

September 2014

SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

# Fantasy Scroll mag



ISSUE  
03

Piers Anthony • Alvaro Zinos-Amaro • Anna Yeatts • James Beamon

**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction - Issue #3 – September 2014**

**Featuring works by Aaron Polson, Alan Murdock, Alex Shvartsman,  
Alexander Monteagudo, Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, Anatoly Belilovsky, Anna Yeatts,  
Carrie Martin, David Neilsen, James Beamon, Piers Anthony,  
Rachel A. Brune, Rebecca Birch**

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**Published by Fantasy Scroll Press, LLC**  
**New York, NY**

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**ISBN #978-0-9916619-2-3**

**ISSN #2333-4932**

**[www.FantasyScrollMag.com](http://www.FantasyScrollMag.com)**

# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #3

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# Editorial, September 2014

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #3 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

I am very happy to say that we were able to stay on schedule and that our publishing process has improved issue after issue. I want to thank all the volunteers who helped or are currently helping with the magazine; without you, things would've been much, much harder! But we stuck with it, and here we are with issue number 3!

Because it's autumn and we are approaching Halloween, this issue came out just a pinch darker than the ones before. You wouldn't say so by reading the first story, though. We are leading with an original fantasy story by legendary author Piers Anthony. "*Descant*" is a light-hearted tale, filled with subtext, color, emotion, and music.

Rachel A. Brune's "*The Peacemaker*" mixes the world of reality-TV with superheros and supranatural events. Aaron Polson gives us a thrilling view of life in "*My Favorite Photos of Anne*," an equally emotional and horrifying story.

The next two stories are a little bit lighter. First is a flash story by Alan Murdock, "*Verisimilitude*," dealing with the writer's struggle, followed by "*Orc Legal*," a story

by the very-funny James Beamon, another installment in his Orc series.

Then we are going dark again with "*Burn in Me*" by Carrie Martin, a psychological horror story, and "*Kindle My Heart*," by Rebecca Birch, a story of love with a twist.

Next we have "*The Memory-Setter's Apprentice*" by Alvaro Zinos-Amaro, and "*Hither and Yon*," by Anatoly Belilovsky—two science-fiction stories, first one about memory and tempering with the brain, and the other tackling the concept of multiverse.

"*The Contents of the Box with the Ribbon*," by David Neilsen is the next horror story, written in a light, rather humorous voice that will leave you satisfied in the end and almost oblivious to the horrors described. Close by is Anna Yeatt's "*Missing Tessa*," yet another horror story, dealing with the southern myth of the Boo Hag.

Did I mention this issue is a bit darker?

"*The First First Fire*," is a short story by Alexander Monteagudo, a fantasy tale that talks about the power of an up-and-coming leader. Last, but not least, is Alex Shvartsman's "*The Perfect Book*," a humorous story that was written as a Tuckerization reward for our Kickstarter campaign. The main characters in this story are two of our Kickstarter supporters. We

thank them and we hope that they enjoy this little story.

The non-fiction portion of this issue includes interviews with authors Piers Anthony and Anna Yeatts. In the spirit of our previous issues, we also have an interview with an editor—this time Scott H. Andrews, editor of award-winning magazine *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. We also have our regular artist spotlight, featuring Thai-born artist and illustrator Suebsin Pulsiri. The issue ends with a book review for the recent *Upgraded* anthology

edited by Clarkesworld's editor Neil Clarke, and a movie review for a classic 70's horror movie, "*The House That Dripped Blood*."

We hope you enjoy this issue as much as we enjoyed putting it all together. If you like what you read, please purchase the issue or subscriptions, spread the word, and give us reviews. It's almost the end of our first year; we have one more issue and we can happily say that we've made it over our first hurdle: year one.

See you all next time!

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# Descant

Piers Anthony

It was an occasion of truce, as King Hubert of Xonia and his retinue attended the annual ceremony hosted this time by the Kingdom of Yostec. A number of other kingdoms were also participating, but the focus was on Xonia because they were the closest and fiercest rivals to Yostec, with a decades-long border dispute, and their king was young and untested. Would he make his mark here—or fail to?

There was all manner of feasting and discourse as normally hostile royals socialized. The high point of the occasion was the singing contest. This was limited to royalty, the performances judged by a jury of specialists from a distant neutral kingdom, whose decisions were inviolate. Victories here counted for nothing but pride, but pride was one of the most important features of royalty. Participants were said to prepare as diligently for this as for battle.

Actually, some of them were not at all bad. Young princesses tended to make up in appearance what they lacked in musical ability, hoping to impress young princes, and the converse was true. Many royal romances originated in these events, and some royal alliances were forged.

At the end of the day only one event remained: the new King Hubert was to sing. He had been in power only half a year, since his father died, and had not before sung at such an event. It was rumored he had a bad voice, so was embarrassed to display it. But as king he was required to perform, however reluctantly, lest his kingdom be shamed by his default.

Hubert strode to the central dais. He was best described as an unhandsome young man, though of course no ordinary person would say so. "My entry will be a duet," he announced.

There was a titter of surprise among the princesses, more than one of whom had her eye on him as a prospect. He would not risk singing alone? But maybe it made sense: a companion singer might to an extent mask the deficiencies of Hubert's voice. That was surely better than fouling it up by himself. But where was his descant singer? Surely it would be royal and female, as singing with another man would be wickedly suggestive. Even if he were gay, he would not advertise it in such manner. Did he have his eye on one of the pretty princesses who had performed? Was this his way of making an overture? If so, which one? There was a widespread bating of breath. True, he was not handsome, but he was powerful,

and that was what counted in a man. A princess who latched on to him early could pretty much shape him to her preference, and her kingdom would benefit significantly.

The king looked around. "I choose for my partner the Princess Hertha of Yostec."

All eyes swiveled to focus on the section where the four princesses of the host kingdom sat. The three younger ones had already performed, and most appealingly; there was already a lineup for dates with them. The eldest sat a little apart, masked by a full hooded cloak. She had returned from the Kingdom of Xonia earlier that day and kept completely to herself. What had happened during her month's tenure there? Cloaking was unusual at an event like this. Was it to conceal bruises? She was not considered an attractive woman, but she was the eldest princess, and if she had been abused, there would be war the moment the truce ended. Now she sat with hands clasped before her, not visibly responding.

Hubert crossed to the princesses' section. "If you will join me, Princess," he said formally, extending his hand to Hertha.

Many eyes turned to the King of Yostec, her father. Would he tolerate this crossing of the line? The singers were supposed to represent their own kingdoms. If the two of them sang a duet, for whose kingdom would it count? This was distinctly awkward.

The King of Yostec shrugged, not protesting. He seemed not to care. That was odd, for he was widely known as a fierce and cunning competitor, a man who was dangerous to cross. Surely he *did* care, intensely. Was he giving Hubert rope to hang himself?

Thus allowed, Princess Hertha stood. She took Hubert's hand and walked with him to the dais, still fully cloaked. Strange indeed.

The two of them took their places on the stage. She was almost as tall as he, and not because of elevated heels; her feet, just visible beneath the cloak, were sandaled. Her height was just one of her turnoffs as a prospective bride, helping to account for her reaching the age of twenty-four without yet marrying. No one would point out the obvious: that she was an embarrassment to her father, and her very existence blocked the marriages of her younger sisters. Tradition prescribed that the eldest marry first.

"We shall sing the song 'Generation,'" Hubert announced.

Now there was mild confusion. Only the oldest, whose mouths opened in surprise and wonder were familiar with that particular song. The King of Yostec nodded to himself, unsurprised. What was there about this one?

Had anyone been able to peer into his mind, they would have seen that he knew what the others did not: that "Generation" was perhaps the most challenging song extant, so difficult that it was believed that only one pair of singers in a generation could sing it



competently, if at all. There were treacherous aspects lurking to foil one singer or the other. That was why it was little known. Yet that was just the beginning of its mystery. These two were rash enough to try?

Hubert and Hertha sang, starting together and continuing with confidence. They had evidently practiced it together. But it remained odd, because his tenor was high, and her alto was remarkably low. Indeed, their ranges overlapped. That should have been extremely awkward, throwing their masculine and feminine identities into question. But it wasn't.

Because they were good. Both turned out to be excellent singers, and they complemented each other perfectly. In fact they supported each other; it was doubtful whether either could have handled its nuances alone. They must have spent their entire month together rehearsing, getting it just right. All who heard it were held in thrall. It was intimately intricate, utterly lovely, supremely potent.

Then it got strange indeed. The entire audience listened and stared, hardly believing. How could such a thing be?



The month before the event, King Hubert of Xonia went personally to greet the arrival of the Princess Hertha of Yostec. She had been sent to negotiate the border dispute, in the faint hope that it could be resolved before the gathering of kingdoms.

He took her hand as she stepped down from the carriage. She was tall, solid, and plain, not at all the traditional image of a princess. But there was no doubt of her identity; she wore the little feminine princess gold crown of Yostec, just as he wore the larger king gold crown of Xonia.

As her feet touched the ground, he formally lifted the hand he held and kissed the back of it. The attending courtiers kept straight faces; it would be a serious violation even to hint that there was no other part of her a man would care to kiss.

The two walked to the palace entrance, while the attendants consulted, arranging to convey the princess's baggage to her designated suite. The king guided the princess to a private chamber. Only when they were alone together did he speak. "Your father must really value this negotiation, to send his eldest daughter rather than a functionary."

"May I speak candidly, sire?"

"By all means. And don't call me sire; I am only three years older than you. We are essentially equals, apart from my unfortunate ascension to the throne. Call me by my name, Hubert, and I will call you by yours, if you are amenable."

She nodded. "I am. I know you loved your father, as I do mine. His untimely death put you in a difficult position."

"You do understand. You would be no more comfortable had it been your father's death."

"True. But I have been well trained for governance, should the unlikely occur, as I'm sure you were."

"May I be candid, Hertha?"

She glanced at him with surprise. "You hardly need my permission, Hubert. You are king."

"This is personal. You are of the line of a person my father considered an enemy, and I should be painfully cautious in dealing with you. But I discover to my surprise that I like you."

"But I'm not a pretty little thing!"

"Neither am I. We do not make a beautiful couple. I think that is what makes me feel that we have something more in common than ordinary."

She shook her head, bemused. "I am uncertain how to respond to that, Hubert. Except to agree that it is true. We seem to be unified in our lack of appeal."

"Does it occur to you that there may be a certain mischief in our meeting?"

She paused. "I hesitate to answer that, Hubert. It would not be kind to either of us."

"Why so?"

"Because I know nothing about the border dispute I have been sent to negotiate. I am wasted here. I fear this is an insult to you."

"Your father is notoriously cunning. I do not believe that he would put his daughter at risk for nothing."

She looked troubled. "Must I spell it out?"

"I think you must, for I am at a loss."

She nerved herself visibly and proceeded. "I thought my father favored me, and wanted what was best for me. But now I fear that I have become a drug on the market. My attractive younger sisters can't marry until I do, though they have many prospects. I am holding them back. I-I need to be removed from the scene. So my father must have made a

practical decision, to cut his losses, as it were. I am expendable." She wiped away a tear.

"Must I continue?"

"Yes," he said grimly.

"You have a certain perhaps undeserved reputation for temper."

He smiled. "Delicately put. I do not suffer fools or rascals gladly. This is a necessary quality for a king."

She nodded. "Having observed my father, I am obliged to agree..." She paused, focusing. "I suspect the hope is that you will be so angry at being thus insulted by my presence with a mock offer that you will lose control and do me harm, perhaps killing me. That may precipitate war, but once that clears, I will be gone and the younger princesses will have their chance to marry and form useful alliances. It is a desperate but perhaps necessary measure to solve an intractable problem."

Hubert gazed at her, his face studiously neutral. "You believe this?"

"I fear it. It is the way my father schemes." She spread her hands, embarrassed. "I love him, but I know him."

"You are mistaken, Hertha. Your father is many things, a number of them bad, as our sometimes bitter experience has taught us, but he has never been disloyal to his own. Neither has he ever been one to waste a potential asset. He loves you and wants the best for you."

She did not look at him. "You believe that?"

"I do. Still, I am reminded of the children's game, wherein a boy takes a girl into a dark closet, and for that minute he must kiss her or hit her."

"I know that game. I never dared play it myself."

"You fear your father sent you to be hit."

"I do."

"I think he sent you to be kissed."

She shook her head, dismissing the notion. "Either way, he is bound to win his case."

Hubert took her hand again. "To allay your doubt about my belief in your father's intention, I will swear it. By what oath would you have me bind myself?"

Now she looked at him in wonder. "You're serious?"

"I am."

"Then I invoke another game that children and some adults play. Make it the oath of the kiss." It was clear that she did not believe he would do it.

He did not speak. He took her in his arms and kissed her firmly on the mouth.

Then she broke down and openly wept. "I would have given anything to have such a gesture be other than a formal challenge."

"But now you believe that I believe."

"Now I believe," she agreed, amazed. "You made the oath."

"Then accept this informal repetition." He took her in again, and kissed her again.

"You did not need to do that," she said faintly.

"I wanted to. You did not need to accept it."

"How could I refuse?"

"You did not refuse, even in inner tension."

"I did not," she agreed. "I confess that I long to be a romantic object. But I am not, and will never be. I am a realist."

"So am I. There is something about you that appeals to me."

"But I can't believe that you actually desired it."

Hubert nodded. "We will return to this anon. Now we have more pressing business. We have merely to discover in what manner your father believes you will successfully negotiate an end to the border dispute. There has to be a way."

"Oh! In the press of circumstance I forgot. My father sent a gift for you. I know not its nature." She proffered a small package. She had been carrying it all along, unnoticed.

He accepted it. He unwrapped the binding strap, and it opened. It was a book.

"Perhaps the demands for the negotiation?" he said, perplexed.

"I do not know. He said it contained the answer."

He opened it. "It's a book of songs!"

She was as surprised as he. "Could he have given me the wrong package?"

"Not him."

They examined the book together. The marker indicated a page with a song titled "Generation." They read it, noting that it had only two parts, alto and tenor.

Hubert glanced at her. "Do you sing?"

"I do, but not in company. My range is too low."

"It is similar for me. My range is too high."

"You are a tenor?"

"Counter tenor. You are alto?"

"Contralto."

"Could you sing this part?"

"I think I could, with practice. It is rather challenging."

"Yes; it is the same for mine." He closed the book. "Sing a note."

She sang a note, sustaining it. Her voice was steady and resonant. After a moment he joined her, singing the same note. It matched hers in quality.

"My father wants us to sing together?" she asked dubiously. "How could that accomplish anything meaningful?"

"You are not familiar with this song?"

"I am not."

"I have heard of it, from my grandfather. It is considered magic. If two people can sing it correctly, the magic will manifest. At least that is the story."

She considered. "Maybe I have heard of it, at least by reputation. A song almost impossible to sing properly, but magnificent if managed."

"There is something else my grandfather mentioned, though I doubt I believe it."

"That only a person capable of singing it can even see the notes?"

"Yes." Hubert snapped his fingers, and a courtier entered the chamber. "What do you think of this?" he asked, showing the open book.

The man looked at him in perplexity. "Sire, that page is blank."

"So it seems. Thank you."

The courtier departed, mystified.

"So it's true!" Hertha said in wonder. "It's magic."

"Sit by me," he said. They took seats on the couch. "Do you think we could sing it correctly together?"

"We might. It might take some practice."

"It might indeed," he agreed. "If we can handle the finale, we can do the complete song. Let's try that much."

They sang the finale. At the end, their voices quavered, straining. Hubert took Hertha's hand and squeezed her fingers lightly, encouraging her. Then they managed the final note.

"Oh!" she said, sinking down as if exhausted. "That was special."

"It was," he agreed. "I think this is the answer to the problem between our kingdoms. Your father wants peace as much as I do, because war is expensive. This may be the mechanism."

"I do not understand."

"We are well matched musically, at least in our difference from others. Your voice is low; mine is high. I do not think your father is mocking us. You are my descant singer, whom I have long sought, as it seems he knew."

"Descant? I still do not understand."

"He believes that we should be together. That would of course render the boundary dispute academic."

"Together?"

"I may choose to marry you."

She shook her head. "Tease me not, please. I do not look or sound like a nubile princess!"

"I agree. You do not look or sound like a princess..." He paused, taking her hand again. "You look and sound like a queen."

She gazed at him in dawning wonder.



Above the two as they sang, swirling colors formed in the air. It had to be magic. The others stared, amazed. They all knew that magic existed, but it was rare and generally practiced only by specialists who had the talent and dedication. For amateurs to do it was remarkable. They had of course won the singing contest, for whatever kingdom it counted for; the virtue of their performance made that clear. But to evoke magic—that was something else.

The song continued, coming to its finale. The colors intensified, forming into a picture of two people. The two of them, singing! Except that in that image he was handsome and she was lovely. It was like a painting that flattered them.

Then came the conclusion. His voice rose, and her voice fell, until they crossed each other, she entering the tenor range, he the alto. This inversion was almost unbelievable: that they could do it, or that they *would* do it.

The figures in the image came slowly together as if about to kiss.

A shift, as he rose one more note and she fell another. Now they were a full octave apart, he above, she below. As they held it, the surrounding theater seemed to vibrate. There was, indeed, magic.

The figures in the image kissed. The song ended. The picture exploded into a shower of sparks.

And, below, Hubert and Hertha kissed.

There was dead silence as the audience realized what was happening. Nobody kissed a princess without her father's permission, because that suggested that she belonged to someone other than her father. Eyes turned again to the King of Yostec.

The king simply sat there as if oblivious. How could this be?

The long kiss finished. Then Hubert slowly put his hands to Hertha's hood and drew it off her head. There was a collective gasp.

She wore the crown of Xonia. Not her own.

Hubert put his hands on her cloak and drew it off. Her gown came into sight.

It was the gown of betrothal. The two were to marry. No one was more astonished than the younger princesses.

Now at last the King of Yostec stood and spoke, "We will presently adjourn to the royal hall for the betrothal party," he announced. "I'm sure everyone will want to congratulate the happy couple, not to mention the magical alliance between our kingdoms. Fear not; we have kegs of wine."

Clearly he had known all about it, and approved. It would be long before others fathomed how he had engineered this coup. Which hardly mattered, considering the wonder of the magic and the allure of those kegs.



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**Piers Anthony** is one of the world's most popular fantasy authors, and a New York Times bestseller twenty-one times over. His *Xanth* novels have been read and loved by millions of readers around the world, and he receives daily hundreds of letters from his devoted fans. In addition to the *Xanth* series, Anthony is the author of many other best-selling works, including non-fiction.

# The Peacemaker

Rachel A. Brune

The Nova walks into the room. Then he glides into the room. The next time, he tries coming in through the window. The producer wants to make it look as natural as possible, so they do it a few more times from a couple of different angles.

Then it's my turn. For this episode, they've dressed me in what my PR guy tells me is my signature outfit. Black dress slacks, black sports coat, white button-down shirt, and skinny black tie, nicely contrasted by the scruffy black Chuck Taylors and about a half a day of forgetting to shave or brush my teeth after the last beer.

At least the shoes are comfortable. I walk in, picturing myself in slo-mo, like a reject extra in some Quentin Tarantino film. Which would probably pay more. We do it a couple times, and I can't even pretend to be interested in what lies behind door number two.

The next take, the guy with the Steadicam gets right up in my face. They're going for the reaction shot. Something in that room was put there just for me. I shrug and open the front door to the house I share with five other people who wish they were somewhere else too.

*Jack .*

Did I say his name out loud? I don't think so. My mouth is too full of spit and bile.

Nevertheless, my former partner turns his head in my general direction. His DAC—digital access camera—is sort of tilting to one side. They're a bitch like that, always sliding around no matter how much effort you make with the straps and clips and duct tape.

I'm acutely aware of the silence surrounding us, and the ice that threatens to well up in the cavern between us. I got nothing. Somewhere some editor is cussing me out. The last time I saw Jack, everyone thought he was going to die.

That sudden anger, the flash of pure fury that always seemed to come from a deep, cold place inside me, veils my eyes momentarily. I come back to myself on the back porch, staring silently at the ocean, just the tiniest hint of frost glistening on the wrought iron railing. I don't know how I got out here, but the camera followed me, and I guess I'm going to make the highlights reel this week.





Wilmington Beach. A second-rate vacation spot of some local fame. Chances are if you live in North Carolina or West Virginia, your grandparents spent at least one vacation here.

It's a sort of cut-rate picturesque type of place, which is how the producers are able to afford the big house on the shore. Not big enough to give us enough space, but enough to insure that the week's conflict can be featured in as many different rooms as possible.

Viewers get bored apparently. Our viewers more than most.

I'm still not sure why people are watching this shit. None of us are famous anymore. The house, the show, the prize—this is just how far we've fallen. A couple of us do guest spots on other shows, but the rest, like me, were just C-List enough to get offered a big house, annoying roommates, and a chance to give America a front seat to our inevitable decline.

After the cameras go off, the producer, a kid who introduces himself by the Hollywood moniker of The Big Show, tells me that Jack is going to be staying. He's our new housemate. But don't worry, because he'll be chemically sedated the whole time. Heavily sedated. I have nothing to do with that.

Or maybe I do.



I head into the kitchen. Wolf-Boy's at the grill. He outgrew the juvenile tag twenty pot-filled years ago, but it's one of those things. You get tagged, and what are you going to do? Not like The Big Show who everyone, except the guy who rolls the credits, calls Bob. He picked his own nickname and good luck trying to make it stick when you do that. Sometimes you work a brand and sometimes that's not what happens.

My hands are clammy. I'm not good at this. The adrenaline starts to rush, and then I want the ice to come, and then I remember where I am and get a beer from the fridge. It's hard, ignoring my former partner sitting across the house from me, eyes fixed on no particular place, DAC just about falling off the end of his temple on his flimsy elastic strap.

"You want a burger?" Wolf-Boy's voice has a growl to it. He smokes about a pack and a half a day. He does it to sound cool. And maybe die quicker.

"No." The beer will hold me over until I heat up some of yesterday's Thai delivery.

I'm more interested in whatever the hell Venus is doing. American Venus. Her looks earned her that particular appellation, and the feminists had a field day with it. She is a cheery beacon of love. All the time. At first I thought it would wear off.

I sit and watch. She hums to herself as she bedazzles her DAC with black and gold rhinestones and little skull stickers. Wolf-Boy brings his slab of steak dinner to the table,

seared on one side and mostly bleeding all over. He has this habit of playing his role to the hilt, but there are no cameras here, at least none that we know of.

"Wolfie." Her voice is as sweet as her face. "You know I'm vegetarian."

"It's my dinner, babe," he says. "You don't like it, go glue your little doily in the living room."

The rush of her anger under the cheer is manna from heaven, hot nectar from an American goddess. I feel the familiar itching in my palms, and clench my fists, squelching the desire to offer her the opportunity to bask in the calm I could bring. She looks up and smiles. I don't know if she realizes how close I came to getting kicked out already. Or maybe she does, and that's why she's smiling.

Venus starts to hum again, her pitch way, way off. Wolf-Boy's ears twitch in agony and then I'm treated to the molasses hate that burns its way through his lanky form.

Jack sits in the corner, nodding in time to the tuneless song Venus continues to sing. Gracelessly, I push my chair back. Pouring the rest of the beer out, I toss the empty bottle in the sink and stalk out of the room. I know that later we'll have to "talk" about this little "incident" and how it made the Lovely Venus feel, but for now I have to get out of here.



I'm standing on the porch again. Jack comes up, uncomfortably close. I can feel him breathing on my cheek. Something is rotten deep inside him, something that won't be solved by brushing his teeth. It's the chemicals they have him on. They've reached all through him, folding him into their bioengineered embrace. His eyes try hard to focus and I think I see recognition in there, but it could be my imagination and I don't really want to think about what happened. I wish I hadn't tossed the beer.

I can't say I was surprised to see him here. I'd wondered when he would show up. They'd been bringing in some of the other sidekicks every couple of weeks. No one expected any of them to win, but they might get one of us to break the code. If that happened, their prize money would be just as real, and they'd probably need it more than we did. A guy like the Nova, he'd been in cheesy martial arts movies since the '90s and with a little Miracle Hair he could keep going for another decade or so.

"Jack. You in there big guy?"

My voice startles my former partner. Instead of focusing on me, though, he cranes his head to look up at the weather-beaten wood planks of the ceiling. I leave him standing there

and head down to the ocean. It's freezing this time of year, and the water feels like heaven on my bare feet.



I made the big time when Strongman had his break with reality on a platform at Grand Central Station. One moment he had been fighting something with way too many tentacles that had slithered up one of the tunnels from the East River, the next he was demolishing anything that looked at him sideways. And given that he was shouting something about the walls having eyes, there wasn't much left of that venerable landmark by the time I heard the call over the scanner.

