick neck. And he said something else, turning the rifle and holding the barrel tightly with both hands, driving the butt into the neck.

Blue Clad crumpled.

Yellow Hair started to stand, and he was knocked down again.

Blue Clad called to his son. He spoke to the others. Holding his neck with both hands, he tried to sit up, and then he fell forward and rolled onto his side, growing still now.

The little demon stood over him, watching him.

Everyone was staring at Blue Clad, trying to decide if he was dead. Nobody saw Raven. He slipped through the shadows, moving behind the crippled wagon and looking at the Blue Clad's rifle left lying on the ground.

Blue Clad moved in pain, and then lay still again.

His son said a few hard words, and one of the unarmed demons picked up a hatchet and stepped toward him, cursing him.

Remembering how Blue Clad had aimed and fired the rifle, Raven grabbed it. He planted the butt against his shoulder and looked down the long, long barrel, curling his top finger around a cold piece of metal. He aimed at the demon with the hatchet. He stepped forward. But nobody wanted to see him, and they were going to beat Yellow Hair next, and Raven stepped forward again, shouting the first demon word that came to mind.

"Fuck," he said.

Five faces turned toward him.

Raven yanked at the cold metal, but nothing happened. So again, louder this time, he shouted, "Fuck."

The little demon turned his body.

Raven tugged at curled metal, and again nothing happened. But then as he lifted the barrel, his fingers slipped behind the guard, and the trigger went *click*, and there was a sharp, enormous explosion.

Everyone fell to the ground, and for a horrible instant, Raven believed that he must have killed everyone. Then Yellow Hair jumped up and ripped the rifle from the little demon's hands, and the others just lay there, staring at the sight of a feral boy wearing next to nothing, his naked feet set far apart as he clumsily but deliberately aimed that smoking barrel at their owl-eyed faces.

Yellow Hair shouted, and the last rifle was thrown away. Then he turned toward Raven, and with a clear, even voice, he said, "Thank you, brother."

Using the language of people, he said, "Now get your ass out of here."



"He called me 'brother,'" Raven reported.

Grandfather said nothing. He looked as if he might be asleep, his black eyes half-closed and pointed down at the bare sand.

"He spoke our language, Grandfather."

"Many do," the old man countered.

"And he called me his brother," Raven persisted. "But there's only one way that can be. I have been thinking—"

"Quiet, Raven."

He pulled his mouth shut.

"Stop thinking," Grandfather told him.

"How can I?" Raven asked.

Grandfather ignored the question. He opened his eyes and leaned close, whispering, "You did a good, good thing. A wondrous thing." His breath was wet and sour and very familiar. "You saved Blue Clad and his son, and maybe all of us, too. And our two demons are going to be grateful for a long time, believe me."

Raven looked toward summer. The night was old but clear, and the distant towers of light stood in a great row before him. He watched the spirit grass bend like real grass beneath a warm wind. He waited, and the wind soon came through the metal ropes and played across his face, and Raven could smell the good grass smells, and he felt tired enough to faint, and he felt nothing but sick of pretending things that weren't so.

"There are no demons," he proclaimed.

Grandfather watched him, and waited.

"Blue Clad is a man, and Yellow Hair is another man." He wanted to whisper, but his voice grew louder with each word. "They are the same as us. And those demons who floated down the river—"

"Raven," Grandfather interrupted. "Stop this."

"They aren't demons, either. They are men, different from us in ways, but not very different. I think."

"Is that what you think?"

The old man's voice was hard and scornful.

Raven said, "Yes," as he stood, walking over to the metal ropes. Then he put a hand on top of a dead tree, and like a buck deer, he leaped over the highest rope, landing in the grass on the other side. "It's the same world over here," he announced. "It feels the same, because it is."

The old man shook his head, tears running.

"Uncle knew," said Raven, "and that's why he left us."

"He left us," said Grandfather, "because he was weak and foolish. No other reasons are needed."

Raven shook his head, wanting to hear none of it.

"You aren't weak or foolish," Grandfather continued. "But I think you have made a simple, horrible mistake."

"What is that?"

The old man followed him, crawling beneath the lowest rope and standing up stiffly to face him. "You are right. Between the spirit realm and our world, there is no difference. But that's because we lost. Our little valley was flooded with the demons' evil, and now everything belongs to them."

Raven winced and closed his eyes, thinking hard now.

"We are demons," Grandfather told him.

"I am not," Raven growled.

"You are, and I am, too. And that's why those demons confused you for men."

Grandfather laughed gently, lifting his good arm and setting his open hand on Raven's shoulder. "The medicine man who brought us here...your ancestor, and mine...knew we wouldn't withstand the demons' flood. We were scarce, and we were human, and how could we be anything but weak?"

Raven shook his head, saying nothing.

"Look below," Grandfather told him. "Imagine our river rising. Imagine those cold black waters covering the valley floor, and then the bluffs, and finally us. You and I would be the last people swallowed by the awful water."

"I don't want to think about that," Raven began.

"But flood waters always fall," Grandfather continued. "And what is the first ground to rise up into the sun?"

"This is," Raven realized. "The last ground swallowed."

Grandfather grinned, saying, "Exactly. Our ancestor wanted us in this place because this place would be the first to emerge. He had a bright, wondrous vision of a great demon who would make himself human again, and make his family human, and then would make the world a good human place, free of madness and pain."

"He saw this?" Raven gulped.

The hand dropped now. "Yes, he did."

A strange sweet hope took hold of Raven. Quietly, he asked, "Could I maybe be that special one?"

Grandfather just looked at him, then turned and slipped back under the metal rope, starting to walk home. "Come with me," he said as he vanished into the shadows. "Come, or you'll never know if you could be."

Raven stood motionless for a long while.

He looked at the towers of light, and he looked down at the quiet little river. And then he looked inside himself, finding the answer waiting there.



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Jenny is Killing Turtles Again

Alexander Danner

She's got her system down: a fly on a string, to lure a snapper to snap; a sharp carving knife to sever an extended neck. Simple. Safer than other methods. She's lost toes to other methods. She's lost fingers. Snappers have wickedly sharp beaks. No one knows that better than she does. There are safer ways, of course. A heavy enough rock lobbed from a distance can shatter a carapace. Shatter a spine. You don't have to get close enough to lose digits. But that way is cruel. Jenny doesn't like cruelty.

She doesn't like killing turtles, either. But it has to be done.

There are two turtles today, which is the right number of turtles. They're near the pond, behind the house where Jenny lives with her grandmother. Where Jenny's parents used to live. It is a place where turtles rarely go anymore. A place the turtles have learned to avoid. The coincidence of finding them here heartens Jenny. It is as if they have been guided here. By something inside them. Guided to Jenny's fly on a string. To Jenny's knife.

She kills them easily. Two quick swipes are all she needs. One for each turtle. She's good at killing turtles now.

Once the turtles' heads have been safely removed from their bodies, Jenny settles into the messier task of opening their shells and peering inside. She doesn't dwell on the details of this process. She tries not to see the bones or the fluids. She doesn't vomit. She hasn't vomited in a long time. But she could. She still could, if she allowed herself to look too closely. Only one fact bears significance: once the turtles have been laid open, their shells pried apart to reveal all they contain, it is clear that there are no ghosts trapped inside.

Jenny curses, then reprimands herself for the slip in her language. Jenny doesn't talk like that. She's a good girl. But she'd been so sure. She is used to disappointment, used to the empty shells, but these two had seemed so perfect, so precisely right. But no. She'll still be killing turtles tomorrow. For today, all she has to show for her efforts is another pot of turtle meat. Her grandmother will be pleased at least. Gran loves turtle meat.

With her armload of turtle carcass, Jenny pads back to the house. She steps her bare feet into the basin of water beside the door, rinsing the blood from between her toes. She leaves the meat in a strainer over the sink, where her grandmother will clean and carve it. Later, she'll clean the shells and bones herself. She can sell them to a man who turns them into "genuine replica native art," which he in turn sells to tourists and curiosity collectors. For

now, she scrubs her hands and forearms under the faucet, then climbs the stairs to her bedroom.

It is the same bedroom she slept in a year ago, though so much else had changed. One year ago, Jenny was only twelve years old. Her parents were still alive. In those days, she spent most of her time out in the woods behind her house, and that hasn't changed really. It used to be fun, though. Back before she hunted turtles. Before she started carrying her knife and her fly on a string.

And, of course, one year ago, her bedroom had not been haunted by the ghosts of strangers. There are seven now, muttering to themselves, shuffling about among her clothes and knickknacks. They play with her toys. They wear her socks. Very few of Jenny's possessions are actually Jenny's anymore. The room has become a boarding house for ghosts, and Jenny is less an inhabitant than a caretaker.

Two of the ghosts have learned to be small, have taken up residence in her old dollhouse. They like to sit together on the little wooden couch, staring at the little wooden television with its painted-on image of a young man kissing a young woman. Mostly the ghosts ignore Jenny. They aren't her ghosts. They're other peoples' ghosts, and they resent that their own children have not hunted turtles on their behalf. Their own children have sacrificed neither toes nor fingers, have not learned how sharp a turtle's beak can be. Jenny knows. The ghosts keep their gratitude to themselves. Just as Jenny keeps her own gratitude to herself. But she knows this too: it is only because of the ghosts that no one will ever take Jenny away from her house or make her live with some other family. Who could stand to take in a girl with so many foundling spirits bound to her? Adopting such a menagerie of haunts would be unbearable.

Tonight one of the ghosts has wound up Jenny's music boxes. There are twelve of them, all built by her father in his basement workshop. Papa had been a watchmaker by trade, but music boxes weren't so different. Each played a dainty tune, well suited to sweet little girls, like he thought his daughter ought to be. Sometimes Jenny winds one up, if only to pretend. The ghost, however, has wound all twelve boxes, creating an unbearable discordance of syrupy tinklings. He is trying to dance to the various tunes, but only manages to twitch un-rhythmically, his elbows banging against the walls. Jenny won't watch these weak gesticulations. She changes her clothes quickly, then exits, stepping quietly back down the stairs.

Water is running in the kitchen now—Gran is washing the turtle meat. Jenny knows she ought to help her grandmother in the kitchen. Her daily hunt usually saves her from this

chore, but her daily hunt usually involves two or three hours of searching before she finds a turtle. The search is the part of the hunt that Jenny enjoys—walking down by the river, beating bushes, stomping through mud. There are deer to be spied on, trees to be climbed. On a good day Jenny doesn't find any turtles at all, and just spends her daylight hours stalking through the trees. Finding those two turtles right outside has robbed her of her escape. Really, she ought to go back out, continue her hunt, since her first kills offered no reward. But she won't kill more than two in one day. That's the limit she has given herself. Her gift to the turtles and her conscience alike.

Jenny walks into the kitchen just in time to see Gran slurp down a scrap of turtle meat. Gran always remembers to cook Jenny's meals, but often forgets to cook her own. Or simply prefers them uncooked. Jenny hasn't asked.

"Anna," Jenny's grandmother calls out. "Anna, come help me in the kitchen."

Anna is Jenny's mother. Anna is dead.

Of course, so is Jenny's grandmother. Death has not cured the senility of Gran's old age. Lost limbs are easily re-imagined in their proper place. Cancers simply forgotten. But senility is a trap—Gran must first remember that she is dead, and no longer subject to living ailments before she can reclaim her wits. Senility is a forgetting disease, and the fact of her own death is lost to her. She doesn't remember the failure of her heart three years ago. She doesn't remember the turtle that snatched her soul and swallowed it down. She doesn't remember the butcher's knife that Anna used to free her.

Believing herself to be alive does have advantages. Gran hasn't forgotten how to eat. She hasn't forgotten how to clean the meat from a turtle's bones, or how to cook it into a nourishing soup. She hasn't forgotten that she loves her granddaughter. When she sees Jenny, she smiles.

"Mama's not here, Gran," says Jenny.

"Oh, she's out? Did she go to buy salt?"

"No, Gran. Do we need salt?"

"Can't make soup without salt."

Jenny checks the salt box, and yes, it's empty. She doesn't particularly like going into town. People don't like her there. They don't like how she lives alone. They don't like what she does to the turtles for miles around. But she doesn't dislike going to town either. She prefers it to watching her grandmother suck on strips of raw meat. And there are never any turtles in town; she can leave her knife at home. She pulls an old pair of tennis sneakers from the hall closet and slips them onto her bare feet.

It isn't far—an hour's walk along a paved road. She can easily get there and back before dinnertime. If she were in a hurry, she could take her father's car, as she has done in the past, during the deep cold of winter and the high heat of summer. The townspeople don't like to see an underage girl driving a car, of course, so she always parks at the edge of town and walks the last little way. But today is cool and she's in no hurry. She prefers to walk, just like her mother used to do.

Jenny often walked with Anna on her trips to town. Papa always offered them a ride, but Anna declined, preferring the slow and quiet hike. It was their opportunity to talk together, mother and daughter, away from the rest of the family. Talk about school, about the changing world, about what it felt like to fall in love.

It was on one of these walks that Anna first explained about the turtles, how they swallow ghosts, how the ghosts long to be freed. Jenny was only seven the first time this was explained to her, but she listened attentively. She had seen turtles behind her own house, had seen how swiftly they could snatch a dragonfly from the air. She instinctively understood that they were not to be trusted, not to be taken lightly.

She was ten when Gran died, out by the pond, the worst place a person could die. She had seen Gran's ghost waft up from the corpse, begin to coalesce into human shape, but there were turtles nearby, as there always were in those days. Just as quick as Jenny could blink, Gran had been snapped up and swallowed.

Jenny had cried out for her mother, but Anna wasn't home, she was in town with Papa. Jenny knew the turtle needed to be killed, needed to be opened up so Gran could climb back out. But she had never before done such a thing, had no idea of the process, and no weapon to use. She thought about running for a kitchen knife or for her father's woodcutting axe, but she was terrified to leave the spot, terrified that the turtle would slip away while she wasn't watching, carry her Gran off into the pond and never return. So she sat in that spot, staring at that turtle, keeping it in sight until her parents came home three hours later. Anna had come out the back door after finding the house empty, taken one look at Jenny, the turtle, and her own mother's body lying in the weeds, and immediately understood. Without a word she went back to the house for her knife.

Jenny paid careful attention to the extraction that followed, and learned her lesson well.

Although she still enjoys the walk to town, Jenny finds her own thoughts a poor substitute for her mother's voice. And walking so far in real shoes makes her more aware of her missing toes; the imbalance of her foot against the insole of her shoe is somehow harder

to ignore than the feeling of grass passing through the gaps when her feet are bare. Still, the trip will be worthwhile; it is early, and she comes to town so rarely. She can afford to dally today. There is no need to go straight to the grocery. She hesitates, considering where she might go. She sees the pet store, but she is no longer permitted through that door. The shop owner doesn't believe in ghosts, and so he despises Jenny, believes she should not be permitted near animals of any sort. She misses them, misses the company of creatures she isn't obliged to kill. But that's not something she can explain to the shopkeeper.

Next, she considers the doll shop. Jenny has already lost interest in dolls herself, but thinking of the tiny ghosts in her room, she decides to pay the store a visit. She has bought them gifts in the past, and they enjoyed them, even if they haven't acknowledged Jenny herself. Instead, they pretend that they have just returned from shopping, pretend they have selected their own new furnishings. They debate whether the upholstery matches the carpeting, whether they ought to have purchased service for twelve instead of eight, whether they gave the deliveryman an appropriate tip.

The shop is small, the shelves densely packed with everything a young girl could want in hand-carved miniature home goods. From basic tables and chairs to kitchen appliances, to linens, to lights and electronics. There is a tiny working radio, but it is too expensive. She considers a tiny bassinet, but rejects it quickly—she does not want to encourage the little ghosts to pretend they have a child. It would upset Jenny to watch such a thing. She rejects blenders, brooms, and lawnmowers. She will not trick them into pointless labor.

When she sees a plump armchair with a lever to make it recline, she is reminded of Papa, of his evening relaxation, with his feet up and a book in hand. Jenny takes the chair from the shelf, hoping the little man will enjoy it as much as her father had enjoyed his own. For the little woman, she settles on a claw-footed bathtub. They deserve these small luxuries, the two little people. Jenny is sure of it. Lastly, she looks for something to adorn the bare walls. She chooses a miniature set of paintings by a woman artist from years ago, five tiny images of flowers and bones, soft and lovely.

She takes her intended purchases to the counter and hands them to the shopkeeper. He wraps each piece in tissue paper before placing them gently into a paper bag. She reaches into her pocket, but the shopkeeper won't take her money. He gives her a sad smile and waves the money away. Being an orphan has its advantages too.

It's time for Jenny to finish her chores. She slips into the grocery quietly, not looking at the teenaged cashier, but she knows he's seen her. She knows this boy. He's a little older than she is, a grade ahead of her back when she still went to school. They used to be friends,

she and he. One year ago. Before he was old enough to have a job. Before she was old enough to live alone. They used to eat their lunches together at school. They used to sneak into the movie theater to watch the R-rated movies when their parents thought they were safely asleep in their own houses. They used to kiss each other in the dark and giggle beneath the flickering projector. One year ago.

She used to borrow his bicycle when they had plans, so she wouldn't be gone from her house longer than necessary, and so she wouldn't be walking alone on an unlit and isolated road. She would take it home after school and hide it in the woods by her house, where it waited for her 'til night. As she slipped out her window and down the tree, she'd anticipate the coming ride as much as the forbidden movie, the illicit kisses. She loved whizzing along with no one to know where she was or what she was doing, pedaling with all her might, carefully swerving around the nocturnal creatures whose eyes flashed light from her single headlamp back to her.

She has no bike now. Her parents never bought her one, and it's an extravagance she can't afford. She has electricity to pay for, oil, and gasoline for the car.

And groceries, of course. She quickly selects the items she needs without lingering over them. A pound of salt goes into her cart. A box of English tea. Some carrots and potatoes and beets—Jenny loves the solidity of roots, would make her whole meal of them if Gran would let her. A bottle of cider vinegar and two of cooking oil. Lastly, a bar of chocolate for herself and a small package of crystallized ginger for Gran. She doesn't usually purchase treats, but today she feels indulgent. She has probably purchased too much—her bags will be heavy on her long walk. But she doesn't mind. Her arms are strong.

Jenny brings her items to the register, where the boy she used to kiss silently takes her money. She hands the bills to him with her left hand, the one missing two knuckles of the ring finger and one of the pinky, but he doesn't seem to notice, doesn't indulge her with recoil or gasp, even though she holds her hand out longer than necessary, willing his eyes to leave hers and find instead her bitten hand. He opens his mouth and almost says her name, but then doesn't, and Jenny is glad. She has nothing to say to him. She cannot be his friend anymore. It crosses her mind to go to his house, to steal his bike. To make it hers. She won't do that of course. It's only a hatchling of a thought, and she crushes it down even as it's just emerging. She leaves the store without looking back to see if the boy is watching her go. She won't allow herself to know.

She carries her packages all the way back home again without once stopping to rest.

When Jenny arrives, Gran is out in the garden, tending the tomatoes, turning soil, pulling weeds. Jenny slips quietly into the house. The turtle meat has been moved to the icebox to keep until Gran is ready to cook it. A pot of water sits on the stovetop, waiting to be turned into soup. Jenny puts away the groceries, refills the saltbox, stashes the sweets in the pantry to save for after dinner. Then she heads back up to her bedroom with the gifts she's brought for the inhabitants of her dollhouse.

The room is quieter now, the music boxes having wound down, the dancing ghost now hiding in Jenny's closet, sitting on the floor, trying on all of Jenny's shoes, one after the other. He pays no attention to proper pairing; on his left foot he is wearing a scuffed Mary Jane that hasn't fit Jenny in years. He is in the process of removing a brown leather sandal from his right, in favor of a paisley rain boot. He grins, pleased with his selection.

The ghost of a young woman lies on the bed, asleep, Jenny's old stuffed rabbit clutched to her chest. She turns over abruptly, disturbed by Jenny's entrance, and her hair falls down over her face, eliciting a loud sniff. She buries her face deeper into the pillow, trying to shut out the waning sunlight.

The other three ghosts sit in the corner, muttering to each other. When Jenny enters, they briefly fall silent, look at her suspiciously, then resume their hushed conversation, voices now even lower. They are plotting against her, she knows. She suspects they were powerful men in life, which is why they resent her more than the others. Owing their freedom to a child galls them. But their plots are always frivolous—they have plotted to hide Jenny's bar of soap. To spread strawberry jam on the insoles of her slippers.

Jenny ignores them, turning her attentions to the dollhouse, already beginning to remove her new accessories from the bag as she glances from room to room, seeking out her diminutive tenants. She finds them in the master bedroom. The two little ghosts are having sex. Making love. There is no shyness in them. They lie atop the covers, fully exposed, oblivious to the missing front wall of their home. Jenny is mesmerized, can't help but watch them. The woman lies on her back, knees raised, eyes closed. There is a brief flurry of motion, and suddenly the woman is atop the man, arching her back, grinning and shaking. The grin is infectious, Jenny can't help smiling with the woman, smiling down on her and her partner, but the pair is slowing now, relaxing into each other, collapsing onto the sheets, no longer grinning, just content and quiet. They are soon asleep. Jenny alone is left smiling, though she isn't sure why. She isn't sure why she suddenly wants to cry either, as all the warmth of a moment ago leaves her, and she's left grinning at nothing, foolish and alone.

She quickly distributes the gifts she has brought. She doesn't linger over the task, just slips them into the house quietly, so as not to disturb the now sleeping couple. The tub goes into the upstairs bathroom. The recliner goes into the living room, near the television and the bookcases. The artwork she leaves on the kitchen table. She will let the ghosts decide for themselves where to hang the paintings.

When she turns away from the dollhouse, she finds the sleeping young woman is no longer sleeping. She is sitting up, looking directly at Jenny.

"You're here again," the ghost says.

"I'm always here," says Jenny. "I live here."

"You should knock before you come in," the ghost says. "Don't you know about manners?"

"No," says Jenny. "I don't."

She leaves the ghost in her bed, leaves her bedroom, and returns downstairs to the kitchen.

Gran is washing her hands at the sink, done with her gardening. She has brought some onions from the garden to add to the soup she's making for dinner. She slices the tops and bottoms from the onions, then cuts them in half before removing the bitter skins which she will toss into the compost bin later. As she is about to turn back to her cutting board, she is delighted to spy Jenny by the pantry, watching her cook.

"Oh, Jenny, there you are," she calls. "Have you seen your mother? I need her to go to the store for salt."

"I've just been, Gran. We're all stocked up and I refilled the box."

Gran lifts the lid of the saltbox to peer inside. "Oh, so you did! Such a good girl."

And Jenny *is* a good girl. She spends the whole rest of the evening helping her grandmother in the kitchen. Chopping onions. Slicing carrots. Stirring the soup. They're both quiet as they work. Jenny doesn't need to talk. But it's better to be near a ghost who remembers her. A ghost who knows her name.

Over dinner, Jenny tells of her trip into town. About stopping in the doll shop, about the clever toys she has seen. She tells Gran about the little working radio, and how she plans to save up to buy it. That is a lie, but it's a lie that pleases her grandmother. She loves to hear about the odd little things the world has to offer, even if she'll never see them herself. The soup is delicious, but Gran never raises her spoon to her lips, just stirs it around and around. She's had her fill of turtle already, before the meat ever went into the pot. That's fine too.

They can pretend together. When they have finished, Jenny puts the soup from Gran's bowl into the fridge with the rest of the leftovers.

"I brought you a present, Gran," Jenny says after the dishes have all been washed and put away. She goes to the cabinet and takes out the ginger candy she purchased at the grocery.

"You didn't!" Gran says, so pleased to be thought of.

"It's just some candy, but I thought you'd like it."

Gran takes the package with a great smile. "Oh, ginger!" she says. "That's my favorite! How did you know?"

"I've always known, Gran. I just haven't seen any in a long time."

Gran opens the package carefully, prying the cellophane ring from the container's rim. The lid pops off easily, and she removes a small piece and places it on her tongue. She closes her eyes, savors the sharp, sweet bite.

"It's been years," she says softly. "The last time I had ginger... when was it?"

"I think it was your birthday, Gran," Jenny says, thinking back.

"No, it wasn't then. It was licorice on my birthday. And brittle toffee the birthday before that."

"I guess I can't remember. I don't see it very often."

"It wasn't so long ago, though, I'm certain. It was another day, not my birthday. I was out walking. Oh, it was a beautiful day! I was out back, walking, and I went down to the turtle pond. We both did, we took a walk. There was a lovely breeze, and the air smelled so fresh, so we didn't want to be inside. It was so cool down by the pond. And I lay down in the grass..."

Jenny has erred. She sees that now.

"Jenny? Why would I do that? Why would I lie down in the grass?"

"It was a nice day, Gran. You just wanted to have a nap outside. That's all."

"No, that can't be right. It can't be right. I'm an old woman. I can't lie down on the ground. I wouldn't be able to get up again."

"But you did, Gran. See, you must have. Here you are!"

"No. I didn't, did I?" Gran's mind has never been so clear. "I died."

Jenny is silent. The package of ginger falls to the table-not from her grandmother's hand, but through it. It passes palm and fingers as if nothing were there at all, spilling the golden candy across the table.

"Jenny, you were there. Tell me. Did I die that day?"

"Yes, Gran."

"Where's your mother?"

"She's out. She's not home."

"Oh, Jenny. I remember... I remember a man. A thief." The bite Gran has already swallowed tumbles out from inside her. It strikes the chair beneath her and bounces to the floor.

"I know, Gran."

"He killed them."

"I know."

"Oh, my poor Anna!"

"I know!"

"And he tried to hurt me, before he realized I was already dead. But he didn't hurt you. Thank god, you stayed asleep..."

"I wasn't asleep."

"You never came out of your room..."

"I wasn't in my room."

"Thank God you're okay."

"I wasn't home. I was out. I snuck out after dinner. I went into town, to a movie."

"But Anna... oh, my Anna..."

"I snuck out to see a boy."

"My poor little baby girl..."

"I should have been here to see them die. Should have been here to catch the turtles that took them. But instead I was out kissing a boy. "

"Turtles?"

"They were gone by the time I got back."

"I don't remember turtles..."

"I never saw them, and now I can't find them. I don't know where they went." And now Jenny is crying, as she hasn't done in months.

"Jenny, I don't remember any turtles. They were inside. They died in the house. There couldn't have been any turtles."

"There must have been! There must have been turtles. Or else where are they? Where else would they have gone? Why would they leave me here?"

"Sometimes they do, Jenny," Gran says. "Sometimes they just do. Not everyone can stay."

"They wouldn't just go," says Jenny, but Gran isn't listening now, just crying, they're both crying. It is Gran who stops crying first, not because she has cried herself out, but because she has cried herself to sleep, right there at the table, sitting upright in her chair. Jenny lets her sleep a few moments, long enough to dry her own tears, long enough to settle herself back into the present. Then she sweeps the ginger from the table back into its tub. She cleans the chewed bit from the floor, returns it to the tub as well, then stashes all of it back in the cabinet. She lightly touches her grandmother's shoulder, rousing her. Gran opens her eyes and she smiles at her granddaughter.

"Oh, I dozed off at the table again, didn't I? Such a foolish old woman."

"Why don't you go to bed, Gran?"

"Is your mother home yet?"

Jenny doesn't want to answer. But, of course, she must.

"Not yet, Gran. She'll be home late."

"I suppose I can't wait up the way I used to. She's a grown woman, after all. I shouldn't worry so."

"She understands. She knows you love her. But you should sleep."

"Well, would you ask her to wake me when she gets in? Only so I'll know she's here. I'll sleep better if I know she's home."

"I'll ask her, Gran. I promise."

"Such a good girl. Have a good night then. Don't stay up too late."

"I won't."

Jenny watches her grandmother slowly head off toward bed, waits for her to pass out of sight. Then she removes the package of candy from the cabinet and slips out the back door. Down past the garden, across the grass, all the way to the turtle pond. She tosses the candy into the water, all of it, every little piece. She won't buy any more, won't bring any more into the house.

She won't make that mistake again.



Alexander Danner's speculative fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Machine of Death* and *The Girl at the End of the World* as well as in the audio magazine *Bound Off*. His comics writing has appeared most recently in the anthology *Colonial Comics: New England, 1620-1750*. He is co-author of the textbook *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present*. He also currently serves as president of The Writers' Room of Boston, a non-profit organization providing secure, affordable workspace to Boston-area writers. His comics can be found online at TwentySevenLetters.com.

The House of Ninety-Nine Secrets

Kurt Hunt

"The nurse says I can stay long enough for a story," I say, gripping the edge of the chair next to your bed.

The air-conditioning—too cold in these places, it's ridiculous—keeps blowing a loose strand of hair into your eyelashes. You blink and lift a small hand, so slowly, I can't believe how slowly, but I grab your fingers and smile.

"I'll take care of it, you just relax."

As I tuck the wayward curl beneath the elastic band holding the mask to your face—too tight, I think, but the nurses swear it's on right—I can feel your fever creep into my fingertips, feel the sweat beading there. And I can see by your expression that my face changed in that moment, that you glimpsed the deep whirl of rage and fear and sadness I hide from you. All I can do is smile again and tell the story and hope you're too young to have learned how to worry as much as your parents. I find no comfort in that thought.



The way people tell it, it was Gus's idea to build the House That Woke, even though he'd never built anything more complicated than a bookshelf.

"I'm so bored, Evie," he said, just a few days after retiring. "I want to wake up knowing that I'm going to do something that matters, that I'm not just going to sit around this place all day."

"But our little house is so nice," said Evie. She enjoyed the garden and the way the sun cut the perfect angle across the breakfast nook when they had coffee together in the morning. But Gus was restless and she loved him so she kissed him and relented.

It took them almost five years, from foundation and frame to pipes and wires to walls and windows and, finally, the finishing touches: oiled wood floors and a sign on the door that read "Gus'n'Evie." It was a bit crude, maybe even ugly, but it was theirs and they grew to love it.

But they didn't understand it. Not at first.



One night, months after they moved in and Gus proclaimed himself to be more content than he'd ever been in his whole life, Evie sat up straight in bed, her heart pounding.

"Gus." She looked around, frantic. There was nothing but moonlight in the room.

"Gus, wake up."

"Mmm?"

"Gus, is that you making that noise?"

"Mmm? Gdasleep Evie..."

So Gus slept and Evie stayed up and listened to the rhythm of the air gliding in and out and in and out and into the room as if it were an enormous lung.

The next night, Evie stretched on the bed and shook her head and smiled at Gus, who was already snoring. But as the soft fingers of sleep began to caress her—

ba-DUM

Evie leapt up and flipped the light switch. Gus reared from the bed like an animal, eyes clenched against the sudden brightness.

ba-DUM

They froze.

They waited.

ba-DUM

"Must be the house settling?" said Gus, but even as he spoke he grabbed the baseball bat from under the bed and crept out to the hall.

It was empty. But the sound—

ba-DUM

—continued. Gus gripped hard on the bat and jumped into the living room, prepared for burglars or a deer rampaging through the kitchen or *something*. But there was nothing. Nothing but—

ba-DUM

—the sound.

"Hello?" called Gus.

"HELLO?" a voice responded. A booming voice, crashing like waves against a cliffside shore, sweeping on him and around him and over him.

Gus dropped the bat.

"Wh—" he said. "Who's there? Where are you?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Evie huddled against the wall, wide-eyed and unmoving. The thump echoed hollow again through the House and they both flinched.

"Hello?" said Gus again.

"HELLO," the voice boomed. "I AM SORRY. HAVE I DISTURBED YOU? I SHALL ASPIRE TO BE QUIET."

The echoes of the voice faded. The *ba-DUM* could no longer be heard except as a faint tapping.

"Who are you?" said Evie, sprinting tiptoe across the living room to stand by her husband.

"I seem to be your house," replied the voice, steady now and smooth.

"But how are..." Gus pushed his hands against the sides of his head. "How?"

"I don't know. I just woke like this."

In truth, although neither Gus nor Evie nor even the House knew it, everyone who tells the story agrees—Gus had built his restlessness into the House. Into every nail, and into every piece of wood. And as Gus and Evie settled into their new home, the House became unsettled.

"So..." said the House.

There was an awkward silence.

So that was how Gus and Evie met the House That Woke.



A machine next to you, one of many, clicks on and begins whirring and cranking like a tiny factory. Fluid drips again through loops of plastic tubing and I trace it with my eyes, this medicinal roller coaster, down and up and around, behind the mattress and then curling up to the IV, secured by a piece of tape that wraps all the way around your tiny elbow. Your eyelids flutter—the doctors warned us this part would always hurt—but still you smile for me and it makes my heartbeat call out through the entire world, shaking the walls and the floors like the sound in the story.

"I'll speak up," I say, "so you can hear me over that thing."



For a time, the novelty of being awake kept the House occupied.

"Look at my windows!" it said with delight, opening and closing them sometimes one at a time, sometimes all at once.

"Yes, House," said Evie, looking up from her book. "That's very nice."

"And my chimney is lovely," it said, puffing smoke into a clear blue sky.

But as the days passed, the House grew more and more used to these things and grew more and more quiet. After many days of silence, the House announced: "I'm bored."

Evie chuckled. Gus just rolled his eyes.

"Aren't there birds dancing on top of you?" Evie said.

"Yes."

"Isn't that interesting?"

"Birds are boring."

Gus and Evie exchanged a look.

The House sighed, shooting a gust of air through the rooms that tangled Evie's hair and scattered Gus's newspaper.

That evening—not everyone tells this part of the story, but I think you'll like it—that evening, the House moaned and giggled. "Oh Evelyn," it said when she asked if it was okay. "I feel very strange."

She patted a nearby doorframe to reassure it. "What's wrong?"

"Well, it feels like, unnnh, like there's..." The House's voice trailed off. Evie started to speak again, to ask if she could help, when the House shrieked so loud the floor vibrated, and every door, window, cabinet, and drawer banged open and close, echoing like cannonfire.

"House!" Evie pulled her hand away from the doorframe just in time to keep her fingers from being crushed. "HOUSE!"

Gus jumped from his chair, hands over his ears, and shouted, "What is your problem?"

"It—" The House, which didn't need to breathe, sounded breathless. "In the... chimney... tickle... tickles in my chimney."

Over the sounds of slamming wood and the panicked giggle-shrieks of the House, Gus yelled, "Alright, alright already." He scooped up a flashlight and shoved an arm inside the fireplace up to the elbow. The House moaned again and began to emit a high-pitched hissing noise like the nervous intake of breath.

"Careful Gus," said Evie, resting a hand on his shoulder.

Gus clenched the flashlight between his teeth and waved her back. "Itsh hfine, Eewie, it'w we hfine."

The House wasn't reassured. "Oh my god be gentle with my flue!" it screeched, but Gus had already yanked the lever and a huge raccoon scabbled down, all fur and claws, and bolted across the living room trailing clouds of ash behind it. Gus cursed. Evie laughed. The House let out a sigh of relief before demanding that they get it out, get-it-out-get-it-out.



"Do you remember when that raccoon got in our garage last summer?"

I laugh, remembering the way I shrieked and jumped on the hood of the car and pulled you up behind me. We sat there for over an hour, thumb-wrestling and telling jokes until I thought to reach into the car window and hit the garage door opener."

"It was so funny, the way it ran." I puff out my cheeks and rock from side to side in imitation.

You crinkle your eyes some. That means "yes" these days.



From then until after sunset, Gus chased the raccoon from room to room with the baseball bat, and all the while the House berated him.

"Have you *seen* the things that climb around on a house?" it said. "Do you know what you're inviting in without a chimney cap?"

"Shut up, House," said Gus through gritted teeth, crouched and circling toward the bedroom closet in yet another attempt to corner the intruder.

"It's not just raccoons, you know. Mice. Squirrels. Birds. Even bats!"

"I said shut up, House!"

The raccoon skittered under the bed and back to the hallway, well out of striking distance.

"Hell."

"Bats, Gus!"

"Dang it, House, just shut up!"

Finally, Gus admitted defeat and Evie took pity on them. She lured the raccoon with an apple core and trapped it in a pair of laundry baskets. Within five minutes it was shambling up the hillside and into the shadow of the tree line.

The House seemed content after that, and carried on about the "exciting beast" for almost a week before lapsing again into a tense stillness.

"Hey, I know what would be fun," it said after days of not speaking, even in response to Evie's "good mornings" and "good nights."

"Hi House, welcome back," said Evie. "What would be fun?"

"I'd like to explore."

"You don't have any legs, House," said Gus, scowling and balling up his newspaper. "You can't explore."

"Well," said the House, clicking its window locks back and forth in thought. "Maybe you could make more of me, then we'd all have something new to do."

"Hmm." Gus tossed the ball of paper from one hand to the other as the House's restless urgency seeped into him. He looked around the room, the same old room, quietly drumming his feet. "Maybe an addition *would* be nice."

Evie sighed. She'd grown fond of the House, just as it was.

"Okay, House," said Gus. "What do you have in mind?"

The House clapped its doors with excitement. "Hallways," it said. "Mysterious, magical hallways. With ninety-nine new doors."

Gus whistled. "Ninety-nine?"

"Yeah, it has to be ninety-nine," said the House. "Ninety-nine is a good mysterious number. And behind each door, I'll put a secret."



You're trying to sit up and say something, but you really shouldn't.

"Lay down," I say, gently guiding your head back to the pillow, careful to keep the tubes untangled. "Just listen and you'll find out."



"What kind of secret?"

"I have no idea. They're secrets! That's what will make it all so interesting to explore."

"Hm."

For another three-or-so years while Evie hummed alone in the garden and read and cooked, Gus toiled. Guided by the House, he built five hallways stacked on top of each other, each connected with a staircase that spiraled up like a vine, and each lined with twenty doors that led to no rooms (except for the top hallway, which had only nineteen doors that led to no rooms). And behind each door the House put a secret so secret that not even it knew what it was (or so it claimed).

So that was how the House That Woke got its ninety-nine doors and its ninety-nine secrets.



In most versions of the story, Evie opened the first door at Gus's prompting. She hesitated—"Don't you want to open it?"—but he kissed her and insisted.

"It'll be fun," he said. "Promise!"

The knob turned easily and the door swung inward to reveal a room twice as big as the entire House. Long wooden tables filled it from end to end, and on each table were lamps, all dark. Sconces of myriad designs hung on the walls, made of stone and greening copper and steel. Chandeliers swayed from chains, ropes, and cords at every height, some scraping the tabletops, others nestled so high against the honey-colored beadboard ceiling that they couldn't be seen from the doorway.

Gus and Evie stood and looked for a long, long time.

Finally, Evie spoke. "How is..." She backed into the hallway then stepped into the room again. "Gus? How is this room so big?"

Gus frowned. "These doors are all flush against the walls." He reached over and held her hand. "Evie, there *are* no rooms."

"House? Where are we?"

The House didn't respond, but one by one the lights in the room began to flick on and off in sequence—two seconds of illumination from a single source followed by a brief pause, then two more seconds of light from the next source. Then another breath of darkness, another light, and so on across every table, every wall, and every bulb suspended from the

ceiling. And as the lamps cycled, and as the shadows leapt first one way, then another, the House began to giggle and sing in delight.

"I'm so bright and beautiful!" it said.

Gus and Evie watched the entire sequence before interrupting.

"House," said Evie, "you still haven't answered. How is there a room here?"

"Who knows?" said the House cheerfully, experimenting with radiant patterns that spiraled and scrolled across the walls. "It's a secret. Best not to think too hard about it."

Sometimes people tell of the thousand-dollar electricity bill they received the next month. But some people don't believe utility bills belong in fairy tales, so you don't always hear about those kinds of details.



As the months and years went on, Gus and Evie opened more doors, each time at the House's prompting. The secrets behind the doors vary from story to story. Sometimes they're poignant, sometimes they're funny, but they're always different because they're ultimately unimportant.

In some versions, they find only an empty room or one in which gravity is reversed and they walk on the ceiling, stepping carefully over exposed beams. In other versions, they find a crocodile in a bowler hat that speaks only in Zen koans ("If you think you really come and go," says the crocodile in that story, "that is your delusion. Let me show you the path on which there is no coming and no going."). Often, one of the rooms contains a bank vault overflowing with hundred dollar bills or a Palmer oak that grows one acorn-sized diamond per day or a gold mine manned by tiny and subservient supernatural creatures. Some people love stories about money.

There's always at least one dangerous room. A room filled with water that rushes out and floods the House as soon as the door opens, or one filled with hornets packed so close together that their wings are pasted, wet and immobile, to their sides. In the old days, people told how Gus saved Evie but lately it's more common to hear it the other way.

The House was full of secrets—ninety-nine in the story, but, in reality, infinite. You can dream about any of them.



The machine is beeping now, loud and insistent, and I hit the call button immediately. Your eyes are bigger, but only just—mostly you look tired.

No one is here so I hit the call button again and jog to the door, trying to conceal the panic corkscrewing through me, but the nurse walks in and the first thing she does is laugh.

"Again?" she says, and walks to the bed tut-tutting. Her smile is huge and genuine. It's one of the only things that makes me feel like a normal person when I'm here, and I hope it makes you feel the same way too. Like just a kid.

"This thing keeps getting twisted," the nurse says, untangling the IV line and clipping it to the bed controls. "There, that ought to keep it in place since this—" she taps you on the nose—"little wiggle worm doesn't want to stay still. And look at all this sweat!"

I hold you while she changes the sheets; you used to hold on to my neck when I did this and I would swing you up, up like a pirate ship at the carnival, but carrying you today feels like carrying a wet towel. I want to hug you, but I'm afraid it would only hurt so I just stand like a piece of furniture while the nurse finishes and leaves and I can put you back into this enormous bed and envelop you in its sheets.

"There," I say. "Better?"

You nod, just barely but enough.



After many years, the House began to complain again about being bored despite the constant discoveries in its new and numerous secret rooms. Evie tried to cheer it up, but Gus mostly ignored it and her. He spent his days examining the many rooms they had discovered, like a man looking for a sandwich on the moon.

Then one morning he awoke to total silence.

"Evelyn!" He paused and listened to the nothing. "Evie, hey Evie!"

But she didn't respond.

"House, is Evie home?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

The House didn't answer.

"Pfff."

So Gus walked the long, narrow halls of the House That Woke, calling out for his wife. It took him many hours—he didn't walk so fast anymore—and when he reached the cul-de-sac at the very end of the very last hall with no sign of Evie, he sank down onto a chair and rested his head in his hands. He wasn't sure if it was night or day; there were no windows in this hallway, no clocks.

"The heck..." he muttered, scuffing his slippers back and forth.

"Perhaps open a door?" asked the House.

"What?"

"You never know what you'll find."