I got out there in time to drop him in his tracks before he finally brought the roof down on himself and about 200 other tourists, commuters and groupies who had rushed to see their hero beat down some tentacle ass. That's not to say there weren't casualties.

Prior to that, I had been working as a cop. It wasn't quite an alter ego, since nobody was quite sure what I could do. Even me.

After that, I took a couple of gigs in international security, corporate negotiations. Wasn't as flashy as some, but seemed a good fit. Every once in a while, I got caught up in something the heavy hitters had going on, but mostly I had my steady gig at the NYPD.

Jack volunteered to be my partner once it became obvious that I was something more than a cop. We didn't call them sidekicks. Partner was better. He was there to keep me down to earth, to call me back whenever the ice tried to lead me too far. I tasted the emotions of the crowd, or the negotiators, or the nemesis *du jour*, and encased them in the cold quiet of calm order.

They called it The Peace, and me The Peacemaker. I remember shivering in the pleasure of its path through my fingers.



End of the week. Time for the "house meeting." We sit and throw one-liners at each other, competing to see who can get the prized spot of rage and potential loss of control that will be cut into the trailer for that week's show.

I dread these things. They wreck my calm.

As I suspected, Venus launches into a rant about the respect for personal life choices, to be free from others' tyranny toward lower species. Here Wolf-Boy growls, as though worried she is including him in that category. She probably is.

The Nova interrupts. "Not everyone can live on wheatgrass and dingleberries."

"I don't think that's a very helpful remark." Venus is conspicuous in her choice of "you" language. "It makes me feel very hurt when others don't respect Mother Nature."

"It's a fucking cow," says Wolf-Boy. "The only thing she was mother of was about a dozen calves they bred from her until it was time to turn her into hamburger."

The emotions spark back and forth. I struggle to stay abreast of them, holding myself above the waves. I sense the guy with the Steadicam inching closer.

"Back off, Cletus." I stand up and take a breath. I get ignored.

The Nova jumps back into the conversation, raising his voice. Venus gets a hurt face on, lowers her voice, puts the pout in her lower lip. Wolf-Boy lights up another cigarette like he's not supposed to.

I sit back down and watch Jack as he tracks back and forth, following the pitch and tone if not the conversation. It must be like someone is randomly turning a volume knob in his brain.

"Listen up, people." I stand again and raise my hands, a neutral gesture, completely misinterpreted. Venus squeals and cowers. Wolf-Boy leaps straight into the air and comes down behind the low partition that separates the living room from the kitchen space. He crouches by the refrigerator.

Cletus gets closer, and I have an audience of one bright staring glass eye. There is a moment in which I can already hear the cheesy swell of foreboding strings they are going to layer over this moment. I put my hands down, force myself to draw the calm back in.

"We just have to work together." It's definitely an anticlimactic moment. Venus sits back on the couch and readjusts her cleavage.

Wolf-Boy tries to get something started again, but then Jack wanders off, Venus gets a call on her cell—which was supposed to be on silent—and the meeting kind of drifts away. It doesn't make for exciting television, but what are you going to do?



The Big Show is not happy, standing in the living room, berating everyone unfortunate to have been caught inside when he showed up. Our ratings are dropping, which means commercial revenues are down. Way down. I think they're starting to use some of the prize money for craft services. This week, especially, it seems that the show failed to generate any controversy; it had generally failed to spur anything online. Even hatred. They should tape this guy's rant. It might help perk up the numbers.

While Bob wracks his brain, I stand on the back porch, watching the ocean. Drink a beer. The house grows uncomfortably small and quiet. When the cameras aren't here, I prefer to stay outside.

I could have told him why his show was diving. People don't watch us because we're hip or cool or they wish they were us or had our problems. They watch to wait for one of us to lose control, for it to be THAT moment, caught live on cameras.

The laws against use of our special talents are pretty strict. I'm sorry to say I was the reason most of them were enacted in the knee jerk legislative reaction that always seems to accompany the actions of one disturbed individual.

That was me, just for the record. It seems that the calming influence I can project, both the light waves of cool collectiveness and the intense ice shards of frozen watchfulness—the physical manifestations they called The Peace—leave more than a small piece of themselves inside everyone they touched.

At first it wasn't that noticeable. There were a few people who never got over their PTSD from the Strongman incident, just kind of sat back in their figurative rocking chairs and let the rest of their lives happen to them.

Then there were a few other things that happened. Strange growths found on some of the internal organs of various suicide victims in the City. Public Health had a fine time alarming the public with fears of some new biological weapon. Nobody could put it together, though, and like all the other amorphous threats of bio-warfare that filtered out of the media, it got tucked back into some Internet graveyard, moving out of the way to make room for the latest paparazzi shot of Venus and her Beau of the Week.

I could have noticed the change in Jack, but we weren't that close. I mean, we were, but he had come to me a cold, reserved man, the kind who finds it easy to control what few emotions he has.

We were ideal for each other. When it got hard to be around other people, when the taste-the-rainbow waves of pain and anger threatened to become overwhelming rather than sustaining, he was there to pull me back on dry land.

He came with me on that call. It was The Rager, our friendly, local recidivist. The first time we faced each other, he had left more than one scorch mark on a sensitive part of my anatomy. The papers loved our duels—Fire and Ice they liked to call it—and published great big color pictures of The Rager and The Peacemaker, duking it out with some iconic NYC scenery in the background.

Unfortunately for the City, I had been growing steadily, stealthily more powerful, and he had been getting more angry and driven. Our final showdown was on its way, just like you see in the comic book mashup movies.

It was going to be an epic battle, but then it happened outside the wrought-iron fence walls of a high-school parking lot. That day The Peace rose quickly, violently, and when the dust settled, The Rager was nothing more than crystallized flesh and bone.

They finally figured out that Public Health crisis. The same growths found on the suicide victims matched exactly The Rager's petrified flesh. And the flesh on the six students and three teachers killed outright, standing within the shadow of the blast.

The suicides came after. Other people—just weren't the people they had been before.

Jack ended up in an institution, his attempt foiled by the misfire of his service revolver. From that time, harsh chemicals and fluorescent lights had kept him in the land of the living. Even if what he was doing wasn't quite that.



It's getting dark. The tide is pulling back from the shore. Three of the last beers in the house sit on the table next to me. It's been a couple hours, but it's cold enough outside to keep them chilled. I debate going back in the house. I could spend the night out here, with the cold as my welcome companion.

Better than the house. Jack's taken to roaming the halls the past couple of nights. I get bad insomnia. My brain can't shut down for a few hours after everyone goes to bed, too full from processing their offerings of jealousy and petty hate.

I can't stand to see him. Not that I feel guilty. Sometimes I do. Every time I go near, he turns to look at me, as if realizing he knows me. But the memory slips away every time his brain gets close to grasping hold of recognition.

The screen door slams behind me with more force than I intended. I pause, holding my breath, waiting to see if I woke anyone. I don't hear any sudden shuffling or movement, so I settle down and go to put the empty bottles in the sink. It's a habit that pisses off the

American Venus, who thinks all beer bottles should be placed in the recycling, but it's dark and I don't want to.

I stand at the sink, the last bottle still in my hand, looking out the window over the dark sand. The full moon casts a path across the ocean. With the breeze coming in the screen door, I can just barely still hear the waves.

The barest hint of frost forms at my fingers, leaving faint tracks across the glass bottle. I try to hold in the dark calm, but there are no cameras here, no prying housemates. Only myself and the night and The Peace.

"Mike?"

The bottle slips from my hand and lands with a surprisingly dull thump in the metal sink. I turn to see Jack, standing in the shadows at the edge of the room. His eyes are more focused. His head drifts around. I realize he is looking for the all-seeing eye. There is nothing but the dark.

He comes closer. I lean back against the sink but he stops a few feet away this time. His eyes rest somewhere below mine, still unable to make eye contact.

"I remember you."

Jack's voice is loud in the room. I wince and lower my voice to reply. "Do you, partner?" I didn't realize my voice would come out so brittle.

My attempt to get him to whisper has no effect. He says in a normal tone: "I remember." I wait for him to continue, but he can't.

Jack drops his gaze and looks around. Carefully, almost delicately he pulls a chair from the table and drags it to where he can see out the door into the gloom over the water. He sits there for a while. I wait for him to say something else, but that's all he's got for me.

I move to stand behind him, my hands resting on his shoulders. It's a curiously intimate gesture for two men who have not seen each other in years, and who were never close, but it doesn't feel awkward. He reaches up to my hand, clasping it in his.

There is a jolt as his pain washes over me. There is something dead under the pain, as if it, too, had metastasized under the touch of The Peace. The calm starts to rise in me again. My hand grows cold, and the ice grows cold and clear. I step forward to stand beside him.

Jack looks up at me. I know he can feel The Peace like an offering in my skin. A light flashes deep behind his eyes. Just for a second, I wonder if I miscalculated, but then he is gone under the ice.



I've tried, but I can't do it. My ability to accept that something I almost had grasped—a chance for recognition, a chance to do the right thing in the world—had slipped irreconcilably away. I can't say when it happened, but I suspect it began when I put the Strongman down on the cold filthy marble of the Grand Central Station.

Revelations that occur after midnight and before the sun rises are not to be trusted. We are more prone to act because we cannot see an end to the despair, to the blackness that settles down, makes itself part of something that cannot be excised without losing some important part of yourself.

The Peace rises in me, the cold heart of its promise begging to slip from my hold. Through the velvet silence, I feel the dim threads of dream hate, anger, worry, jealousy and just the slightest amount of love, courtesy of Venus, seep through the night.

I reach out and grasp the metal railing, the cold leaching itself into my palms, to be met by the slow, encroaching tide of ice. Questing out, I push the shadows of silent canyons through the fragile modern spaces of the house.

A sigh drifts up, the only sign that life still clings to its idea, if not its fleshly reality. There is a sound like coughing, and then I'm alone.

My bag holds a few necessities, and I don't mind helping myself to the keys to one of The Big Show's shiny cars. I have a long way to go. I was never much of a hero; now I realize that was never my calling. All I can offer is a final sort of Peace.



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# My Favorite Photos of Anne

Aaron Polson

I am no storyteller, but I photograph my wife every day.

One of my favorite photos of Anne shows her sitting on our bed, face stretched and beaming, with the little white pregnancy test stick in her hand. Her freckles glow in the picture. Her eyes jump at will between green and brown. Most indoor photos give them a darker tint, but not this snapshot. Her single dimple, left side, is deep and at its face-cheering best. Anne's dark curls wear sun-bleached highlights because it dates to late summer, only six months before the first death in Vermeer Park.

I took the photo one month and six days before Anne's latest miscarriage.

Anne and I decided we wanted to have children on a walk through Vermeer Park, and we have tried for three years. We've spoken with a fistful of doctors, burned stacks of money, and heard everything from low sperm count to "hostile vagina." We've suffered three miscarriages together and face the reality of drifting into our thirties without a child. Our friends—all married couples—have one or two of their own. The Wollcotts are having a third.

"Number three's on the way," Jason said over the phone.

He called me hours before we both met in the park amid the snow and trees—me to snap photos and he for his police work.

You see, I photograph the dead too.



She is—was—a student at the university, a girl of 19 with brown hair, blue eyes, a fake driver's license, handful of crumpled bills, birth control pills, and a can of pepper spray in her purse. Her arms are tucked under her body with the purse lumped under her abdomen. Her butt is in the air, knees bent. She looks like she could have fallen if not for her arms bending at such an unnatural angle. There are no signs of struggle, only faint scratches on her face, arms, and neck—none of which broke enough skin to draw blood. She hadn't used her pepper spray.

She simply died three days after Christmas, and the snow fell, covering everything.

The city had installed streetlamps earlier in the year, vintage-looking black metal poles topped with rectangular glass boxes. They look like old gaslights, the kind which filled cities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were hand-lit, something out of a Dickens story. The lights were installed after my childhood treks through the dark—too late to calm my fears—but they should have made a difference for a 19-year-old girl that winter.

Should have, but she was murdered—I use "murdered" because I don't know another word—murdered and dumped, as garbage in the snow, all under the bright glow of the new lights.



When I was younger, having children seemed far away, a decision I wouldn't need to make, but now, now with Anne's miscarriages—the last after implantation—cold reality has robbed us of the choice. It's different, choosing or being robbed of a choice.

But Anne loves me. She says she does and smiles enough for a woman broken from the inside. She sleeps through most nights. She's tired all the time, closing her eyes as early as 8:30 on some nights. She rolls away from me and simply goes to sleep. When I touch her, spooning her close to feel her warmth, I find none. Anne is cold. Anne doesn't know how long I hold her at night, hoping for some spark. Any spark.

She doesn't know how much I think about the dead girl in Vermeer Park. She doesn't know how it feels to take photographs no one should ever see.



A boy from Anne's school finds the second body in early February.

He was an older man, a member of the local Rotary club and a retired banker. He is found much like the first: hunched over with his arms awkwardly tucked under his body and butt in the air. There are scratches, too, just like the girl, tiny marks on his face and exposed hands and forearms. These scratches, like the girl's, are on the surface only, little pink lines.

I take photos. I do the work the police ask. I snap shots of the walk, the trees, and the late-winter shadows for the paper. We won't print the body, just sterile images of the area where the body was found with police tape circling a group of officers in winter coats. This is how we publish deaths in the paper or post them to our website—photos of the area but never the crime, the setting but never the story.

Two deaths within two months, both bodies found in the same park, just to the east of the sidewalk... these details must mean something.

"Not good," Jason says to me as we stand under the arching trees in the park. "Not good at all."

The camera dangles from my neck, heavy and solid like a stone-tied leash. I rub numb fingers together for warmth and say, "Any leads? Any clues to what's going on?"

Jason's smile is half-formed. "You know I can't tell you anything, Pete. You know I can't show you too much."

It's a game we play. He always shares too much, but I play along. "A college co-ed and then this old guy... not much link there except for the location and manner of death."

Jason coughs. His eyes shift toward me.

"Something about the manner of death?" I ask. "What about the girl?"

Jason glances over his shoulder. A shudder shakes his body. Something has him spooked, at least a little, conjuring memories of our childhood fears. I know images and faces and every expression Jason makes. "You know this is hush-hush, right?"

"Scout's honor," I say. I was never a Boy Scout. "What's wrong?"

"We couldn't reveal too much, you know, confidentiality and it's not all that newsworthy." His gloved hands press together. "She just died."

"I took pictures, Jay. I know she was dead." My voice lowers, knowing it needs to hide. "What do you mean, by 'just died'?"

"Like a heart attack, but she was nineteen. Fit. The docs couldn't really explain it. It's like her heart just quit. Like her body just gave up."

"Drugs?" I ask, knowing the answer.

Jason wags his head. "No. No booze, no narcs, nothing. Nothing we know of anyway. Nothing we can trace."

I touch my cheek with cold fingertips. "The scratches?"

"Big mystery. They're spaced just about right but not fingernail marks. At least that's what the coroner said on the girl. But this guy... shit. I don't know." He clears his throat and nods toward the body. "They couldn't be nail marks. They're tiny." He coughs. "Look. We didn't have this conversation."

"Hush, hush," I say, and the shiver finds me. The words "tiny nail marks" spark in my brain.

"Right. Hush, hush." His eyes drift skyward toward the branches overhead, and I follow suit. A moment passes between us, a moment of frozen air and long-ago thoughts. "The trees are still creepy. Unnatural. Remember that game we used to play?"

"We'd count," I say. "We'd count and see how fast we could run through the park."

"But never off the sidewalk." Jason scratches his lean chin. "If we did, they'd get you." He shivers. I'm sure it's the cold. Jason is a practical man, a man of law and logic.

"Child's play," I say. "Used to scare the crap out of me, imagining something hiding in these trees."

As a boy, I feared the park. Maybe it was the meandering sidewalk and trees-tall, groping trees and the lack of anything else between the community building in the north to 12<sup>th</sup> street two blocks to the south. The paved path curved slightly, a concrete ribbon looping past century old oaks trimmed high above the ground. No small bushes or other trees were allowed to grow near the path. Darkness owned the park at night.

Jason pulls his collar close to his neck. "I don't like this, Pete. I don't like things being broken like this. Two dead in the same place within two months. This town isn't big enough for shit like this."

We turn and walk toward the lot, following the same path we ran as children. Silence hangs between us and grows to an awkward, ungainly thing. I want to ask what happens when we find a third body. I can't.

"How's Anne?"

"Anne?"

"Yeah. It's been a while since we've seen you guys. Everything all right?"

"Nightmares," I say. "She's having nightmares."

Jason coughs. "Since when?"

"Around Christmas."



Another photo is ten years old, another bed shot—her with disheveled hair, "crazy hair" like she called it. Her smile is there, though, and while not as big as the pregnancy test photo, her dimple and wrinkled nose tell the story. She'd just woken. She was happy. She was in love with me, and the world held wonder. I imagine her dreams that night were big and beautiful.

Her dreams are haunted now.

Now she knows only nightmares.

Dr. Redding claims her fertility cocktail—Follistim and Lupron and God knows what else—shouldn't have any effect on Anne's dreams. The nightmares haven't listened to Dr. Redding. Coincidence, although not causation, always makes a strong case. Anne's nightmares are real, visceral things. She thrashes her arms and speaks gibberish. She often wakes with glassy, trance-like eyes, sometimes in her sleep, leaving the bedroom for the long hallway and stairs.

"What were you dreaming?"

"Horrible things," she says. "Horrible things."

The way she looks at me freezes my stomach. I want to hold her, to do something meaningful, but my hands are cold and arms feel stiff like rubber. She's a mile away on the other side of our bed. The dim dawn light paints her face blue. Her eyes are black, but glassed over with a film of tears. The ice doesn't thaw in my gut, but it does splinter. Shards drive through my heart. I ache.

"What kind of things?" I ask. My voice is small and dry.

"The trees," she says. "That park where those people died. There are children trapped in the trees."



I fell in love with Anne because she broke another girl's nose playing rugby in college. You could hear the snap on the sidelines. We'd been friends before, and Anne had invited me to watch. We made love for the first time later that night, after beers, after laughter, after I re-taped Anne's sore knuckles. I still have the team photo from that day—I was the unofficial photographer. Anne's usual smile was instead a snarling mask as she tried to make a face befitting the blood stain on her jersey.

She was a fighter. She *is* a fighter.

Now she fights in dreams. She fights the invisible reality that she might never have a child of her own. She fights me without fighting. She never wanted to move here, back to my hometown, back to the university town in which we'd built memories, but I convinced her. I convinced her to live here, and now she has nightmares, and no baby.

Now I imagine children born of Anne's mind trapped in trees.



"I know I'm meant to have children," Anne tells me.

I twist spaghetti noodles around my fork. "We could call the agency. The one my aunt suggested." My eyes are fixed on the pasta and the shining utensil. I don't want to meet Anne's gaze. The dead man, the 19-year-old, the nightmares, and the park... talk of life and death stirs the debate again at dinner. I close my eyes and see the tiny fingernail scratches on dead bodies.

"It's like a hole inside my body. They want to be born, Pete. They need to. They feel trapped."

I think of filling that hole with an adopted child. I think of smoothing the lines on her face and damming her tears. Maybe I'm too simple, too forward about it. Maybe Anne understands only as a woman who craves her own child understands. A baby isn't a commodity. One quick glance at her face tells me her mind is set.

Anne won't entertain the idea of adoption. She says, "They're trying to talk to me. My children. I'm going to help them, Pete. I'm going to set them free," she says. Her eyes burn like the Anne who broke another woman's nose, but something is missing. Something is wrong.

I love Anne, though, or so I tell myself.

I don't need to make love like we used to—with passion and energy and desire.

We just need to stay together.

How can I say she doesn't smile in photos anymore?

I imagine impossible connections between the children she dreams of in her nightmares and the dead bodies with tiny, pink scratches. These are 2:00 AM thoughts, impossible thoughts. But the images are there, flashing in my brain.



The discovery of a third body closes the park.

She's another college student, a girl of twenty-one with black, curly hair and no identification. She's found two weeks after the previous body. Unlike the first two, she is discovered on her side, legs bent and tucked close to her stomach in a fetal position. The scratches are there, of course, tiny surface things almost unnoticeable but undeniably there, spaced evenly, four little lines like... I glance at my hand... scratches from a baby's tiny finger nails. I have no proof, only photos and my thoughts.

And Anne. I have Anne with a vacancy in her eyes and nightmares every night.

"This is it," Jason says at the scene. "This is a pattern. This shit's going to get ugly."

"Ugly? What do you mean?" I ask.

He sighs.

"The FBI, at least. Maybe bigger. Three killings in two months, Pete." Black rings haunt his tired eyes. "We can't manage this without help. We won't be allowed to."

I'm a child again, running down the sidewalk in Vermeer Park. I want to say something to him about Anne, about my worries, but midnight thoughts and late night fears melt into child's play under even the duller winter sun. I'm afraid of the shadows and the dark. I have no rational reason to fear, no photographic evidence save the bodies we've found and the changes in my Anne. Would anyone else see fingernail marks where the camera captures tiny scratches?

Would anyone believe me if I told them Anne is a monster?

I will take pictures of my wife every day, but there will be no more favorite photos of Anne. The thought empties my chest with a blade of ice.

When I arrive home, Anne grabs my arms, her hands tight like bands of metal. Her eyes are almost black, the pupils dilated even more and wide and wild.

"They're trapped, Pete. They're trapped and they just need help. I'm trying to help them, don't you see?"

I schedule the first psychiatric appointment that afternoon.



Anne's meds bloat her. They make her fat and uncomfortable in her skin. Her hair darkens, too, almost inexplicably. I remember it is winter and during winter Anne's hair darkens, but these memories make no sense with my present reality. Her meds make her complacent. Everything about Anne washes to grey, but the nightmares are gone.

I take the photos, one each day, a record of her life and how I love her.

I am left with photos and the reality that the deaths in the park stop when she starts taking medication, when she gives up her dream of having children. The medication robs me of the Anne who broke another woman's nose in a rugby game. It steals the dimple from her cheek and her eyes are no longer green.

I wonder about the truth of what I imagine. I wonder if Anne populated the trees with her wished-for children and somehow, in some impossible way, force-fed her fighting spirit into them. I wonder if they were born in those trees, the first place Anne and I spoke of being

parents together, and they struggled there half-formed. I wonder if we killed them even as they found a way to touch the world, severed their psychic umbilical cord from Anne with the razor blade of antipsychotics.

These are impossible thoughts.

I wonder about their veracity.

I wonder if it matters. Three people died and Anne will never have her child. Our child.

As a photojournalist, as someone who documents reality, none of this happened as I imagine. My wife did not conjure those things in the park. She did not murder three people with her mind, with her desire to have children. She did not create things in those trees that needed freeing, things that withered when drugs addle her brain.

I wonder if it matters.



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**Aaron Polson** currently lives in Lawrence, Kansas with his wife and six children. He's now at full sitcom. To pay the bills, he counsels high school students about post-graduation plans, but he's still not sure what he wants to be when he grows up. His short fiction has appeared in *Shock Totem*, *Shimmer*, *Bourbon Penn*, and under several unsavory rocks. Rumor has it he prefers ketchup with his beans.



# Verisimilitude

Alan Murdock

It is here, sadly, that I will do my last writing in this world. Sad for me anyway, though probably not for anyone else who has read my work. Critics have called my ideas unreal, impractical, and half-baked. They say my characters are inconsistent, impossible to root for, and are involved in unrealistic plot turns. But this piece will be different. It will be better. It will contain what none of my writing up until now has: Realism.

Last Saturday I sat patiently at my table, located on the furthest wall from the doors, tucked into a corner in the large hall of the hotel at yet another sci-fi convention. On the table I had an assortment of my latest books (available only in paperback), and a misspelled nameplate reading Charls Branford. I added the E joking to myself it would be the most writing my autograph pen would do all day.

I usually have some passers-by stop and talk, although they seem to only be those who have never read my work. People more familiar with me tend to keep walking. But those few who stop are usually good for a sale.

It was when one of these individuals stood in front of my table that this story was prompted.

He looked very tall, although my view was low from the cheap folding chair. His face was darkened beneath a ball cap, his features indistinguishable. I thought it odd that anything could be shaded under the bright fluorescent lights hanging over the hall, but then something stranger occurred.

"I'm a long time fan," he said.

*I didn't think any of you existed*, I thought.

"Thank you," I said.

He asked for a copy of *Zombies On Planet Nine*, my latest novel. He handed me twenty dollars and I asked his name so I could inscribe it. He told me, however, I couldn't spell it.

"That sounds like a name I would use for one of my characters," I told him. I have often used long unpronounceable words with too many consonants in proportion to vowels, and what this man said sounded like the correct pronunciation of one of these words.

I asked him to repeat it, thinking the echo of the hall combined with the excited mutterings of fans had distorted his voice. He did, and then, following what was surely a quizzical expression on my part, told me just my signature would suffice.

I did as requested, and handed him the book. After thanking me, he turned to walk away.