So Gus opened a door to a room filled with dozens of crows, perched on the walls, flying and pecking each other. Their cries overwhelmed him and he fell back against a wall and watched for long minutes as they fled the room, a storm of black feathers and claws escaping down the stairs. The emptied room, coated in the cracked white refuse of the flock, stank like a farm in summer and Gus retreated down the hall.

"Perhaps another?"

"House, where is she?"

"Perhaps another, Gus."

The next door opened into a massive cavern of ice. And there, curled in the center of the floor, still and white as the ice itself, was Evie.

Some say she was dead; some say she was asleep. But the way that everyone tells it, Gus ran out of the room in a frenzy and Evie never spoke a word in that House again. When Gus returned only minutes later, the cavern was empty.

So that was how Gus lost Evie.



There were dark days for Gus after that.

"Gus?" said the House. "Aw, Gus."

But Gus stayed quiet and refused to set foot in the hallways with the doors and their many secrets, even as the House nudged and cajoled.

"Maybe you should open another door," said the House. "Sometimes secrets come at just the right time."

Gus sat, head between his knees, hands on his head. But the restlessness grew.

"Just one door, Gus. We have nothing better to do."

Everything stretched out long, endless before him, and he deflated. "Fine. Fine, House. One door."

The room was small, almost a closet. Dark maple floors abutted brick walls, the mortar crumbling even as he watched, first in little flakes of dust, then in marble-sized chunks that tumbled like a miniature avalanche. There was no ceiling.

On the floor, curled at the edges with age, lay a piece of paper.

Gus picked it up and read it. His hands trembled.

"What's it say?" The House flickered the lights in its excitement, but Gus stayed quiet, staring. "Come on, Gus, it's been weeks since we did this. What's it say, what's it say?"

Breath came slow then filled him the way a sunrise fills a valley. "It says," he said, "She Is Behind A Door."

"Oo, good secret."

"She's behind a door."

"You just said—Gus. Gus!"

But Gus was already in the hall, deaf with hope and tearing at the handle of the next door, and the next, and the next. Inside were wonderful things: a human cannonball frozen in mid-air; a cliff-side looming over an ocean of mercury; an obese caterpillar flying a kite made of smaller caterpillars; things different in every version of the story. But none of them were her.

So he moved like a clock hand down the hall, secret after secret revealed and stacked atop each other like coins. Each failed him and each failure was more crushing, wrenched harder, than the last.

As he ran to the end of the final hallway, to the final door, hobbling on his bad knee but heedless of the pain, resilient as all heroes should be, the House flexed its floorboards down, then up, and Gus hit the ground like a dead man. He didn't move, barely even heard the breath rattling in his lungs. He just waited.

"Gus..."

The House's voice was soft. Even timid?

"Gus, you've got to slow down. We're not even enjoying the stuff you're discovering. Did you know that the monkey we saw three doors back is, at this very moment, performing slam poetry with the ghost of Rimbaud? Or that the door next to them contains a river so long it loops its world and runs parallel to itself, not once but four times?"

"Who cares, House? None of those were her."

"None of them *need* to be her! It's us now. Just us. And look at all these amazing things we've found. Look at the gifts we built ourselves!"

Gus kicked his feet at the floor and shouted. "Do you really think those things matter? Do you think people look back and say, 'Gee, I wish I had more gifts and secrets and adventures?'"

"But there's so much to explore—"

"No! They don't! They think about the person that mattered most to them, and they say, 'I would give anything, *anything*, for one more day with that person.'" Gus pulled himself to his feet. "Keep your secrets, House. I'm gonna go find Evie." He steadied himself with both hands against the wall and he began to walk.

"Gus. Gus, if you go through this last door, it's over. You can't ever come back." The House howled and whipped the hallway up and down like a rope bridge in a storm, but Gus walked on. "Gus! We won't even be able to enjoy all the secrets you've left laying around! ... And I'll be *alone*, Gus."

The floor shuddered one last time and became still; the warped boards clutched each other and groaned.

"... Gus?"

Gus shook his head, the doorknob cool in his hand, and he stepped through the last door and left the House forever.



But every story has different endings. In every version of this story, everyone agrees: the House That Woke was left alone and empty. What it did next is a different story entirely.

As for Gus and Evie, it depends on who you ask, and when. Some people tell it like a cautionary tale, like this:



Gus stepped across the threshold into a cold, barren room with a single door in it. The door behind him was gone. "Evie!" he called. He opened the door and ran and found, through that

door, another door, and through that door, another door, and through that door, another door, and through that door, another door, and through that door...



You get the idea. But there's another version, a newer version that I think you'll like more and that I think is probably more true.



Gus stepped across the threshold and immediately shielded his eyes against brilliant sunlight that filtered and flickered through the luscious green-glass leaves of maple trees. Disoriented, he pivoted; the door behind him was gone. But before him, across the ocean of grass speckled with ladybugs and hummingbirds, through the undulating scent of the magnolias, was their old house, with its old porch, and on it an old woman, waving and smiling and calling out words that were eaten by air.

"Evie!" he cried, and he went to her.



You give me a little thumbs up, your breath clouding the mask so all I can see is your eyes and your hair and your arms sticking out from beneath the sheets the way driftwood sticks out of a beach. I kiss you on your head.

"Go to sleep, sweetheart," I say, but I hate that you sleep here, I hate returning from our little shared worlds to this one with its biopsies and white walls and framed paintings of balloons. "I love you."

And your eyes close. The fluorescent lighting becomes an ocean and submerges me and for a terrible moment I can find no air. But your face is serene. I can just watch you now, the way your chest rises, the way the heat has colored your cheeks, the way your hairline looks just like your mother's and your eyes look just like mine, and I hope you enjoyed the story and I hope you understand that life is not just a series of things that happen to us and I hope you understand, somehow, about the joy of stillness and the value of what you have and

I hope you're dreaming now about doors and secrets and crocodiles in silly hats and home, especially home, and love and love and love, and I hope you know that we will too, that we will always dream about you and this time with you and your love, and your love, and your love.



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Kurt Hunt is, in no particular order, a father, a lawyer, a husband, a human, and a daydreamer. Sometimes he writes things, but usually he doesn't. Kurt grew up in Michigan. These days, his body is usually in an office, but his heart is in the Hebrides.

The Adventures of Captain Contempt in Mixed Media Installations

Ian Creasey

The gallery is a smooth, sleek ocean liner of a building, delivering its cargo of culture to posterity. Smog disfigures the white stone like an encrustation of barnacles. I reckon the pollution is overdue for cleansing, both outside and within.

The evening sun throws long shadows pointing the way. There's been so much interest in Clark's new show that preview tickets were allocated in shifts, and Clark has given me the final slot, just before the opening party. Presumably this is so I'll have less time to write my review—a feeble ploy.

Outside the gallery, a giant billboard shows Clark looking as fabulous as always with his neatly trimmed stubble, baby-hedgehog hair, presidential chin, and 'Come up and see my etchings' smile. Underneath there are adulatory quotes from everyone except me. As I approach, Clark's eyes track my steps, and the billboard speaks.

"Hello, Captain. Have you stocked up with fresh invective?"

Clark's nickname for me is Captain Contempt. I'm flattered to be a superhero critic, armed with barbed comments and cutting insight—and it's a jazzier byline than Neil Brown—but the tag implies I'm always negative.

"I don't automatically hate everything you do," I protest.

"You have to see it first," he says, deadpan.

"Exactly. I visit your shows fresh, open-minded, equally ready to throw a bouquet or throw up."

In the billboard picture, Clark catches a bunch of flowers. "Thanks. I'm sure you'll see this show as my most absorbing yet."

"That wouldn't be saying much," I retort.

"You never do say much," he replies. "Though you say it very well."

I'm tempted to blast him with vitriol, scouring his flesh to expose the grinning, empty skull beneath—the death of art. But his face is too handsome to mar. I content myself with ageing the flowers until they droop into faded glory. If only I could wither Clark's career so easily. Not waiting to see his response, I walk past the billboard to the gallery door.

I step inside. The gallery is brightly lit, a blank white space. I glance round once, twice. It's empty! Clark has finally taken minimalism to the ultimate.

The first impression is important—most art, especially Clark's, is so banal that it doesn't produce a second—so I make some notes. "The Emperor's New Show. Its content reflects Oliver Clark's talent: zero. Yet this is the first show of his career that I can applaud, for it has surely killed nihilism. Where can it go after this? How can artists do any less, except by staying in bed and never exhibiting at all? (I commend this course to Mr Clark.) What can they do now—start producing real art? For that you need skill, vision, discipline: everything the New Nihilists lack."

It's a rough sketch, something to build on. People think it's easy to be a critic, but after years of seeing shape and color tortured into every conceivable combination, it can be difficult to summon any response beyond a verbal shrug. Still, I never have any difficulty reviewing Oliver Clark, or disparaging celebrity based on soundbites and good looks.

As I walk further into the gallery, I tread on something soft and squishy. How appropriate. At these moments you usually find you've trodden in shit, and here I am in Clark's latest show. I look down, and find I have only stepped on some polythene, a ball of discarded shrinkwrap. It must be part of the show, or it would have been removed. I make another note: "What do I think of it so far? Rubbish!" Still, I'm glad there's something here. A completely empty show could have been a sensation, when hyped by easily seduced critics—of whom I am not one. I'm outside the consensus pissing in.

Near the polythene I notice a clear glass jar. And another, and a few more. I bend down to examine them, but they resist analysis. Empty, no lids, no labels. They look sterile, as if they've never held turpentine *or* flowers. There's not even a dried shred of marmalade clinging to a rim.

I nearly kick another jar as I stand up again. It's hard to see anything in here. The floor, walls and ceiling shine a brilliant white from all surfaces. There are no shadows, and any reflections disappear in the uniform glow. I jump like a horror film ingénue when something brushes my head. It's a cluster of transparent balloons. Their texture is clammy and repulsive, like the caress of a lecherous ghost. As I escape their ectoplasmic embrace, I stumble and my feet get soaked. There's a recess in the floor filled with still water, back-lit and camouflaged.

The gimmick is clear: the gallery's full of invisible stuff. I find a low glass table further in. Careful not to break anything, I kneel for a closer look, with the passive, reverential, *Don't Touch* attitude expected for art. It's as if our eyes are the only senses we have, all the others long atrophied. After all, voyeurs only need eyes. But this blank show makes us conscious of looking.

Maybe Clark's got something here, though it's hard to tell. This is why I hate five-minute minimalism. The less the artist puts into their creation, the more the spectators must project their own meaning onto the Rorschach exhibition.

So, let's interpret. Here's a glass of vodka, which might well have come from one of Clark's after-show parties. Its appearance here could assert that parties are invisible, and don't affect reputations. Posterity will judge the work, and this diamond says that Clark's work will last forever.

Next there's a pen, a cheap biro made of clear plastic, which appears to be full of water, or perhaps invisible ink. This could be a dig at me: Clark saying that my words are invisible, futile; and the balloons implying I'm full of hot air. The whole show could be aimed at me—I can't see anything because my eyes are fallible, my views are wrong. I can't see Clark's genius.

But I can see through this transparent nonsense. Other people would generate their own interpretations, seeing the glass of vodka as hidden alcoholism, or the shrinkwrap polythene as our throwaway society. In a show like this, anything can represent anything else. It's a luxury only allowed to artists. If my reviews were lists of random words in which the reader could find any meaning they liked, I'd be accused of laziness and piffle.

Unlike Clark, I have to decide what I mean, then say it. I wonder what to write about this show. On the one hand, it's a trivial gimmick that only needs me to say, "Move along! There's nothing to see." On the other hand, it illustrates the operation of the senses, like a video of John Cage's *4'33"* composition.

Is there any more? I walk away from the table, and near the far wall I bump into something: a large sheet of glass. I turn left and soon hit another obstacle. There's a corner in the barrier, so I have to turn left again. Then I find I've been travelling down a dead-end, and must turn round.

I feel like a lab rat approaching a food pellet or an electric shock. Again I hit an invisible wall. Haven't I encountered four walls, four right-angles? And I may be stronger on art than science, but doesn't that make a box?

I walk round again, running my fingers along the glass, but there's no break. I have been soundlessly enclosed. Technology has enabled some terrible installation art, and even worse interactive art, but this is something else. My feelings swing between irritation and grudging admiration. The show is gimmicky, but art is supposed to surprise, to shock. I still reserve the right to hate it—I'll need to work out my snappy put-downs—but I have to admit that Clark's come up with something.

What, though? What's next?

It's hard to breathe in here. It might just be claustrophobia, but I fear Clark may be drawing my attention to something else that's invisible. Air...

I suffer a pang of panic, convinced he resents my criticism enough to suffocate me. I'm terrified—I can't breathe!—yet, for a brief moment I can't help feeling flattered. This will make my reputation. Posthumously.

I force myself to take slow deep breaths, and gradually I calm down. A flicker catches my eye. Outside my prison, something emerges from the floor. It's a transparent table, with wine glasses and clear plastic plates. There's a large bowl of something: jelly, probably. Invisible drinks are easy, but invisible food is trickier.

This is why I was given the last preview slot, just before the opening party. I look to the door, and see a horde of people coming in. After so long straining my eyes to see transparent exhibits, the party guests look hyper-solid, as if occupying more than three dimensions. The men wear architectural hats—towers, skyscrapers, pyramids—and Paisley shirts, Hawaiian shirts, or no shirts at all, with animated tattoos advertising their latest lovers, latest works. Women's close-fitting costumes have been sprayed onto contoured physiques, with cutaways exposing shiny body-jewellery on hips and buttocks: this season's fetish zones.

Everyone heads straight for the tables to fuel themselves on drink. That done, they begin the serious business of networking, exchanging handshakes and air kisses and promises to call. The more old-fashioned artists give out paperweight sculptures, maquettes for forthcoming projects, or miniatures of their best-known work. The New Nihilists just have business cards.

Most of the guests have already seen the show, or haven't come for the art, but some take another look round. The exhibition won't survive the party: they'll break the jars, burst the balloons, and fall into the pool. Not that I care.

Inevitably, a few people approach my glass enclosure. Some cultivate a connoisseur's frown; others have the easy-going smile that lasts just as long as the free drinks. I try to look as dignified as I can, but I'm too embarrassed to meet anyone's eye. Yet I soon realise there's no danger of that. The guests avoid my gaze, affecting not to see me.

That's the point. The gallery is full of invisible stuff. Clark has put me here to say that I am invisible too: no-one pays any attention to me.

I can't deny the truth of this. Despite all my criticism, Clark's career keeps snowballing—the faster he goes downhill, the bigger he gets. It's humiliating to be ignored.

Here in his glass case I feel like a bust of Cassandra relegated to a museum basement, only ever regarded by the cleaner who dusts me. I might as well not exist.

And yet if Clark has gone to the trouble of arranging all this, he must have been piqued by my last critique. I've finally grabbed his attention.



Clark always rations his ideas to a maximum of one per show. His previous exhibition was a vapid collection of big shiny blocks, whose spiritual home was the car park of a multinational's head office. The perfectly mirrored surfaces were only visible by the reflections they cast. Clark could Midas anything into art, even a fairground mirror, just by putting it in a gallery.

As always, the party afterwards was the main event, the wake by art's corpse. The dull exhibits were relegated to obstacles around which customised waiters carried trays of wine, highs and zero-calorie food. The waiters had the faces of famous artists—Duchamp, Warhol, Hirst—posthumously press-ganged as cupbearers to Clark's ego. Phones trilled their mating calls, as roving gatecrashers conferred on rival venues, converging on the party with the most drinks, drugs, and ogles. Many would come here: Clark always ensured that his party was the best one to be at, to be seen at.

I stood by the door with a big box of green spectacles, handing them out to everyone who entered. It had seemed a good joke when I cooked it up, but I hadn't realised people might not get the reference. Maybe that's why art is so superficial in the multicultural age: no shared vocabulary to draw upon. I kept having to say, "The Wizard of Oz is a humbug! Don't be dazzled!" I felt like a street evangelist reviling the Devil, knowing that hardly anyone listened. Some people took the glasses, but few put them on. When the box was empty I donned my own pair and went in.

The green glasses projected a percept overlay, distilled from my opinions. Wearing them, I entered a desolate wasteland where the Mona Lisa had once smiled and burning giraffes roamed no more. The landscapes had long eroded, and the portraits were all dead. Even the abstracts that killed them had faded now. There was nothing left. The mirrored objects were holes in the air, sucking art and soul from the party-goers, who chattered and flirted while their imprisoned images screamed.

The exhibition's centrepiece was a statue of Clark, cast as a perfect mirror. In the overlay everyone bowed down before it; the statue was a mosaic of their obeisant reflections, Clark only the sum of his worshippers.

Around me I heard his claque spinning him another triumph. "The chrome represents our obsession with surface appearances, and the distorted reflections show that it's impossible to see anything as it truly is." "The chrome is the glittering future, our longing for shiny new gadgets." "It's really neat, huh?"

I refused to add my voice to the chorus of approval. When Clark first got himself noticed, I thought he was just another micro-fad. His early champions were the kind of critics who discover seven Next Big Things before breakfast. But his networking skills and camera-friendly looks gave his bandwagon enough momentum that practically everyone felt obliged to hop on board. I'd hoped it would stall when everyone realised his work didn't add up to much. However, that was itself the gimmick. And everyone embraced the New Nihilism because no-one wanted to be left holding yesterday's zeitgeist—just as no-one at his parties wore last season's clothes.

Grey was the new black, and beige was the new grey. Watching the partying freeloaders, I decided that the difference between nihilism and minimalism was that nihilists were allowed to accessorise. Pharmed human skin was still in vogue, but it was passé for gloves and handbags to match their owners—now they had exotic tans and decorative cancers. Chameleonic outfits changed to stand out from the crowd, or blend into it; the cheaper ones were confused by the mirrors and kept cycling through their repertoire.

The socialisers included everyone who was anyone, and plenty who were no-one, together with several of Clark's ex-lovers, of both sexes, still in thrall to his charm. I was glad to see a few guests wearing my glasses, and laughing at the overlay. As word of the prank spread, the commotion summoned Clark himself to investigate.

Clark, the star of the moment, glowed with influence. He wore a suit of finest compliments, his hair lacquered with praise. How classically handsome he was! The overlay caricatured him as Michelangelo's David animated by Ray Harryhausen, a stunning monster dressed to kill. His reflection did not appear in the mirrored exhibits. As the party-goers mobbed him, he mutated into a vast, fleshy idol weighed down by worshippers scrambling to suck his teat-penises.

Clark's assistants, who constructed all his work, appeared as cute little cupids in leather and sunglasses, wearing the chunky gold jewellery of pimps. One of them gave him a

pair of the glasses. He glanced through them to appraise the effect, and handed them back with a fastidious shudder.

He frowned at me. "You must have prepared these in advance," he accused. "It's a poor critic who judges the show before seeing it—I thought better of you than that."

I'd anticipated this objection. I brought out a sticker and slapped it onto the nearest exhibit. The sticker was a large gold star reading '10/10'.

"I was prepared for praise," I said. "But I didn't think it would be required, and it isn't." I reached into the sticker and dialled it down to a brown turd, 0/10.

Clark laughed. "Ah, the new binary criticism—Love/Hate, Hot/Not. Detailed analysis is such a chore, isn't it?"

Acknowledging the point, I dialled the sticker up to 2/10, a dunce's cap. "Okay, I was a bit harsh. These mirrored objects, although uninteresting in themselves, do reflect the secret of your success." I indicated the crooked reflections of the party around us. The guests weren't completely ignoring the art: someone was snorting cocaine from one mirrored plinth. "You put far more effort into your after-show parties than into the shows themselves. The growth of your reputation just proves your genius for publicity."

He peeled off the sticker, then stepped up to me and removed my green glasses. The momentary touch of his finger made my pulse hammer. He placed the 2/10 sticker on my glasses, and gave them a reproachful look. "So much ingenuity wasted on carping. You're far too young to be a crabby old critic—why don't you express yourself constructively and become an artist?"

I smiled. "Why don't you?"

He looked more hurt than the jibe deserved. "I do my best," he said. "I'd hoped you'd like this show."

He still stood close to me, and I was acutely aware of his presence. His expensive fragrance was far removed from the whiff of paint and white spirit I thought an artist should exude. The chrome abstract loomed before us, its mirrored concavity exaggerating his stature. Behind our own reflections, the party guests circulated in a whirl of shape and colour.

I pointed at them. "You've already conquered most of the art world. Do you really need to mop up the resistance?"

Clark said, "They hitch a ride on every passing bandwagon, but do you think I care for the crowd's roar? Seducing tarts is no challenge. I crave approval that's harder to win. I long to convert your cold rebuffs into passion."

As he said this, he leaned into me until he was almost whispering into my ear. His warm breath on my cheek made me shiver. Although the party still laughed and whooped around us, we had stepped into another space, a still centre invisibly framed. This was the core of his success: he convinced everyone that he cared about their good opinion, and they gave it. His patter was convincing, his body-language sincere—and what a body.

"But if you conquered me, what motivation would you have left?" I barely managed to keep my voice level.

He stepped back. "Weasel words. Surrender or stand firm, but spare me the hypothetical."

Already I felt his attention drifting away. Freed from his captivating gaze, I recovered some composure. "I'm a critic," I said. "Weasel words are my stock-in-trade. If you want another answer, I can only reply with Morrissey's." I waved my hand, encompassing the whole tawdry show in an offhand gesture. "You just haven't earned it yet, baby."

"Who's Morrissey?" he asked. "You should stop attaching other people's quotes to other people's shows, and look closer to home. Critic, review thyself."

Clark placed the green spectacles back on my head. He pushed me toward the nearby sculpture, forcing my head close to the chrome. I saw my distorted reflection, filtered through the percept overlay. The sticker covered one lens, creating a vast blot on my outlook. In the mirror stood a nervous boy with a lump in his throat.

That must be where I've swallowed a dictionary, I thought. I knew that sometimes my criticism was convoluted, too clever-clever. I turned back to Clark to say something more basic, but he had vanished into the melee of patrons and groupies, who all wore sheepskin coats.

My eyes ached from the shiny mirrors and the distorting effect of the glasses. Inside I had another painful feeling that I refused to analyse. I was an art critic, not an agony aunt. I walked out of the party, and composed reviews in my head all the way home.

"Mirror, mirror, in the show—who's the lowest of the low?"

Too personal, I thought. Attack the art, not the artist.

"Mirror, mirror, in the show—should not have left the studio. Yet again Oliver Clark proves that art is whatever you can get away with. He substitutes fame for form, and intent for content. The Old Masters had to be able to draw, paint, sculpt, or *something*; but modern art mainly requires a talent for notoriety, and Clark has always excelled at that.

"They say there's no such thing as bad publicity, but here goes..."



Stuck in my glass cage, I realise that this tableau is Clark's revenge for my splenetic reviews, my green glasses and insulting stickers. I can see him across the gallery, talking to his sponsors, sharing a joke. He radiates celebrity and charisma. Has any artist ever shone as he shines now? He is feted by the world, and his chief critic languishes in an exhibition case, ignored by everyone. How the columnists will chortle over his latest coup!

Am I just going to let that happen? After a while, when my skin stops crawling with humiliation, my brain starts working. No matter what, I'm still a critic. I can still have my say, even cooped up in here.

In here? I originally interpreted the clear walls as enclosing an exhibit: myself. Yet if I'm the critic, surely I'm on the *outside*. Inside, neatly encased in glass, is the show, the party, the art world that Clark has conquered. All I have to do is review it.

What do I say? Do I change my mind and recant? I did have some positive thoughts about the show, so I could praise it while claiming—in the weasel words of a convert—that the New Nihilism has 'developed' and 'matured' since my earlier flak, and is now the dominant mode of the post-postism era. I could say that Clark's prank on me is a brilliant use of his own medium to answer criticism. Yes, I could join the gang.

Clark strides by, en route from one worshipful cluster to another. As his radiant smile illuminates the area, the glass cube feels hotter. Is he looking at me? Did he wink at me?

It would be so easy to surrender.

But I won't. Clark's work says nothing. It tries to be about its own emptiness, about the impossibility of novelty when everything has been done before, but that's defeatist. I believe it's still possible to be original, to be meaningful, to be non-ironic.

I lean against the barrier, dig out my notebook, and start drafting a critique of the party as installation art. "A work in mixed media: artists, hangers-on, drunken hacks; sponsors and publicists; pseudo-nibbles, fashionable drugs, oceans of free booze; lies, flattery, and hype, hype, hype. Talent?"

Turning round slowly, I give the whole room an appraising stare. Then I write, "The word is much in evidence, as are the words 'genius', 'masterpiece' and 'more drinks, anyone?' But of the thing itself there is no sign. How can there be, when everyone is too busy partying to ever work? Clark knocks something up in five minutes, delegating any hand-dirtying tasks, then spends the rest of his day schmoozing. Soon the hacks will have their own assistants to

file copy, so that neither artist nor critic has to pause to make art or review it. Then the cocktail circuit can revolve friction-free-until everyone wakes up with a hangover and winces at their gullibility while drunk on cheap nihilism."

I feel better for that. I could go on, but there's no point in elaborating when no-one's paying attention. I'll have to get used to being disdained. At every outbreak of laughter I flinch inside, thinking it must be at my expense. How long will I be invisible? The stretching hours are a foretaste of the years of irrelevance lying ahead.

I'm not going to stand here and take this. I'm not going to be ignored. I'm going to... what?

First, I'm going to find a way out of this glass cage. How? I could try clambering over the wall—assuming there's no ceiling—but that would involve undignified scrabbling, and I might not manage it. Even if people are supposedly ignoring me, I don't want to look any sillier than I already do.

If only I really was Captain Contempt, armed with vitriol and demolition-job reviews. Then I'd soon blast my way out.

I should at least give my critical armoury a trial. I delve into my pocket for the sticker I took to Clark's last show. Seeking inspiration, I dial from 0/10 to 10/10, and two icons catch my eye-five: a thumb pointing down, and six: thumbs-up.

I dial back to five, then place the sticker on the glass wall. I reach in and grasp the thumb, moving it from down to up-turning it like a doorknob-while pushing the glass as if I expect it to open.

And it does. I prefer to think it works because gallery automation has to allow pretty much anything, though Clark might have programmed the exhibit to free me if I gave it a sufficient approval rating. Whatever. At least I'm out of the cage. I walk into the party, find a chair—with some difficulty, as it's transparent like everything else—and slump into it.

No-one appears to have noticed my escape. I'm still officially invisible. That's Clark's conceit, as he put me in his exhibition of nothingness, and his sycophants don't dare break the illusion by acknowledging me.

I steal someone's drink. There's no resistance, no cry of outrage. I drink the gin and tonic at one gulp. God, I needed that! I knock back another. Sipping a third, I watch Clark as he gracefully turns to each guest, smiles, charms, and moves on to the next. I tap my feet to the Networking Waltz. I'm getting tipsy. Being invisible gives me a feeling of power. I can do anything now.

I slip through a gap in Clark's halo of courtiers, and walk right up to him. I hug him and give him a big wet sloppy kiss.

He gives me a startled look that mirrors my own surprise. "Is this your new reviewing style? I must say it's an improvement on the old."

I step back. "Er... it was more for you than the show," I say. "Just to show there's no hard feelings," I add hastily. Now that Oliver has spoken to me, everyone's staring at us. I feel even more exposed than I did in the exhibit.

"Then what do you think of the show?" he asks.

I remember all my caveats, but I don't want to repeat the same old quibbles yet again. I feel as if I've changed, broken out of something else as well as the glass cage. Yet I'm not going to recant: I'm not such a pushover. I bring out the glasses I wore at the last show, and select a new colour. Wearing rose-tinted spectacles, I make great play of peering round the room. As everything's invisible, and obscured by party-goers anyway, my painstaking inspection gets a bit of a laugh from the onlookers.

"Genius!" I declare.

"Is that all?" he asks teasingly.

"You'll have to wait for the full review," I say. I take off the rosy spectacles and give an exaggerated double-take, though Oliver looks just as gorgeous with or without them.

"I look forward to seeing it," he replies. He moves on, dismissing me. It hurts to see his gaze move away and light up someone else, but the sun has to shine on everyone.

I head for the door. Despite having made an exhibition of myself, I'm strangely elated. On my way home, I keep trying to think about the show and how to review it, but I can't stop thinking about Oliver Clark, and myself, and how feelings influence opinions.

Maybe that's the function of art and artists: to show us ourselves.



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My Brother's Keeper

Beth Cato

Half the county figured my big brother Samuel had bricks for brains. There was mighty good evidence in favor of that, like the time he decided to walk through downtown naked simply cause it was a hot day and clothes just plain didn't feel good. But I knew Samuel wasn't a dummy, just quiet, with his mind in a different place than the rest of us.

So when I heard him with two speakers of dark words, I knew to hunker down and listen. Here by the barn was the most private spot on our property—or would be, if I wasn't up in the rafters.

I smelled the bad guys before I heard them. Mama didn't get to teach me much, but she did teach me to heed my nose when it came to good and evil and all the grey in between, and those men stank like the septic tank being sucked out on an August afternoon. I gagged against my wrist to keep quiet, Mama's old chain bracelet warm at my lips.

"I want to kill Macaulay," said Samuel.

That name made me inhale with a hiss. Kill Macaulay?

"It's easy to kill someone you hate that much," said one of the men. "But if you want to join our circle, you can't simply kill for vengeance. It's too easy."

There was a long pause. "He's got a wife and kid," said Samuel. I recognized the scuff of his bell bottom jeans dragging against the dirt.

"Three," said a deeper voice, "There's power in that."

"Yes," agreed the other man. "You must kill the entire family, on the equinox, with this knife. Then you can join our circle."

"I want them books of yours." Samuel's drawl was slow, every word dragged out like his puffs from a cigarette.

"You'll have access to our knowledge in stages. It takes time."

"I can do it," Samuel said.

When Samuel took that knife blade in his hand, I felt the wrongness of it rattle down my spine. That knife was an ugly, cursed thing. The other men left, heading back down the trail towards the base of the hill. Samuel stood there, holding that thing, assessing it in his quiet way. I barely breathed. I kept a pencil frozen in my hand, same as it was when I first smelled them come my way.

After a while, Samuel thudded back down the hill. The stink of evil faded. Why was Samuel doing such a stupid thing? If Mama knew, she'd whip his hide. She'd been the only one to ever keep him in line, the only one who understood he was so smart underneath all that stupid. But Mama was dead and gone and beneath feet of red iron dirt, and now Samuel was set out to kill the whole Macaulay family tomorrow night, and for magic, too.

Anger got all tight in my chest. At least Samuel had some magic, had some words to go by.

I stared down at my half-done math homework. I hated math. All those numbers danced around in my mind and the answers never came out right, but I'd rather do a full fifty pages of algebra than save those Macaulays.

Old man Macaulay was the one who killed Mama, blowing past the stop sign at Templeton Hill and crunching our car flat as a griddle. They said in town that Macaulay had enough whiskey in him to pickle him like a frog for science class, but he hadn't been the one who died.

I scampered up and left my math for the mice to nibble on.

Given my druthers, I'd rather help Samuel out than save those Macaulays, but Mama loved everyone. She used to be close to Grandma Macaulay, too.

Mama wouldn't want Samuel to meddle with darkness, wouldn't want that blood on his hands. I just had to ignore whose blood it was.



Most all the other men around came back from Vietnam and fell into the bottle, but not my Papa. Nope, he fell straight into Jesus's arms.

Papa had the table covered with books for his seminary course and was all hunched over, muttering to himself. He didn't notice me going by, or flinch when I opened up a can of cola. But the second I headed towards my room, his pencil stopped scratching.

"Deborah?"

"Yes, Papa?" I turned around, the cola fizzling on my tongue.

"We're out of bread."

"I can go by the Pig later."

His head bowed over his work, and I moved on. I didn't have any kid brothers or sisters underfoot. Didn't need them. I had Papa and Samuel, and the fact that I was twelve

didn't matter a doodle. I cleaned, I cooked. If it wasn't for the fact that I made Sunday dinner just like Mama, Samuel might have never visited the house at all.

I can't even say I held any fondness for Papa, not anymore. He was more like an extra piece of furniture around the house, something to take care of because it'd always been there. Just looking at him made that anger rise up again, all because of what he did the day after Mama's funeral.

He burned her books. The family books.

Mama never said that what she did was magic. It was as natural as breathing. The words were all for focus, she said. So she wrote down what she learned, just as her mama had, and her grandfather, and her great-grandmother. From the way Mama told the tale, her great-grandma was all sneaky about learning to read and write as a slave, and did it all so she could preserve the words and pass them along.

Papa burned every last shred of those books, a full century of songs about growing okra in a day, warding away mosquitoes, making babies form all perfect, and calling on rain. Papa sobbed as he did it, said that it was an awful thing that Mama was burning in hell right now, but he'd save us kids. I woke up because I felt the flames itching along Mama's old ink; it woke up Samuel, too. Mama had already started teaching Samuel. Me—she said I was too young.

Now I'd never know how to focus or sing the words, not unless Samuel taught me, and he didn't know much.

But I had been learning from Papa. Not that he knew those kinds of words, of course, but he had been writing down his experiences from Vietnam. Called it his "spiritual cleansing." Course, those weren't the kinds of things a girl my age should be reading, but it was an education in the ways a man could die and the way eating half-cooked chicken could make him pray for death as he spewed out his guts for days and days. I had the latest book tucked under my mattress, and just the other day I read something that would come in mighty useful.

Samuel was a big fellow at seventeen. I couldn't overpower him. I didn't even know where to find him now, though I guessed he was sleeping somewhere in the woods, somewhere within easy walk of our place.

Keeping Samuel away from the Macaulay's house would require some military strategy.



It would have been a brilliant plan if it hadn't involved math.

I spent the rest of that Saturday gathering supplies, so I headed out after dark to set everything up. I figured I had to establish a perimeter around the backside of the Macaulay shack, which would be the most direct way for Samuel to sneak up on them. Any car on the drive would be too loud. So, I snuck a full reel of fishing wire from Darrel Craigshead's garage, and a pop cap gun from Lewis David's back shed, and I dragged myself through the woods to make a tripwire.

See, Samuel had this thing about particular loud noises—the pops of guns or firecrackers or car backfires. He'd cover his ears and hunker down and freeze. I figured that I could rig this tripwire and scare him away, and I could do it far enough from the Macaulay house that they might not notice. Turns out that farther away means a bigger perimeter, and big reels of fishing wire aren't so big as they look.

Also, it's cussed hard work in the dark, in September. My skin was sticky as a swamp.

I was so busy muttering that I didn't hear Ralph Macaulay till he was five feet away. He had a shotgun in his hands aimed straight at my head.

"Deborah Kinsey." His mouth gaped. The porch light from his house gleamed off his glasses. "What are you doing out here?"

Now I'd known Ralph my whole life but barely said more than a grunt. That's because from the very start of kindergarten, when I could barely count to ten, Ralph Macaulay knew his multiplication tables. Since 3rd grade, each afternoon he'd gone to the high school across the way to sit in on the advanced coursework. I hated him long before I hated the rest of his family.

"Ralph."

"You didn't answer my question."

I looked around. The pop cap gun was leaning against a tree way far away. I had no desire to confess to him that I was trying to save his no-good family from some sort of dark sacrifice.

His eyes narrowed behind that thick glass. "Is that an empty wire reel in your hand?" He stepped closer, his gaze on the ground. "You... what is this, some kind of trap?" The barrel raised towards me again.

"Oh, what, you gonna shoot me?" I was hot and sweaty and bone-tired. "I'm not setting a trap for you, stupid."

"Then who? Looks like you ran out of wire, anyway."

If I had possessed any understanding of how magic works, I just might have blown him up. "Yes, thank you so much, Mr. Einstein." How could he even tell that in the dark?

"If the wire's not for us... is it for Samuel?"

My jaw almost hit the dirt. "What? How?"

"Maybe you should come to the porch where there's light. We can talk there."

The thought of going near that house made my stomach clench like a fist. "Nuh-uh, I don't think so."

Ralph sighed, all deep and heavy. "Look. We know Samuel's up to something. I thought you were him, that's why I came out." He motioned with the gun barrel. "We know about the magic. Your mom used to come over and chat with Grandma about it all the time, about how it affected my dad, and me."

"... You?"

"It takes different forms for different folks. For me, it's numbers."

"Oh." I couldn't help but ask. "Then what about your pa? He doesn't have any knack for math."

"No. No, he doesn't. He sees shades, and since he killed your mom, she's been clinging to him. She's the one who warned us about Samuel."

"Are you trying to tell me my mama's a ghost?" The thought didn't disturb me as much as it could have. I mean, better for her to be a ghost than to burn in hell like Papa said. I felt a bit of relief, really.

Ralph led the way through the brambles towards his house. "No. A shade is... a shade." Upon glancing back and seeing the dumb look on my face, he continued, "Ghosts haunt out of vengeance. Shades are like a shadow of a person, after the soul's gone on. If someone like my dad is responsible, the shade joins with theirs, like a reminder."

"So, Mama is clinging to your dad, and she can talk to him?" I could talk to her? My heartbeat roared in my ears like a revved lawnmower.

"It's not that easy." Ralph stopped on the porch. "Dad dropped bombs when he was over there. That's why he drinks, to blur the shades all together. There are... lots of them."

"I want to talk to him," I said, and went right up to the door.

"Deborah...!"

I didn't have Mama's insight, but soon as I stepped in that house, I felt that clog of spirits. Even with box fans bellowing at full blast, there was an extra stickiness to the air, something beyond humidity. Like cobwebs tearing against my face, prying at my hands. Raw frustration scratched at my throat. I wanted to see more. I wanted to see Mama. Hear her. Not just feel these... vapors.

Maybe if I had our family books, I'd know what to say so I could see, so I could understand, but I didn't have squat. I hated feeling so stupid and helpless.

But there was something familiar about the cobweb feeling. The air felt that way around Papa, too—not nearly this thick, but that weirdness was there.

"Deborah, listen. Dad says it's really noisy in his head. It took him weeks to figure out what your mama was saying. All he got out was that Samuel was going to come after us, and that you both needed to forgive and let go."

"Forgive?" I recoiled from Ralph. "Forgive your papa?" Mama *would* expect that of me. Mama always had high ideals like that.

"That's what he said, that's all I know."

"Is there a way to get the other voices quiet, so he can just hear Mama?"

"If he forgives himself and lets them slide away," he said, his voice low. "This point, they cling to him as much as he clings to them."

Ralph's papa lay stretched out on a couch. The blanket ended short, covering the nubs of his legs. At least he lost something when he killed Mama. His head didn't move but his eyes did, widening with something I could only call fear.

"No. Ralph, she can't be here." He pushed himself up on a flabby arm.

Good, he hated seeing me much as I hated seeing him. "My brother aims to kill you and Ralph and your wife tomorrow night. I'm aiming to stop him."

"Go away! You look just like her. God, you look just like her."

"What else has my mama told you? What can I do to stop Samuel?"

What words should I speak? That's what I wanted to ask, what I wanted to hear. That maybe she had some legacy to pass along, just for me.

"God, get out of my sight! The shade is bad enough, I don't need you in color, standing there! Oh Jesus." He moaned and blubbered and he hid his face beneath a pillow.

I would have spit on the man but I saw the misery on Ralph's face, and for some reason I didn't hate him near so much now. Instead, I stalked outside and let the old screen door shriek as it shut behind me.

Ralph and I stood there, staring at the dark outline of the pines. "So," he said, a quiver in his voice, "How's he plan on doing it? Samuel, I mean."

"Some bad fellows gave him a knife. The thing is stinky evil. He's supposed to kill all you with it, then he's in their club."

"Oh." He took in a long shaky breath. "I can understand revenge against Dad, but... me and Mom, we liked your mom just fine." He hugged his arms close, like he was cold.

"Even I know there's power in threes. You're the math wizard and all."

Ralph shrugged. "I'll shoot Samuel if I have to, but I don't want to. How are you thinking to stop him? What magic can you do?"

I blinked back the tears and frustration, the musk of those burning books flaring in my nose like the fire was fresh-lit.

"You think I'd be laying tripwire at midnight if I could do something special?" My shoulders hunched up like they could hide my face.

"What? But..."

"I can't do a thing, you hear me? I can sense power, smell it, but I can't *do* anything. And Papa, he burned all Mama's books. I don't even... I don't even know how to learn. When you said her shade was in there, I thought..."

To his credit, Ralph didn't look at me, but at the woods instead. "I'm awful sorry, Deborah."

"Yeah." I didn't say anything for a minute, and just listened as the crickets hollered back and forth. "Why don't you all just pack up and leave the state for the day? Get away? He can't kill you if he can't find you."

"Dad's stuck on that couch, and Mom's working double shifts at the diner. She doesn't believe in this... stuff. She won't leave, and I won't leave either of them behind." His voice shook again, but he stood straight and tall.

I sighed all heavy. "I can't talk Samuel out of anything, either. Mama's the only one who kept him grounded. He only really comes home now to eat my cooking, cause I cook just like Mama. He probably hasn't said a word to Papa since..." I blinked. The cooking. I looked at Ralph. "Whenever I cook, Samuel always manages to show up, even though he's not staying at the house anymore."

"There could be something to that."

"Maybe." Mama always had said that recipes were a way of putting words together in that special way. But once I had Samuel there, I had to stop him somehow. Keep him from

his awful ritual. Cooking wasn't the kind of power I wanted, but it was something carried down from Mama.

I thought back on Papa's diaries again, about his awful experiences with food poisoning, and I grinned.



At one o'clock prompt that Sunday afternoon, I set the last dish on the table. It was all Mama's best fixings, done in my hand: country-fried steak strips, fried okra, mustard greens, and cornbread. A lemon pie sat chilling in the fridge. Samuel slammed through the door at 1:05 with all the focus of a cat headed to a can of tuna. He grabbed a plate and started shoveling it in.

As for Papa, he was at the church, and would be all day. His books marked his place at the end of the table. Not for the first time, I wondered what he'd think if he came home to find them all burnt, but I knew it wouldn't mean a thing. He could just buy more.

I worked on dishes and eyed Samuel. He always ate his foods one by one and saved his meats for last. That steak strip coating's where I whipped in a hefty dose of ipecac. I threw together some barbeque sauce for dipping, with the hopes that'd cover up the super-sweetness of the syrup. I wasn't big on steak, so I could skip eating it and he wouldn't think a thing of it. I figured ipecac was made to make people throw up, so it'd do the job better than serving up half-raw meat. Samuel wasn't that stupid.

"Haven't seen you for a few days," I said.

Samuel grunted as he speared okra on his fork. The thick aroma of frying oil lacquered the air, but even so I could smell the stink of that knife. He had it clipped to his waist.

I wanted to watch him without looking like I was watching, so I sat down in an old recliner. Next thing I knew the light in the room looked something funny and Ralph was standing there, kicking at my foot.