"Excuse me, um," I called after him. "Sir."

He turned, and even at this new angle his face was dim and vague. "I was wondering if there was any one thing specifically you like about my work?" It sounds egotistical, as if I were prodding for a compliment, but my critics are so busy pointing out my shortcomings that I've never received constructive feedback. If I could be made aware of even one positive attribute, it may give me something to work with in the future.

He said, "It's so real."

"But none of it's real. Not the characters, not the plot, not the setting, none of it," I said, hating myself for repeating my critics. Clearly, the continuation of our conversation was nothing more than a waste of time.

"You write reality as I see it," he said. "It's all around us. Surely you see it too."

"I only write fiction," I countered. "And not well."

"You are appreciated where I come from."

"Where is that?"

"I think you know."

He left before I could say anything further.

I abandoned my desk in a futile effort to locate him.

From then until now I have looked for him everywhere. It was only a short time ago when I sat down to my latest story that I realized where to find him—and moments ago I did. I now know his name is XTHYMOS GZRANDLP. He was in my writing all along. I'm in that world, his world, now with no plans of ever leaving. As long as I continue to write these words, I will be able to live here forever. I think this ends chapter one, but I'm in a book with an infinite number of pages.

XTHYMOS is calling me now, and so I must go deeper, deeper into the world I did not create, but merely found.



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# Orc Legal

James Beamon

I stopped counting two hundred and thirty-seven days in. That was the day the magistrate told me that I only had eight more hours of community service to earn my freedom. Magistrate also followed that up with "I'm going to see to it you never get those eight hours, filthy orc".

The jail cell was getting smaller.

Meanwhile rumors floated into my shrinking cell, talk of evil overlords growing powerful in different corners of the Seven Realms. Any one of those overlords would need orcs like me, making up their faceless hordes in black armor, ever-ready to do his/her evil bidding while raking in pillage and employment benefits like decent co-pays for dental and a viable retirement plan.

It was a great time to be a henchman, and here I was serving time. The new fish in the cell next to me wouldn't stop crying. And the warden was pissing in my water ration with religious tradition.

Speaking of, it was lunchtime in the dungeon. The other dungeon dwellers, humans naturally, complained about the food like they complained about everything else down here. I was still trying to figure out how anybody had the stones to complain about a consistent meal of bread and gruel. Seriously? This was a banquet hall compared to Lord Dreadbane's death marches... back when he was on the scene we basically had to eat any orc that fell to exhaustion.

Old Lord Dreadbane... man, did he have a great incentives program.

I could hear the warden making his rounds with the food cart, with the *squee squee* of the wheels and the clang of tin bowls that he tossed at despondent prisoners. When he got to me, my water was surprisingly clear.

"What? None of your homemade lemonade?"

"I ain't forgot about you, sweetness. My proprietary blend's in there alright... I'm just giving most of it to crybaby next to you. Maybe it'll dry his throat out enough for him to shut up."

"Good plan. What's his deal anyway?"

"One of them weird races. Centaur, brought in for lewd conduct."

Warden glared down at the next cell. "Enough already, princess pony!" he shouted as he squeaked his wheels down to where the centaur was.

Sooner or later (you never knew which one was which down here), the centaur's crying downgraded to sniffing. That was about the time the elf came to visit him.

I saw the elf scowling into the centaur's cell, looking all dapper and tall and blonde.

"You're a disgusting sack of filth. I'm going to see to it that you never leave this cell unless it's as glue, dog food, and transplant organs. You make me sick. I'll see you in an hour."

The elf left and I called out to the centaur. "Man, the District Attorney really has it in for you."

"District Attorney? No, that was my court-appointed lawyer. And here I was thinking he wouldn't care about my case since I wasn't paying him anything."

"Sorry dude."

"Sorry for what? This is great! He's an *elf*. And his designer look lets me know he's a professional. I'm sure he won't let personal feelings get in the way of doing his job."

"Why in blue-green blazes are you so sure of that?"

"Duh... he's an *elf*."

Again with the myth of elvish nobility. Every race looked up to those lanky bastards just cause they were elves. Most orcs knew their secret; they used most of their fairy magic shrinking their guts or making their faces beautifully aquiline or keeping their hair from having split ends. That's cause if they just let themselves go natural most of them would end up looking like orcs, and then where would they be? In dark armor marching for dark lords to make ends meet, no doubt.

Screw this centaur. It would be just desserts to see him hang from his stupid notion of bright and right elvish goodness. I turned to do some pushups and an idea hit me.

Public defense counted as community service.

If the centaur requested it, no way the magistrate could say no.

"Hey centaur, what's your name?"

"Moxie."

"Nice to meet you, Moxie. I'm Anglewood. Listen, I think you deserve more for your defense. Someone who's not only a true professional, but someone who is passionate about your case and will work tirelessly for at least eight hours to see you free."

"Sounds nice. But no one will defend me because I can't pay."

"I'll defend you."

"You? What do you know about the legal system?"

"I'm an evil henchman for hire. I've been in and out of jail since I was a kid. What don't I know about the legal system?"



It took about three hours to make all the necessary arrangements and prepare the defense. That meant five hours away from freedom.

Moxie took the time to relay the particulars of his case to me from his cell. Like I cared. I took a nap.

The courtroom was full of angry townsfolk. I was glad they had to leave their torches and pitchforks outside.

The District Attorney was the same elf that was acting as Moxie's public defendant a few hours ago. Guess he got a taste of half-horse meat and refused to let go. The jury box was full of the same lanky elves.

Everyone was looking at me like I was on trial, including my client.

"Dear Judge?" the centaur asked. "Can I change my mind about my lawyer?"

I pulled his human head down to my level. "What are you doing?"

"I thought you were a human. If I knew you were an orc I would have said no in the first place."

My other hand pointed to the jurors. "Your racism isn't exactly warming any hearts over there in the jury box and I'd be kicking your horse's ass right now if I hadn't sworn an oath to defend it."

Moxie slapped my hand away from his head. "You ever been horse stomped and elbow dropped all at once? Cause I'm telling you, there's a first time for everything."

"Enough," the judge interrupted. "Pervert centaurs don't get much leeway round here. You made your bed, now lie in it, or sleep on it standing up, or do whatever it is your kind does when its bedtime."

That's how the trial of the decade for this small township started.

The elf called his first witness. While they talked yada yada, I was getting an earful of Moxie's disappointment. "I could have had a professional looking lawyer like that. No, I got roped into having an orc who wears dirty tattered rags for a business suit."

"Dude, I live in a dungeon, not a palace parapet. Get over it."

"Your witness," the elf told me.

"What? That's it?" It had only been like three minutes.

"That's why they call these things open and shut," the elf sneered.

I milked the witness for everything it was worth. I tried to ask him all sorts of questions like what did he have for breakfast and did he have plans on going back to school, but the elf kept citing relevance. Judge explained I had to stick to the point. Even so, you'd be surprised how long you can drag a point out... I've been in enough quarterly meetings with dread overlords to know. Here's an excerpt:

Me: What did you see, Farmer Brown?

FB: Well, that perbert asked the lil lady for sensual favors.

Me: No. That's what you maybe thought you heard. We'll get to that later. What did you see?

FB: I saw that naked man-horse perbert gyrating like he beside hisself with his wanton perbersion. And he reared up so the lil lady could see his horsey parts.

Me: What do you mean by you "saw"?

FB: I was looking square at him.

Me: With one eye or both eyes?

FB: Both eyes, dead set.

Me: So you looked at his horsey parts?

FB: What?

Me: His horsey parts. Your attention was dead set, both eyes squarely focused on his horsey parts as he reared up?

FB: You is a right perbert yaself.

Me: I wasn't the one gazing at another guy's horsey parts and evading questions about it.

Elf: That wasn't a question, your honor.

Me: Was I the one gazing at another guy's horsey parts and evading questions about it, or was that you Farmer Brown?

By the time I was done with sight and the other four senses I had killed an hour and a half off my community service.

Before I took my seat, I gave that elf the backside of my middle finger. Screw him and the forest he prances around in.

The elf stood up enraged and spoke to the judge. "Your Honor, before I call the character witness, I posit that the defense attorney is motivated to defend his client for purely

self serving reasons that present a conflict of interest. I motion that his community service be rescinded in the event that he fails his client."

"What's he saying?" I asked the judge.

"He's saying if you don't win, you don't get no community service hours. And I agree. Motion granted."

And the hammer came down.

"Can you do that?"

"I'm the judge. I can do whatever I want."

"Sir, I need a break."

"You mean a recess?"

"If you want to go outside and play during the break that's cool with me, have your recess. Me? I need a break."

"And me? I didn't become judge to worry about the filthy needs of filthy orcs."

Now I had to focus on the case, for reals. So I put my fantasies of breaking the elf's lithe little legs on the back burner and looked at the case file that had been sitting on my table the whole time.

Ms. Lily White was accusing Moxie Centaur of soliciting sex. Also cited was indecent exposure and willingness to engage in unlawful acts with a minor.

Lily was sitting at the prosecution's table. I must have really been in the zone thinking about beating down his highness elf, cause this was the first time I noticed her. She looked so demure and innocent. I bet the jury was lapping that up.

And on the stand now was Farmer Dell, telling the whole wide world how Lily White was as pure as the driven fricking snow.

That accursed elf was working this case with evil precision.

Me? I wasn't going back to jail without a fight. I was going to fight evil precision with evil brute strong arm tactics.

It was my witness.

Me: Do you have any tasty children?

FD: What?

Me: Sorry. School age children?

FD: Yes. Four.

Me: A deliciously round number. And you've kept the same wife all these years?

FD: Yes.



Me: There's character in fidelity and stability. So her back's grown strong like yours working your land?

FD: Sure.

Me: Excellent. You look like a hard working individual. That says a lot about your character. I'm sure her back, just like yours, is well suited to working your farm or enduring never-ending hours in a forced labor camp.

FD: Um, thanks?

Me: No, thank you. And where do you live? Out deep in the fields, well past the outskirts of town and any town sentry patrols, yes?

FD: Uh, yeah.

Me: Close to the northern road, so it's real easy to find, even on moonless nights?

FD: Um...

Elf: Relevance!

Me: He's right, scratch it. I'm sure it was just a personal question anyway. Ok, Farmer Dell, would you say you're a man of confidence?

FD: Yes.

Me: A self-described confidence man, good. I like that. But confidence has a slippery slope. On one end, you know with total confidence your name is Farmer Dell. Then on the other end there's very little confidence, say, for example, your confidence that I'll always be locked up instead of free to roam the northern countryside with a band of blood-thirsty marauding orcs. Where on this slope is your confidence that you truly know Ms. White?

FD: Uh, since you put it that way, nowhere near my confidence that my name's Farmer Dell.

Me: Ms. White's no longer the little girl you used to know with a huge degree of confidence. How would you describe her behavior when new men come into town, now that she's come of age?

FD: Well, uh, Miss Lily does get awful giddy when new jacks come through. Think they all are adventurers or heroes or some such.

Me: So you think she entertains notions of steamy escapades with every new guy that comes into town?

FD: Maybe...

Me: I thought you were a confidence man.

FD: The term I would use for her behavior is wanderlust.

Me: What was the last syllable of that last word?

FD: Lust.

Me: Could you say that one more time, with confidence. And look at the jury when you say it.

FD: Lust!

Me: No further questions.

Elf tried to cite me for witness intimidation, but like I told the judge, I'm an orc. That just happens naturally. Meanwhile, I'm dressed in dirty rags. I'm much more intimidating when I'm dressed in all black armor and bearing down on an unsuspecting farmhouse in the middle of the night. And the judge had to concede the point.

Next up was Lily White. Her doleful eyes and quivering full lips had the crowd entranced.

Little witch, every word from her pubescent mouth was scissors shredding any chance I had for freedom. By the time the elf was done drawing out her story the jury was thirsty for centaur blood. It was like she was wearing a sign, "Victimized Maiden Needs Avenging".

My witness. And I had no experience demonizing innocent looking maidens. All I knew how to do was terrorize them. I played to my strengths.

"Ms. White, how often do you fuck?"

Everyone gasped. The judge brought down his hammer.

"Now see here, you dirty orc. You can't go asking Lily White nasty questions like that. Get some damn couth, that's a maiden you're talking to."

"Ok, let's try it this way, Ms. White. Are you still able to count how many times a random guy has put their magic wand into your hairy potter?"

More gasps, more of the hammer. "Didn't I say stop it already?"

"But Yonor, how can I expose that she's a rabid slut if I can't ask her simple questions?"

"Look, if you want some sticks I'll give you some sticks. You can stick to the events of the day in question or I can stick you back in your damn cell. Which stick you want?"

"Event stick, please."

"Not thoroughly soaked in stupid I see. Proceed."

I proceeded without any idea on how to proceed. It wasn't like me to leave a maiden unterrorized.

"Ms, White, what did the defendant say to you?"

"He told me if I was up for it, he'd put his back into it and give me a ride my sweet, young body didn't even know it had been craving."

"Ms. White, if you're so chaste and pure, how did you know what he was offering?"

"Well, I learned long ago in Young Maiden Chastity School that only a nasty man asks you to ride him. Seeing that he's at least half man that makes him at least half nasty."

"For serious?"

"Yes. We also learned fractions in Young Maiden Chastity School, so I know what a half is."

"What about the half that's horse?"

"That half was naked so that makes it nasty too."

"What do you normally do for rides?"

"Why do you keep saying I normally do this sort of thing?"

Then she started bawling.

Usually I'd have to burn down the village and cart the family off in the slave wagon to get these kinds of waterworks.

As much as I love seeing maidens cry, this was doing nothing to spring me.

I looked at the judge, whose hammer was poised to strike and I resigned myself with a nod.

"No further questions."

The elf's grin made me want to run over to his table and chew his face off. That's saying a lot, cause raw elf face had a horrible plastic taste. "Prosecution rests," he said.

"Way to tool it up," Moxie whispered to me.

"I tooled up your mom. Why are you butt sore now?"

"You could have tried pointing out that this could have just been a simple misunderstanding, cultural differences or something. But no, stupid orc tries to harlotize Miss Innocent."

"Wait, wasn't that you trying to harlotize her? I mean, that's why we're here, after all."

"You know, jail's worth it at this point just to see you rotting next to me. Can I get a presumption of innocence here? You're the one who has to get everyone else to believe I didn't do it."

It never occurred to me that the rat bastard didn't do it. I mean, I spent most of my free time doing wicked things. I just assumed everybody else was doing likewise.

If I had thought him innocent, this case probably could have gone a lot better.

And what the hell did people do for fun if they weren't doing wicked things?

"Hello!" Judge called to me, "Prosecution rests. That means wrap up your tender love moment and call your first witness."

First witness, like I had a buffet of choices here.

I called Moxie. The first question was the one that had been burning in my mind for hours.

"When you reared up, did you notice Farmer Brown gazing at your horsey parts?"

"Perbert!" someone yelled from the crowd.

"Relevance," said the elf.

"Damn! Well, could you explain, in detail, exactly what your good intentions were?"

Moxie looked at Lily White and his eyes softened. He spoke enraptured. "I just wanted to give her a ride. One of those long, hard rides that leaves a maiden's cheeks red and flustered, her bosom heaving as she gasps for every next breath and her delicate thighs quivering from the effort to stay tightly straddled astride me as I run my course. Our pace ever quickening, our muscles taut, grinding against each other in needful unison, in sweaty syncopated harmony, until we crest the hill and from the bowels of our souls comes a satisfying cry of accomplishment. You know, a good hard ride."

The silence was deafening. I looked around. Everybody was red and flustered. Women were fanning themselves rapidly. Sweat was beading up on the judge's brow.

"Um, ah no further questions, Yonor."

"Good. We're taking a recess. I have to go home and discuss matters of critical importance to my wife. Be back in one hour."

The courtroom emptied like there was a fire.

When the session resumed, and most everyone looked noticeably more relaxed, the elf didn't even bother to question the centaur.

So my defense rested.

This court had something called closing arguments. Basically it was free time to talk crap about the other side. I was looking forward to this because I had a whole trove of "your mama" jokes to burn that damn elf with.

"Members of the jury," the elf began, "As elves we know something of nobility. And what this centaur did was not noble. It was very not noble..."

"Hey, what's a jury?" Moxie asked me.

"Those are the guys that decide your guilt or innocence."

"What? Crap! I'm screwed. They're elves. You're an orc. Prosecution is an elf. Who do you think they're going to side with?"

I should have thought of that too. High and mighty elves all stuck together in their elitist attitude. They loved nothing better but to join together in their snubbing of the 'lower races'.

Well, there was one thing.

And it was my only hope.

"...the disgusting pervert doesn't even wear horseshoes. You know what choice has to be made," the elf finished his argument.

And then it was my turn. I was worried cause I was relying on a speech to save the day. Who the hell relies on an orc's talking points for salvation? I plied the only angle I thought could work with this jury.

"Esteemed elf folk, what we have here is a simple misunderstanding. I remember back when I was a little orclet, Pops would read us stories about grand elves from his book 'Twenty Different Elves, Twenty Different Reasons to Sit Down at the Dinner Table'.

"Never mind the title. Anyway, all the coolest elves, you know the ones with the names that begin with double "I's" and have a ton of apostrophes, those guys all rode centaurs. That was right after the unicorns got scarce once all of them decided to go gay for each other and chase rainbows.

"So the coolest elves, the most noblest and grandest of all elves, kind of like you elves here in the jury, have all rode centaurs. They even preferred centaurs to the unicorns cause they could use one of the centaur man-hands as a cup holder and the other hand could play the harmonica. That's riding in style.

"But centaurs don't just let any elf ride them. Nope, you had to be cool. And this centaur saw this maiden, who was pure and had clearly not been packed like a rented mule, and decided to offer her what usually only gets offered to grand and noble elves: a ride.

"She misunderstood. It happens. And her lawyer misunderstood. Cause he's far from cool. He's an asshole lawyer who spent his cool college years researching law crap.

"They all misunderstood. But luckily, we have a cadre of the noblest elves who can't misunderstand. And that's what justice is all about."

I rested my case with that. Some crap I had totally made up, except the cookbook.

The deliberation was rapid, the decision unanimous. Moxie was a free centaur.

Elf snobbery wasn't just for other races. None of them wanted to be the one who admitted he hadn't rode a centaur.

Speaking of snobbery, no elf was going to take a beating like this from an orc lying down. The district attorney stood up to put the screw on me.

"I must remind your honor that the defense councilor did not complete eight hours of community service," he told the judge.

"What are you talking about? I did eight and a half."

"One hour was recess. It doesn't count."

"No way."

"Yes way," the judge said. "Recess is a break, as in a break from getting community service hours. You owe thirty minutes."

And all this time I thought evil needed overlords to be effective.

Sooner or later (you never knew which was which down here) a voice drifted into my cell.

"You that legal orc aren't you? I want you to take my case."

What else was I going to do down here?

"Give me the details."



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First published in *Nine: A Journal of Imaginative Fiction*, Issue 2 (June/July 2012).

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**James Beamon** has been published in *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *AE*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and the *Unidentified Funny Objects* anthologies among others. He currently lives in Virginia but his day job as a defense contractor has taken him to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the dreaded confines of office meetings. Not above shameless self-promotion, he urges you to buy his novelette *Dialogues with Talking Heads* so he can actually quit his day job. Please, tell a million of your closest friends.

# Kindle My Heart

Rebecca Birch

Joreth knew when Maia entered his father's smithy, despite having his back to the door. Her honeysuckle scent wafted through the smoke and curled like a fist in his gut. He yanked the rope to squeeze the bellows, but the rush of air couldn't block out her voice.

"Good day, Halbor," she said, addressing the master smith.

"Miss Maia," Halbor replied between hammer strokes. "Acolyte Maia, I should say. The White becomes you."

Joreth squeezed his eyes shut. Why couldn't she just stay away? She'd made her choice. Did it give her pleasure to torment him?

Well, he wasn't going to give it to her. Joreth released the rope and turned, touching his hand to his forehead in the expected gesture of reverence to an acolyte of the Sunspire.

She stood on the far side of the counter, a perfect vision in her spotless white robe, mahogany curls loose under a silver filigree circlet. Beautiful, but a stranger. His Maia wore homespun wool, her hair in braids, and was most at ease in the high meadows, surrounded by the wildflowers she wove into chaplets to sell in the square on market days.

Maia waited under his silent scrutiny. A scarlet flush inched its way up her cheeks. She blinked as if she had a speck of dust in her eye, but Joreth knew better. If she didn't blink, the tears she held barely in check would fall.

He sighed. Even now he couldn't bear to hurt her. "Congratulations, Maia," he said. "Father's right—the White looks well on you."

She smiled and tugged at the wrought-silver chain that held her spire-gem. It hung around her neck and disappeared beneath her robe. One of her curls tangled in the chain as she pulled. Joreth fought the urge to fix it. Soot clung to his sweaty hands. What if he accidentally sullied her robe? Besides, a Sunspire warder hovered behind her—a silent, looming threat.

"Look," she said, pulling the pendant free from where it nestled between her breasts. Brilliant light almost blinded Joreth.

He squinted and forced himself to smile. "You've already kindled."

"No one's ever done it faster."

Joreth wasn't sure if it was pride or sorrow that tinged her voice. It had been less than a month since she turned away from him to enter the Sunspire, and already she was altered.

She dropped the pendant back beneath the robe. Joreth blinked to clear the purple-rimmed holes that danced across his vision and tried not to think about the soft skin the pendant was touching, or the fact that now that she'd kindled, his last hope was gone. There was no going back.

He turned away and pulled a glowing rod of steel out of the coals and began to pound it, hard and fast. Sparks flew as the metal flattened under his blows. His breath rasped. If only he could remember what he was supposed to be crafting.

A few more strokes, then Joreth stopped, panting. It was useless. Punishing the rod wouldn't solve anything. He wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve, painting his face with a gritty smudge.

"Will you walk with me, Joreth?"

He tried to bite back a grim laugh and choked. "Will your shadow let you walk with a peon like me?" he asked, gesturing to the warder who looked past him in return as if he weren't worthy of so much as being noticed. "Isn't he supposed to guard your virtue?"

Maia stared up at him with wide silver eyes. "Would you harm it?"

Joreth clenched his hammer so hard his arm trembled. He would never harm Maia and she knew it. He glanced at his father, hoping against hope to be forbidden to leave. Halbor shrugged and turned back to his work. There was no escape from this invitation.

"As you wish."



Maia led Joreth past the market square, through the bustle and din that hushed as they passed by, then rose again two-fold. He could feel the townsfolk's judging stares and caught the voices of goodwives muttering how sad it was to see Halbor's only son pining after a dream.

Maia kept her head high and walked toward the outskirts of the town and the blooming meadow that carpeted the hillside above. Easier to do when a spire-gem flared at your touch than when you had to return to your life and listen to wagging tongues you could do nothing to silence.

The warder strode just behind Joreth's shoulder, grinding small pebbles into the dirt beneath his boots. His presence cast a pall as dark as night-clouds. Despite his forge-wrought



strength, Joreth couldn't help but feel outclassed and outmanned without a weapon and with no battle training.

Joreth tried to tell himself it didn't matter. No one was going to be stupid enough to attack a warder acolyte. Not even a kindled acolyte. Still, he couldn't help seeing every person they passed with suspicious eyes. It didn't matter that he'd known most of them all his life. Acolytes were rare and they were valuable. That value made them a target. He lengthened his stride until he walked just ahead of Maia. Even an inexperienced shield was better than none.

At last they left the thatch-roofed buildings behind and started up the grassy slope. Maia led the way toward a stand of birch trees. Her brown hair caught in the breeze and the white robe tangled around her legs. As they climbed, she bent to pluck yarrow, lupine, and forget-me-nots, braiding them together with deft fingers. If only the warder weren't with them—if the White didn't clothe her in impossibility—it would be just like before.

By the time they reached the copse, Maia had finished the circlet. She rose to her tiptoes and settled it on his head. Her white robe grazed his forearms, which he'd crossed over his chest. Warmth radiated from her skin. One of her fingers curled briefly in his hair, the gentle tug reminding him painfully of how, in their other life, she would have drawn him down for a lingering kiss.

Seeming to realize what she was doing, she dropped her hand and stepped back, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth.

Joreth stared, unable to look away from the scarlet flush that painted her mouth.

The warder strode between them, taking up position beside the nearest birch, reminding them both of his presence.

"Sit?" Maia asked, looking up at Joreth from beneath her long lashes.

Joreth settled himself on the grass and Maia dropped down beside him. A pair of bees took flight, their humming drone fading as they flew off to find new sources of nectar. The warder remained standing, his gaze never seeming to leave the horizon, but Joreth knew he was seeing everything and would not hesitate to intervene if he saw anything untoward.