"You were sleeping?!" His scowl turned his face red.

"I was up half the night! And what are you doing here, stupid? Do you want to get killed? Where's Samuel?"

"Out in the woods, sick as my old man after a night of drinking. Come on!"



I knew Samuel was up ahead on the trail, and not just because he was a veritable volcano of sickness. That knife stank like a manure truck.

"Ralph, you gotta stay back," I said, shoving him behind me. He had his shotgun, but by the quiver in his hands, he wasn't too steady about using it. Which was good. Samuel was already messing with his soul. If he died now... no, I couldn't let that happen. Not when Mama's soul was already in doubt.

Samuel was all hunched over and on his knees, his head in the bushes. The knife was on the ground right by him. I rushed forward, all sneaky-like, but not enough so. Samuel managed to sit up and clutch that evil thing close. He didn't say a thing, just looked at me, his face a funny shade of pale.

"Samuel, that thing is awful evil. You don't need that," I said.

"I do," he rasped. "If I want to get books that tell us how to bring back Mama."

Despite the sweet heat of the evening, all my blood went cold. "You... what?"

"I see the Macaulay boy." Samuel's thick fingers twitched on the knife's handle. "Got to do this."

"Mama... Mama wouldn't want to come back like that, Samuel, it's wrong."

"She's not going to burn!" Samuel's shout sent birds flapping from the trees.

Oh, no. That's what this was about, what Papa said. My own anger stirred up in my chest, fists balling. "Mama's a sweet and good person. She can't... she wouldn't go there." Would she? I didn't rightly know.

Samuel didn't need to say a thing. He worked to stand up, all slow. His pant hems dragged on the gravel of the trail. This was all about Mama, and not even revenge. He didn't care about his soul, what those dark words would do. He'd do it all to save her.

"Mama'd hate you for doing that," I said.

"Mama never hated a thing," said Samuel. He was right.

A rock plunked Samuel straight on the forehead. He blinked, furrowing his brows. Another one whapped him straight between the eyes. He kinda tipped backwards and splatted on the trail. I stared a moment before looking at Ralph about fifteen feet back.

He held a palm-full of gravel, the gun at his feet. "Didn't want to kill him," he said. "It's all geometry and physics."

"Dang. If you could go all David and Goliath, why'd I bother poisoning him?" I started forward.

Ralph snorted. "You think he'd have stayed still like that if he felt well?"

The sheathed knife slid right out of Samuel's slack grip. He was breathing, his body still and limp as a sardine. The smell of that knife made me heave.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Ralph.

I stared at that knife, focusing, trying to find words just like Mama. This was the important moment and all. This is when I needed that insight. Instead, the bugs just buzzed in the trees and my nose got used to the stink of the knife and I was left no wiser than before.

"Guess we'll throw it in the river," I finally said, hating how stupid and uninspired it was.

Ralph didn't say one thing or another. We headed through the trees and to the big river. This was the area where Mama said I could never ever swim because the current was so fast. I handed the knife off to Ralph, as he had math in his favor, and he prettily threw it some twenty feet till it splashed deep. Then he turned around and squeaked like a kitten.

Samuel stood at the edge of the woods. Well, hunkered there, leaning on a tree. His skin had an awful sheen, and a big old bump grew on his forehead.

"I don't get a second chance with them," he said, his words slurred.

It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about. "You shouldn't have even had a first chance with those speakers of dark words." I marched up to him. "Your soul's still clean. That's what Mama would want."

At least he wasn't doomed like her. I hated that thought, but it was still there, sticky to my brain like sweat on my skin.

"Will they come after you?" I asked.

Samuel jerked his head in a *no*, then leaned into the bushes. I waited till his guts emptied some more, then I grabbed him by the arm. Even with me half his size, I managed to prop him up and we staggered back towards the house. Ralph hung far behind, and I can't say I blamed him. The smell of my brother alone was enough to make a person gag, but at least it was the scent of sickness, not evil.

"How long will I be sick?" Samuel whispered.

That was pure Samuel. Didn't ask or care how I'd done it. "Till tomorrow, most likely."

We were halfway across the yard when I saw Papa's car parked there and heard the clink of silverware carry through the screen door.

I hadn't cleaned up the poisoned dinner. Papa was sitting down to leftovers.

Good, I thought. He deserved to get sick, sicker even than Samuel. This was all his fault, anyway.

Anger festered in my chest, all raw and awful, and that's when it hit me. Mama's shade hadn't been talking about forgiving old man Macaulay, though she'd want that of me, too. No, she was talking about Papa. Letting go of the anger about what he said. Letting go of the books and everything they meant. I blinked back hot tears.

"Ralph, can you wait in the barn?"

"Yeah. Sure," he said.

I wanted to speak the old words, not because I wanted power like Samuel, but because I wanted something of Mama. Cooking wasn't enough. I didn't know what would be enough, but I knew Mama wouldn't want me poisoning Papa. Even if he did deserve it.

Mama didn't deserve to burn in hell, either, but God and Jesus would know her best. Better than Papa, that's for sure.

I let Samuel lean on the railing and I bounded on up the steps. Papa's shades whispered against me, that guilt and grief he tried to push away with Jesus. It was working, in a way. The shades didn't dwell on him like they did Macaulay. I was surprised at how that relieved me. I didn't want Papa to suffer, not really.

I just wanted Mama back, and that could never happen. Not even Samuel's dark words could make everything like it'd been.

Papa was still standing there in the kitchen, dishing up food on his plate.

"Papa, you can't eat that," I said, yanking him back. "The steak, I think it's gone bad. Samuel ate some and is sick as a dog." On cue, Samuel staggered in and past Papa.

"What?" Papa said, blinking at me. Unpleasant sounds shuddered from the bathroom.

I plucked the plate from his hands and in two steps dumped the whole thing in the trash. I didn't trust the whole surface, not after that meat had touched it. I threw away the few remaining pieces of steak, too, not that there was much after a hungry seventeen-year-old boy had had his way.

"Here. Have this instead." I pulled out the icebox pie.

"Is that lemon?" Papa asked. I swear I heard drool in his voice.

"Yeah. Yeah, it is. You listen in case Samuel needs help, okay?"

I walked out of the house. The rage wasn't in my chest now, just emptiness. I hadn't forgiven him, not yet. But without that heavy feeling on my lungs, it was easier to breathe, even in that sticky evening air.

The lights were on in the barn, but I didn't see Ralph. "Hey," I called.

"Up here!"

I climbed up the ladder and found him in my spot, those math sheets spread out.

Figured he'd be drawn to the numbers.

"You got a few wrong," he said, voice mild as could be.

I snorted. "A few?"

"I could help you, if you wanted. Not going to cheat on tests for you or anything, but I could give you pointers, maybe."

I plopped down on some old straw, staring at this boy I hated for so long. "Maybe," I said. I stared out the slats at the fading light. "There's something your papa said. Do I... do I really look like her? My mama?"

"Sure, you do," Ralph said. "Probably look more like her as you grow up, too."

I nodded to myself. Maybe the words would come in time. Maybe I'd learn the hard way, like my great-great-grandma did. But for now, I had some things from Mama, and that'd do.

"Come on," I said. "Let's have some pie."



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Hand of God

Erica L. Satifka

From the roof of his house, Andrew can see everything in the town of Pandora. Right below is his yard of wispy yellow grass that breaks at the touch. A little way down is the dead creek, a stinking, mucky place. And above him, always, is the hand of God. Briefly, he trains his flashlight on the underside of the hand, studying the whorled, grayish flesh, then he stares back toward the outskirts of town, peering through his binoculars at the mushroom farmer's trailer.

The farmer makes a drug. Andrew's not supposed to know about the drug, and he certainly isn't supposed to take it, but the farmer's daughter goes to school with all the other kids, so word gets around. He must have mixed a new batch. The townspeople are lined up all the way back to the old Sunoco station, their headlamps making a broken ant trail in the ever-present dusk.

Stupid addicts, Andrew thinks. He's never going to wait in that line. As soon as he grows up, he's going to get out from under here. He reaches a hand under his tee-shirt and feels at his ribs. Nice and scrawny. *That's the way you get out.*

"Andrew! Dinner!" He pockets his binoculars and climbs down the rope ladder to his bedroom window, then goes down to the dining room.

Andrew's father glowers at him over a seven-year-old newspaper borrowed from the town library. "You weren't up on that roof again, were you?"

"You know I was." He isn't scared of his father.

"Oh, leave him alone," his mom says, dishing out a bowl of stew. Potatoes and mushrooms again. The family doesn't make enough to afford hydroponics. "He's safe."

Nobody dies under the hand of God. But nobody's born, either.

Soon, I'll be out of here .

He eats enough to make his mom happy, then goes off to his room to do his homework. By candlelight, he poses in front of his bedroom mirror, stretching out so thin and lithe. He imagines himself slipping through the finger cracks, or maybe under the hand itself. Maybe he'll send help, maybe he won't. He wonders what it's like out there. Do they only eat roots and fungus, too?



During the day, enough sunlight gets through the minute spaces between God's fingers so you don't need your flashlight all the time. Andrew pedals his bike to school, dodging the cracks in the pavement. Even if the people of Pandora wanted to fix the roads, there isn't enough concrete. Andrew doesn't mind.

At school, most of the girls and some of the boys are crowded around Delia, the mushroom farmer's daughter. Delia wears the best clothes of anyone in town, and always has enough to eat. She even eats meat that comes from a tin. Meat! Andrew doesn't know what that is, really, but it sounds fancy.

"My daddy let me stay up all last night," Delia says. "*I* had to take care of all *your* parents when they came to our house to get high. Otherwise they might hurt themselves."

The kids don't say anything. They're all just waiting for an invitation to nibble on Delia's sandwich. Its tangy, unusual odor is unlike any food Andrew's ever eaten. He wonders if it's made out of meat.

Delia points to a tiny girl in the front row. "You may brush my hair, if you want to." Delia's hair is as red as a brick under a full flashlight beam. The kids don't really care about brushing it, but they do care about her lunch, and her house. The tiny girl takes Delia's comb and eagerly begins working.

Andrew turns and goes into the school. He doesn't care about Delia or her demands. *His* parents don't take the drug, never have. It's none of his business.

"Hey, you there!" It's her.

He turns. "What?"

"Do you want to come by my house later?"

Andrew freezes. Of course he does. Everyone wants to go to the mushroom farmer's house. When the hand of God first descended upon the village of Pandora, he'd leapt into action, hoarding the best supplies for himself. Now the people of Pandora need the farmer's mushrooms to survive, so nobody dares to cross him. But Andrew's parents wouldn't like it. He hopes Delia is confusing him with someone else. "Uh."

She laughs, a sharp ugly sound. "*Uh.*" She motions for the other kids to join in, and they do. "Tonight after school, we'll go together."

Andrew doesn't tell his head to nod, but it does anyway. "Okay. After school."

Delia stands up suddenly, causing the tiny girl who was brushing her hair to tumble backwards. The wave of resentment branching from the other kids is almost visible in the grayish daylight. "We should all get to class now."

The bell rings.



All through the school day, Andrew thinks about Delia's house. What does it look like up close? What would they eat? The few times he had walked or ridden his bike past the mushroom farmer's trailer, he had been overpowered by the stench of mushrooms. Nobody lived as close to the hand as the mushroom farmer's family. Everyone else regarded it as dangerous, or at the very least, bad luck. But the mushroom farmer had openly flouted the superstition: painting a mural, hanging up a sign advertising his wares on God's hand. He even once donned a pair of spiked shoes—where he had scavenged *those*, Andrew had no clue—and climbed up, up, up, almost to the center.

In school, the kids learn practical things like hydroponic farming, weaving, sewing, and construction. Even though the adults expect the hand to lift sooner or later, they had to be prepared in case it doesn't. Andrew stares out the window. The school sits just under God's ring finger, and in the dim daylight Andrew can see the curves and dips of the fingerprint.

Andrew was three when the hand descended. This is his sky.



After school, Andrew follows Delia to the mushroom farmer's house. The outside of the trailer is painted a glossy red, like Delia's hair. They lean their bikes against the porch and go inside. Delia leads him into the kitchen, dimly lit by a row of candles.

"Are we going to eat now?" Andrew asks.

But Delia isn't interested in food. Instead she makes a beeline for a porcelain jar on the counter. It's in the shape of a cat holding a fish. "You want to see something neat?"

"I guess."

Delia reaches into the jar and withdraws a small plastic baggie. "My daddy makes this. You can have some, he'll never notice."

Andrew's never seen it in person, but he knows it's the drug. "Are you crazy? I don't want that junk. I'm not a loser."

Delia laughs. "Everyone in this town is a loser."

Andrew's flesh is burning. "I want to go now."

"Nobody goes until I say they can go," Delia says. She puts the baggie back into the porcelain cat and re-screws the lid. "You can go."

"What does that stuff do, anyway? Besides make people sick." Andrew shakes his head. "I still don't want it."

Delia smiles slyly. "It takes you outside the hand. So you can see what it's like out there. Then you come back."

"I don't need that stuff to leave. I can leave anytime I want without it."

"Sure you can, skinny boy. That's why so many people have done it already." She walks him toward the back door, out into the permanent twilight.

"I can do it," he responds lamely, kicking a pile of rocks with the tip of his sneaker. "It's a lot better than using drugs. It's healthier."

Delia sighs. "Why are you so dumb, Andrew?"

But he can't answer. Delia's already slammed the door in his face.



Over the next week, Andrew tries his best to avoid Delia. He doesn't want her father's stupid drug. He concentrates on his studies of first aid techniques and root biology, and comes straight home. He doesn't even go up on the roof anymore. Curiosity leads to trouble, that's what his parents say.

But still, he can't stop thinking. He read an old book once by someone named Bester, about teleportation: going from place to place in the blink of an eye. Is that what the drug does? And do you have to come back? Andrew won't come back when he goes out there, not if he can help it.

Delia's full of it. She doesn't know what it does. But he still can't get it out of his mind, and he's getting bigger and bigger every day.

That Friday night, Andrew tosses and turns in his bed. He needs a drink of water. As he comes back from the bathroom, he catches his mother slinking into the master bedroom with a guilty frown on her face. She's shaking. All of a sudden, she catches Andrew's eye.

"Go to bed, son. Just... go away." She's wearing her boots.

"Were you outside? What's going on outside?"

"There's nothing outside. There's nothing anywhere. Go to bed."

Andrew usually listens to his parents, but he's going to break their rules. On Monday he's going to talk to Delia.



At recess, he pulls Delia aside and hunkers down with her under the jungle gym. "I need to go back to your house. I want to take that drug."

"I thought you were a good kid who didn't take drugs." She grins toothily, like she's enjoying dragging this out. "I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Will you give it to me or not? I don't have any money."

"First one's free. After that, you have to pay."

"Oh, I won't need more than one. I'm not coming back."

Delia giggles. "One-way trip, coming up. Yeah, we'll go to my house. And you don't have to be so secretive. All of these kids have already tried it."

Andrew's eyes go wide. "What? All of them?"

"Well, some of them." She rolls out from under the jungle gym. "I'll meet you here after school."

In the kitchen, she goes straight for the porcelain cat, and takes out a fingertip-sized quantity of the drug, a small brown ball like a clod of dirt. "Hold on, I need to put it in water." The water that comes from Pandora's cisterns is almost as brown as the dirt clod. She plops it in the glass, and hands the glass to Andrew. "Bottoms up!"

Andrew almost spills it in his haste. He pours the concoction down his throat before he can think too hard about it. He doesn't want to wimp out. Then he falls into a plastic kitchen chair.

"It takes a minute," Delia says, making as if to check an invisible watch.

It doesn't take a minute. It takes forty-three seconds.



Andrew clamps his hands over his eyes and screams. The light is so bright, as bright as a case of flashlights. Slowly, he opens his left eye a crack. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

He looks at the ground. The tall grass bends rather than breaks under the pressure of his soles, and he sits down, dazed. A light rain falls from the sky, resting on the emerald grass like fat jewels. The sky above is vast and seamless, a shocking blue that sears his eyes. A row of lumps marks the distant horizon.

Mountains, Andrew thinks as he drops to the ground and paws at the cool, damp soil. *Those were called mountains*. Never had he imagined that the world outside the hand of God was so beautiful.

The hand! He looks back, wondering what it looks like from the outside, but he must have teleported far away, because there's no mighty wrist plunging from the skies, no cracked gray flesh cupping the valley. Pandora will be just fine under there until he can get some help.

Picking through the grass, Andrew searches for a road or a house. The buzz of insects—*they grow so large out here*, he realizes in amazement—drowns his thoughts until he can barely concentrate. Shielding his eyes with a hand, he looks up at what he now knows to be the sun. It burns him like acid, but he can't stop smiling.

Below his feet a crack sounds. He snaps his attention to the ground, to a white stick. Sharp where he's broken it, the stick looks funny; he picks it up. It's not plastic or wood. And then he knows.

Andrew drops the stick.

Suddenly, a scream echoes over the vast field of green, green grass. It's a woman's scream, followed closely by a man's. Andrew hunches down so they can't find him, belly pressed to the ground, grass tickling his nose.

The two people chase one another. It's more of a ritual than a genuine pursuit. Their faces are raw and bloody, their teeth sharp. There is a smooth expanse of flesh where noses should be. They are not human, or at least not anymore. They tear through the landscape like a razor across skin, then head toward the mountains. Andrew knows, somehow, that more will follow, that these two are just the first of many. The sweat on his brow mingles with the mist of rain.

I want to go back, he thinks, hands clasped in a prayer, and closes his eyes.

Delia sits in a kitchen chair, spooning strange-smelling food from a can marked "Spam." She puts the can down. "So, what did you think?"

Andrew feels his face contort and opens his eyes. His breath goes rapid. "What *is* that? That's what outside looks like?!"

"Oh, the monsters? Yeah, that's what it looks like now. We lost a war, or maybe we won one, and I don't know if those things are human or not. I've never been there myself. I don't know why anyone would want to go there. It *sucks*."

Andrew begins to cry. He can't help it. "You tricked me."

Delia just smiles and picks up the Spam can.

Andrew runs. He runs out of the mushroom farmer's house, climbs back on his bike, and pedals back to his home. When he gets there, he finds his parents crowded together on the sofa, sharing an old paperback. He tries to go upstairs without being seen, but when he gets to his door, a hand falls on his shoulder. He jumps, remembering the creatures, remembering the bone.

"Andrew?" It's his mother. He just looks back speechless, his mouth hanging open. "You were there." His mother heaves a loud sigh.

"How did you know?" He starts crying again, involuntarily.

"You'll have to keep going back, you know. I hoped it wouldn't have come to this. You'll need a weapon." Andrew's mom slips him a long, flat metal tube. When he pushes a button, a thin blade slips out. "Don't tell your father."

"Can we beat them?"

She shakes her head. "No, I don't think so. Unless there are other towns... but I don't know if there are. But we can try. Every Friday night, we try. It was a *very bad idea* to go alone," she says, shaking Andrew. "Now go to bed. You've had a long day." She releases Andrew's arm.

Friday night, Andrew thinks. Then we'll beat them. He flicks his pocketknife in and out, and slips it in his pocket.



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about terrible worlds and the slightly-less-terrible characters that inhabit them. She is currently working on a novel about the evil that lurks inside big-box megastores and a zine about her cross-country move.

Meat

David Steffen

Try as I might, Master, I fail. Keep the house clean and keep red meat in the fridge, he said. These are menial tasks, yet I fail.

He will be unhappy that his bank account has been drained. This weeks-long power outage causes no end of trouble. Without electricity the meat rots and must be replaced daily. Meat is expensive, and Master's account has had no deposits since he left for this unusually long business trip. Without money, acquiring meat is difficult, sources scarcer every day.

A knock sounds on the door. I open it and greet the two police officers, one man and one woman.

The man looks at me and then at the woman. "This household doesn't have any registered bots."

"Black market."

The man turns to me again. "Is Mr. Keats home?"

"No," I say.

He shows me a piece of paper. "Search warrant. May we come in?"

The warrant appears valid, so I stand aside to let them pass. They step across the mat, not bothering to wipe their shoes. I follow behind and scrub their dirty footprints from the carpet. Master despises a dirty house.

With their long strides they quickly outpace me. When they enter the kitchen ahead of me I hear the woman exclaim "Jesus Almighty, it stinks in here!" They come back to me. "Why's the kitchen stink of ammonia?" she asks.

"Master likes a clean kitchen," I say.

"Those fumes could kill! What kind of mess were you cleaning?"

"I was preparing meat for Master."

They exchange a look. "What kind of meat?"

"Red meat."

"In the fridge?"

I nod.

She turns to the man. "We'll come back with rebreathers, but I'm grabbing some meat as evidence." She takes a deep breath and holds it before walking into the kitchen.

"Master wants the meat to be in the fridge," I say.

"Easy," the man says, grabbing my shoulder. "She'll just grab one piece. Your Master won't miss it."

The woman opens the fridge door. Already the tidy rows of neatly packaged meat smell of rot. She reaches one dirty hand toward it. Master would not like this. I cannot buy more meat. Meat gone is meat that cannot be replaced.

I grab the man's hand on my shoulder and twist to loosen his grip. His brittle bones break and he shouts in pain. The woman turns, eyes wide, and draws her gun. I must not allow her to shoot me, or there will be no one to tend the house. When he returns, Master will be upset the house is dirty and without meat. I hurl the man at the woman and they land in a heap. If they rise they may shoot me so I hold them down until they stop struggling. Their chests rise and fall for a few minutes more, and then are still.

I retrieve the scissors from the drawer and begin cutting away blue fabric. Meat does not need clothes.

Master will be pleased.



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David Steffen is a writer and software engineer who lives in Minnesota. His work has been published in *Escape Pod*, *Daily SF*, and many others. He's the editor of *Diabolical Plots* and co-founder of the *Submission Grinder*.

Fortune's Dance

Jaymi Mizuno

Kara followed the New Year's procession through Chinatown, deep drumbeats echoing in her ears punctuated by the pop of fireworks. Smoke from the fireworks hung low in the windless air, filling her lungs with an acrid scent and making her cough.

She welcomed the smoke. It gave her an excuse for her tears.

Chinese New Year had always been celebrated at her grandmother's home, where banquet tables groaned under the weight of the food. Rooms filled with cousins she adored, even though they threatened to drive her mad.

Then, they would finish off the night with a family trip to view this parade.

All of those traditions ended the night her grandmother died.

Perhaps it would have been different if she'd died of natural causes. If they'd had a chance to say goodbye. Instead, she'd died for worse than nothing.

She died paying for another person's addictions. Her family was shattered that night, and none of them had ever figured out how to put it back together.

Kara scanned the crowds again, hoping to see a familiar face. No such luck.

She fell in behind the procession, following the last group of dancers moving down the smoke-choked streets.

One "lion" in particular caught her attention. Its low, slithering movements were more serpentine than feline, and appeared to defy gravity, while the pair of human dancers manipulating its movements remained completely invisible.

Such skill. Such amazing skill.

The main body of the lion was a brilliant red cloth, embellished with lush white fur. The huge head turned briefly in her direction.

She waved her red envelope high in front of her face, but the dancers did not come back for her offering. That was unusual. "Wait. Please."

A commotion further up in the parade line forced the dancers to stop. She scurried in front of the lion, and waved the envelope again. "This is for you."

The cloth head opened at the mouth, revealing another lion within.

No.

Not another lion. A lion would not have scales. Or horns.

It was a dragon.

Kara touched her hand to her throat, feeling the gold charm, one that had belonged to her grandmother. She'd been wearing it the night she died. The robber had mistaken it for a bargain store trinket, not realizing its value and antiquity.

The creature before her looked exactly like the one on her chain.

The dragon opened its mouth revealing long, wickedly sharp teeth, but she felt no fear. Tradition described dragons as benevolent creatures of good fortune. Her family had several stories about encounters with the beasts throughout the generations, though Kara had never believed the tales.

Until now.

There was nothing threatening about the dragon. Instead, *it* seemed to be the frightened one.

She stepped closer. "Are you hiding?"

A brief pause. Then a nod.

"Why?"

"Hunters." The word ended in a low, sibilant hiss. "Please. Help me."

"How?"

"I must reach the sea so I can go home."

The shore was a good twenty miles away. Impossible for the creature to walk there without being seen, and if it tried to fly, it would be seen by people, or radars at the very least.

"Why are they trying to kill you?"

The dragon's eyes were endless deep pools, and she nearly drowned in their depth. "Fear, of course."

"People everywhere try to destroy what they are afraid of." Like a ninety-year old grandmother. "It's a weakness of human nature."

"Not at home. Not always." The creature shook its head, the fur of the lion costume shivering. "Fear can be tempered by respect."

"Then why did you leave?"

"Curiosity." A glint of humor appeared in the dragon's eyes. "You humans often say curiosity kills the cat. I never thought it could apply to dragons." It cocked its head to one side. "Are you not afraid of me?"

"I saw the way you danced. I think if you really wanted to hurt me, you could easily do so before I could defend myself."

The dragon gave her a startled look. The massive jaw dropped open into what she assumed was a grin. "You're a very unusual human."

"Thanks. I think."

It glanced up the street, at the increasing distance between them and the tail end of the parade. "As intriguing as this debate has been, this is not the time or place. I must reach the ocean."

"My truck is parked at the beginning of the procession route. If you can fit in the bed, I'll take you to the beach."

The dragon gave a surprisingly elegant bow, despite the awkwardness of its disguise. "Thank you."

They turned away from the crowds. Tension radiated from the dragon when two men approached. They looked ordinary enough, until she saw the rifles in their hands.

The hunters.

The need to kill the dragon must be intense, if they were willing to walk the city streets with their weapons exposed. Oregon might technically be an "open carry" state, but Brenton, like Portland, Salem and many of the other larger cities, had a ban on carrying loaded firearms. This was more than a simple case of fear driving them to kill what had frightened them.

It was deeper and more sinister than that.

Kara fought back a shiver.

The men studied her. Her chest tightened, trapping her breath in her lungs, but she forced herself to meet their gaze.

No fear. She could not show any fear.

Their attention turned from her to the dragon. Matching frowns further marred their faces.

The muscles of her neck contorted into painful knots. Her fingers tightened in the fabric of the lion costume as they continued walking. She focused on the open sidewalk beyond the hunters. If they could just pass by without giving themselves away, there might be a chance.

Almost there. Almost...

A pair of metallic clicks. Something small and hard pressed into the back of Kara's neck. "Take another step, and I'll blow your head off."

Kara froze.

The second hunter aimed his shotgun at the dragon. "All right, buddy. Let's see what's under the costume."

No movement. Not even a flicker of fake fur.

The end of the barrel pressed deeper into her flesh. Fear spiked through her veins. Tears burned her eyes and caught in her lashes. The world blurred.

This must be what her grandmother had felt, in her last few moments.

"Don't be stupid. And don't try to be a hero." For a moment, she thought the hunter's words were meant for her, until he added, "Would be a shame if we had to hurt the lady."

"Take off the costume," the first hunter said. "Nice and slow. No sudden movements."

The fabric moved. Flowed down to the ground. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the whole dragon for the first time. It was much larger than she had expected.

A strong odor filled the air: musk mixed with a touch of sulfur.

One of the hunters retched. "Great move. You scared it into taking a crap again."

That scent was coming from the dragon? It smelled similar to a skunk, but much stronger. Perhaps it was also meant to be a defense mechanism, like the skunk's musk.

The second hunter gave a harsh laugh. "Then shoot it and put it out of our misery."

"Don't," Kara said softly. She had not been there to save the one she'd loved, all those months ago, but if she could keep them from murdering this innocent creature... "Please."

"It's all right." The dragon turned to the hunters. "Leave her alone. She has nothing to do with this."

"Yeah? And how do we know she isn't one of you beasts in disguise?"

"If dragons could change into humans, do you think I would have let you see me like this?"

So calm. So rational. A stark contrast to his hunters. For a moment, Kara wished she was a dragon. His kind seemed so much easier to live with than her own. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's simple, babe. Nobody will believe we saw a dragon, without the body."

"What? You've never heard of a video camera?" She needed to keep him talking. Each time he spoke, she felt his gun waver from her neck, as if he could not manage both actions at the same time.

"Not taking that chance. It never worked for Bigfoot."

The dragon began to breathe faster, and the air grew heavy and damp.

Fog.

It started raining, cold and unpleasant in the chill of the February night. The sky overhead was clear, the stars sparkling bright. Not a cloud in sight.

"Not again. I told you to shoot it right away."

"Hey. I'm not the only one with a gun here."

"I have another target. Even you can see that." The gun slipped again. The barrel brushed her shoulder. She took a quick glance back, unnoticed by the hunter, who continued arguing with his buddy. His gun dropped further, and Kara slammed her elbow back into his gut.

He let out a howl, and his weapon clattered to the ground.

Kara jumped for the shadows.

The dragon roared. The fog and rain intensified into a downpour. Her field of vision reduced to mere inches.

The men cursed.

"Hold out your hands." Something smooth and slick passed beneath her palms. His scales. "Grab onto my fur."

Kara clutched at the long silken hair of his mane, letting it tangle around her arms as her feet left the ground.

She bit back a scream.

They rose above the fog, which reached only as high as the second floor of the nearby buildings. Gunshots fired into the air, random and wild.

The dragon twisted and slipped between her legs so she straddled his strong, serpentine body. He was surprisingly warm. "You said you have a vehicle?"

"At the start of the parade route. To the east." They covered a lot of distance in a very short time. The sensation of flight was strange and wonderful, and she didn't want it to end, but landing would be the rational thing to do. "There's my truck."

The dragon touched down beside the vehicle, and Kara slid off his back. She glanced from the truck, to the dragon, and back again. "I don't know if you're going to fit."

He slithered up over the bed and constricted like a snake, coiling back upon his body. She drew the bed cover over him, and found that it concealed the dragon completely.

She drove in the opposite direction of the hunters, though it wasn't the most direct route to the beach. She didn't know if the men had a vehicle, or if they had managed to follow them at all.

Just to be safe, she drove about in a meandering, wandering route, careful to keep to well-lit, populated streets, where it would be easy to see if anyone followed them.

No one did.

Kara pulled up to the beach. The chilly weather, combined with the late hour, ensured that the sand and the water were empty. She let the dragon out, and followed him to the edge of the ocean.

For long moments they simply looked at each other in the pale, dim light of the crescent moon.

Then the dragon circled her, breathing its warm, misty breath over her shivering body. The heat concentrated in the pendant she wore, and made the gold glow in the night. "You were very brave. Thank you."

"Take me with you." The words were an impulsive plea, blurted out without thought.

"Someday. Perhaps." He made one final circuit around Kara, then slipped away, diving headfirst into the waves.

Kara watched until he was nothing more than a glimmer of scales. The waves nipped at her feet, soaking through her shoes to chill her skin, but she barely noticed.

Kara turned, and trudged up the sand.

The pendant continued to glow, and under the gold, the heat branded the shape of the dragon into her skin. The dragon was gone, yet it remained.



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Jaymi Mizuno writes fantasy and light science fiction, often with some of that mushy romance stuff thrown in. She received an Honorable Mention in the L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future competition and her first published story can be found in *Liquid Imagination*, Issue 21.

The Nixie's Rival

Brynn MacNab

"We need to talk."

The nixie did not reply at first. She leaned her elbows on the embankment and laid her head to the side. "It's warm," she said. "For the time of year."

"Yes, it is." Harold shifted his weight and glanced at the trees surrounding the nixie's pool, their yellow foliage beginning to brown. A squirrel chattered in a tall oak and hefted an acorn at him.

"They don't like you," said the nixie. "Well, they don't like me, but they know better than to give me trouble." She lay back in the water, examining the fingernails on her long, sleek hands. "When you have married me, they won't trouble you either. I'll see to it."

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Go on." Though her tone remained casual, she froze absolutely still. He thought he could see the water at her sides starting to ice over.

"Well, it's just...I mean, I don't even know your name."

She rose up slowly, water streaming from her black hair. "But you know hers, don't you?" Her voice was low and dangerous.

He rubbed his hands together. The day wasn't quite as warm as he'd like, whatever she said. "No. It's nothing like that. Listen, it's not that I don't like you—"

"What. Is. Her. Name?"

It seemed as if every other creature in the forest had stilled. Harold was beginning to be sorry he'd raised the subject. "Has it gotten colder, do you think?" he said. "These autumn days are so changeable."

"Aren't they?" Quick as a rushing stream, her hand shot out to grab his hair. She pulled him in, closer, and he teetered on the edge of the shore. "Don't play with me." Black eyes glared into his. She put a hand on the side of his face and ran her thumb across his lips. "You sang a different tune when last we met, my changeable autumn darling."

He tried not to cringe from her cold, wet touch. How could he have thought she was sexy? Gorgeous, yes. Hot? Never. "Please don't drown me."

"Drown you? Oh, Harold. No. I'm going to drown *her*." She tossed him backward. He sat down hard on the forest floor, while she rose up laughing. "Wherever you roam and

however you hide her, remember, my true love: all water's connected. I'll find the home wrecking siren. And then—!" She dived, disappearing into the pool's murky depths.

Harold stumbled to his feet and backed out of her glade. He made off down the road as quickly as he could, trying to feel relieved. There wasn't any other woman. Not for him. Not yet. So, no harm in her threats. Surely, he told himself, by the unlikely time he found a human sweetheart, one he wanted to keep—why, by then his nixie would have forgotten him.



"It's nothing like that," Harold moaned, his grip tightening on his tankard of ale. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at the woman beside him. "I *can't* marry you. I was once in love with a nixie, and she's sworn to drown the next woman who wins my heart."

Leneé chuckled. "How many women has that brush-off worked on, Harold?"

"Ten." He felt himself blush. "But it's true!" He had enjoyed using the excuse until now. With Leneé it was different, or it could have been different. If only he hadn't been such a fool.

"And if I survive the nixie?" She leaned forward, the red curls of her hair brushing against his arm. "Will you marry me?"

"I can't ask you to risk your life for me."

"Don't ask, then." She winked. "Just tell me where this nixie lives."

"She lives in the woods outside town."

"Oh, real specific." Leneé sighed, rolling her eyes. "You know, you could have just told me you didn't like me. I'm not a child."

"I'm not making this up! She's a mile north of here, just off the road. You know the pond there? Ask anybody about it. Is that specific enough? I'd show you, but we can't. She's got it out for me, Leneé. Please, you have to promise me you won't go—"

"Harold." She put a warm finger to his lips. "Trust me."

He was ready to grab her arm if she tried to leave then. But she didn't. The rest of the evening was pleasant, and they talked of simpler things. At the end of the night he couldn't keep her from going home, though he watched her go with a sinking feeling.



Pebbles dropping into her pool woke the nixie from her mid-morning nap. She floated to the surface, and broke the water to face the impertinent caller, a young woman, sunburnt and freckled, with her red hair frizzing wildly like flames.

"My," said the girl. "You are pretty. I can see why my Harold once loved you."

The nixie drifted closer. She didn't recognize this one, though she'd caught glimpses of many a fling in her beloved's washbasin, or from the horse-troughs that he passed with whatever romance of the moment on his arm.

"I'm Leneé," said the girl. She grinned. Stupidly, the nixie thought. They all looked like that, the clumsy land-bound halfwits. How could Harold prefer such creatures to herself? "I'm here to talk about my fiancé."

The nixie felt her anger spark. "Actually," she said, "*my* fiancé."

And she yanked her rival, unstruggling, into the water.

She pulled the woman down, down to the depths and felt her fingers suddenly scorched. She let go, and Leneé twisted once and became a lithe orange salamander. The salamander darted at the nixie and blew hot water at her face.

The salamander kicked off, upward, as the nixie dove for mud to comfort her burnt hands and cheek. When she resurfaced, holding the compress against her face, Leneé stood on the shore, completely dry, adjusting the wrinkles of her dress. Her hair frizzed in all directions. "About my fiancé," she said. "You're to leave him alone." She smiled. Viciously, the nixie thought. "Or I'll boil your pool. Understood?"



Leneé was nowhere to be found and Harold headed to the bar early, determined to drink himself from depression to stupor. How could he have bungled things so badly? Either he'd run her off with his lame line or...he shivered, and hunched his shoulders. She couldn't have really gone out to confront the nixie, could she? Broken hearts were one thing, but to have a death on his conscience...

He rounded the corner of the tavern and spotted Leneé, striding toward the door. She checked, turning to him, and her face lit in a wide smile. "I spoke to your nixie," she said. "It's all settled."

His jaw dropped.

"She's given up claim. Sees how silly it is to cling to the past."

"Uh," said Harold hoarsely. "Uh."

"Shut your mouth, Harold. You look like a fish-which, thanks to me, you will never be."

He shut his mouth obediently, and then he pulled Leneé into his arms and kissed her. "Marry me," he said, finding his voice.

"Of course."

He laughed. "This is so great! You have no idea how good it feels to just be with a regular, human woman again."

Leneé smiled, trailing a warm finger along the line of his jaw. "Sweetheart," she said. "We need to talk."



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Brynn MacNab has been reading speculative fiction since before she knew there was any other kind, and writing it for almost as long. She has had stories published by *Penumbra eMag*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. You can find links to more of her work at brynnmacnab.blogspot.com. When not writing, Brynn enjoys such varied delights as crochet, yoga, and data entry. Wait, no. That last one is just her day job. She lives in eastern Pennsylvania with a cornucopia of housemates and no pets, much to her chagrin.

Interview with Award Winning Author Robert Reed

Robert Reed was born in Omaha, Nebraska and he received a B.S. in Biology in 1978 from Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska. He worked several jobs, but since 1987 he has been prolific enough to make his living as a full-time science fiction writer. Bob has had twelve novels published, starting with *The Leeshore* in 1987 and most recently with *The Memory of Sky* in 2014. Since winning the first annual L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest in 1986 (under the pen name Robert Touzalin) and being a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for best new writer in 1987, he has had over 200 shorter works published in a variety of magazines and anthologies. Eleven of those stories were published in his critically-acclaimed first collection, *The Dragons of Springplace*, in 1999. Twelve more stories appear in his second collection, *The Cuckoo's Boys* [2005]. In addition to his success in the U.S., Reed has also been published in the U.K., Russia, Japan, Spain and in France, where a second (French-language) collection of nine of his shorter works, *Chrysalide*, was released in 2002. Bob has had stories appear in at least one of the annual "Year's Best" anthologies in every year since 1992. He has received nominations for both the Nebula Award (nominated and voted upon by genre authors) and the Hugo Award (nominated and voted upon by fans), as well as numerous other literary awards. In 2007, he won his first Hugo Award for the 2006 novella "A Billion Eves". Robert continues to live in Lincoln, Nebraska, with his wife, Leslie, and daughter, Jessie.

Q&A

Julian: Dear Robert, your earliest work dates back to 1986 when your story "Mudpuppies" won the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest. Since that time, your writing career has exploded—to date I can count 11 novels and 200+ short stories. Tell us a few words about the time before the fame: How did you grow up, any particular influences in your life, and, of course, what jobs have you had before going full-time writer? Since writing, have you ever considered any other career?

Robert: The "time before the fame" is pretty much my entire life. As a kid, I watched *Gilligan's Island* and *The Big Valley* after school, and in the glow of the black-and-white TV, I tinkered with bloody stories involving superdinosaurs and the like. Very little has changed. I watch different shows and I write what catches my interest, as always. Most pieces sell, and maybe I'll read reviews. Maybe several times a week I get appreciative emails. Maybe. This is a very subtle fame. The money made as a full-time writer has been minimal. My writing went full-time because that was the only way to get enough work done. I managed the trick

because Lincoln is a cheap town and I was able to survive just above the poverty line. I worked in a local factory for years, sometimes full-time and sometimes half-days. I did some mentoring for gifted students, and I married well. My wife has always been employed, and her paychecks have never bounced, and I am daycare for my daughter, except now she's a teenager and mostly I just bother her enough to make sure she isn't doing something too wicked for words.

How did you start writing? Was it an Eureka moment for you, or was it built over time? The world is filled with people who wake up every day saying: "one day I will be a writer." You actually did it. Is there a secret to that success?

My Eureka moments are constant. I endure them every day, sometimes several times a day. I've learned to ignore most of them. I can't stop myself from figuring out a hard story, though the next Eureka might wipe away that solution—so I don't get attached to these moments of false brilliance.

In part, I wanted to be a writer because I thought I would be a good writer. A bigger part is that I couldn't imagine myself being successful at much else. I like science, but I hate labs. I can teach, but I rarely want to stand in front of people and tell them what to think. I can be a writer because it means too much to me. I love playing story-games in my head. Signing autographs is a neutral event. Seeing my books in Barnes and Noble is a good reason to move to a different department.

What would you call the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew you turned pro? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that? Was there anyone who helped you along the way, or was an internal struggle?

One of my favorite writer moments was at the end of BLACK MILK, my third novel. I had a tense situation involving a treehouse and armed stand-off. I didn't know what would happen next. But then several parents to the main characters walked off to get a ladder, which is what older, wiser souls would do. Those characters knew more than the writer, and the writer wasn't too proud to deny them that chance. Ever since, I listen to my characters, and probably to a fault.

People have advised me along the way. Good advice, bad advice. But always honest, and in most cases, I try to forget what they say.

Let's talk about editors for a little bit. Without naming names, unless you want to, do you find working with editors difficult, helpful, annoying, etc? Any bad or enlightening experiences you'd like to mention? How important is the editor?

I love some editors. Well, no. Let's rewrite the line. I adore some people who happen to be editors, and I respect what editors can accomplish. Don't I want a better product? Of course, if it is genuinely improved. But good editors are not as common as some might believe. One old stallion of the business warned me that he was an exceptional editor, far better than the gal I had before him. He got me ready for a heavily marked-up manuscript. For months, I was waiting for hundreds of pages of difficult choices. The book was pushed back because of delays, and then finally, Fed-Ex delivered it. But I was under a strict timetable, what with problems beyond his control. (He had a life full of problems, and usually someone else's fault.) And here's the thing: The manuscript was heavily worked, but usually only for ten or twenty pages at a shot. Then, nothing. For thirty pages, nothing. Then a new pen and more good help. And it was good help, don't doubt that. But his voice came and went, and that pattern was repeated for years. Looking back, I assume that the fellow was attention-deficit, or more likely, an attention-deficit pothead. Not that all dopers are vague and manipulative users incapable of meeting deadlines. But that's what he was, and despite some very successful work together, I have a hard time conjuring reasons to miss him.

If you were to choose one favorite novel and one favorite short story from your own works, which one would it be? Related to that, for people who haven't read your works yet (e.g. those stacks of people living under rocks)—what would be the best place to start getting to know your world?

MARROW is the novel for those who like big space-opera work. It's also my most successful work, in terms of financial rewards. BLACK MILK has just been reprinted in e-pub form, from Diversion Books. That might be a good read for a more personal, character-driven work.