The town spread across the valley below like a patched quilt. In the distance, beyond the far ridge, the Sunspire speared towards the heavens, a gleaming golden beacon. From its peak a beam of light pulsed skyward so bright Joreth couldn't look straight at it. Blue sky spread in a wide circle surrounding the beam, but beyond that ring a roiling mass of heavy purple, green, and charcoal clouds fought to break through the Sunspire's barrier and blot out the sun.

Sitting at Maia's side, the spectacle took on a new meaning. All his life, Joreth had understood that the Sunspire brought daylight to the world. Without its beacon, they'd be trapped in unending darkness. The First Priestess had kindled it in the time before memory and it must be tended for all time by those who could harness its vast power.

The Sunspire meant life. Joreth understood why Maia had left when the Priestess claimed her, no matter how much he hated it. But now?

"Why did you come back?"

Silence stretched between them. Maia looked down at her hands, clasped together in her lap, and shivered, despite the afternoon's warmth. "I had to," she said at last. "The Priestess commanded it."

"I don't understand."

"I'm so sorry, Jor. I begged her not to make me. I knew how much it would hurt you. I just didn't—" She squeezed her eyes shut. "I didn't realize how much it would hurt me, too."

Joreth's throat clenched. "Do what you must quickly, then," he replied, his voice a low rasp.

"She told me to end it with you."

The circlet of flowers suddenly felt too heavy. Joreth pulled it off and held it between his hands. "We did that already. Once was enough."

"It wasn't. Because I can't forget you."

"So what does she want me to do? Leave the valley? Travel so far I lose my way and have no hope of coming back? Find a willing girl and get myself safely married off? Doesn't she trust me to keep my distance? Have I once tried to find you?"

He couldn't keep the anger and frustration from his voice, and once he started, he found he couldn't hold back the stream of words—not even when tears began to seep from the corners of Maia's closed eyes.

"What have I done wrong, Maia, besides love you?"

Her eyes flashed open, their startling gray glimmering like quicksilver. "It was never wrong to love, Joreth. Neither of us could have known I'd be chosen. That I'd kindle."

She took the flower circlet from his hands and held it up between them. It cast an oblong shadow that ringed his chest. "Look at the stems. See how they intertwine? Each one by itself has some strength, but when they're plaited together, how much stronger is the whole? That's what you are to me, Joreth. You're the lupine to my yarrow. You weave through every thought. Breathe in every word."

Maia traced one finger over a trembling yarrow petal. The scent of honeysuckle that followed her everywhere danced on the breeze. Joreth drew it in, letting the subtle flavor linger on his tongue. He ached to pull her close, to tell her how her memory never left him, waking or sleeping, but the warder hovered nearby, just visible out of the corner of Joreth's eye, naked blade in hand.

With a choked sob, Maia lowered the circlet. "As an acolyte, there should be nothing between the spire-gem and myself. Those Joreth-stems should be replaced with webs of power and light, but it's not happening."

With one hand, she pulled her pendant from beneath her robe. Joreth glanced to the side, sparing himself from the blinding glare. "Watch," she said, and began to hum.

Her voice rose and fell in a modal tune unfamiliar to Joreth. The lupine stems flared gold, then dimmed. Ashes blew away, leaving silvery threads in place of the braided wildflowers. "This is what I'm commanded to do. To burn away your love until all that remains is the Sunspire and my allegiance to it."

"Maia..." He had seen the spire-gems' power before, used to punish the worst of criminal offenders. Their bodies remained whole, but after being subjected to the power of the Sunspire, little remained of their minds. And this was to be his fate? For daring to love a girl he had no reason to fear?

Tears rolled unchecked down Maia's face. The circlet fell from her hand, landing in a twisted pile. "I'm sorry, Joreth," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry."

Even then, he wished he could comfort her. It was absurd and he knew it, but as she raised the pendant towards him—as she began to hum again—all he wanted to do was wipe away her tears. It wasn't right that his last memory, before all memories were lost, would be Maia's sorrow.

He reached toward her. The warder shifted closer, a black cloud on the horizon of Joreth's vision. Invisible wings fluttered against his eardrums, beating out the melody of Maia's song. Darkness blurred his sight, creeping inward until all that remained was Maia's swimming silver eyes, then nothing at all.

Silence fell at the same moment he felt her gentle touch against his cheek. His eyes flashed wide. "Maia?"

"I can't," she whispered, her lips so close to his face they grazed his stubble, her breath warm against his ear. "I can't do it."

Joreth smoothed a trailing tear from her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "It's all right," he said, although he had no way of making it true. "It'll be all right."

The warder grunted. Joreth looked past Maia's shoulder in time to see him lunge toward her unprotected back.

Joreth shouted wordlessly and shoved Maia behind him. He barely heard her shriek before the warder's sword pierced his chest. Pain speared through him, hot and slick. Blood soaked into his tunic.

He looked down at the protruding blade. Saw the scarlet stain spreading down his chest. Where was Maia? Who was screaming?

With a jerk, the warder pulled the sword free. Joreth fell forward onto his hands and knees. Buzzing filled his ears. His mouth tasted of soot and steel. He toppled onto his side.

Maia's face filled his vision. Honeysuckle-scented curls tickled his skin. Something salty and wet fell on his tongue. He swallowed convulsively. It hurt.

Why couldn't he hear anything? Where was the warder? Why had he attacked? Was Maia safe? Joreth struggled to rise.

Butterfly wingbeats pulsed at his eardrums. A flare of heat shot through his chest. He arched and ground his teeth together so as not to scream. After a moment, the burning pain dulled, spreading outwards towards his limbs in a wave of banked flame.

Joreth fell back against the grass, gasping for breath. Sweat soaked him and a heavy weight lay over his chest. He reached up and his hand caught in a tangle of curls. "Maia?"

She pushed herself off of him. Blood mottled her white robe and smeared her cheek. "Joreth? Are you...?"

He touched his chest tentatively. The tunic was torn, but the wound which had been there moments before was gone. "I'm all right," he said, hardly believing the words as he spoke them.

"The Priestess was right."

It took Joreth a moment to realize it was the warder who spoke. He stood three paces away, the sword still red with Joreth's blood.

"What do you mean?" Joreth asked, staggering to his feet. He took one swaying step, placing himself between the warder and Maia.

The warder slowly lowered his sword and laid it on the grass. "The acolyte spoke truth as far as she knew it. An acolyte binds with the power of the Sunspire, twining to make herself stronger. But two threads are never as strong as three. Look at this," he stooped to pick up the forgotten circlet. "Lupine and yarrow, yes, but forget-me-nots as well. The strongest acolytes are bound both to the power and to another. The one whose love is stronger than life. Their true warder."

Maia rose and stepped closer to Joreth, a hand at his waist to steady him, her sharp gaze daring the warder to object to the contact. "She expected this?" Maia said, a rush of red flaring in her cheeks. "She expected me to fail?"

"And commanded me to try to end your life if you couldn't bring yourself to burn away his memory. If he loved you enough, you would live."

Maia surged forward, a bloody finger outstretched towards the warder. "You nearly killed him!"

"And you are a kindled acolyte. She knew you could save him. Now, he's bound to you."

Joreth straightened, the residual heat of whatever Maia had done to save him pulsing strength through his veins. "I've been bound to her since the day we met."

For the first time, a smile crossed the warder's face. "You gave your life for her and through the Sunspire she returned it to you. She'll hold it for the rest of your days."

"It was always hers for the asking."

The warder glanced up at the sky. The surging night-clouds danced ever closer to the Sunspire's beacon, heralding the coming of evening. "We'd best be off. Your father will be wondering what's become of you."

As the warder led off down the hillside, Joreth rested his arm around Maia's shoulders, leaning on her for support. Deep within him a new flame burned, hotter than the smithy's furnace. Like the lupine, he'd been seared by the Sunspire's power and come away transformed.

Maia was his lodestone. His world. Invisible webs bound them, rooted deep within, and Joreth sensed that he would feel her presence no matter the distance. He was her shield, forged and tempered to her service. He would never lose her again.

Strands of Maia's hair drifted toward Joreth in the breeze, wrapping around his neck. He let the sweet smell of honeysuckle envelop him. With Maia tucked in the circle of his arm, Joreth smiled.

Everything was just as it should be.



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# Burn in Me

Carrie Martin

The fire engine races as fast as my heart through the dark, snow-banked streets, sirens shrieking.

Still I see his blackened shell, red eyes pitted inside a face twisted with madness and malice. Still he is with me. But I couldn't tell the shrink that because I have to keep going. If I don't get back out there and do this now, my career is over. And the memories will be there to haunt me just the same.

"Maddy?" says Peter, leaping from the truck—a jolt to reality, and I hurry after him, already sweating inside my uniform despite the frigid air.

Behind the ground-level windows of a two-story home, a powerful inferno blazes bright against the stark white backdrop of a moonlit winter. Smoke pours off the roof like a swarm of lost spirits escaping into the night. And behind a second-floor window, two bodies—small and pajama clad—press against the glass, sobbing and banging.

Amid the chaos of hoses and floodlights, the wail of an ambulance, bouncing red lights, Peter and I run with the ladder. Snow crunches under our boots in an off-beat rhythm. The crisp night air morphs into the acrid stink of liquefying plastic. We throw the ladder against the house; I fasten my headgear, and pull the crowbar from my belt. Peter takes the ladder base. I'm the smallest and fastest in our unit, so I clamber upwards, as I have always done. Only this time, the pride-induced bravery that usually fuels me is gone. And now all I feel is dread at how this night might end.

I pry the screen from the window, and a third figure materializes behind the children, barely visible, charred, red eyes—*not now, not on the job, not with children...*

"You can't save them, Madeline," he says. "You can't even save yourself."

"You're not real," I whisper into the shield covering my face, and scrunch my eyes shut to erase his image.

A humorless laugh—the same vile, seeping sound that has plagued me since that night—echoes in the claustrophobic space around my head. "I *am* real," he breathes, cold in my ear. *All the protective gear in the world can't keep him out*, I realize, and an icicle of fear drips down my spine.

But the children are screaming—"Our baby brother's in there!"—and I'm helping them out the window and down to Peter, barely aware of my actions amid the turmoil of my mind.

"Where's your parents?" says Peter. As I climb inside the house I hear, "Gone out," between coughs and cries.

I trudge through the clutter and haze of a bedroom with bunk-beds, breathing heavy behind my mask... enter the hallway into a menacing block of white smoke... feel the walls for a door...

*Trapped behind the door; the children I couldn't save.*

... look inside, and find a bathroom. Empty.

The next door I try releases the squeals of the baby boy; I exhale a breath of relief. But the figure creeps into view. His shrivelled hands clasp the rail of the crib, and as he leers at the baby, he sings: "Burn little baby, don't say a word." A sickly-sweet smile stretches over his ash-grey teeth, and then he fades once more.

I can't let this baby die. I've got to hold it together.

I force my shaking legs across the room, open the window, pry off the screen, and double-back to the crib. But before I can reach it I hear his laugh, the same taunting echo, and the crib slides and scrapes across the floorboards, away from me.

Ice cold fear prickles and hardens in my veins. Because now I know, and maybe I knew all along: the boy who haunts me now is more than a memory infecting my mind.

He exists.

He is here.

The boy who locked his friends in the basement of his house, set them alight, then burned in the flames of his own hell. *Maybe Hell is where he came from...*

That day, he stood in the shadows of his hallway, before a door, closed shut. I didn't know the door was locked. I didn't know what horror lay on the other side of the door. A magazine, twisted tight, burned at one end in his hand. His eyes were wild with pleasure and power, his face a twisted grin. He had no intention of leaving his creation behind; that much I knew. Yet it was still my job to save him, and I advanced toward him, my arm out, beckoning. But he held the burning magazine like a weapon, thrashing the air, forcing me back. He used the flame from the magazine to light a stack of discarded newspapers; then dropped the magazine into an open air vent and kicked it down the shaft with his foot. He began to shriek with laughter. I thought I heard a distant scream, but it drifted away with the sound of his shrieking and the flames roaring in the basement. If I had known the door was locked—that the children were down there, dying, dead—I would have barged past him and kicked the



door in. But I didn't know. And as I stood there, hesitating, the door to the basement crumbled to ash, the children with it. The boy howled before the orange blaze, directing his red-eyed gaze upon me. Then the floor beneath him broke apart, and the fire swallowed him whole.

I was the last person to see him alive. Now I'm the one who sees him still—through *me* his evil lives on.

But I can't let him win. Not this time.

I charge again at the crib and drive it against the wall, then scoop the bawling infant into a bundle of baby-blue blankets. Books and toys strike my back as I sprint to the window and lower the bundle into Peter's outstretched arms.

I stand, gloved hands straddling the window, staring into the chilly abyss, and consider my fate.

I can leave this house behind, but I cannot leave *him*. Every waking moment, every nightmare, every child and fire that I face, he will always be there, growing stronger, more dangerous. And I will be his prisoner, his vessel, his weapon, as he seeks to destroy the very life I am sworn to protect.

Beyond the window, slivers of snow have begun to fall in the velvet moon sky, swooping and swirling and finally melting within the tentacles of smoke engulfing the house. And like wildfire spreading from a single spark, I begin to see clearly what I must do.

I turn around. I go back inside. There is only one way to end this, one way to stop him.

"No more children," I say to the boy, the empty room. "No more."

The crib spins past me and smashes into pieces against the wall, as though he already knows my intent. But I don't stop. I keep going, like I always do, following my instincts and my heart.

*Courage to face and conquer my fears...* silently I pledge the firefighter's oath, as I work in a trance-like state to remove my headgear and air-pack, and loosen my uniform. Then I storm downstairs. I throw myself into the seething heart of the fire, blistering, boiling, screaming, "Burn in Hell!"

The boy rages in my face, a screeching mask of fury and disbelief, red eyes stretched wide, his mouth a vulgar chasm as empty as his soul. Yet beyond the fear, the searing pain—the pulling and the tightness and the numbing of my flesh—a feeling of calm rises within, cool and clean as a crystalline lake on a summer's day. And the boy is taken, like a snowflake in the smoke, swooping and swirling and finally melting. Consumed by the fiery beast; returned to Hell.

I close my eyes, and pray that he doesn't take me with him...



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**Carrie Martin** is a graduate of the Institute of Children's Literature, and a writer of quirky and dark from children to adults. British and Canadian bred, she now lives near London, Ontario with her husband, daughter and two wee pets. She is a graphic designer by trade, now a full-time mom following a childhood story-writer dream. She is often seen drinking red wine, contemplating words, fiddling with her website, or watching cartoons and horror movies.

# The Memory-Setter's Apprentice

Alvaro Zinos-Amaro

Those who survive combat with the Sarakul return home with holes in their memories. As memory-setters, it's our job to delve inside their skulls and repair the damage.

When I say "our job" I'm stretching the truth, since I'm not yet a memory-setter. During my last three years of apprenticeship under Master Agoza I've assisted with many restorations. Even completed a few solo. But technically I'm still an apprentice.

Tomorrow that will change.

First thing in the morning, Master Agoza will test me. If I pass the test I'll become a Master, able to practice independently.

And if I fail... well, I guess then I'll be looking for a different way of supporting the war effort.

I'm lying in bed, unable to sleep, when my sister Cora opens the door to the small room we share in this Solace Home, one of many in the Kapali province. Cora believes that the government calls these places Solace Homes because an honest name—like orphan centers—would make people too uncomfortable. It's one of the rare times we agree.

I occupy our bunk bed's upper mattress. With the door open, light spilling in from the corridor reveals my open eyes to her.

"Beyo." She sounds concerned rather than relieved. She closes the door and turns on the light. "I expected you'd be getting rest for your big day tomorrow."

"I wish," I mutter, and sigh heavily. Maybe it was a mistake to tell her about my "big day". Though I doubt it was her intention, her comment has piled onto my anxiety. I climb down from the bunk bed and stand beside the open window. I part the thin curtain and look out into the moonless night, my back to Cora. She understands this is her cue to change into her night-clothes, and does so. There's not much privacy in such cramped quarters; our system of signals, much needed for a brother and sister sharing a room, evolved quickly after arriving here six years ago.

"How was your shift?" I ask without much interest.

"You know how it goes," she says, similarly unenthusiastic. For the last year, Cora, in addition to apprenticing to become a doctor, has been volunteering her time to help new

arrivals. Sometimes I think she does it just to make me feel lazy by comparison. "Truth be told, I'm exhausted," she goes on. "Can I turn off the light?"

"Sure."

She gets into bed. I continue standing where I am. Even with the window open, the air inside our room is stuffy, as it tends to get during Kapali's scorching, humid summers. I run my hand through my sweat-slicked hair and sigh again.

"What's wrong?" Cora asks, turning in bed.

"Nothing."

"If that were true you'd be sleeping. Master Agoza?" I don't answer. She asks, "What happened this time?"

"Nothing *happened*," I snap. "He's just being his usual tight-lipped self."

"About the test?"

"About everything."

"Maybe if you didn't take so much after him, things would be easier. Tell me more about the test and I might be able to help."

I can't believe Cora thinks I'm similar to the Master in *any* way. I couldn't be more different from the man! And there's that word she always uses, *help*. It irritates me so much. Ever since Cora became my guardian all she's wanted to do is *help*. If she's so good at helping maybe she should have helped Dad stay home, instead of getting himself killed at the hands of the Sarakul; or maybe she should have helped our mom overcome her grief and stopped her from committing suicide shortly after. But no. She was helpless then, just like me. And now she wants to make everything better.

Some things just can't be fixed.

In the silence that stretches on uncomfortably, I realize maybe I'm being too harsh. I hear myself, using the same mind-listening talent that made me apprentice as memory-setter, and I have to admit I sound like kind of a jerk.

I relent. "I don't know what the test will consist of."

"What do you mean?" Cora asks, puzzled.

"When I asked Master Agoza about it he just said, 'You'll either be ready or you won't.'"

"Maybe he thinks you'll do well no matter what."

I cross my arms. "Maybe he doesn't care whether I pass or not."

"But he's invested so much time in you."

"Because he enjoys making me suffer."

"Beyo, stop. If you think that—"

"Look, it doesn't matter what either of us thinks," I say, cutting her off. I can't stomach a lecture right now. "I'm going to get some fresh air."

"At this hour?"

Wordlessly, I put on the fresh clothes I had prepared for the morning, step out into the corridor and let the door behind me click shut.

Outside, I breathe deeply in the damp night. The stars are cold pinpricks of light in a black sky. Faraway, someone is hollering, or perhaps singing drunkenly.

Now that I'm out here I admit to myself that Cora's concern was justified. Vagabonds and addicts tend to hang around Solace Homes, looking for food, access codes to the center, medicines, drugs, whatever.

I scan my surroundings.

I'm alone.

The feeling is familiar to me. It's been with me for the last six years. I know Cora means well, but she can be so overbearing.

I begin walking, at first not aware of my destination, but as I glance at street names I figure it out. With increasing briskness I'm heading down East Laza Street, towards Farlu district, also known as the Healer's district.

I'm making my way to Master Agoza's memory-setting clinic.

How absurd. The place will be closed. Master Agoza will be sleeping soundly at home. Yet I keep going. Something inside me is unwilling to listen to reason. *Tonight*, my mind says, *you should be unreasonable*. As my pace increases small beads of sweat slide down my neck and a chill of uneasiness snakes down my nape.

When I arrive I see lights on inside.

*Thieves*, I think, my heart pounding. *Someone has broken in. I should call Master Agoza—*

Then I stop. Would criminals really turn on the lights? I look inside through the entrance room window and see a familiar shape shuffling toward the front door. I would recognize that stooped figure's gait anywhere: Master Agoza.

He lets me in, as rude and aloof as ever. Inside the back room where we hold our lessons, it seems odd to sit at my usual place, so I stand a few feet from the central workbench instead. Master Agoza, eyes as lifeless as always, ignores me, busy changing settings on the equipment we use for memory-setting.

"I couldn't sleep," I volunteer. I hate to be the first to speak, but I prefer hearing my own voice to not hearing any voice at all. "Can I help with whatever you're working on?"

He doesn't respond, but continues tapping quick commands on the computer's display. Then he begins connecting cables to the main unit.

Anger flushes my cheeks. I'm about to make a smart remark about Master Agoza's lack of social skills. He may be the greatest memory-setter in all of Kapali, but he's surely a fool in regard to just about everything else that matters in life. He has no friends, lives only for his work. Again Cora's earlier comparison stings me. But I keep my mouth shut. All this could be part of my evaluation. The test was supposed to start in the morning—but what if that's changed? What if the test begins whenever the apprentice shows up?

I study his movements. He's configured the system for a one-on-one connection. One setter and one patient; no secondary setter to assist with the procedure.

*Ah, I think. Tension in my neck and shoulders eases. That's the test, then: a solo memory-setting.*

But as I study Master Agoza further, I analyze how he has set up the ports and connectors, and I see something I missed before. The interface sensitivity setting, which regulates the strength of the link between the two joined minds, has been left blank. The higher this setting, the deeper the connection between two minds. Usually this parameter is set to "auto": it's fixed by the computer when the session begins, optimized for the maximum mental connection that will heal the patient without over-exposing the memory-setter to the patient's thoughts.

Master Agoza turns to me at last, and, in his gravelly voice says, "Select a patient. Here are some possible choices from the wait list." Eight war veterans, with a few key statistics about each one's degree of memory damage, are displayed on the screen. "After you've made your choice," Master Agoza continues, "you'll adjust the sensitivity setting, and in a few hours, when the sun is up, I'll call the patient. Once he or she arrives you will perform a restoration."

I frown. It seems obvious that I should select the patient with the least amount of damage so I can be sure of success. But the obvious answer is often the wrong one—especially where Master Agoza is concerned. Perhaps he would take this to mean that I'm not ready for more challenging cases. On the other hand, if I select the patient with the most damage—a soldier whose mind, according to the file, is riddled with massive memory cavities, and who would be challenging for even the most veteran memory-setter—am I not taking an unnecessary risk?

I see then what he's doing: he's evaluating my ability to judge my own skills.

The best way to proceed, then, is to pick someone towards the upper end of the difficulty range, but someone whom I'm still confident I can help. Yes, that's it.

I open my mouth to speak the name of the sixth patient—

And then stop.

*Too easy.*

"When I am a Master," I say, "I won't be able to choose which patient arrives at my clinic. Doesn't selecting a patient now give me an unfair advantage?"

"You aren't yet a Master, and at this rate you won't become one," Master Agoza says coolly. "Choose a patient, or be dismissed."

I stare into the Master's useless, milky-white eyes. I find them repellent. For the first time, I realize that on some level, strange as it sounds, I *resent* him for his blindness. As though he somehow chose to be this way so that he could avoid eye contact with other human beings. *Calm down*, I think. After all, Master Agoza himself is a war veteran. Doesn't he deserve the same empathy as any other veteran who walks through the clinic's front door?

Still staring at Master Agoza, I consider that I've never asked him about his war experiences, though I've been tempted many times. I've always held myself back, out of respect for his privacy. No one knows exactly what happened to him in the war; apparently, as his previous apprentice told me in a hushed voice the day he ended his apprenticeship and I began mine, Master Agoza was captured by the Sarakul but somehow managed to escape. I thought that was an unlikely story when I first heard it, and it seems an unlikely story now. The Sarakul don't take prisoners. Even their disruption of our long-term memories isn't deliberate, the experts say, but a byproduct of their combat pulse technology (something about the frequency of their beams weakening the neuronal connections that enable memory retrieval). Why should the Sarakul, then, have captured Master Agoza and kept him alive? As I ask myself this question, I feel emboldened by my anger. The earlier instinctual thought returns: *Tonight you must be unreasonable*. And I replay in my mind the words that Master Agoza uttered as he pulled up the patient profiles: *Here are some possible choices from the wait list*.

Possible *choices*.

*Which is to say, not necessarily all of my choices.*

I've never known Master Agoza not to choose his words carefully.

"I've made my selection," I say in what I hope will be a neutral tone. The less emotion I display—good *or* bad—the less he'll have to use against me. "I choose *you*, Master Agoza."

He sits very straight. A thin smile spreads across his gaunt, unshaven face. Not joy; more like a self-satisfied smirk.

"As you wish," he says. "Since you've chosen me, there's no need to wait. Let's begin."

Entering into the role of memory-setter I guide Master Agoza to the ports, but he links in to the system on his own. I sit down at the station that he usually occupies during our lessons, our places reversed, and hook myself up.

I glance at the sensitivity setting and decide to go for a high level. Given this rare chance to explore Master Agoza's mind, I want to find out as much as possible.

I input the startup commands and let him know that I'm about to ask a standard set of pre-connection questions to which I'll be recording his responses.

"Have you ever had your memories set before?" I begin.

"No."

"To the best of your knowledge and the knowledge of the physician who last examined you, are your memory gaps the result of Sarakul technology?"

"Yes."

"How extensive is the damage? Please rate your memory loss on a scale of zero to ten."

"Who knows," he says. "Some days it feels like zero. Others like ten."