As for a favorite story: Try "Truth". The novella was a runner-up for the Hugo, and it's being made into a movie right now. In Canada, on a tight budget. Google PRISONER X. From what I understand, the movie makers are keeping my story intact. Which is the biggest thrill.

What is your writing process, and how do you manage to juggle so many things? Do you have clear goals set ahead of time, or are you more of a spur of the moment kind of writer?

I juggle. I set goals. I spur of the moment, yes. Every year, I make a list of working stories, but lists are meant as guidelines only. If I sign a contract, I focus hard, and I don't know if I've ever been more than a couple days late on a manuscript, and it's usually in good shape.

Other people think of me as being disciplined. I'm more of the mind that the rest of humanity is undisciplined, and if I ever did achieve order in my life...well, then stand back.

As of the time of this interview, "The Memory of the Sky" is your most recent novel, published in the beginning of 2014. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

MEMORY is three novels in one world-sized volume. The first story was written several years ago, and it went hunting for a publisher. Prime Books eventually took it and wanted two more in a series, and Barnes and Noble wanted a single volume. That's how things get made. Dark matter, baryonic matter. What is the universe built on? Silly crap, mostly.

MEMORY is a Great Ship book. That's the same universe as MARROW. Both volumes are part of an ongoing saga that I won't finish in this life, but I will try to.

How do you feel about the alternative publishing platforms? For example, our magazine is an online venue and e-book publisher. Self-publishing and indie-publishing are growing every year. I feel like the writers today have a lot more choices than what you had available back in '86, but is that a good thing or might it lead to a lot of lower quality content out there? How do you think these movements are affecting the publishing field?

I love the idea of being able to publish what I want, when I want. I hate not having qualified editors to help. I love the ease of finding an audience waiting for me. But most writers don't have that advantage...an advantage built for me on years of ordinary publishing. I also fear that all of these markets and this extraordinary focus on "social" networks crushes every chance we have to earn a fair-shake in the world. The system has never been noisier, and the only people who think the system is successful are the ones who won the lottery.

What is your advice for the young writers of today? Is there a secret handshake we should learn about?

An anecdote: Last year, I met a young writer who just sold a story to a market where I sold a story. He didn't like his work and wanted to pull it. I cautioned him not to. "Believe me," I said, "in twenty years, you'll hate everything you wrote today."

He didn't act all that pleased with my advice.

If you were able to have a conversation with any writer, alive or dead, and try to convince them to co-write a book with you, who would that be?

My younger self. I would go back and we would write one monster book, and then he'd never speak to me again.

I am a runner and I see that you are a runner too. What does running do for you and are there any other activities you enjoy doing when you are not writing?

I am a runner, if I heal. My right arch has some kind of tear in it, and that happened a month ago, and I'm 58 and see no point in doctors for what needs rest, not surgery. Except I'm 58 and who knows how long before I can run without pain?

So I use an elliptical. In warm weather, I sort of garden. I ride a bike. But running is my love, and it does nothing for me but keep me sane and heading in the right directions.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I do work part-time for Bungie, helping them with their chaotic Destiny game. Mostly, I play with voices they invented and their universe. Very small stuff. They say that they'll hire me back. And after playing their game for several months, two hours a day, I think I have some stories to tell.

Robert, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. I can't wait to read the new installments in your series!



Interview with Author Erica Satifka

Erica Satifka's short fiction has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Shimmer*, *Clarkesworld*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Ideomancer*. She lives in beautiful Portland, Oregon with her writer husband Rob and too many cats. A bike rider, sporadic blogger, sometimes zinester, and former Pittsburgher, Erica delights in telling stories about terrible worlds and the slightly-less-terrible characters that inhabit them. She is currently working on a novel about the evil that lurks inside big-box megastores and a zine about her cross-country move.

Q&A

Julian: Tell us something about Erica Satifka. How/where did you grow up, what was your upbringing and were there any particular influences in your life?

Erica: I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, south of Pittsburgh, in an area already gutted by the loss of the coal and steel industries years before I was born. This is clearly reflected by how many of my stories, including "Hand of God," take place in isolated crappy towns. (Or dilapidated exoplanet colonies. Or broken spaceships. Ruins everywhere!) My parents aren't really readers and sometimes I think they're baffled by my choice of career, but I was not to be swayed. I sought out what books I could, wrote all kinds of stuff, and was basically drawn to reading/writing like a moth to flame. I wanted to leave my small town ever since I could remember, and that shows up in my stories too, in characters yearning to escape their circumstances.

My other main influence is my politics. Outside Pittsburgh, Western PA is really conservative. In my first year of college, I started getting into zines, which opened up my eyes to feminism, socialism/anarchism, etc., things I'd never encountered in my working-class, 95% white, Appalachian town. This doesn't often come out in my stories explicitly, but I like to think it's there bubbling beneath the surface.

How did you get involved into writing? Give us a summary of your path.

I've always written stories, even in elementary school. Even though I had almost no exposure to SF as a child outside of a few TV shows (*Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits*), almost everything I wrote was speculative in nature, including the first story I ever wrote, which was about a sad uplifted ape. Until I got to college I was limited to the poor selection of books available at my high school library, which included only a few SF short fiction anthologies in between the classics and "teens in crisis" books. I was still writing weird SFish stories, but had no idea that getting them published was even possible (this was in the nineties, before online magazines but after the paper SF magazines had ceased being available in drugstores and

whatnot). Late in college I discovered Dick and Le Guin, plus the new online magazines coming out like *Strange Horizons* and *Ideomancer*, and I knew there had to be a place for the kinds of things that I wrote. But even after I moved to the "big city" of Pittsburgh, I wasn't writing consistently: maybe one short story every six or seven months, plus the first iteration of my novel. I eventually sold everything I wrote back then except the novel, but I wasn't truly serious about it in those days. It was a hobby, not a passion.

Between 2008-2011 I barely wrote anything at all (one single finished short story, which will soon be reprinted in *Escape Pod!*), for a number of reasons I won't get into. But I felt a hole in my life that nothing else seemed to fill quite right, so I started again, and turned up the productivity dial from two to maybe seven or eight. Seriously, I wrote more stories in 2013 than in all other years combined, and my 2015 production will hopefully be higher than that. I've sold almost twenty stories and reprints since the "break," and at this point I won't stop until I'm dead.

I need to also mention that the Codex Writers Group (which I discovered post-break) has been an invaluable resource to me. I've learned so much about being a working writer from the people there, and there's a wonderful sense of camaraderie.

You also teach writing, specifically science fiction/fantasy writing. How did you get involved in that and how do you enjoy it? What is your general approach to teaching these difficult subjects?

When I moved to Portland, I immediately started hitting the ground looking for work: part-time work, "gig" work, something to supplement the writing. One of my friends here teaches writing classes at Portland Community College and said I should look into it, so I did! I finished the first four-week cycle of adult education classes in February, and I think it went well. Each of the classes has a specific focus: plotting, worldbuilding, character/voice, and a class critique session. The class exercises are all geared toward writing potentially publishable finished stories, which the students really seemed to appreciate. I also give a short talk about how to submit your work. It's a fun class, and hopefully an enlightening one.

What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career? Was there an epiphany and if so, how did you feel?

Probably my first "pro" acceptance from *Clarkesworld*, in 2006. I didn't know much about publishing short fiction back then. My undergraduate classes didn't really cover submitting to markets, maybe because they were more literary-focused. I only found out about the submission call by chance. So when I got in, and later learned in retrospect how difficult it was to get into that magazine, especially with the then-current assistant editor, it was like some kind of sign that maybe I'm good at this.

Everyone in my writing group hated this story, by the way. Always trust your instincts!

You also provide editing services for authors. Tell us a bit about your process and what makes you different from other editors.

I provide comprehensive edits, looking at not just grammar and spelling mistakes but also pacing, point-of-view shifts, and continuity errors. I think self-publishing is great (although I don't do it myself, yet) but so much of what gets released doesn't go through even one round of editing. Even if you have confidence in yourself as a storyteller, you always need another pair of eyes, and I'm happy to be that pair of eyes and give an unbiased take on your story or novel.

You've published several stories in professional magazines, including *Clarkesworld* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Describe your writing and submission process. Do you write for a magazine specifically?

Never. For one, you never know what somebody will like, so "writing for the magazine" doesn't work. I placed a futuristic SF story in a magazine that's primarily fantasy, and had other stories rejected that I thought would be "perfect" for the markets I sent them to (but they were rejected, so clearly I was wrong!). So I usually submit to the fastest responders (among the professional markets) first, then on down the line, only skipping a certain market when I know for surer that a particular story won't be a fit.

Secondly, if you're not writing what you want, then it's not going to be any fun and you'll hate what you write. And what's the point of that? I mean, I could obviously make more money and build a bigger "brand" if I wrote an epic fantasy series about damsels in distress, or zombies in spaaaaace!!, but it would be like pulling teeth to write something like that. Little weird stories about reality bending are something I really like to write, and although it's work it's also play. If you're not jazzed about what you're writing it's going to show.

In our issue #6, we've included your story "Hand of God," previously released in audio format by PodCastle. Tell us a bit about it. How did it come to be? What does it mean to you?

This was the first story I wrote after I restarted writing. It has my basic "small crappy town" setting, evil forces beyond the characters' comprehension, and of course drugs. It took a long time to get this one into shape because I was so out of writing practice, but then the next one was easier, and the next one after that was easier still. I think "Hand of God" will always be special to me because of where it fits in my writing journey, the first link in the second (and better) part.

Do you have any works in progress? If so, can you tell us something about it?

I always have multiple short stories in progress and I try to finish at least one a month. I'm also wrapping up the final edits on my novel, which has taken quite a lot longer than I thought it would (I keep getting distracted by short stories!). Eventually I also want to dip a toe into self-publishing, but right now I'm pretty committed to the short story world.

What is your advice for today's young writers who are trying to break through this ever more difficult market?

Start at the top. For a long time I didn't even know what a "professional" market was and that was a problem. Don't worry about writing every day or doing "morning pages" (ha! I never get up before nine unless I have to). Beware of jealousy, either of others or jealousy directed at you, because it will kill you. Many hours have been lost to "building brands" that are better spent writing stories. Write them. Send them out. Repeat. Everything else is optional.

What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I have some stories coming out later this year, some of which have been announced, others not. I'll be teaching at least two more cycles of classes at Portland Community College and probably more after that, including a class for teens. Please visit my website to find out more! I'm also really looking forward to attending WorldCon in Spokane this year.

Erica, thank you for this interview. Good luck with everything and hope to see your works again in our magazine!!



Interview with Award Winning Editor Ellen Datlow

Multiple award-winning editor Ellen Datlow has been editing science fiction, fantasy, and horror fiction for almost thirty years. She has been fiction editor of OMNI Magazine and SCIFICTION, currently acquires short stories for Tor.com, and has edited more than fifty short story anthologies, including the previous long-running The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and since 2009 the current Year's Best Horror of the Year series. You can follow Ellen on Twitter at [@ellendatlow](https://twitter.com/ellendatlow) or read more about her on <http://ellendatlow.com/>.

Q&A

Iulian: Before we jump to your amazing work, I'd like to know a bit more about the person behind your fame. Please tell us a few things about yourself: where were you born, how did you grow up, how early on did you have an idea about what your career would entail?

Ellen: I was born in Manhattan, grew up in the Bronx and then Yonkers, the latter a suburb just north of New York City. My father owned a luncheonette (cross between a diner and candy store, which sold comic books) during most of my formative years and my mom returned to and graduated from college when I was around 12 years old and taught elementary school. I moved to Manhattan in 1973 or so after traveling around Europe for a year after graduating University.

I knew I wanted to have something to do with books as a career but didn't think of publishing until my early 20s.

To date you've edited 60+ horror, fantasy, and science fiction anthologies. What drives you to the speculative fiction genre? Do you remember what pushed you first in that direction? How did you see the genre change over your activity of 30+ years?

I love the magic, the weirdness, the strangeness, the creation of possibilities in the "what if" component of sf/f/h. I've always read fiction with an "odd" bent along with mainstream fiction.

I've seen the genre of the fantastic and grotesque (handy ways of referring to sf/f/h) become more inclusive as to who is writing in it. I've seen the genres mix more and most markets care less about enforcing strict divisions among the subgenres. I see this is a natural evolution and a positive development overall, although the development seems to have created so many more niches (sub-genres?) that the market may be having a bit of a hiccup keeping up.

We'll get to the anthologies in a bit, but first let's look at magazines. You've edited fiction for *OMNI*, *Sci Fiction*, and *Event Horizon*. How was that experience for you? Can you give us a short glimpse into your work in each of them?

OMNI was a joy to work for as I had a large budget and a creative art department. Omni's art direction was *the* major influence on most subsequent genre magazines/webzines in the look and use of fine art for illustration. Look at old issues of *SF Age* and *Fantasy*. Their layouts look just like OMNI's.

Initially, I was more constrained in what I could buy, so no horror. But as other editors (this position is sometimes called Editor-in-Chief or Publisher depending on the magazine) took over the direction of the the magazine, they trusted me and things loosened up, so by the end I could basically publish what I want—great stories of sf/f/h.

Working at OMNI taught me office politics, and gave me the confidence to contact anyone for a new story, which is how I acquired original fiction by writers such as Julio Cortazar, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Joyce Carol Oates, William Burroughs, and even Patricia Highsmith.

It also taught me to be creative about getting around constraints. Space limitation was always an issue at OMNI—the magazine was meant to be one-third fiction, one-third nonfiction, and one-third art. That ratio remained the same. But a good chunk of any advertising-supported magazine, requires that a percentage of the magazine contains ads. Advertisements would drop in and out at the last minute and they had to be accommodated. Over time, I had less room for fiction (the same with the nonfiction) so I thought up the idea of creating groupings of themed short-shorts in which I could cram 3-6 stories into one “slot” in addition to a normal length story. I commissioned about eight themed groups between 1983 and 1993 comprising around sixty short-shorts. Out of all those I commissioned, I turned down and paid a kill fee for only one, which is a pretty good record. (Commissioning vs soliciting stories (in the latter case—which is most often—the latter you have no commitment to pay anything). A couple of those stories have become classics: “They’re Made Out of Meat” by Terry Bisson and “Two Minutes Forty-Five Seconds” by Dan Simmons.

When OMNI went fully online we ran what was possibly the first online convention for Eos Books. We started live chats with fiction writers and scientific luminaries. We started online “round robins” of 4-6 sf/f writer participants who took turns writing bits of stories through four cycles.

Even Horizon was the brainchild of mine and my three former OMNI colleagues. Rob Killheffer and I edited it, with me in charge of the fiction and Rob in charge of the nonfiction. We intended it to be a showcase for what we four OMNI alumni could create online—we

brought over the ideas from OMNI online, adding a commentary column written by Douglas E. Winter, Lucius Shepard, Jack Womack, David J. Schow, Howard Waldrop, Barry N. Malzberg, Carter Scholz, and Paul T. Riddell, on whatever topics interested them plus book reviews. We published original stories and reprints on a regular basis. Our biggest problem was making money from the site. Even though we sold advertising, none of us knew how to actually collect the money owed us. After a year and a half, we closed Event Horizon down. It's still available via the wayback machine.

When OMNI online folded, I had been approached by Craig Engler and Sean Redlitz, who were working for the Sci Fi Channel's website, then called the Dominion. They said the site wanted to expand into fiction and would I be interested in editing that section. I said sure but then heard nothing about until just as EH was closing down. They approached me again, said they now could hire me. By this time the site was renamed SCIFI.COM and we came up with the name SCIFICTION for the fiction area. I acquired fiction for the site for about six years. When I was first brought onboard, the site was expanding to become a huge portal intending to attract all kinds of sf/f fans, with web comics, online videos, fiction, book reviews and news, and a lot more. But over the six years I was there the site contracted, a lot of people were laid off, and eventually it became a site to drive traffic to the Channel, rather than provide original content. Fiction was the next to last thing to go and finally even the news/review went.

Currently you collaborate with Tor.com as a consulting editor; you also solicit stories from specific writers. First of all, how did this collaboration start and what do you enjoy about this role?

I was approached by Irene Gallo, head of Tor.com and asked if I'd like to consult for Tor.com by acquiring stories for the website.

I don't read slush—I mostly solicit from the hundreds of writers I've worked with or whose work I know and like. I can buy anything I want at whatever length from very short story through novella length. Because I'm only one of several editors acquiring stories, there are no slots to fill and thus no pressure to buy things I don't love.

Who and what type of stories do you mostly target when it comes to soliciting stories?

All kinds. As to who, see above.

You edit a lot of horror. Please tell us about your passion for this genre, what lead you to edit horror fiction and why you chose "horror" to be your main source of editing at this time?

I started editing horror in order to avoid a conflict of interest with my editing job at OMNI, but I've always loved horror. I haven't chosen it. It's chosen me.

I would love to edit more science fiction, but there are few opportunities for me to do so. I've encouraged some of those who have written it for me in the past to submit their sf to me now. But I'm just getting better f/h than sf for Tor.com. I edit fantasy as much as I do horror. (at Tor.com and for anthologies). But I actually do prefer exceedingly dark fantasy/horror to light.

It seems like coming up with interesting and unique themed anthologies is a skill you have mastered. How do you keep it fresh? What comes first, the theme or the writers? What I mean is, do you create the idea in a vacuum and then source it, or do you create the theme with a few writers in mind?

Sometimes I get burned out, but then something or someone gives me an idea for a theme I'd like to work with. The theme always comes first. Then I think of writers who might be appropriate/interested.

The skills of editing for a magazine versus an anthology are a bit different, but in the end it's all about the quality of the prose and the uniqueness of the story. How do you define a great story? And on the other end of the spectrum: what themes and motifs are you tired of seeing?

I can mention the things that draw me into a story and some of the elements that allow me to read and reread that story again and again without ending up hating it. But it's difficult to define a "great" story.

When I buy a story for a magazine or anthology I know I'm going to be reading it multiple times because I will likely read it at least twice before buying it (possibly asking for revisions before that point) then will be rereading and editing it several months later before it goes into production. When reading for *The Best of the Year*, I'll be reading and rereading until I eliminate all but the stories that will eventually go into the actual book.

Voice matters to me. If I don't like the voice (not the character but the "voice" of that character), I'll very likely not love the story. Story telling and having a story to tell is important to me. I prefer there to be multiple layers to a story although sometimes a humorous story might get through to me (I feel that most humor, when not satire, is pretty lightweight). I need to believe in the characters and their problems while I'm reading the story. I also like a strong sense of place.

As horror's the only genre I'm reading in extensively, it's the only one in which I'm well-read. (Although I'm not well-read in horror novels).

I get tired of the (usually English) couple on the verge of a break-up who go someplace in the country on vacation, do really stupid things, and then get really screwed up. I see a lot of those while reading for the *Best Horror of the Year*.

There are tropes that everyone says they never want to see again: vampire, werewolf, zombie. Even I said that about zombie stories several years ago. But I've changed my mind because there is always something new that can be done with those tropes. But it's ALL in the story. Most stories of all kinds (in or out of genre) are only so-so. It's always the skill and passion of the writer that makes the reader sit up and take notice.

Let's talk about your *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. What did that period mean for you? What was it like collaborating with Terri Windling, Kelly Link, and Gavin Grant?

Our packager, Jim Frenkel, created the project, coming up with the brilliant idea that readers would be interested in an anthology combining the best of fantasy and horror. The twenty-one years during which the series existed proved him right.

We didn't collaborate. They read and acquired the fantasy. I read and acquired the horror. Once in awhile we overlapped on a story that we considered both fantasy and horror.

Following *Year's Best* you moved on to edit *The Best Horror of The Year*, now into its 8th year. What do you enjoy most about this series, and can you please confirm for us that it will never, ever, ever end?

I love that I can keep doing what I was doing in the *YBFH* series—picking the horror stories I love best and can thus push them onto an unsuspecting reading public. (I can't guarantee how long it will continue that—it depends on the marketplace. Will readers continue to buy enough copies to keep my publisher happy and can the publisher continue to pay me enough to make it worth my while. I do more work on the best of the year than on anything else I do, and get paid the least. I'm currently reading for the eighth volume.

Are there any editors out there that have influenced your work? Any personal heroes? And on a similar note: what qualities are necessary to make a good editor?

Judith Merrill and Harlan Ellison in science fiction and horror for their taste and willingness to experiment and broaden the minds of their readers, and Maxwell Perkins in mainstream for his relationship with his authors.

You must be able to say no to submissions that don't work, even if they're by friends and/or big names.

You must enjoy working with writers and it helps to learn tact. (I'm less tactful with writers with whom I've worked a lot, but that's because I know we're on the same wave length and they can take a bit of bluntness.)

If you're a writer yourself (I'm not, but I've heard horror stories)—you must be very careful to *not* impose your writing style on the author's story. For all editors, it's important to remember that it's your author's story, and if there's something you want to "fix" (and it's best if the writer, not the editor fixes the story) it's for the *story* not your own ego or from a personal bias. I may make suggestions, but I expect the writer to make the actual changes in the manuscript.

Meet your deadlines.

Here's comes my favorite question for editors: Can you name for us your all time favorite story and favorite anthology among all that you've edited and published?

And why stop here? What is your all time favorite piece of short fiction?

I'm afraid I can't. I have no one favorite story (either that I published or read). I have many favorite stories.

I've got several favorite anthologies but mostly those I've done solo because I didn't have to compromise.