"I will set you down as a five. Have you suffered other injuries in the war?"

"Who hasn't?"

"Please be more specific."

"In my case I think it's obvious," he says, and waves a hand in front of his unblinking eyes. "Unless you happen to be blind."

"For the record, visual impairment. Anything else?"

"Yes."

"I repeat, please be more specific."

"It's none of your goddamn business."

I swallow. "Are you being treated for your other difficulties?"

"No treatment is available at the present time."

"What is your occupation?"

"I help war veterans. And in my free time I turn young pissants into men."

I pause. "You're an instructor."

"I am a Master Memory-setter," he corrects.



"Before that, what did you do?"

"Killed Sarakul."

"Do you have an emergency contact?"

"No."

"Next of kin?"

"All deceased. Can we get on with it?"

"In the case of any memory-setting there's a small but non-zero chance of cognitive collapse. In such a situation, to whom do you wish to bequeath your possessions?"

"What do I care?" he asks. "You can keep my things, for all they're worth."

"Very well. Thank you for answering these questions. The next part of the process—"

"Maybe you weren't listening, but I told you I'm a Master Memory-setter, so I know what the next part of the process is."

My pulse quickens. I force myself to engage in make-believe, to pretend that I don't know this man. He is a stranger, a patient I've never seen before. I am a Master Memory-setter. I will help him. I will help him. That is all.

Using the computer, I prepare my mind with the usual array of cognitive analogs—a vast dictionary of images, sounds, smells, tastes, even tactile sensations—that will help me through the process. Finally I say, "I'm activating the link now."

My mind is hit hard.

I've never experienced a tidal wave in real life, but I have to believe this is what it would feel like. A pent-up reservoir of shapeless, inscrutable thoughts crashes into me, testing the limits of my identity. The surge tries to drown out every thought that helps to make me *me*.

My hand bolts forward toward the sensitivity setting, but before my fingers make contact with the screen I see that Master Agoza is grinning. That's when I realize: he's doing this on purpose, marshaling his thoughts, rallying his mind, trying to invade me with it. Lowering the sensitivity setting would be a sign of weakness, of losing control during the session. I must hold my ground.

I lower my hand back down.

Just as I feel that I've restored a measure of control, he says, with unmistakable smugness, "Are you sure the connection is working? I can't feel anything."

I grunt. Another attack. Attempting to verbalize a response right now would distract me from the task at hand, which is to learn the contours of his mind. I close my eyes and complete a focus-strengthening exercise we have practiced often. Little by little I feel my

mental resolve returning. The writhing sea of foreign thoughts pushing up against me begins to settle down. I can afford to speak again. "Sometimes the connection takes a few instants. You should sense it shortly."

I have shaped my consciousness into a barrier that fends off the ocean of his otherness—a wide, sturdy, dam-like wall. I imagine myself on top of this wall now, studying the scene. Now I must take the next step. I have to become familiar enough with the sub-structure of his mind to identify which places have been altered by the Sarakul, so that I can restore them.

Plunge *into* the sea.

In the real world, traces of spittle line the edges of Master Agoza's lips. *Maybe, I dare to think, this is not easy for him. And then: Stay on track. What's important is how I'm doing. I'm coping. Good. Good. Time to go deeper.*

I leap in. I'm instantly chilled by his thoughts, amazed that anything this icy can move around, let alone be liquid. My real body, sitting by the computer, shivers. In the mindscape, hungry undercurrents tug at me but I make myself too heavy for them, too burdened by purpose. Mustering all my focus I plummet down until I hit the seafloor of Master Agoza's mind. At last, with the equivalent of a dull, water-muffled thud, I feel myself on firm ground.

At these depths it's utterly dark. I broadcast the message as loudly and clearly as I can that I'm here to help him, but the darkness smothers me. It becomes so oppressive that I forget how to breathe—both here and out in the real world.

I'm paralyzed.

*Help me, I think, uselessly. Please.*

A few moments later a familiar voice replies: *I'm here.*

I feel a gentle nudge and my body slips out of panic's death-hold. Air flows through my real lungs, in and out, in and out, a delicious, intoxicating rush that translates into the ability to move around in the mindscape once more.

*Good*, the voice says, pleased. *Together we'll get through this.*

*Cora?*

*Yes.*

*But how is that possible?* I ask. *How can you be inside my mind?*

*I'm not inside your mind, I'm a part of your mind,* the voice explains. *A fragment of your own consciousness that represents resourcefulness, hope, whatever qualities you admire in the real Cora. If you think of me as her, it will make everything easier.*

Master Agoza once told me that this could happen. A talented memory-setter, he explained, might encounter a patient so damaged that the effort of helping him or her would trigger a mental avatar of someone known to the setter. I remember thinking it sounded like fantasy. But this is real-as real as anything that exists inside the mind.

I try to move forward but feel myself pinned down. The pressure all around me is rising.

*What do I do?*

*Relax, Cora instructs. Think of something pleasant. Like the time I taught you to identify the basic night sky constellations.*

I summon the memory. A gorgeous winter night, several months after we found out our mom had killed herself. It seems crazy to give in to this particular memory so deep in Master Agoza's mind, but Cora's voice is impossible to distrust. I allow myself to re-experience that evening. I relive the numbness of my shocked emotions. But then I remember something I had completely forgotten until now: the joy of learning how to read the sky, the exuberance of discovering order and beauty in the heavens. And a curious thing happens—as I allow the memory to overtake me, something loosens inside. A radiant energy is released, seeping out of me, into the darkness.

*Very good, she says. Use the glow to illuminate the landscape.*

It takes time, but the more terrain I study, the stronger the glow emanating from me becomes. I make note of bizarre ridges, areas of seabed erosion, outcroppings of younger rocks at impossible angles wavering in and out of existence. These features represent different parts of Master Agoza's mind: unpleasant memories of things that were done to him, experiences he has repressed, severed from neighboring memories, and so on. The more I see, the more convinced I am that parts of Master Agoza's mind have been reshaped from the outside. If I were to guess, I'd say these weird structures are the Sarakul's doing, some kind of enhancements.

As I explore more of the seabed, I see a sharp descent into a trench. With cautious steps I advance and pause on the edge. The drop is huge. The light stemming from me is not nearly strong enough to penetrate it.

*You know what this is, Cora says, and you know what you must do about it.*

*Yes. Yes.* The trench represents one of the chasms into which Master Agoza's memories have been cast. I have to restore the seabed's normal gradation.

I glance back into the fissure.

*It's too deep*, I say to Cora. Whatever Master Agoza is hiding down there, he *really* doesn't want it to surface.

*Just looks that way, brother.*

I believe her. Which is to say, I believe myself.

I give it everything I've got. There's no point, after all, in trying to save my strength; if I can't restore this set of memories, I will have failed. As I concentrate on raising up the trench floor I think of the *real* Cora. I feel an unexpectedly poignant upsurge of gratitude. *Where would I be without her?*

A rumbling underfoot pulls me out of the experience. The water around me begins roiling.

*It's working. The ground must be rising. All I need to do is continue applying pressure—*

*Something's wrong*, Cora warns. *Look around you.*

The water has become murky, a cloud of something black is spreading through it like ink. I lose all my hard-won visibility. Within seconds the stuff is everywhere, coating my body.

Ash. Volcanic ash. The fissure must be the opening to some sort of metaphoric hydrothermal vent—a feature I've never encountered in anyone's mind before—and it is erupting with vicious force. The seabed shakes, and the pressure front generated by the spewing black material sends me reeling, tumbling away.

Spinning wildly, I lose all sense of direction. The real me in the chair hyperventilates.

*Follow the sound of my voice*, Cora says. *It will lead you back to the surface.*

But before I can do that I hit something hard, some sort of underwater barrier. At least it ends my mad careening. After a few moments I feel my body breathing more regularly again, shallow, short gasps, but getting steadier.

I wave my arms in the water to try and clear some of the ash, and I see that I'm standing next to a wall, unnaturally smooth and rising straight up parallel to me.

*Up here*, Cora is saying, from what feels like an enormous distance away.

Something distracts me from her voice. A source of light coming from *within* the wall.

I push my face closer and realize the wall isn't made of rock, but glass. It becomes transparent. And on the other side of this divide is Master Agoza, sitting in the chair that I am presently occupying in the real world; he is connected to the computer just as I am connected to the computer; and in the chair opposite him in this room within his mind—the chair in which *he* is sitting in real life—another patient is connected to the computer. I've never seen

this man before. He looks haggard, with sunken eyes and sallow cheeks, as though he hasn't slept in a lifetime. Both of them have their eyes closed. They are in the middle of a restoration.

*Up here!* Cora says again, more forcefully.

I think the thoughts that enable me to start floating up from the bottom. I'm aware that ten feet from me the vent is continuing to jet out its noxious substances, that I have to ascend to a higher level before it's too late.

Cora urges me on: *Yes, good! Keep going!*

As I gain buoyancy, I'm again captivated by what I see through the glass. Eight feet or so above the seafloor, and continuing to drift up toward the surface, there's an identical room on top of the one I just witnessed. Another Master Agoza and another patient, again connected to the computer, again undergoing a restoration. And as I continue to float up I see a whole succession of these rooms, all of them containing Master Agozas and other patients, each room atop another, five, eight, fifteen, twenty, until I stop counting.

At last I see the telltale refractions of the world beyond the surface rushing towards me. I look away from the bizarre building and burst into the air.

My eyes take a moment to adjust to the radiance of the clear sky as I hover in place. I return to the dam-like barrier from which I originally descended. Perched safely on this structure, I gather my thoughts.

*Thank you,* I say. *You saved my life.*

*You saved your own life*, Cora says, but now her voice is different, more like my own, and it echoes in my mind until its last repetition sounds entirely like me, *is* me, and I know Cora is gone for now.

The water below is murky. Black and grey plumes begin to shoot out from the surface, darkening the air with poisonous gases. There's no way I can go back in and survive, so I will myself back into full consciousness. With quick, deliberate movements I sever our connection and disengage myself from the equipment.

It takes Master Agoza a few moments to join me, an unusually slow return by his standards.

He massages his temples.

"You failed the test, apprentice Beyo," he says, in an odd throaty voice, as though he were underwater.

Using techniques he has taught me, I process the images still reeling behind my eyelids. I confirm my earlier impressions—the Sarakul did things to him, *changed* him inside.

But there's more.

"Yes, I failed the test," I say. "Because you don't want your memories restored. You've made it impossible for anyone to help you."

Master Agoza's features change, twisting into what on any other day I would label contempt. But today I realize it's merely a mask. He leans forward. "You understand nothing."

"The Sarakul didn't only scramble your memories, they *rewired* you. They amplified your ability to remain dispassionate. They unleashed something within you." Master Agoza doesn't tell me I'm wrong, so I continue. "And you did horrible things. I don't know how, exactly, but that volcano deep inside your mind... That must be how you escaped."

"I hadn't learned how to control it yet," Master Agoza whispers. Is that remorse in his voice?

"I also saw how many vets you've helped since returning home. That's your penance, isn't it?"

"Not nearly enough," he replies, slowly shaking his head.

And then I understand what he's been hiding from me, the truth he has kept from me during our joined restorations. "That's the way it is for *all* memory-setters, isn't it, Master Agoza? Deadening oneself to the emotions inside others' minds is the only way to get the job done. The better your skills, the colder you become... until you're no longer quite human."

"The price we pay," he says. His voice is far away.

I think about my mom and dad.

I think about Cora.

"No."

I get up and walk over to Master Agoza.

Still seated, he turns toward me, as if in slow motion. At this distance I see deep black lines under his eyes. He is very pale.

"You would throw away three years of apprenticeship?" he asks in a barely audible voice.

A solitary tear falls from his right cheek; one can be blind, it seems, and still cry.

I place my arms around him. I hold him.

My voice doesn't sound like my own. "Thank you."

And then I leave.



I go for a long walk. Eventually I arrive back at the Solace Home.

Our room, normally familiar and reassuring to me, feels foreign, as though I'm seeing it for the first time. When I step inside Cora is snoring mildly, but as I approach the bed she wakes up. I sit by her side on the floor. "I'm sorry, Cora," I say. "I've been an ass."

"Beyo?" Concern creases her forehead. "The test..." She rubs her sleep-addled eyes.

I nod. "It's all over. I got through it—thanks to you."

She props herself up on her elbows, frown deepening. "Me?"

I nod again. The time for detailed explanations will come later.

"You passed, then?"

"I failed," I say. "But it's for the best."

Outside, the sun is rising. Its rays pass easily through the thin curtains, dappling the wall opposite our bunk bed in golden hues. I hear the patter of feet in the corridor as others wake up and head down to the meal area in search of breakfast, a sloppy, volunteer-served breakfast, but breakfast nonetheless.

A new day is beginning.

I smile at my sister. It takes a few heartbeats for her to smile back, quizzically at first, then reassured by the warmth and depth of my expression, and we find each other in the moment.



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**Alvaro Zinos-Amaro** is co-author, with Robert Silverberg, of *When the Blue Shift Comes*, which received a starred review from *Library Journal*. Alvaro's short fiction, reviews and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Analog*, *Nature*, *Galaxy's Edge*, *Strange Horizons*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and other venues. He also edits the blog for *Locus* magazine. Alvaro and his co-conspirator and sometimes editor (read, girlfriend) currently reside in sunny Irvine, California. Read more about him on his website *Waiting for My Aineko* ([myaineko.blogspot.com](http://myaineko.blogspot.com)).

# Hither and Yon

Anatoly Belilovsky

"So how'd you guys get together?" Katie asked.

We stopped at the top of the rise, leaned against a pink wall in the shade of an awning: Janie and I, and the couple we met at dinner, first night of the cruise. It was an effort to remember their names: Katie and Kevin. I kept thinking of them as Lucy and Ralph. As in, Ricardo and Kramden.

"George and I met at a Cancellation Day party," said Janie.

For a moment I flashed on Janie as I saw that day, gift-wrapped in black tights and a golden tunic.

"A whoosie-whatsit day party?" said Kevin.

"June 3, 2009." I said. "40 years to the day since 'Turnabout Intruder' aired. The final episode. Janie came dressed as Kirk."

I looked at Janie, and she at me, and once again my breath caught. Our eyes had met that day through the dry ice fog that poured from a punch bowl; hers were set to stun. A smile pulled my cheeks like a tipsy great-aunt at a wedding rehearsal.

"And you went on a cruise for your second anniversary," said Kate. "How romantic! I bet he never forgets your anniversary, like you do, half the time, right, Kevin?"

"I thought Kirk was a man," Kevin said.

"He was," Janie answered. "Except in that episode, he gets body-swapped. I borrowed a command tunic." She squared her shoulders.

"You musta looked hot," said Kevin.

"Don't go changing the subject," said Kate. "We were talking about how thoughtless you are."

"Once," Kevin muttered. "I forgot it once."

"Right," said Kate. "I can count. You forgot our second anniversary, that's one out of two. Half the time."

Kevin took a breath to say something, thought better of it, and deflated in silence. Janie did the eyebrow shrug, Vulcan style. I looked around, anywhere but at Kate and Kevin.

We turned and walked toward the Hamilton wharf under a long awning shared by a dozen tiny storefronts. The air grew cooler as an onshore breeze swirled dust and fallen



leaves in pirouettes and loops; a cloud drew across the sun, tempering its glare with the mercy of shade.

"Oooh, look at these!" said Kate, her all-penetrating voice now coming from the other side of the street. "Janie, come over here!"

"What time is it?" said Janie. "I think it's getting late..." The last word sounded Dopplered-down.

I turned to look. Kate had a hold on Janie's hand and one foot in the doorway of a shoe store on the other side of the street.

"Hurry up, Kate!" yelled Kevin from behind me. "We got a ship to catch!"

Janie flashed me a come-hither look: come-hither and save me, that is.

"—*I'll protect you, fair maiden!*" I shouted.

"—*Sorry, neither!*" she shouted back.

"Huh?" Katie said, her head tilted.

"The Naked Time," Janie said.

Janie loved being rescued. She'd never actually *needed* to be saved, until now. I turned to follow, but with one last yank Kate pulled Janie through the doorway, and the door slammed shut.

Kevin grinned, not unsympathetically. He straightened his back and began to whistle a familiar tune. The words came to me as if he spoke them:

*"Hello, silence, my old friend,*

*I've come to talk to you again..."*

A flash of lightning answered him.

In seconds, the sky darkened and began to churn; thunder rolled over us as air tingled with ozone. I started across the street. It wasn't that wide; a few drops of rain weren't going to stop me.

I would have made it, too, most places. Not in Bermuda.

Halfway across, lightning and thunder hit me in a single body blow, and rain roared in my face like a rabid fire hose. Next thing I knew, Kevin was pulling me up and back under the awning, both of us soaking wet.

"Jeez," said Kevin. I barely heard him, between the downpour and the ringing in my ears. "Thought you was a goner there for a second. Close call!"

I scrambled up. Beyond the awning there was only a wall of rain.

"But..." I said. "The girls..."

"I'm sure the shoe store is still there," said Kevin.

"We can't just leave them," I said.

"They probably didn't even notice," he said. "We'll wait here. Boat's not going to leave without us. Maybe we can go inside someplace..."

"But..." I shook water out of my hair, wiped my eyes. The rain, if anything, got stronger. I backed away from the spray off the awning, as if it could have got me any wetter.

"Hey, check this out!" said Kevin, pointing behind me. "It's a video store! Let's go look!"

I followed Kevin through the glass door. It closed behind us, muffling the rain to a whisper. An ancient air conditioner wheezed and rattled overhead; flyspecked lights flickered from murk to gloom and back again. We dripped on the doormat.

"Let's just stay here," I said. "I don't want to leave the place a mudbath."

"Come on in," said a muffled voice from farther inside. Kevin raised an eyebrow at me. I shrugged.

We advanced a step. Kevin flicked the last of the rain from his eyes, stared at the stack in front of him. Several rows of very pretty couples stared back.

"Would you get a load of that?" said Kevin. "Chick flicks. A wall of chick flicks. Not one movie I ever heard of. Or wanted to. I tell you, everything is for chicks these days. Chick flicks, chick shops, chick clubs. I bet a chick runs this..."

A tall bearded man, aged anything from thirty to sixty, came out from behind the stack. He walked with a stork's high-stepping gait; in his tilted face owl's eyes blinked, magnified by thick round glasses.

"Can I help you with anything?" He said, in a voice that would have been Bela Lugosi's if Bela Lugosi had been a Texan.

Kevin and I traded a look again.

"You are welcome to sit out the rain," he added, blinking.

Kevin blinked back at him. "Sci-fi," he said. "My friend here likes sci-fi."

I cringed.

"*SF* is in the corner," said the proprietor, sounding like an English butler played by a Texan Bela Lugosi. "Here, let me show you."



"Whassamatta with you, George?" Kevin hissed. "Can't you see? He's busting your chops. Yanking your chain. Jerking you—"

"I get your point," I said.

"So let's call him on it," Kevin whispered. "Give him the fifty bucks and tell him to put on the show, right here, right now. I betcha he'll say the player is busted." He pointed at a TV-DVD combo behind the counter. "I swear I'll punch him out if he does that."

I looked at the shelf. The boxes were still there. Nice shiny shrink-wrapped boxes, about the right size for DVDs, with genuine-looking iridescent lettering: *STAR TREK: SEASONS 1-5, STARFLEET JAG, STAR TREK: VULCAN ACADEMY, STAR TREK: MIDSHIPMEN*. Some of the credits brought tears to my eyes, others made my mouth water; each sang to me its sweet siren song. " *Script by Philip K. Dick.* " *Directed by John Carpenter.* " *Guest stars: Marlon Brando, Bette Davis.* " I looked at the proprietor. He looked back, blinking. I looked out the window.

The wind picked that particular moment to fling a sheet or ten of rain at the plate-glass window, turning the street outside into a mess of funhouse mirrors. Such a small decision: Kevin and I walked down one side of the street, Kate and Janie on the other, men ducking left, women right. *Mirror, Mirror...*

Kevin was probably right. It was a hoax, had to be. There are no gateways between universes. Not even in Bermuda.

"Well?" Kevin asked.

*"It would be,"* murmured a silent inner voice, raising one eyebrow, *"a highly illogical assumption. The odds against it are astronomical."*

A minuscule, tiny, infinitesimal risk.

*"Bermuda Triangle? It's a myth! A tale to frighten children!"* another voice snapped. *"Dammit, I'm a doctor, not a folklorist!"*

"George?" said Kevin. "Hello?"

"No," I said firmly.

"'No I don't want to make a fool out of this jerk,' or 'No I don't want to see the final episode of Star Trek by'—who did you say it was?"

"Frank Herbert," I answered automatically. "Or so he says." I nodded at the salesman. The salesman grinned, tilting his head even more.

"So which is it?" Kevin demanded. He shook stray raindrops from his nose with a sideways jerk. He would have looked like a rooster if roosters looked like fireplugs.

"No, I don't want to take a chance of losing Janie," I said slowly.

Kevin threw up his hands. "Can you believe this guy?" he asked of no one in particular.

The proprietor fielded the question himself. "I haven't believed either of you guys since you opened your mouths," he said. "You are either senile or Canadian, is what I think. Best TV show of all time, canceled after three seasons?" he continued. "President Heinlein would have flown us Marines out of Hanoi to take over the studio if they tried that. I wish he'd done that, I was gettin' bored babysitting Giap."

I ran for the door, Kevin a breath behind me.

Rain squalls don't last long in Bermuda, which is just as well. You will hardly ever be late for anything if you wait one out. I did not wait. I ran into and through the curtain of warm water, slipping on bumps and splashing through puddles, until I felt a solid wall against my hands.

I wiped my eyes. By sheer dumb luck, I stood against the window of the shoe store I'd seen Janie go into. I saw Kate right away, turning a slipper this way and that inches in front of her face. It took the longest second of my life to find Janie, talking with a salesgirl in the dark interior of the shop.

"Any other day," Kevin growled behind me, "I'd'a said you've been out in the sun too long." He pushed open the door and shoved me into the shoe store.

"Give me a break," I said.

"I can do that, George," Kevin said, more Brooklyn than usual in his voice. "You want a break to your face or a break to your kneecap?"



"And that's why we are standing here making puddles of ourselves," Kevin concluded.

"Wow," said Kate. "This is so romantic. Kevin, would you ever do something like that for me?"

"I'm standing here dripping, don't I?" He said. "Braved the elements, and all that."

"It's not the same," said Kate.

"How is it not the same?" Kevin roared. "We ran the same, we got wet the same—"

"George had a more romantic reason," Kate declared. "Even if I don't understand it."

"Schroedinger's cat?" Janie asked.

I nodded. "Exactly."

"What?" Kevin said.

"One possible explanation for the Bermuda Triangle," I said, "is the Many Worlds hypothesis, itself a corollary of Schroedinger's thought experiment—"

"Please, George. English," Kevin said.

"Short version?" I said. "If this is true, then, I thought, watching the videos from an alternate reality would collapse the wave function in that reality. We'd have to stay there."

"And what would be wrong with that?" Kevin demanded. "Five seasons of Star Trek. Winning the Vietnam War. Or do you think that would have been bad, winning the war?"

"Screw the war," I said. "Janie and I wouldn't be together."

"Why not?" Kate broke in. "I always thought you two were destined for each other. A perfect couple. Why can't we be like them, Kevin?"

Kevin took a breath to answer. Janie beat him to it.

"We would have had no reason," she said, "to meet that day."

"Two years, two days ago," I said. "If that weren't Cancellation Day, neither of us would have gone to ConTrek. No cancellation, no party."

"Ooh, goosebumps!" said Kate. "Hey! Rain's gone. Let's go over there again."

"Sure," said Kevin. "Maybe we'll collapse into a reality where I never forgot anything. Or where you learned to keep your mouth shut."

"You're a such a pig, Kevin," said Kate. "If you made your own universe, all the women in it would be barefoot and pregnant."

"Not really. They'd be bare-butt and—" Kevin began.

"Bare-butt and pliable?" I suggested.

"Bare-bust and programmable," Janie said.



"Season Five?" The proprietor took off his glasses. "What planet are you guys from?"

"Told ya he was yanking your chain," Kevin said. "Let's go, Kate. Back to the ship, it's sailing in an hour."

"Everybody knows there wasn't but one season of Trek," the salesman continued, in the same Texan Bela Lugosi voice.

Janie started to walk toward the door. Kevin and I followed.

"A short one, too, only twelve episodes," the salesman continued. "I guess America wasn't ready for a woman Number One."

I stumbled, caught myself. Janie took my hand. We walked on, toward the open door.

"Some say, though," he said, "it was the show that helped get President Bush elected."

"Bush?" said Kate. She walked just behind Kevin, holding his hand. "What's he got to do with it?"

The salesman laughed. "He? What are you guys, Canadian? Everybody knows there's but one brain in that family, and that's Barbara."