You've won a lifetime's worth of awards and accreditations for your amazing work. What do these awards mean to you, and do you have any specific award you consider *The One*?

It's fun and gratifying to receive an award for editing but often it's luck and timing, as with most awards. Some of the anthologies I consider my best did not win awards. I think Life Achievement Awards might be the most gratifying.

We have a lot of writers among our subscribers, so I always like to ask this question: what is the single best piece of advice you can offer to all the young writers of today's (crazy) publishing world?

Never throw out anything. If a story doesn't work, cannibalize. Use the good bits for other stories.

What's next for you? What can your fans look forward to in 2015 and beyond?

I've just finished an all (but one) reprint anthology for Tachyon called *The Monstrous*—it will be out this fall. *The Best Horror of the Year Volume 7* will be out this summer. I've got a

contract for a new original anthology that won't be out till late 2016. I'm trying to sell a couple of new fantasy/dark fantasy anthologies and I hope to sell a new reprint anthology to Tachyon.

Dear Ellen, thank you for speaking with us today. It was a pleasure!



Artist Spotlight: Franklin Chan

Franklin Chan is a Hong-Kong born and raised artist whose works include concept art, illustrations, and matte painting, mostly with influences from science fiction and fantasy.

Iulian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?

Franklin: I was born in Hong Kong and moved to UK when I was a kid. I also moved around a lot when I was young, so I guess that made me want to constantly explore new places and experience new things. Although, I think my biggest early influence as an artist is watching a lot of movies growing up, which I still do to this day. What I enjoy the most when I paint is capturing an intriguing story or profound emotion and how lighting affects the mood of a scene. I think I've learned a lot of that from watching movies.

What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?

My favorite tool is definitely Photoshop, since I use it for my work most of the time. I also use 3D programs like Sketchup, Modo, Maya to aid my design and drawing process. When it comes to learning, I am pretty much self-taught by going online and searching for video tutorials.

Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?

I think there are just too many to name them. I came across Dylan Cole's work when I was in University. His matte painting and concept art is what made me aware of the entire industry. Feng Zhu and Ryan Church are two artists I really admire, not only because they produce great works, but they are also great teachers.

Where do you find inspiration?

I think reading novels provides the best inspiration. It gives you an interesting story to base your work upon, and your job is to take the novel's words and add your own interpretation.

How would you break down your workflow in steps?

I emphasize the efficiency of my workflow because I spend most of the time working as a freelance artist, meaning that you have to make your own schedule and discipline yourself to meet deadlines. Therefore I am really careful with the steps I am taking when creating a project from start to finish. The most important thing I stress is research, before I even start

doing any painting, I ask myself what is it that I am trying to achieve? If this is client work, what is the purpose of the artwork? Is it for a pitch? Is it a concept for another production artist? Is it for marketing? If this is a personal piece, what is it I am trying to learn or achieve at the end of the process?

When I set myself a target, I think about how I can achieve that with the highest quality possible within an appropriate time constraint. If capturing the mood of a story is important, I tend to start painting directly, and I can quickly explore color and lighting. If I need to illustrate an idea of a man-made structure and how it's put together, which later needs to go to a 3D artist to be built, I will start with a line sketch and then refine it in 3D. If the idea is based on something that already exist and the client wants photo realism, I would go out and shoot for reference and paint on top of photographs. I am sure every artist would have a different approach, but the general principle is understanding how each tool will contribute to the final result and be very flexible with your approach.

Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?

I think the power to imagine your own world in your artwork is really the most precious thing in the world. It is also the process I enjoy the most when I paint.

If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?

Since I am completely self-taught, I think the best advice I can give is to be patient and enjoy the learning process. It takes years of practicing and studying to become a great artist and the beginning journey can be very painful. And if you want to choose art as your career, that painful process will never stop even when you are experienced, because you will always have to learn new things and face new challenges on the job.

We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.

I always enjoy doing sci-fi painting. Ever since I heard the new Star Wars Trilogy is coming out, I wanted to do a piece to show my admiration for the genre. And, I wanted to do a scene where a gigantic industrial city is built on the surface a planet like Mars.

Where can we find you on the web?

<http://www.artbyfranklin.com>



Book Review: The Grace of Kings (Ken Liu)

Julie Novakova

The Grace of Kings

by Ken Liu

Saga Press (April 7, 2015)

Ken Liu has long since become an acclaimed short fiction writer and translator whose works had earned multiple awards. In his eagerly expected debut novel *The Grace of Kings*, the first book of *The Dandelion Dynasty* trilogy, Liu takes us to his secondary world of the Islands of Dara: Not too long ago divided into several ever-quarreling states, but recently unified under the rule of Emperor Mapidéré from the state of Xana. Hardly anyone from the conquered states is satisfied with his rule; old nobility has been deposed and relocated, men are suffering as corvée laborers, people are growing hungry... A daring attempted assassination of Mapidéré, however, shows them that he is not invincible. An unruly and courageous student, Kuni Garu, sees that not even an emperor is above fear. Mata Zyndu, a son of a deposed duke longing for revenge for his family, takes it as a sign that the new unnatural order of things was not going to last long. Years later, wheels get into motion fast as the old emperor dies and the court plots about the new successor. A rebellion eventually rises up, sweeping through the islands. Kuni and Mata end up as unlikely allies at first, close friends soon after. Yet that's still only the beginning of the upheaval awaiting the whole Dara...

The Most Interesting Thing

"All life is an experiment... I just promise myself to do the most interesting thing every time there's an opportunity."— Kuni Garu

Characters are one of the strongest features of *The Grace of Kings*. Even though many of them appear only briefly in the novel, most of them are portrayed very in-depth and achingly human, and especially Kuni Garu and his wife Jia Matiza have undergone the most exciting and very believable character development. Kuni's philosophy of life—trying to live the most interesting life—is sympathetic and appealing not just to most speculative fiction readers. However, sometimes the most interesting things can lead into dark places as well, and the cheerful young man gradually grows up... It's also interesting to watch the development of brothers Dafiro and Ratho who witness the revolution from its very beginning, comment on it with refreshing pragmatism on one side and idealism on the other, and finally part ways to

follow a different leader each. And I cannot forget to mention the gods of Dara who are at the same time believable characters and beings thinking in slightly different terms than humans.

In contrast, a few near-caricatures are carefully sprinkled throughout the story to spice it up with a dash of mild absurdity or comedy, like King Huno. His portrayal adds to an almost Orwellian feel at some moments: Huno's paranoid game of "who watches the watchmen" felt absurd and too believable at the same time. This is also true for a scene where Regent Crupo persuades the new emperor and his council that what they're seeing is really something wholly different. Many high fantasy novels only show the usual palace intrigues disregarding anyone below a certain station; Liu did not settle for it and introduced many more levels of scheming and also different levels of characters' motivations, sometimes conflicting or not really conscious.

The Theater of Life

"Show *is* substance."—Kuni Garu

While wars are won largely by numbers, we often forget the other bits: espionage, diplomacy, pretense, infrastructure, science and technology, and last but not least some luck... Some authors forget that as well; not Liu. Threads of all these elements go through the rebellion and shape its course. Sometimes an ingenious new creation or a little show can do more for victory than a bigger army. Bits of theater—usually constructed by the resourceful Kuni—appear many times, culminating in an intense scene on the Liru river between Mata and Kuni where it becomes painfully clear that sometimes you just have to play the monster, and become one in others' eyes, to avoid loss. This also ties to one of the strongest messages of the novel: We cannot really influence how history would remember us apart from trying to do good and hoping for the best.

While Kuni arranges his little theaters, readers and gods can watch the whole Dara as a grand theatre of life. We see personal and larger tragedies that could have been avoided if only the involved parties had complete information, or resulting from insufficient cooperation. In the rebellion, all the states fall back into quarrels over disputed lands, as the temptation to use the situation to their advantage is too sweet. These kinds of failures of cooperation and communication are very life-like and made me believe what I've been seeing. The whole world Liu brings us into is fascinating and diverse. The states of Dara each have a distinct culture, and we truly get a glimpse of a whole, rich culture, and not just some *one* defining trait to tell them apart. I was also excited about the female characters and their representation in the world. Women don't have it easy in Dara and often have to fight prejudice or unfair law but they are a force only a fool would disregard, living their own lives, actively engaging in the rebellion and shaping their destinies.

However, I found a few drawbacks in the novel as well. One of the strongest for me was the level of technology in the world. Wars in Dara seem to be fought mostly like conflicts in late medieval times, yet there are inventions and actions evoking early 20th century and WWI. If I may allow mild spoilers for a comparison's sake: we visit a world with airships, submarines and parachute troops, yet no firearms even though a substance like gunpowder is known. I found this aspect of the worldbuilding not very believable. I also didn't completely believe the characters at some occasions, namely Prince Pulo as he learns about his father's choice about the succession or Mata in his way of dividing lands. But these are just minor objections that don't change my overall perception of the novel, which is highly positive: It has been an epic, intricate and very entertaining story.

I will be very much looking forward to returning to the Dandelion Dynasty. *The Grace of Kings* left me very curious about the future development of Dara and shifting of powers. And Liu dropped some hints about the second book of the trilogy on his blog: It seems that a new technological revolution awaits Dara, which will surely lead to very interesting outcomes. *The Dandelion Dynasty* has started very well and I have all the reasons to assume it would also continue that way.



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Book Review: Half The World (Joe Abercrombie)

Jeremy Szal

Half The World

by Joe Abercrombie

Del Rey (February 17, 2015)

Until *Half A King* (2014), we all knew what we would be getting once we popped open an Abercrombie novel. Violence. Swearing. Cynicism. Dark humor. Snarky characters. Un-heroic adventures that dragged fantasy down into the mud in the most delightful way possible. Worlds that subverted traditional fantasy tropes for a grittier, more action-packed flavor.

And then came along *Half A King*, somewhat less intense and swearsy, but still retaining a lot of Abercrombie's traditional tools that we've come to know and love. It was a fantastic start to the Shattered Seas trilogy, raising the bar for YA speculative fiction everywhere.

And *Half the World* (2015) just raised it again.

Thorn is one of the two main characters of the novel. Struggling to carve out her place as a warrior in a male-dominated society, she's fought her way uphill through years of strenuous tests, only to accidentally kill a student in the training grounds. She is soon sentenced to death. That's when Brand comes in. A young warrior who hates to kill, he speaks up on her behalf, starting a chain of events that sees the two of them bound together on a ship, facing terrible dangers as they sail across half the world to seek allies against the High King.

Thorn is harsh and hot-tempered, the complete counterpart to the brooding, quiet personality of Brand. Yet their chemistry is irresistibly charming, packed with laugh-out-loud moments and passages of pure genius. There's no soppy, drawling spurts of lukewarm romance or spoutings of pseudo-philosophies on relationships here. Abercrombie doesn't fool himself into thinking he's reaching new heights when it comes to teenage dialogue. He writes what's genuine and it works. It's fast, it's tight, it's real, and it's magnificent.

The rest of the ragtag crew is also marvelous. They're far from the dashing, handsome lot that you'd want to sail the seas with. They're filthy, rough and shoulder a dark history of their own, many of which become unraveled through the course of the book. Yet they become close friends that we can't bear to bid farewell. Each of them has enough plot-time to sculpt them into three-dimensional characters, but never enough that they threaten to steal the spotlight.

The strongest aspect of Thorn and Brand as characters is that they are both fundamentally flawed. They're not trying to be heroes, they're not trying to be the golden center of attention. Thorn dives head-first into trouble, not giving a damn whether it's safe or not. And Brand often lets others push him around as to not cause problems, yet problems eventually find him anyway. They're far from perfect, but we can't help but love and cheer for them. We want to sail across half the world just to spend more time in their company. Their relationship and development as characters is the true core of *Half the World*. Their slow evolution through the novel is a joy to experience, and their bitter-sweet interactions span everything from heart-warming to heart-breaking. This meticulous slow-burn of a relationship is easily the greatest and most daring I've seen in any YA novel, ever.

If there is something negative to say, it's Thorn's mildly grating attitude. She harbors resentment to almost everyone who crosses her path, regardless of their intentions. Of course, this only provides a greater opportunity to see her change and develop as a character, and her deep-rooted anger is understandable, given the death of her father and her nagging mother. Her frustration with the limitations placed on her as a woman is also warranted, given that a poor treatment of women is a cruel fact of pre-modern existence, one that Abercrombie (and many other fantasy authors) are perfectly justified in portraying. Yet I personally wanted to be Brand more than I did Thorn, and found myself looking forward to his chapters more than hers. In saying that, both are fantastic characters that have taken deep root within me and made a lasting impression.

And I couldn't justify not giving Yarvi a mention. The protagonist of the first book has become a Minister, playing his deadly game in the shadows, maneuvering and manipulating entire kingdoms without their knowledge. He's a smart, yet devious character who straddles the lines between white and black. In a sea of grey characters, Yarvi is the greyest of them all. When you see the situations and circumstances that transpired solely because of Yarvi's actions, your jaw will drop. He's the master puppeteer, pulling the strings behind the scenes.

As with *Half A King*, the world of the Shattered Seas takes place in a Scandinavian-esque fantasy world, complete with fjords, shield walls, and bearded blades. And honestly, there's no better place to set your world in. It's a kingdom teeming with diverse, exotic locations that aren't just limited to the typical snow-capped mountains. Each place feels alive and well established, complete with its own political situation that's tied to the world at large. Abercrombie doesn't dwell there, but nor does he brush them aside for the sake of simplification.

Just like in the previous book, not a single word, not a single paragraph, is gone to waste. The journey itself is brimming with danger and adventure. There's a large amount of traveling involved, yet not once did I feel bored or bogged down. Like every great writer, Abercrombie

has no qualms about thrusting his characters into awful situations where something terrible will happen. The battle scenes are vivid and life-like, full of intensity and bursting with dynamic energy. They simply leap off the page. You can almost hear the splintering of wood, the clatter of swords and the whistle of arrows. The last battle sequence is absolutely riveting. My eyes were glued to the page, taking in every breath, every swipe, and every slash. We don't expect anything less than superb fight scenes from Abercrombie, but the final one absolutely blew me away. They definitely feel more heroic and glamorous as opposed to Abercrombie's adult novels, but they are never glossed over or sweetened for easier digestion. These sequences also have a lasting impact on Thorn and Brand, shaping them into the characters that they are by the end of the novel.

I've been an avid fan of Abercrombie even since I first picked up *The Blade Itself* (2006), and I knew without a doubt that *Half The World* would be just as riveting. I just didn't expect it to soar as high as it did. It dragged me down to its gritty, freezing depths and enticed me to the last page, leaving me ravenous for more. I truly didn't want it to end. It's even better than *Half A King*, and quite possibly my favorite young-adult book of all time. Abercrombie really doesn't do anything by halves. He's truly established himself as the new High King of young-adult fantasy.



© Jeremy Szal

Movie Review: 2001: A Space Odyssey

Jeremy Szal and Thomas Elliot

No one saw it coming. Kubrick had made substantial changes in cinema previously, but to revolutionize an entire genre and change the state of cinema forever? No one could have guessed. *2001: A Space Odyssey* is a film that completely deviates from the style of classic Hollywood cinema and reinvigorates the notion of science-fiction in cinema. With a few exceptions, the majority of science-fiction cinema was considered "B grade". Popcorn flicks screened at shady cinemas with very little substantial material to sink your teeth into. A genre not to be taken seriously.

That changed when *2001: A Space Odyssey* arrived in 1968. Co-written by sci-fi legend Arthur C. Clarke, Stanley Kubrick presents a film in which the entire narrative arc is understated through minimal dialogue delivered by non-traditional characters. The film also plays on topics such as mind and identity, man vs. machine, and the grandest of them all: human evolution.

Instead of ham-fisted exposition through the use of action, explosions, and dystopian cities, the audience is presented with long periods of silence, intermittently interrupted by classical music or minimalist dialogue. Viewers are kept engaged through the aesthetics and set design, and by the intrigue that such a minimalist narrative creates. While traditional Hollywood films drive the narrative by the use of dialogue and character action, Kubrick intentionally subdues these aspects forcing the audience to formulate their own opinions and interpretations of the material presented, challenging the Hollywood standard of spoon-feeding their viewers. Audiences likely sauntered in the theater, expecting cheap sets, low budget values and a story that could have come straight out of a pulp magazine. It's not hard to imagine the surprise when they were confronted with long gaping silences and the challenging of human origins.

Through mise-en-scene, soundtrack, dialogue and character action, Kubrick uses non-classical Hollywood style filmmaking to demonstrate the isolating effects of space and to subvert traditional character roles, in particular the relationship between HAL's humanity vs. Dave's robotic nature. Easily the most memorable scene in the film is the non-diegetic use of Gayane's adagio; the slow somber nature of the music immediately evokes a feeling of isolation, melancholy, and loneliness that Dave feels, encompassed by the endless void of space—a rather de-romanticized portrayal of the stars. Kubrick's use of non-diegetic classical

music during space sequences (as there would be no diegetic sound in space) is prevalent throughout the film in order to provoke emotion, from the haunting sounds of the choir upon finding the monoliths to the exciting, adventurous feeling evoked by the Blue Danube waltz when the ships are docking, to the innocent, sad nature of HAL singing Daisy Bell as he is shut down.

In combination with the classical soundtrack, Kubrick's use of sound becomes minimal and muted during the space sequences to depict the sparseness and isolation of space; this is evident in the sequence where there is no sound apart from HAL and Dave's dialogue and the muted humming of bland technology. Kubrick contrasts this subdued audio against the raucous cacophony of the primitive apes presented earlier in the film.

Another primary aspect of 2001's aesthetic is the non-traditional set design. Clean, white surroundings convey feelings of a technical prison and the sterile isolation of space. As Dave walks through the rotating centrifuge, his isolation is further identified by the lifeless, mummified crewmembers that surround him, as though he's walking through a tomb. A dead man walking, so to speak.

Kubrick's innovative set design is further evident throughout the interior of the ship. Hallways are shaped in basic geometrical patterns such as octagons and circles, while the usage of locked-off smooth camera work accentuates the geometrical consistency of the set design and makes moments such as the usage of a distorting fish eye lens for HAL's perspective stand out.

Through static shots we see Dave showing his artwork to HAL. The shot makes us feel as if we are having an unaltered glimpse into the scene—like through a space porthole. We see a point of eye-line shot from HAL's perspective as he remarks in a mildly sarcastic tone how Dave has "improved" dramatically in his drawing. HAL's statement gives us an insight into his self-perception—a machine who remarks that a human is getting "better", despite how art is subjective and HAL himself is unable to create art, placing himself in an elevated state that transcends humanity. This trope would be followed for years to come in many countless science-fiction tales, essentially setting the standard.

Through the use of a fish-eye lens, Kubrick displays the limited scope of vision that HAL who, despite being omnipresent and able to navigate the ship at will like some sort of god, is still restricted to the limitations of his technology. This inability to "see" everything is

portrayed in his request to look at Dave's "art". He is unable to see it himself and must ask Dave to show it to him, placing the images in front of him in an almost mocking fashion.

The theme of HAL's humanity is one of the driving narrative themes throughout a film in which a consistent narrative thread is missing. HAL's struggle to contain the information he knows about what happened on the moon is the catalyst for the majority of the film's action. This guilt that HAL feels is particularly evident through his dialogue within the sequence; the way he attempts to engage Dave into the gossip surrounding the events on the moon demonstrates his inability to cope with hiding secrets (a particularly human trait).

Kubrick's narrative both directly and indirectly addresses the nature of HAL's humanity; Kubrick succeeds in proving the depth of HAL's humanity with a single scene—his death. During the scene, as HAL's memory cores are being removed, we see him revert back to an almost childlike state as he sings Daisy Bell. We glimpse and can interpret an entire past for HAL, something Kubrick achieves through a single character moment that other traditional Hollywood films would have labored on.

Throughout the film Kubrick contrasts HAL's humanity against Dave's bland android-like nature. The shots of Dave's bland posture, his utter disinterest in HAL's questions, and even the way he has perfect "cropped" hair, all signify his android-like state that emphasizes the lack of humanism in Dave. His banal, abrupt dialogue with HAL as he attempts to explain his suspicions about the mission are likened to a dutiful machine or servant that takes zero interest at the task at hand, but does so anyway because he has been programmed to do so, like a long-suffering servant. Dave and the other humans speak in terse, emotionless voices, whilst HAL speaks calmly and slowly, intricately plotting each and every word that he speaks.

Additionally, the medium shots of HAL's body (or computer system) show clear messages on the screen. Upon bringing up the matter of the mission, the word "DMG" (damage) flashes up on screen. This is direct foreshadowing to future events, and is also symbolic of Dave's inability to read what is—quite literally—in front of him. In some cases HAL displays "body language" when the screens pulse and flicker—something comparable to tense blinking or showing his "emotions". However, Dave sits in his seat, completely unreadable and utterly unemotional. His clothes—a bland, one-piece suit of grey fabric demonstrates his monotony and lack of empathy. This contrasts with the orange spacesuit when he is enlightened and undergoes advanced evolution that propels him to the next stage of humanity.

2001: A Space Odyssey is a film that completely goes against the crowd in terms of narration and the choice of a main protagonist perceived as a traditional "hero", deciding to head in a more ambiguous direction where the audience is told to form their own opinion on the film. This is in contrast to the typical Hollywood style, where the audience is given a specific set of clues to follow and arrive at a general conclusion. And for such a significant change to take place, primarily within the science-fiction genre, places *2001: A Space Odyssey* as nothing short of a revolutionary film that would alter the genre for years to come.



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