Janie froze in the doorway. I tried to stop but slipped in my own puddle. Newton's Laws seemed to work the same in this universe as anywhere else; the hundred pounds or so I have on Janie swept us both out the door. I grabbed at an awning support to keep from falling. My momentum spun me to face the door as I clung on.

Kevin's face was only visible for a second; I saw what had to be Kate's hand on his shoulder, fingers dug deep into the folds of his shirt. After his face receded into the dark interior of the store, slipping from sight like a drowning man's, a lightning flashed, and seared on my retina his very last look.



When we came back into the store, we found no one there but the same proprietor: stork-gaited, owl-eyed. And on the shelves, the three familiar seasons of STAR TREK TOS, plus the expected TNG, Voyager, and movies. No surprises in the credits: Ted Sturgeon, Harlan Ellison, Ricardo Montalban. I looked at Janie; she looked at me and took my hand. We left without a word, and walked together to the pier, touching more and talking less than ever before.

Someone else had Kate's and Kevin's cabin on the cruise ship; the strangers had been there since sailing from New York. Another couple had their places at the late dinner seating. Even the memories are fading, though Kate's glass-on-Styrofoam voice might haunt me for a while. The last I'll probably remember of Kevin, like a Cheshire cat's smile, might be that desperate last look.

The "come-hither" look.

The "come hither and save me" look.



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First published in *FlagShip* from Flying Island Press, edited by Zachary Ricks, February 2012.

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**Anatoly Belilovsky** is a Russian-American author and translator of speculative fiction. His work appeared in the *Unidentified Funny Objects* anthology, *Ideomancer*, *Nature Futures*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Immersion Book of Steampunk*, *Daily SF*, *Kasma*, *Kazka*, and has been podcast by *Cast of Wonders*, *Tales of Old*, and *Toasted Cake*. He has neither cats nor dogs, but was admitted into SFWA in spite of this deficiency.

# The Contents of the Box with the Ribbon

David Neilsen

Death arrived in London in a plain, brown, cardboard box topped with a ribbon.

Martha Bazelton found the box on her stoop early on a chilly Tuesday morning. Expecting to see little but the week's milk when she opened her door, Mrs. Bazelton instead took her first steps toward her own gruesome and painful death by cocking her head to the side with curiosity. Then she leaned down and picked up the object of mass doom. It seemed an ordinary box, perhaps eighteen inches to a side, and she found it slightly heavier than she might have expected, as if someone had shipped a twelve or thirteen pound bowling ball to her front stoop.

She went inside and closed the door. The week's milk remained behind.

Mrs. Bazelton brought the innocent-looking box into the kitchen and sat it down on the table in front of her husband, Gordon Bazelton. Mr. Bazelton was an important man, with a good job in the financial sector of the city, and Mrs. Bazelton assumed any package sent to their door must be meant for him.

"What's this?" he asked, a spoonful of cottage cheese halfway to his mouth.

"A package," answered his wife, quickly busying herself with making her husband's lunch.

"I can bloody well see that," snarled Mr. Bazelton. "Who's it from?"

"Don't know, didn't see a return post," was her answer.

Mr. Bazelton frowned energetically at his incredibly lazy wife, then peered down at the box. He looked at the top of the box. He looked at the sides of the box. He picked it up (grunting slightly at the unexpected weight of the thing) and looked at the bottom of the box. Mrs. Bazelton was right, there was no address anywhere on the box. In fact, there were no markings, nor was there anything on the box to indicate that it was meant for Mr. Bazelton.

"Where did you say you found this?" he asked Mrs. Bazelton.

"It was on the stoop with the milk," she answered, before throwing her hands up. "Oy! The milk!"

And she shuffled back to the stoop to retrieve the forgotten milk.



Mr. Bazelton sat back down in his chair and gazed at his box. Yes, he had decided that markings or no, it was his box. It had been found by his wife on his stoop so that made it his box.

He wondered what could be inside his box. Money? Jewels? The latest mechanical wonder, straight from the workshops of Crankshaft & Groove? (Mr. Bazelton had always wanted to be the first in the office to own something new from C & G, if only to rub it in Barnaby Snaller's pudgy little nose.) Of course, there was no way Mr. Bazelton could ever have guessed what actually awaited him within the confines of that simple, cardboard box which sat looking as harmless as the sugar bowl on his kitchen table. He had no way of knowing of the days, weeks, months, and years of agony and terror he would suffer because of the contents therein, nor how his name would grow to become synonymous with the end of the world, nor indeed how he had been specifically selected as one most likely to open the anonymous box and help bring about that which history would eventually term The Spreading.

He had no way of knowing that within the box, sitting just inches from his face, was a Lovecraftian horror the likes of which mankind had never known and would never have the chance to know again.

In truth, Mr. Gordon Bazelton had simply no idea what could possibly be in the box. But he assumed it was valuable.

Why else ship it in a box?

So Gordon Bazelton pushed his chair away from the table, stood, and crossed to the counter where his wife was just finishing up his pickle and cheese sandwich.

"Hand me the scissors, will you Luv?" he asked.

Mrs. Bazelton tut-tutted her husband as she folded the slice of bread over on itself, completing the main course of the last lunch Mr. Bazelton would ever eat (and that only because he would eat it long before arriving at his office). She quickly and automatically licked remnants of pickle from her fingertips before wiping them on the hand towel tucked at her waist, then opened the utility drawer to fetch Mr. Bazelton the scissors.

"Here you are then," she said.

Mr. Bazelton snatched the scissors from his wife's plump hands and returned his attention to the mesmerizing cardboard box. Though bereft of markings, the box was professionally sealed with sturdy packing tape. Oddly enough, the taping had been so thorough that not a single edge or seam remained unsealed.

This could have been, if not the first, then certainly one of the earlier warnings regarding the inherent danger of the contents waiting to be revealed, but of course Gordon Bazelton paid it no mind.

As the one who had sent the box had known he would not.

"Right. I'm opening the bloody thing," said Mr. Bazelton. Not exactly inspiring final words, but then, of course, he wasn't aware they were to be his final words.

With a steady-handed jab, Mr. Bazelton broke the hermetically-sealed (if a seal created by industrial-strength packing tape could be considered hermetic) box, exposing the enclosed surprise to the atmosphere for the first time in exactly 26 days, which happened to be the creature's gestation period.

Mr. Bazelton withdrew his scissors from the box, opened them wide, slipped the lower blade into the cardboard wound he'd just created, and proceeded to calmly cut through the tape until he was able to bend back the flaps and peer inside. He was, for all intents and purposes, already dead, a fact that would dawn on him a few hours later as he was dragged kicking and screaming into his own private Hell.

"Hmmm," mumbled the soon-to-wish-he-was-dead man.

"What is it, dear?" asked Mrs. Bazelton, who after no small manner of investigation would come to be labeled Patient 0001.

Mr. Bazelton reached inside the box with both hands and pulled forth three small, pulsating bulbs resting within a single standard-sized clay pot. That it was some sort of plant life was obvious. Exactly what sort of plant life it might be was anything but obvious.

"Good Lord, Gordon! What on Earth have you got there?" asked Mrs. Bazelton.

The bulbs had an almost fleshy look to them, and the only hint that they were plants was the stubby, greenish stems ploughing themselves into the dirt. The surfaces of the three bulbs rippled, much like the belly of a pregnant woman ripples when the baby within kicks and turns. Mr. Bazelton leaned forward, equally fascinated and disgusted, and gently poked one of the bulbs with his finger. The skin gave slightly, then sprung back into shape when he pulled his hand away. It was unlike anything Mr. Bazelton had ever seen—not surprising since he was, in fact, the first human to ever lay eyes on this particular species (the only other human to have ever come into contact with it had been extremely careful never to let it fully germinate).

Mr. Bazelton was about to tell his wife that he'd never seen anything like this before in his life (thereby updating what was to be his final words) when one of the bulbs exploded in his face.

"Gordon!" shrieked Mrs. Bazelton, as her husband gasped a desperate 'Ack!' and tipped his chair backwards, arms flailing in front of his face. A sticky, sickly-brown sap covered every inch of his face, clogging his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, and in the half-an-instant after the bulb burst, Mr. Bazelton crashed to the floor, banging his head hard against the wall in the process and causing his eyes to momentarily roll backwards into his head.

"Oh, Heavens! Gordon! My sweet Gordon!" Mrs. Bazelton dropped everything and ran to her husband's side, fearing the worst. She knelt down, utterly devoid of any idea as to what she should do: her husband's face was covered in sap to the point that he appeared unable to breathe, this same sap had spread all over the kitchen and, in fact (though she was unaware of this), microscopic molecules of it were even now burrowing their way into her lungs, and the kitchen chair had toppled over onto its side leaving a mark on her wall.

"Gordon? Are you alright?" She felt as if she should shake him awake, but found herself unable to place her hands upon his sap-encrusted body. Instead, she realized it was her duty to find someone else to try and help her husband. "I'll call an ambulance!"

The ironic truth of the matter was that had she done so, the human race might have been spared the horrific future it was soon to undergo for at least a while longer. It is not realistic to think The Spreading would never have happened, because had the attempt been foiled by Mrs. Bazelton's quick thinking, there is every reason to believe the perpetrator would have tried again. And again. Until he or she succeeded. However, it is undeniable that had Martha Bazelton called for an ambulance the instant her husband had been first hit by the spray from the exploding bulb, the outbreak would have been contained to an easily-quarantinable hospital, and the death toll would have been mere hundreds (including most certainly both Mr. and Mrs. Bazelton), rather than billions.

However, just as Mrs. Bazelton stood to reach for the phone, her husband reached up and grabbed her arm.

"Gordon! Good grief! You gave me a fright!"

Gordon Bazelton may have tried to say something, but his mouth had been completely sealed by the sticky sap of the bulb. The remainder of his face, however, was oddly clearing of the other-worldly substance. Had Mrs. Bazelton bothered to notice (which she did not), she would have seen the sap ooze its way into the various orifices of Mr. Bazelton's face. Sap rose up into his nose, dribbled down into his ear canals, and even forced its way through tear ducts not nearly large enough to accommodate the globular mass. All of this caused agony unmentionable to Mr. Bazelton, however, seeing as his entire system was in the process of shutting down, his reaction was understandably muted.

"Gordon? Are you alright? Would you like a wet nap for your face?"

Her husband groggily pulled himself to a standing position as the remaining sap on his face sunk into his skin through his pores. Once he had his balance, he gazed out at a blurry world through eyes speckled with flecks of green and red while microscopic *things* moved about within his body.

"Oh! You're... how are you... I say!" Mrs. Bazelton was not exactly coherent at that particular time, her pleasantly simple-minded nature finding it difficult to proceed in light of recent events.

For his part, Mr. Bazelton blinked at the foggy world around him, unable to vocalise his feelings (having, as has been mentioned, already imparted what would be, at least at this particular stage of his life, his final words). He knew that something dreadful had just happened to him, and he rather thought his prized box was to blame, but for the life of him he hadn't yet managed to wrap his head around the whole business.

"You should... well perhaps... should I call..." Mrs. Bazelton's mind spun through an assortment of responses to her husband being attacked by an exploding plant, but came up empty. In truth, the poor woman was overwhelmed by the gruesome details of what had just occurred, and her unduly-burdened intellect desperately sought for a way to regain some semblance of control over the situation. Finally, she glanced at the clock on the wall, shoved all thoughts of horror untold out of her mind, and allowed her good breeding to kick in.

"Deary me! Gordon! You'll be late for the tube!"

She hurried to the far side of the counter, grabbed Mr. Bazelton's lunch, handed it to her awkwardly pliant husband, and shooed him towards the door. "You've got that big meeting this morning! Salsbury's up from Brighton!" She grabbed her husband's coat and hat and stuffed Mr. Bazelton into his proper garb. "Hurry! Hurry!"

And with precision rarely found in the modern family, Mrs. Bazelton steered her dazed husband out the door and pointed him towards the tube station at the end of the street, purposefully oblivious to his current state of zombie-like incoherency.

Once he was away, Mrs. Bazelton closed and locked her front door, shaking her head and walking right past the two remaining bulbs sitting in their pot on the table as she made her way to the kitchen, where she had dishes to wash.

The bulbs would burst momentarily, of course, but as Martha Bazelton had no errands to run and no plans to set foot outside her home all day, their efforts at mass carnage would be thwarted and they would have to satisfy themselves with making Mrs. Bazelton's final moments on Earth a living Hell of pain, suffering, and terror.

She would be dead in less than two hours.



How Gordon Bazelton managed to board the tube in his condition he would never know. It was difficult to concentrate with everybody and everything refusing to come into focus. Plus he was suffering some damnable headache that seemed to crest upon his consciousness in wave after pounding wave. The repetitive chug-chugging of the underground train did not help matters, nor did the unnatural heat that seemed to permeate the tube on this particular morning.

Though the tube was quite crowded, what with it being the morning commute and all, Mr. Bazelton found himself sitting alone in a three-seat booth—his fellow travelers having quickly pegged the heavily-sweating individual stumbling down the aisle as someone with whom they would rather not share a seat.

As the tube churned beneath London on its way towards the center of the city, Gordon Bazelton found himself ripping open the lunch bag, which had been so painstakingly folded by his wife, and wolfing down his pickle and cheese sandwich in a minimal number of bites. That was followed by the tea biscuits meant for his morning snack and even the apple he usually tossed into the waste bin.

When a woman pregnant with child eats a large meal, it is said that she is eating for two. Though he had no way of knowing, Mr. Bazelton was, in fact, eating for just over 700, which might have had something to do with the voracity with which he devoured what would be his last identifiable meal.

Though the trip through the London Underground seemed to pass in the blink of an eye to Mr. Bazelton, such was not the case to the rest of the car's passengers. Rather, they feared the nightmare commute would never end and that they'd be forced to remain confined with the slimey man who oozed and spit and was obviously ill and just as obviously contagious for eternity. The rows immediately in front of and behind Mr. Bazelton emptied almost before the train had left the station. Only the standard morning rush hour over-crowding kept anyone within the car at all, though more than a few got off at the earliest opportunity to wait for the next train.

The seventeen passengers who chose to struggle through, however, would eventually come to be known as Patients 0002 through 0016, Patient 0019, and Patient 0231 (it took some time before the existence of Mr. Carson Beckett on that ill-fated train was discovered,

during which time the cause of The Spreading's sudden explosion within the city of Paris had remained a mystery).

The tube arrived at the lower levels of King's Cross Station right on time. Mr. Bazelton, now more or less running on autopilot, lurched his way forward, coughing up spittle with every step. His fellow passengers shoved one another aside in their rush to escape both the confines of the train car and the path of the alarmingly diseased Mr. Bazelton. Like roaches scuttling from the light, these Typhoid Marys quickly emptied the platform and raced up the stairs to put as much distance between themselves and their morning commute as possible. One by one they hailed taxis, jumped onto passing buses, or just hurried down the street—all the while unknowingly sharing the seeds of Armageddon with every individual they passed on their travels.

Mr. Bazelton's office was less than a block away from the station. When Benny, the octogenarian doorman, held the door open for the familiar face, he froze in shock at the sight before him. His mouth hung open so long that his jaw nearly dried out.

Mr. Bazelton somehow made his way to his office, leaving a growing parade of stunned onlookers in his wake. There was Miss Wilmington the receptionist, Fredricks and Fallow in accounting, young Archibald the lift operator (the unfortunate recipient of a particularly violent sneeze from Mr. Bazelton), Mags in personnel, the new boy whose name Mr. Bazelton could never remember, and finally his own secretary, Agnes Millford. Each person shrunk back from Mr. Bazelton in horror. Each person worried after the health of Mr. Bazelton. Each person wondered if he really ought to be in the office in his condition. Each person was infected and would be dead by the end of the day.

"Mr. Bazelton? Are you ill, Sir?" asked poor Agnes Millford, poking her head into Mr. Bazelton's office only as much as propriety demanded.

Mr. Bazelton answered by coughing up gobs of mucus all over a series of very important documents having something to do with pork futures.

"I've got Salsbury here, up from Brighton. Shall I send him in, then?"

Another coughing fit, punctuated by a vigorous nodding of the head and wave of the hand. Somewhere inside the inner workings of what had once been Mr. Bazelton's body but was now more accurately labeled as an unwilling greenhouse, the man he had once been was determined to carry on with his normal routine, infestation be damned.

Agnes pulled her head out of the office and ushered in Salsbury, who had come up from Brighton. A spindle of a man with an elaborate mustache, he entered the room fully

prepared to dive into the nitty gritty of his business but stopped two feet inside the door when he beheld the twitching figure of Mr. Bazelton.

"Good Lord, Bazelton! You're a sight!"

A moist grunt uttered from somewhere deep within the moving carcass of Gordon Bazelton. Salsbury mistakenly attributed it to his associate, but the truth was, the noise was simply the result of chemical reactions within the man's innards as more and more of his internal organs were terraformed by the biological entities forming beneath his skin to serve other purposes.

Salsbury, bless his heart, was a kind-hearted soul. While his generousness would not be the death of him (simply entering Bazelton's office had served that purpose), it did bring upon the gentle man an especially horrific fate. "I say, Bazelton, you look a bit dehydrated. Hang on a moment."

Being a frequent guest to the office, Salsbury knew Bazelton kept bottles of chilled water in the ice box next to his desk. The good samaritan hurried over and pulled one out. "Normally, Old Boy, I'd look for a proper glass, but I think this may not be the best time to stand on ceremony," he said.

Unscrewing the lid, Salsbury moved to Bazelton's side and lifted the bottle towards the sickly man's lips. At the same time that this honest deed of good will was being performed, something deep within Mr. Bazelton erupted and his mouth opened to release a gruesome stream of gore along with a few concentrated pods the size of cocoa beans. The jet of bile slammed into Salsbury, knocking him backwards, while the pods pelted his forehead, splitting open upon impact and releasing tiny, squiggling, tendrils of life desperate to plant themselves within something soft and begin their own circle of life.

Unfortunately for Salsbury, four of the evil nubs did indeed plant themselves into his flesh. He screamed an unholy roar of agony and terror as the nubs quickly and easily dug in, spreading their tiny roots within his bloodstream, interrupting the normal workflow of the human body.

Bazelton continued to spew forth a small number of seed pods, many of which broke open leaving their contents little to no hope of finding fertile soil in which to evolve, until the final spasms left his system and a semblance of humanity returned into the farthest reaches of his mind. He saw Salsbury on the floor, he heard the screams of Miss Millford who had yet again popped her head past the door. He knew he was to blame, and he wanted to leave. He needed to leave. He needed to go away.

Again, his thoughts were not so much his own as they were being guided by the demonic entities within him. They, too, were aware of their surroundings, and they saw that aside from the newly sowed field of Mr. Amos Salsbury, there was little here suitable for planting.

This was why Mr. Bazelton had the odd desire to find his way below ground as quickly as possible, though the final traces of his humanity explained the urge away as a wish to return home on the tube.

The being that stumbled its way out of the office building was vaguely shaped like a human, but that is where the similarities ended. The former Mr. Bazelton's flesh was an unsettling shade of brownish-green (not surprisingly the same color as the original pods that had arrived that morning on his stoop in a cardboard box topped with a ribbon), he gave off a powerfully distinct earthy aroma, and, had he stood still long enough for any to notice, they would have seen an assortment of unholy movement just beneath the surface of his skin. They also, if they looked closely enough, may have noticed one or two green shoots which had ripped their way out of his scalp.

Giving in to an animalistic need to be underground, the thing that had once been Mr. Bazelton hopped, limped, and slumped its way back to the tube station, spewing forth gallons of highly-contagious bile and spittle with every step, and infecting dozens of innocent passersby who would soon enough enter their own personal Hell. At the top of the steps leading to the underground, one his eyeballs burst from his head, shoved out of the socket by a large green stem which quickly whipped about from within. The Bazelton Creature dropped to its knees, and then rolled down the stairs into the darkness below, its progress easily indicated by the squeals of all it encountered along the way.

Acting on instinct alone, this sad remnant of a human being dragged itself forward onto a platform. Within seconds, all others had fled and Patient 0000 lay on what had once been its stomach, alone in the dark. The other eye was forced out of the socket, rolling off the edge of the platform to splatter onto the tracks below. A second thick green stem snaked out of this suddenly-vacated eye socket and felt around the home nest, searching for moisture, searching for darkness, searching for soil.



When Investigators arrived on the scene the next day (thereby inadvertently exposing themselves to the contagion and doing their part to further The Spreading) they found nothing



in the dark catacombs but a bloody trail leading from the middle of the platform to the edge of the tracks. As the lone security camera on the platform had been inoperable for the past two weeks, there would never be documentation of what transpired on the platform that morning. Where the bulk of matter making up Gordon Bazelton's body disappeared to would not be known for several years to anyone except a lone individual. A mad, twisted individual tortured beyond all imagination.

Somewhere in the darkness beneath London, this lone individual screamed a perpetual, silent scream-haunted by memories that, wish as it might, would not be forgotten.

Memories of dozens of multi-limbed stalks punching their way through his flesh like tiny, unwanted extra limbs.

Of these arachnid-like appendages lifting the body off the ground and dragging it down to the tracks.

Of its journey into the void of the tunnels, where it would gestate, mutate, and evolve over the next several years.

All the while, the small etchings of humanity that remained untouched in a huddled corner of the diseased mind were never completely allowed to forget what it was, what it had become, and what it was doing.

Or the pain. It was never allowed to forget the pain.



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**David Neilsen** is the author of a number of unnervingly disturbing short stories and slightly less disturbing novels. He lives in New York next door to Sleepy Hollow with his wife, two children, and two pagan cats who know more than they will admit. While he is not overtly hostile towards the vegetable kingdom in general, he keeps his eye on the houseplants. Just in case.

# The First First Fire

Alexander Monteagudo

Iron spear tips brushed the bound captives' necks. Battle scars still bleeding, they knelt in mud at their guardsmen's feet. Most of Pempamsie village stood gawking at the captured slavers held just inside their walls.

The sight of the prisoners' ragged armor and chains made Ralo's stomach clench.

Slavers had attacked his people. What should he do?

Ralo shook his head, and long braids battered the air. He wiped sweat from his palms on his brown linen shirt and kilt. He left the crowd.

His sister trailed him, her bushy hair bouncing with each step. "How awful. What are we going to do with them?"

"I don't know, Nyata," Ralo replied, then the realization came. "We need a jail. We've never needed a jail before."

Despite the afternoon sun overhead, Nyata shivered. "I don't want to think about it." Nyata poked him. "You didn't have to carry that for me."

Ralo grimaced at the sack of combs and oil jars in his hand. "I've got nothing better to do," he muttered.

Ralo had only been named First Fire a month ago. Main Jye created the title for him to help connect him to the community, despite Ralo's stigma. Ralo was tasked to use magic—ma'at—to help as needed, but his new leadership role remained unclear. He felt like a fish in the sky. What exactly should he do? So far the only defined responsibility was attending councils between Pempamsie's chief—Main Jye—and the neighboring Mains.

"Well, there's the council today," Nyata reminded him.

Ralo cringed. At the last meeting, desperate to be helpful and show leadership, he had suggested the elders promote eating less meat out of kindness towards animals. They laughed until they fell over.

Nyata sighed and pulled on one of his plaits with a sardonic grin. Ralo snatched it away. All these years and her pulls still hurt. How could someone so skinny generate such power?

"No one likes a pitiful man," Nyata lectured. Her grin became a smile. "I know you worry about your new role. You'll figure it out. You just have to contribute to the community. Like me with braiding." She brightened. "You should mention the prison idea at the council."

"I... maybe..." he stuttered. Enemies had attacked. Helplessness ate at him like maggots on a corpse.

"Brother, you're our Fire. If you burn weakly, how will we see in the darkness?"

As they strolled toward the braiding hut, passers-by whispered behind their hands and scowled. Hunters pointed spears and glares at them. An old man spat in their direction. Ralo bit his lip and suppressed the anger.

"Not everyone's happy there's a First Fire," Ralo whispered.

Nyata nodded. "So few can use ma'at. And many hold to the old beliefs that ma'at is evil. But—"

The old spitting man moved to enter his hut but slipped while sidestepping chickens that roamed his path. Before the man's body reached the grass, Ralo focused, eyes closed, fists clenched and body straining. Ma'at was unseeable, yet everywhere, like air. With great concentration Ralo's mind could feel and touch the invisible power around him. With care he pushed a small amount of power toward the man, who was caught mid-air then placed on his feet. The man stared, then ran inside and slammed his hut's wooden door. Witnesses pointed in wonder.

Nyata clasped Ralo's shoulder. "Well done, First Fire."

She kissed his cheek. Warmness spread in his chest. Despite her teasing, Nyata was the girl who raised him after their parents died. No foreboding or confusion could overpower his love for her.



His sweaty legs folded beneath him on the dense straw floor. Ralo listened from behind the row of Mains as the hunter spoke, though he had trouble focusing through his nervousness. The council terrified him, and the hunter, who was the same age as Ralo, gazed down at Ralo like he was a dog allowed to dine with people.

"Fortunately, I and a few other hunters were with Merchant Dakiembe's caravan when the slavers ambushed it," the hunter continued. Scars criss-crossed his bare chest and arms.

"They circled us, but we overpowered them."

Main Jye reached for his bowl of shea tea. It filled his hut with a wet flower fragrance. His spotted, wrinkled hands shook as they lifted the bowl. "This is the third time they've attacked us," he noted between sips.

The other two Mains nodded at their elder's words.

Main Jye asked, "These slavers, we know where their base is?"

The hunter bowed to acknowledge his elder. "Yes, Main Jye. They move constantly, but our trackers can find them if given a few days."

The youngest Main, a man with grey locked hair, spoke. "They will see our food and people stolen until we are weak enough to be broken, then attack our village."

The hunter bowed. The other two Mains nodded. Fear and coldness gripped Ralo, as if he'd been dipped into the Filindi River at night.

Main Jye crossed his arms. "Then we must go to war, or become slaves."

The hunter bowed again. "Understood, Main Jye. I will not see my village enslaved."

Ralo imagined Nyata in chains. Imagined the skinny girl who raised him enslaved for work and sex by foreigners like the prisoners. His coldness disappeared.

He decided how to be First Fire.

"I'll go with the hunting party," he announced.

They stared at him.

Then the hunter guffawed. "The *plant lover* fighting with hunters? How?"

Ralo tried to ignore the insult. "I have power. Ma'at orderers are rare. They'll never expect warriors *and* an orderer."

The hunter laughed, pointing at him as he would a dog trying to walk on its hind legs.

Ralo concentrated, straining to feel the ma'at around him. Unlike with the old man, this time he pushed hard. Ralo screamed. The hunter crashed against the wall, then fell unconscious onto the floor.

The Mains sat in shock as the room shuddered.

"I can help," Ralo pleaded to Main Jye between gasps. "You gave me this title. Let me help my people."

Main Jye glared at Ralo over his tea bowl. He sipped, then nodded.

Grateful for his newfound clarity, Ralo bowed. The fire inside him comforted his terror at the days ahead.



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When not working out, playing video games, or missing Honolulu, **Alexander Monteagudo** can usually be found at the Baltimore Science Fiction Society.

# Missing Tessa

Anna Yeatts

Behind the local anchorwoman, Tessa's snapshot hung suspended in the corner of the screen.

"Day two of search for missing woman," the ticker tape read.

I switched off the set. I palmed my face and scrubbed the two day old stubble along my jaw.

Curled on Tessa's side of the bed, I racked my brain as to where she might be, who she might be with.

If she was even alive.

I held the pillow against my mouth, trying to smell Tessa on it. But she was already fading.

Something scratched in the far corner.

My neck tightened. I strained to hear in the dark. The scratching continued.

A mouse. Maybe a rat.

"Hey." I sat up, flung a crumpled beer can. "Scat."

The scratching stopped. I laughed. Tommy Sutherland, Rodent Intimidator.

*Loser*, I imagined Tessa saying, grinning all the while.

Maybe she up and left me. Police thought I did her in. Calling me a "person of interest."

I slumped back and flattened the pillow over my head.

The scratching started again. Rustled, more like something trying to squeeze through a space it didn't fit.

"Damn it." I sat up and climbed out of bed. The pine boards were cold against my bare feet.

Wood groaned. The lamp pull slipped between my fingers.

"Who's there?"

From across the room, wood broke with dry snap.

A shape crouched in the corner. My heart knocked into my chest.

"Tessa?" I asked.

It hissed.

My fingers caught the lamp pull and I yanked. The light clicked on, bathing the bedroom in soft yellow light.

The room was empty. Tessa's knickknacks made scarecrow shadows on the walls.

I checked the baseboards. No knot holes or broken boards.

Beer washed away my lingering paranoia. I passed out on top of Tessa's missing person posters, sleep coming for me as quick and hard as a fastball.

I dreamt of Tessa.

She climbed out of the baseboards, cracking the corner boards apart with her nails like a squirrel opening a nut. I wasn't scared. This was Tessa with her turned up nose and freckled cheeks.

She crawled to the bed with her leaf scented hair over her face. Naked as a jaybird, every curve as perfect as I remembered. Tessa climbed atop me and straddled my hips. I reached to touch her, but she pushed my hands away.

Tessa grabbed the flesh of her chest with both hands. A gash opened over her breastbone. She dug her fingers into the raw, red space. The skin made a soft, sucking sound as it peeled away from her exposed flesh.

I opened my mouth, but Tessa pressed her sticky finger to my lips. I shook. Tessa worked her right arm free of the rubbery skin, shedding it, the muscles and sinews glistening.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself out of the dream. Her lips touched mine and I shuddered at the smell of cadaverous rot.

With a jolt, my lungs spasmed. The air in my chest was sucked out as forcefully as if I'd been kicked in the gut. I struggled to breathe, but her lips never left mine. My breath spun out... and out... and out...



I woke at half past three in the afternoon, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. My lungs burned. I struggled upright, half falling when I tried to stand. Every joint in my body ached until I wondered if I'd aged overnight like old Rip Van Winkle.

A trail of translucent white flakes led away from the bedside. Crouching, I poked the flakes with my fingernail. They peeled up easily from the worn floorboards, reminding me of slime trails left behind by garden slugs. I rubbed my fingers together, held them to my nose, and sniffed.

My stomach lurched with the smell of rot.

My lips felt numb. I could almost feel the sticky wetness of Tessa's mouth sealed against mine.

I stumbled from the bedroom, and grabbed my wallet and keys from the kitchen countertop, hands shaking. I could barely unlatch the security chain on the apartment door. The chain popped loose, and I swung the door open.

The creature had taken Tessa, my Tessa, through its door.

I stared into the empty hallway and my rational world crumbled.

A sick pit opened in my reality.

I stepped back inside, closed the apartment door and locked it, because the door to find Tessa wasn't going to open with a key.

I'd inherited a crowbar when my old man died. It was buried in the hall closet beneath a pile of coats, so I dug it out.

I wedged the iron crowbar beneath the baseboard. Throwing my weight behind it, I popped the corner board loose. The crowbar splintered through the floorboards at the corner's base. Shards pelted my face and eyes. The last layer of floorboard, big enough for the creature to have climbed through, broke free in a gust of stale air.

I stared down into a deep tunnel dug out of the red clay. Grooves marked the edges. It seemed to have been scooped out with bare fingers.

I squatted. Clicked on my flashlight and shone it as far as it'd go. The tunnel dropped about six feet then curved off to the left, away from the apartment building's main foundation.

"Tessa?" I whispered.

I swear the tunnel sucked up my voice the same way her lips had sucked my breath.

I tried again, louder. "Tessa?"

Nothing.

"Crap." I swung my feet into the hole, and before I could lose my nerve, I dropped.

I hollered as I fell, landing in a crouch. The tunnel was barely wide enough for my shoulders. The damp clay smelled of earthworms and taproots and upturned stumps, all the things I used to love. Now they made my guts churn.

Wriggling onto my belly, I shoved the flashlight in front, and crawled on my elbows into the tunnel. The best I could tell, it extended fifteen feet or so more to the left, slanting downward before curving out of sight.

The tunnel narrowed; I shimmied my way through. My hips dragged, legs wedged together so tight I had to push on my toes in spots.



I don't know how long I crawled. By the fourth or fifth switchback, the flashlight started to flicker so I switched it off and slid it in my jeans to save the battery. The tunnel got colder the deeper I went, the clay tighter packed, broken up by flat chunks of rock that scraped the skin off my arms and shredded my jeans.

The quiet plink-plink of water droplets made me pause. A breath of warm air stirred against my cheek.

"Tessa?" My whisper rasped against the darkness.

A rustle came from ahead as if some nocturnal creature had shaken itself awake.

I dug at my waistband to pull the flashlight free. My hand closed around the aluminum grip and I slid it up my back.

I imagined the creature slithering toward me, obscene limbs dragging behind it. My pulse spiked in my ears. I jabbed the flashlight forward, snapped it on.

A mewling creature squirmed away from the cone of yellow light. Skinless arms wrapped over its scalped head. Its legs curled, fetus-like into its sinewy belly, muscles coated in grime.

I gagged.

It cowered, pressing itself deeper into the tunnel wall.

My jaw shook.

"What..." I started.

The creature lifted its head, and my words choked in my throat.

Some flash of recognition passed over its face. It lunged for me. Both skinless arms reached out. I tried to crawl backward. It slithered forward on its belly. Its fingers groped at my face, touching my eyes, prodding my mouth.

My yells echoed off the walls and drowned out all thought but to knock the creature away.

"Tommy." It seized my face between muscled fingers.

I slapped its hands away.

"It's me." Its fingers wrapped in my hair, made me look in its eyes.

Eyes I knew.

I stared at the ghoul gripping me.

I shook my head, squeezed my eyes tight, the raw meat stench festered in my nose.

"Lost," it said.

The air left my lungs in a rush. I opened my eyes, but I could hardly look. "Tessa?"

"I hurt." Her voice was weak. "Stole my skin."

"What did?" I couldn't wrap my brain around it. No one stole human skins. "You need a hospital." I wriggled back the way I'd come and motioned for her to follow.

Tessa curled her legs into her chest, the yellow line of her shins showing between the strips of muscle. "The hag's wearing my skin."

"That's crazy talk."

"Look."

Tessa was a monstrosity. A horror. Skinless. By all rights she should have been dead.

"Go," Tessa said.

I shook my head. "You're having some kind of delusion."

A hiss echoed from further down the tunnel.

"She rode you. Stole your breath," Tessa whispered.

"The creature in the night, the one I thought was you, who I..." My spine locked tight.

"Hide," Tessa said.

I turned off the flashlight and gripped it two-handed. "I'm not leaving you alone with it."

The scuttling grew louder. I remembered the creature in Tessa's skin crawling toward my bedside, long hair swishing back and forth. I imagined it now, brown hair sweeping the tunnel's floor, spine arched against the clay ceiling, swollen with my breath.

The hag clucked to herself as she drew near, nattering in a sing song voice that sent ice down my spine. She stank of rain-slicked rot and the three day dead.

The hag stopped. "I smell man."

I held my breath, lungs burning.

"It's me," my Tessa said.

"Lie." The hag crawled closer.

I waited, flashlight clutched tight.

The hag grew still. "Two hearts," she said at last.

Her breath brushed my face, hot and foul. "There's the man."

I flipped on the flashlight. The beam blazed into the hag's watery eyes. She howled and flung her arms around Tessa's stolen face.

I cracked the flashlight into her forehead. The hag screeched. Tessa squirmed herself around the hag's waist and pinned her down. I smashed the flashlight above the hag's ear and she crumpled.

Tessa and I half lay, half sat in the cramped tunnel, panting. My flashlight was still raised to strike. A clump of long brown hair hung from the its glass cover.

Tessa reached out a knobby finger and twisted the hair.

I wrapped my hand around hers, the tendons thick and strong as piano wire.

"Can we put your skin back?" I asked.

Tessa smiled weakly.

I shone the light on the hag who sprawled in Tessa's skin. Blotches were already forming around the head and neck. I winced.

Tessa didn't hesitate.

"Here." She pointed to a faint pink line running vertically down the hag's breastbone.

Tessa dug her fingers into her stolen skin. It peeled back with the same grisly sucking sound. She yanked and tugged. Together we rolled the hag over and peeled the skin completely off.

Tessa shook her skin out gently. Her abandoned arms and legs swayed in the flashlight's beam. Tessa was exhausted. I could see it in her eyes.

I smiled as she unrolled the creamy flesh of her calf and began slowly putting herself to rights.

I didn't flinch when I touched her skinless arm. "I love you."

"You better," she said.



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**Anna Yeatts** is a dark fantasy and horror writer living in Pinehurst, NC. Her short fiction has appeared in *Suddenly Lost in Words*, *Mslexia*, and *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, among others. Anna is the publisher of *Flash Fiction Online* ([flashfictiononline.com](http://flashfictiononline.com)). Follow her at [annayeatts.com](http://annayeatts.com) or on Twitter @AnnaYeatts.

# The Perfect Book

Alex Shvartsman

Benjamin Bengfort was a much better scientist than he was a writer. He was the world's foremost authority on artificial intelligence with an alphabet soup of degrees listed by his name, a corner office, and tenure. He was the big fish in the small, stale pond of academia. By all rights he should've been happy, reaping the rewards of his success. But every time I ran into him at the faculty cafeteria, the man was miserable.

"Hello, Jacquelyn." He perked up a little when he saw me approach. "How's life in the English department?"

"Oh, the usual. You haven't lived until you've tried to make a gaggle of bored freshmen appreciate Longfellow."

Benjamin nodded.

Here was a man who could write a scientific paper in his sleep and have the editors of *Nature* and *Science* fight it out in a mud-wrestling cage match for a chance to publish it. But all he wanted was to write fiction. He was always eager to chat up anyone with an MFA, as if he could somehow absorb their creative writing skills by osmosis.

He was a pleasant enough guy, so I didn't mind hanging out with him at lunch—so long as I could dodge reading another one of his manuscripts.

Benjamin sighed, stirring the contents of his bowl with a plastic spoon.

"Another rejection?" I didn't really have to ask, but I'm a glutton for punishment. Not in Benjamin's league, of course, but still.

"They bounced 'No Quarter' without so much as a personal comment," he said.

I racked my brain. "Is that the epic fantasy retelling the War of the Ring story from the point of view of the Ents?"

"No. I sent that one to Colossal Fiction just the other week. 'No Quarter' is an existential literary prose poem about the narrator's inability to pay at a parking meter. Would you like me to print you out a copy?"

I shuddered, then sent up a silent prayer for the folks at Colossal Fiction. Far as I knew, those poor souls didn't even publish epic fantasy. Surely karma would find a way to make it up to whichever hapless editorial assistant was forced to read Benjamin's submission. "Maybe I'll pick up a copy at your office, later," I lied.

"Oh, you should definitely come by. I've been working on something. A project you'll really want to see!"

Naturally, I assumed that Benjamin was talking about another one of his stories. So I avoided his office and the entire Computer Science department like a day-old cafeteria casserole. That's why I only found out about his amazing invention when everyone else did.

"I've been writing this program for years," said the image of Benjamin on the screen. I wasn't used to seeing Benjamin smile. But then, I wasn't used to watching his smug face on the network news, either. "The computer is in the process of analyzing all the greatest works of literature. Thousands of books. Millions of words. It'll identify patterns and figure out what makes those particular titles stand out, when compared to all the rest. And then the program will use this data to generate the definitive novel. It'll be the greatest book the world has ever read."

You can imagine the pandemonium that ensued. Talking heads speculated about how the program would reproduce the works of Shakespeare, or the Bible, or "Atlas Shrugged," or whatever book they happened to hold in high regard.

Meantime, Benjamin's computer program was in the final stages of consuming the world's classical literature. It was scheduled to spit out its manuscript on the following Tuesday. Everyone who's anyone wanted to be there and share in the moment. So it was a very pleasant surprise when I received one of the coveted invitations. My never having dumped on his fiction must've meant more to Benjamin than I realized.

On Tuesday an auditorium full of notables held their collective breath when Benjamin's program finally finished its task. The first pages of the perfect book were displayed on the giant screens set up throughout the room and everyone began to read.

It was no Shakespeare. It was no Bible. It was the worst drivel I've ever seen collected on a page. The writing punched me in the eyeballs. Once read, it could never be unread. The prose made Benjamin's own efforts appear brilliant by comparison.

The other scientists claimed that Benjamin's program was flawed. It malfunctioned due to a bug in the code or some other faulty bit of programming. But, when presented with the source code, none of them could figure out a way to fix it.

As for Benjamin, he defended his invention fiercely, illogically, even as it cost him grants and prestige. He wouldn't give up.

"There's nothing wrong with the program" he told me the same exact thing he kept telling everybody else. "Fiction is *subjective*. Maybe today's readers just aren't sophisticated enough to recognize this book's brilliance. The future generations will vindicate me."

And if the readers failed to recognize the merits of this book, they could just as easily fail to recognize the talent in Benjamin's writing. He didn't say this, but I could see in his eyes that he believed it indubitably.

They never found a way to improve on Benjamin's code and his project eventually faded from the public's eye. Benjamin kept on writing fiction, and he kept on amassing piles of rejections for the stories that never seemed to improve at all.

But he was a lot happier.



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**Alex Shvartsman** is a writer and game designer. His adventures so far have included traveling to over 30 countries, playing a card game for a living, and building a successful business. Since 2010, Alex sold over 60 short stories to a variety of magazines and anthologies. His fiction has appeared in such venues as the journal of *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Galaxy's Edge*, and many others. Alex resides in Brooklyn, NY with his wife and son.

# Interview with Author Piers Anthony

**B**est known for his *Xanth* series, Piers Anthony is one of the most popular authors of fantasy and science fiction today and is followed by a large group of devoted, long-lasting fans. To date he has had over twenty novels hit the best-seller list, and he is the author of over 160 books in such varied categories as science fiction and fantasy, horror, historical fiction, and non-fiction. With an average of 3 new books published every year, Piers Anthony is one of the most prolific authors in science fiction and fantasy. We are extremely happy and honored to have the opportunity to interview Mr. Anthony, and learn a little bit more about his career and life.

**Iulian:** It's always fascinating to me to learn about the beginnings of prolific writers' careers, even if just scratching the surface. I know that your initial catalyst was an issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, but from that to over 150 novels is a long way, and I assume that the first part of that journey was filled with hurdles and hardship. Tell us a little bit about that beginning—what made you go this way, who helped, who was in the way, and how did you manage to push through this winding road, littered with rejection and criticism?

**Piers:** I realized in college that I wanted to be a creative writer, but it took eight years after my decision to make my first story sale, and another four to sell my first novel. Then my publisher cheated me on royalties, and blacklisted me for six years when I protested. When new editors came in, one of whom had also been cheated there so he knew the score, the blacklisting ended. They put me on the national bestseller list. Unfortunately, ironically, I had to leave because the editor got old and started cutting out whole chapters, not seeing why that would bother an author. So it's been a roller coaster. In effect, over simplified, I had to choose between artistic integrity and bestseller status. So I am no longer a best seller. It's a choice other authors face, unfortunately.

**Iulian:** As a married father of two, I know that the family life and the writing life are two sides of a fragile balance, and it's not often that the two find themselves in perfect harmony. How did your family life affect or influence your writing, both growing up and later as an adult?

**Piers:** It seems that the root source of successful writing is to have an unhappy childhood. I was not abused, but I seriously questioned whether my life was worth living. I resolved to do better by my own children, and believe I did; my daughters did not become writers. My wife has always been supportive, and I believe having a long—58 years and counting—and quiet

marriage has contributed to my success. In sum: you need to start unhappy, but thereafter you can get away with being happy.

**Iulian:** Your world-building is almost an art form, and over time you've created several worlds, each captured in various series or separate novels. Out of these, *Xanth* obviously stands out—an amazing achievement, adored by fans and publishers. But if you are to take a birds-eye view at your entire career as a writer, what would you describe as your best achievement? Once you said, and I paraphrase, "write for the readers, not for yourself." How does this circle back to you, the writer?

**Piers:** I regard the historical *Geodysey* series as being my best work, and the *ChroMagic* series as my best fantasy. *Xanth* is easy, fun, and it pays my way, so it continues. In effect, it makes my more serious work possible. It is my most commercial fiction, and yes, it is written for my readers, a number of whom contribute to it.

**Iulian:** You received several awards and quite a number of your novels reached the status of best-seller. Was this ever a goal for you? Did that shape the way you approached writing in anyway? And given that your career is far from over, what is your next goal?

**Piers:** The main award I received was The British Fantasy Award for *A Spell for Chameleon*. I've never had a Hugo or Nebula. Early on I wanted awards but time and experience have satisfied me that many have become corrupted, being in-group popularity contests rather than indications of merit, and my interest in them has diminished accordingly. My goal is simply to write what pleases me, and to please my readers. I never dreamed of becoming a bestseller; that was a pleasant surprise.

**Iulian:** You write a lot of long fiction, much more than short fiction. Has that changed over time? It is said that today it is impossible for a writer to make a living from short stories, but perhaps this wasn't the case a while back. What are short stories for you today? Are they unfinished novel ideas, or perhaps just sprouts for future, extended works?

**Piers:** I regard myself as a natural story writer, but I couldn't earn a living from stories, so I switched largely to novels. Now two things have changed: I no longer need money, so can write what I want, and do. And self-publishing has flowered, so I can get my stories published. I have an ongoing series of collections going, *Relationships*, and sometimes I place one in a magazine or anthology, as with "*Descant*". I am also doing more short novels, 40,000 words, and novellas, 30,000. So my pieces are trending shorter today. I don't think most writers ever could make much of a living from short stories.



**Iulian:** In your long career, I am certain you had your share of interactions with editors and publishers. What was your general experience working with them? Was there someone in particular who inspired or supported you, or was the relationship more or less transactional, lacking emotional substance?

**Piers:** The only editor I cared about was Lester del Rey. I had admired his editing in the magazines and wanted to work with him. I retain fond memories also of his wife, July-Lynn del Rey. She was a dwarf, physically standing maybe three and a half feet tall, but what a publisher she turned out to be! My daughters knew her personally, too, and loved her. Other editors it's pretty much business. Well, there's Dan Reitz, my leading fan, who started Mundania Press to republish my dirty fantasy *Pornucopia*, then branched out enormously.

**Iulian:** I find that the larger the bibliography, the harder this question becomes, but I will ask it anyway: if you were to select your top 3 favorite works, which ones would those be? Were there surprises, such as one you thought would be great, but wasn't so greatly received by fans, and vice-versa?

**Piers:** 1. *Tatham Mound*. 2. *Tarot* (published in 3 parts originally.) 3. *Macroscopic*. All were major projects from the outset. None were bestsellers. The popularity of *Xanth* was the main surprise. Of my shorter novels, I really like *Aliena*, self-published, about a nice girl with the brain of an alien starfish.

**Iulian:** I've always wondered why your novels haven't been turned into movies or TV series? Was this ever something you hoped for? Were you ever actively trying to pitch some of your works through agencies or movie producers? It seems like, and it's unfortunate, that some writers with long careers got their well-deserved fame only when Hollywood enters the scene. Do you think that's being a sell-out? Either way, which one of your novels would you love to see on the big screen?

**Piers:** I've been trying for 25 years to get movies made from my novels, and there have been some close calls. With luck it still might happen in my lifetime. Any *Xanth* would do, or *Split Infinity*, or *Balook*, or *Aliena*.

**Iulian:** Your short-story "*Descant*" leads our magazine's Issue #3. Give us a little bit about this story. Where did it come from? What was the inspiration?

**Piers:** Ideas constantly come to me, and I summarize them in my voluminous Ideas file, then write them when their time seems right. "*Descant*" was a favorite long before I wrote it. It started with the idea of singing being a better way to relate than appearance or information. When you solicited a story from me, I suggested it, and was glad for the chance to get a home

for it. It was one notion among many. I don't know why I like it so much, but it still holds me. My favorite line is "You look and sound like a queen."

**Iulian: With the amount of words you produce every year, it is pretty obvious to me that your free time must be very limited. However, there must be some... So, what are other things that interest you and occupy that free time?**

**Piers:** Free time? What's that? But I do take breaks playing Free Cell on the computer, and I watch videos. Hamilton had a sale, and now I have hundreds of movies to catch up on. But mainly, I really do like to write, so free time = writing time. I am most truly alive when deep in a story or novel.

**Iulian: I like to end my interviews with this question because I think there's no better advice than the one coming from those who have struggled and have succeeded: what is your advice for young writers who are trying to break through in this never-settling publishing world? Is your advice today vastly different than that from twenty or thirty years ago?**

**Piers:** Yes. Today is vastly different, because with electronic publishing and self-publishing any writer can make his dream available for others to read. I worked to help bring this about, and I still maintain a list of electronic publishers at my HiPiers.com site, so I tell aspiring writers to check that list. I do it in significant part because I can; no one can blacklist me today for telling the truth. That's not true for most writers. But I still do tell newcomers "Don't give up your day job," or have a working spouse or a rich inheritance.

**Dear Mr. Anthony, thank you very much for participating in this interview and for your contribution to our magazine.**

**Links:**

<http://hipiers.com>



# Interview with Author and Publisher Anna Yeatts

**A**нна is a fantasy and slipstream writer living in North Carolina. Her work has appeared in various print and online magazines in a variety of genres. She publishes Flash Fiction Online and spends a great deal of time wading through the never-ending pile of slush that accumulates there.

**Iulian:** It's hard to condense one's life in just a few paragraphs, but I am sure you can do it better than most people. Tell us a little bit about you: How and where did you grow up, what influenced you in your decision to become a writer and a publisher?

**Anna:** I grew up in Reidsville, North Carolina, the heart of tobacco country, deer hunting, and homemade banana pudding (and if you used Jello pudding instead of real egg custard, you would never be invited back for Sunday dinner). I was incredibly shy as a child. It's hard to believe now, but I would sit in the booth at the local Pizza Hut (a very big attraction for a small town girl) and sob rather than ask the cashier for a box to take our pizza home in. Reading became my natural escape from social interaction. I could have a thousand conversations and never say a word. I carried my books everywhere. I barely learned to navigate the handful of streets to and from high school because I was always reading in the car.

I loved to write stories from the time I was very young. In first grade we were asked to write our own fable. I was thrilled to write and illustrate my own. I'd read a very old edition of Aesop's fables I'd found at my Granddaddy's house. I'll never forget my dad's face when he saw my hand drawn copy of "A Man and his Ass". The Man had a lovely little Ass that he took everywhere with him because he loved it so much. After a budding writing career like that, how could I not end up in the literary world someday?

**Iulian:** Let's talk more about your writing. What attracts you to fantasy and horror? Have you written in other genres as well?

**Anna:** I love the escapism of fantasy. It seemed like a natural place for my own writing. The more I explored my own voice, I found myself going to darker and more macabre places, hence the branching out into horror. I had difficulty calling my own writing "horror". There is such an innate bias within me that nice women don't write such morbid disturbing tales. But I read an interview with Ellen Datlow discussing why more women don't write horror, and I realized that I needed to get over myself. So what if my brain is a dark, twisty place? I love to

process why certain things make me uncomfortable and why. Then I try to use those uncomfortable ideas in my stories.

I write a bit of mainstream fiction, but it still leans toward the oddball. I don't think I'll ever be able to write a story that doesn't make my mother question my sanity.

**Iulian: You mostly write short-fiction; have you attempted writing a novel? If no, why not? Is there anything that keeps you from it?**

**Anna:** Ah, the novel. You called me on it. Let me confess that I'm a seat-of-the-pants writer. I've tried writing novels. I felt the need to outline my novels. And I did. The problem is that once I outline, I feel like I've written them and I lose interest. I force myself to sit down and try to crank out a chapter, but it's not good. The oomph isn't there. All the coffee in the world doesn't help.

The thought of pants-ing a novel terrifies me. But there is definitely a novel I'm chewing on. It's begging me to write it. And I want to. But I have to shore up my attention span and the courage to go for it.

**Iulian: Now let's talk a bit about Flash Fiction Online. Give us some history about how you got involved in this project and what do you love most about it? And, related to that, why only flash fiction?**

**Anna:** I started working as a slush reader for Flash Fiction Online in the spring of 2012. I realized reading bad stories helped my own writing. By seeing so blatantly how other stories were broken, I became more objective about what I was doing wrong.

My favorite part is finding "that story". I've been known to cradle my laptop like a baby and make happy cooing sounds. It frightens my children so I try to use restraint when they're home.

When Jake Frievald stepped down last year, I decided to try my hand at publishing FFO. I've loved it, but it's been a challenging year. Running a magazine, and a free magazine at that, takes an enormous amount of work. The biggest challenge was (and still is) finding a source of funding. We branched out into convenience subscriptions through [WeightlessBooks.com](http://WeightlessBooks.com) and recently launched our Patreon site. But still, I very much finance out of my own pocket (so if anyone would like to donate so I can go shoe shopping again...). I'm always looking for ways to FFO run as a self-supporting venture while still keeping it true to Jake's original format.

Only flash is another part of the business model that I inherited. When Jake founded Flash Fiction Online, there were very few venues interested in flash. Through Flash Fiction Online, Jake did push further the representation of flash fiction as a modern and very readable literary form. FFO is listed everywhere from about.com to the *New York Times*. I'm quite proud to carry on the flash fiction tradition. It's a quick and accessible read in a busy world.

**Iulian: You are the publisher of FFO, and you have several volunteers on staff, including Editor-in-Chief Suzanne Vincent. How involved are you in the slush and editing processes? Unless the numbers are confidential, what is the average number of submissions you get in any given month?**

**Anna:** We have such a fabulous staff, including the immensely talented Suzanne Vincent. Her eye for stories is impeccable. I think she has an uncanny superpower for finding diamonds among the cubic zirconiums. She is the artistic vision behind FFO. The final call on any story is hers. I have a say in the decision, but at the end of the day, if you get an acceptance or rejection from winnowing, that's from Suzanne.

FFO gets around 550 stories per month. So I read slush—a lot of slush. I'm on a slush team (yes, Chris Phillips is my boss) but I float around. If a slush reader on another team is being slow or a story needs a deciding vote, I'll drop in. The entire staff reads for winnowing. I always read and vote there. I try to leave constructive feedback for the author that I would appreciate in their place.

**Iulian: I know many writers who'd like to publish at FFO. Could you share with them what makes a great story for you, and what are some of the things that make a story bad?**

**Anna:** A great story gives me something unexpected. It goes off the rails and takes me somewhere new. I want a story that makes me feel something. Happy, sad, a gut punch, angry at your main character's unfair plight. Make me weep. Make me care. Tell me a story. Take me on a journey. Beautiful writing is nice but it's not necessary. Not all characters have flowery voices. Some characters are rough and crude. Give me a character voice I can roll up in like a blanket and escape in for five minutes while I read your story.

Ah, the bad. The infamous cat stories. The fluffy stories that don't matter. The "Meh". Slush is full of stories that are sweet, or cute, or okay. Don't be "meh".

Then there's the soapbox bad. The sexual predator stories. If the woman in your story is threatened, raped, beaten, or stalked, DO NOT SEND ME YOUR STORY. You will be rejected. Even if you gender swap and have this happen to the male character, DO NOT SEND ME YOUR STORY. Even if you have this happen and then at the last minute throw in

a twist and pretend it was all make believe (ooh! It was all a clown show!) DO NOT SEND ME YOUR STORY.

Okay. Soapbox done.

**Iulian: It's great that FFO is a SFWA-approved market. Was that a goal for you? Where do you want to take FFO next? Are there any future plans?**

**Anna:** I was fortunate enough to inherit SFWA affiliation as well. We raised our payment to \$60/story to keep that status. I think that's important to maintain the level of stories we're used to receiving.

I have lots of goals for FFO. I feel like I should crack my knuckles and announce world domination now. But that might be scary.

Suzanne and I discuss this quite a bit. Her goal, which I agree with, is to be the gold standard for flash fiction - to be taught in classrooms as "this is how you do it". The beautiful thing for both of us is that this is coming true. We have numerous classrooms using our site as reference material for their students. I would love to see this grow and see FFO work in partnership with educators and young writers.

And, of course, there are these little things called Hugos and Nebulas. I'd really, really like to see one of those sitting on the bookshelf. Or Suzanne's. Or one of our author's.

But that's a serious pipe dream. Right now, I'd settle for paying the bills!

**Iulian: We published your short-story "Missing Tessa"; tell us a little bit about it.**

**Anna:** As a Southerner, I'm fascinated by the legend of the Boo Hag - a skin-slipping witch who rides a man in order to steal his breath. I told my children about the boo hag legend so, of course, my four year old runs around yelling "Boo Hag!" at people and they give me the most puzzled looks ever.

I was an anatomy geek and worked the cadaver lab my senior year in college. I love dissecting (yes, especially people... and it always made me hungry for roast beef but that's a whole different interview...). I found the skinned bodies fascinating. But there's an otherness about a body in that state. It's us, but not-us. And that not-us is what made me write about Tessa in her skinless form. Relating to someone when they're in a not-us state tells us so much about the character. It was a dynamic I couldn't resist.

**Iulian: As a writer and publisher, how do you see today's publishing world? Is print dead?**

**Anna:** Print will never be dead. There's nothing in this world like holding a book in your hands and smelling the ink and paper. I mainly read from my iPhone but I hoard and buy print books. I can't explain. I just need them. It's like breathing. I can't stop.

I do think e-publishing is more profitable than print. The overhead is so low compared to the cost of print. I could never afford to run FFO as a print publication. But online? Sure. Yes, there's an overabundance of unedited, everyone fling their writing online publications, but I think the market will even itself out. Readers are savvy.

**Iulian: What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

**Anna:** More writing. More reading. More chugging through slush and keeping the wheels rolling over at Flash Fiction Online. Yes, I'll get to that novel. You've called me on it. I suppose I have to do it now.

Thanks for having me over to visit at Fantasy Scroll. I love seeing short fiction alive and well in today's market. I'm honored to be in it.

**Dear Anna, thank you very for this interview. We wish you all the best in your writing career and good luck with running Flash Fiction Online.**

**Links:**

[Annayeatts.com](http://Annayeatts.com)

[@AnnaYeatts](https://twitter.com/AnnaYeatts)

<https://www.facebook.com/anna.yeatts>

<http://www.flashfictiononline.com>

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# Interview with Editor Scott H. Andrews

**B**eneath Ceaseless Skies (BCS) is an online magazine of "literary adventure fantasy": fantasy set in secondary-world or historical settings, with a literary focus on the characters. BCS launched in October 2008, was named a SFWA-qualifying venue fifteen months later, and in six years has published over 315 stories and 135 audio fiction podcasts. BCS has been a finalist for two Hugo Awards, one British Science Fiction Association Award, two Parsec podasting awards, two Aurealis Awards, and four World Fantasy Awards, and stories from BCS have won the Aurealis Award and the World Fantasy Award. Lois Tilton of Locus online has called BCS "a premier venue for fantastic fiction, not just online but for all media."

Today we are talking with Scott H. Andrews, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Beneath Ceaseless Skies.

**Iulian: Before we dig into the meat of the magazine, tell us some things about yourself: where did you grow up, what were the biggest influences in your life, and how did you get involved in writing and editing?**

**Scott:** I grew up in a university town in central Virginia. I think the two biggest influences on my life were science and art, the latter both literature and music. I've always been good at scientific sort of problem-solving and teaching; I have a PhD in biophysical chemistry and I teach college chemistry. I read a lot as a kid, all sorts of stuff including science fiction and fantasy, and I had a great high school English program that had us reading college-level literature like Joyce, Faulkner, Dostoevsky. In high school I got into music and started playing guitar, and I listen to all sorts of music from rock to prog, metal, classical, jazz, fusion.

I started writing little stories as far back as the fourth grade. I placed a couple short stories in my high school lit mag, and the advisor asked me to join the magazine staff—I think they figured writers and artists would also be interested in working on the magazine. When I got to college, we had two lit mags, one that originally published student work but had expanded to publishing work from the neo-pro literary community. I auditioned for that one and was selected for the fiction staff, and the next year they asked me to be co-Fiction Editor, which I did for two years. The lit mag was a great experience; reading interesting fiction and talking about it with really insightful people. (Patton Oswalt, the comedian, was on my lit-mag fiction staff!)



After grad school, I got back into writing and attended several F/SF writing workshops. I was writing short fiction set in secondary worlds but focused not on action or plot but on the characters; inside them, with a Realist sort of portrayal, trying to explore what it meant to be who they were. I loved to read that sort of fantasy too, but there was very little of it around. There were occasional stories in *F&SF* or *Realms of Fantasy* and rarely any anywhere else. I had wanted to get back into editing and to do it in the F/SF field, and I noticed this absence of a dedicated home for character-centered secondary-world fantasy, which I call "literary adventure fantasy." So I started BCS.

**Iulian:** BCS is a SFWA-qualified market, and readers know the magazine for its high-quality. In the end, it all boils down to the stories you select. What do you expect from a good short story? And the reverse: what is a bad short story? What are you sick and tired of seeing over and over again?

**Scott:** The main thing I expect from a good story is "the human heart in conflict with itself," a quote from Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. I want to see a character who is dealing with some sort of conflict, whether an external struggle like plot obstacles or an internal one like trying to overcome flaws or to grow in relationships, or ideally both external and internal. I also want a story to take me into a vivid and interesting world that is somehow different from our contemporary, mundane world, whether an invented secondary world or alt-history or a paranormal historical setting.

A story that would not appeal to me is one that doesn't make me feel something about a character who is in conflict. I often get stories that have a character in an interesting situation, but the writer isn't executing the story such that I can feel what it means to be who that character is. For me it's not enough just to see the character; the story has to make me *feel* for them. I also often get stories that are more about the action or the world, not a character. Those don't appeal to me because I have to connect with a real person at the center of all that action or world in order for me to have a reason to care about it.

We do see a lot of common fantasy tropes in submissions to BCS. I think authors turn to the tropes they love without realizing that people who read a lot of fantasy, not just editors but also readers, have seen many of those things so often that without some new twist, they don't engage us. One of the most common is stories that open in a fantasy tavern, a stock pseudo-medieval tavern or inn like the Prancing Pony. Most all those stories would feel more interesting to me if the writer instead put their own unique twist on the age-old fantasy tavern.

**Iulian:** How involved are you in the slushing process and what is your approach when dealing with authors? Do you take the extra time to fix a story that needs some level of fixing, do you ask for rewrites?

**Scott:** I sort through all of the slush myself and pass about three-quarters of it to my current first reader, Nicole Lavigne, and I read the other quarter myself.

My approach with authors is I think very instructional. I have twenty-five years of experience in teaching and a decade of experience in writing workshops. All our rejection letters include personalized comments, for every submission. No other top-level magazine to my knowledge offers that. We get thank-you notes from authors every week; authors have told us that they revised their stories using our comments and later sold them to magazines such as F&SF, Realms of Fantasy, and Interzone.

I do take the extra time to fix a story that to my mind has a great core or a great character but in my opinion needs structural changes or logic fixes or a different ending. I do often ask for rewrites; I would say that over half of the stories that appear in BCS have had some level of rewrite. My approach to authors is to explain what I think needs to be changed, to offer suggestions, but then leave it up to them how to go about fixing it. They often agree with my issues but come up with their own ways to fix them, which is the perfect resolution.

**Iulian: Tell us a little bit about your editorial team. I know how important it is to work with good people and have a strong process in place. What is the general structure of your magazine and how do the responsibilities get split?**

**Scott:** The responsibilities at BCS are almost all handled by me. I have a first reader, Nicole Lavigne, who's been with BCS a year now, and before that a first reader, Kate Marshall, for four years. They do a great job handling the majority of the slush, but other than that, it's all me. I read all the passed-up submissions, I do all the rewrites and line-edits, I edit and produce all the audio podcasts, I make the ebooks, I handle all the business stuff and PR, and I manage the website. It's a lot of work, but it's a labor of love.

**Iulian: Besides being an editor you are also a writer. How was your writing affected by your editing of BCS? Are there times when you wish you had more time for your own writing?**

**Scott:** Yes, I am always wishing that I had more time for my own writing. I think editing has definitely improved my analytical skills on fiction and fiction writing in general. I see so many different examples of things, both great and not so great, and I think about fiction and fiction craft constantly. Among my workshopping buddies, I think I've always been known for giving good critiques, and I think I've gotten even more insightful at that.

But I don't think that that insight has yet spilled over into my own writing. One thing that we writers often have is trouble seeing our own fiction from a neutral, outside perspective; seeing it the way another person sees it, a reader; seeing it the neutral way we see everyone

else's fiction. I can't yet see my own fiction in that way. I'm trying to work toward it, because I think I'm a pretty good editor, and if I could apply that to my own writing, I think it would improve my writing a lot. But I'm not there yet.

**Iulian: BCS focuses on fantasy exclusively. To be more precise, you publish literary adventure fantasy. Could you explain what that means exactly, and why did you decide to keep the fields so narrow?**

**Scott:** To me, it's a combination of literary focus on the characters and a world that's different from our contemporary world. An English-class way to put it might be "Realism in worlds that aren't real." I wanted BCS to stick to that niche partly because there was no dedicated home for that, but mostly because it's what I love to read: the human heart in conflict with itself, in some awe-inspiring other world.

The restriction of those other worlds to fantasy, to ones that don't have advanced tech is, I admit, an arbitrary one. Fantasy readers seem most comfortable with worlds that are pre-modern in their technology. But I also love "science fantasy"—that currently passé blend of futuristic technology with elements that are so fantastical that they are beyond the reality level of science fiction; like *Dune*. BCS has done two special theme months of science fantasy, where we featured stories that had fantastical worlds with futuristic technology. Some readers and reviewers really liked those stories—I really liked them—but other readers preferred it when we went back to our regular settings of pre-tech worlds. That to me is part of the duty of a niche magazine—to experiment and diversify but still stick to your central ethos that the readers know and like.

**Iulian: Who are your editor heroes? Was there anyone in particular that you could name as having a major influence on your style and approach to editing?**

**Scott:** I don't know that I have any editor heroes per se. Perhaps Neil Clarke of *Clarkesworld*, who in my opinion has pioneered the current era of online magazines. A big part of my editing approach comes from my teaching experience, and my high school American Lit and British Lit teachers were some of the best teachers I ever had, at any level.

Another big part of my editing approach comes from my writing workshop experience, and my hero there is Jeanne Cavelos, the director and teacher of the Odyssey F/SF Writing Workshop. Odyssey is a six-week residential workshop like Clarion or Clarion West, but with an important difference—instead of being taught each week by a different writer, five weeks of Odyssey are taught by Jeanne, who is not just a writer and award-winning former editor but also a college teacher, so the instruction is much better than you get from most writers.

As for my editing style, I just pick the stories that resonate with me; the ones whose world seems awe-inspiring and whose characters move me. I think at the root level, that's what all editors do—pick what they find cool and trust that the readers will enjoy it.

**Iulian: Your magazine pays professional rates and offers stories for free online, a model that has worked well for other magazines, such as *Clarkesworld* and *Lightspeed*. Is that the secret of having a profitable e-magazine that also attracts well-known writers?**

**Scott:** *BCS* is a bit different from *Clarkesworld* and *Lightspeed* in that we are a non-profit, a 501(c)3 charitable organization, like *Strange Horizons*, who pioneered that model in our field. We are primarily funded by donations, and because we're a non-profit, donations to us are tax-deductible. We are indeed like *Clarkesworld* and *Lightspeed* in that we also sell *BCS* as ebooks and an ebook subscription through [WeightlessBooks.com](http://WeightlessBooks.com).

I think the secret to having a profitable e-zine is to balance the free online fiction with other things that generate revenues, like the ebook subscriptions or our *Best of BCS* ebook anthologies. Subscribers get our ebooks a week before the stories go live on the website, and they can have them delivered direct to their e-reader device, so they get some perks in exchange for buying the subscription. Many readers also buy our *Best of BCS* ebook anthologies, even though they have already read all those stories on the website, in order to get those stories in a convenient package. Many subscribers and anthology customers buy the ebooks just as a way to support us.

I think that attracting well-known writers to a new or indie magazine involves soliciting and then letting the magazine build to a level where it will attract great writers on its own. When I started *BCS*, I solicited neo-pro short fiction writers like Yoon Ha Lee, Aliette de Bodard, Margaret Ronald, and Saladin Ahmed. I had a bit of an advantage; I had met them at writing workshops. Word soon spread about *BCS*, and I had stories by great short fiction writers like Holly Phillips and the late K.D. Wentworth come through the slush. Fast-forward a few years, and the next rank of great neo-pro writers also came through the slush, like Seth Dickinson and Benjanun Sriduangkaew. Benjanun has said that she submitted to *BCS*, I think the first pro-rate zine she ever subbed to, because she saw Yoon's stories in the magazine. And hopefully the next rank of neo-pro writers out there right now is seeing Benjanun's stories in *BCS* and will be inspired to send us their work.

**Iulian: I have to ask this: your bio says you own nine guitars. I own three, a drum set, and a piano, and I play neither one of them. Do you play and if so, what?**

**Scott:** I do play, yes! Electric guitar. I gigged originals in several small bands for years, but that dried up a while ago. I now appear to have come full circle; my neighbor is a drummer

and we bang out the same classic rock covers as graybeards that I used to play in high school. I've built many of my guitars myself, so that's one excuse for why I have so many—I keep building new ones.

**Julian: What's next for BCS and for yourself? What is your vision for the future?**

**Scott:** *BCS* will continue to march relentlessly forward in publishing great literary adventure fantasy. Our new ebook anthology *The Best of BCS Year Five* just came out. We did a steampunk theme reprint anthology, *Ceaseless Steam*, a few years ago, and I'm planning another one next spring of Weird Western stories from the magazine. We recently launched a second audio fiction podcast called The BCS Audio Vault, which features past BCS Audio Fiction Podcast episodes with a new introduction by a guest author or editor. October 2014 will be our sixth anniversary; our Sixth Anniversary Double-Issue will include stories by Richard Parks, K.J. Parker, and Aliette de Bodard, and later in October we will have a new story by Gregory Norman Bossert, whose previous *BCS* story "The Telling" won the World Fantasy Award in 2013. My vision for the future is to keep publishing great literary adventure fantasy by neo-pro writers and veterans alike, online, as ebooks, and as podcasts; to keep doing what has made people call BCS a premiere venue for fantastic fiction.

**Dear Scott, thank you very much your detailed answers. I wish you good luck with BCS and any other projects that will surely come along.**

**Links:**

<http://www.beneath-ceaseless-skies.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Beneath-Ceaseless-Skies-Online-Magazine/110083031133>

<https://twitter.com/BCSmagazine>

<http://www.Scotthandrews.com/>



## Artist Spotlight: Suebsin Pulsiri

**S**uebsin Pulsiri is a graphic artist and illustrator from Thailand.

**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?

**Suebsin:** I was born and raised in Bangkok, Thailand. I don't know if I can say exactly what had a big influence on my work, but I think I became interested in drawing because I loved watching animation when I was a kid.

**Iulian:** What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?

**Suebsin:** Of course, I use Photoshop; I think it's the best software for drawing. I started learning it in the office and became better in time. Before that I used to draw on paper and canvas only.

**Iulian:** Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?

**Suebsin:** I have a lot of favorite artists. Among my idols I can mention: Frank Frazetta, Justin Sweet, and Craig Mullin. I am also a big fan of Studio Ghibli, an animation studio that produces great work.

**Iulian:** Where do you find inspiration?

**Suebsin:** I get ideas from everything in my life, such as cartoons, movies, games. I also study and get inspired by the works of other artists.

**Iulian:** How would you break down your workflow in steps?

**Suebsin:** Normally, I start creating a rough sketch directly in Photoshop (not scan). That becomes my guide. From there, I gradually paint, adding different layers until completion.

**Iulian:** Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?

**Suebsin:** I think that freedom of thought comes with fantasy. I absolutely prefer to draw a man riding a dragon more than driving a Ferrari in real life.

**Iulian:** If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?

**Suebsin:** Never stop training and improving your skills. Study other artists and always try to work outside of your comfort zone.

**Iulian:** We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.

**Suebsin:** It started from my desire to study the muscles of human and beast. Eventually that study turned into this picture. In my head, I created a story that turned into some sort of barbarian warrior riding a monster.

**Iulian:** Where can we find you on the web?

<http://www.facebook.com/choicepage>

<http://www.facebook.com/friendhaircut>

<http://drawcrowd.com/friendhaircut>

<http://www.choice01.com>



# Book Review: Upgraded (edited by Neil Clarke)

Julie Novakova

## Upgraded (anthology)

Edited by Neil Clarke

Wyrm Publishing; September, 2014

*Better. Stronger. Faster. Do these words really describe what becoming a cyborg means? Authors in Neil Clarke's new anthology UPGRADED contemplated this idea and each had a different take on human cyborgification. In the twenty-six futures offered there, humans are remade into living weapons, mining equipment, half-alien chimeras, fully cybernetic individuals, demigods, angels, and much more.*

Few anthologies have an origin story as unusual as this one. In 2012, Neil Clarke, editor of *Clarkesworld Magazine*, suffered a severe heart attack and had to have a pacemaker installed afterwards. He became a cyborg, which prompted him to focus his first themed anthology on this topic. Part of the stories was solicited, part came from the slush. The final selection of stories is quite diverse and able to fit various tastes in fiction. In the space of this review, I cannot mention all of the stories in such a length they would deserve, therefore I'm going to focus more on those that have stuck in my head more stubbornly than the others.

*Tongtong's Summer* by Xia Jia is by far the most optimistic, joyful story of the anthology and yet one that also contains great depths of grief, worry and sadness. Truly heartfelt, very realistically depicting what our very near future might look like and what effects might new technologies have on ordinary human lives. It was the most moving story to me and one of the highlights of the entire anthology.

Ken Liu's *The Regular* captured me almost instantly by a surprising twist and continued to draw me deeper and deeper into the story. Its portrayal of augmentation was very realistic and Liu also incorporated some highly interesting small extensions of currently existing technologies. Both main characters—that of a private investigator Ruth Law and a murderer she's chasing—were depicted in great detail and depth and their development was most interesting. Liu has a talent for describing the worlds in which his stories are set in a way that can make the reader imagine them better than their own. This one is very close to our own world today but Liu takes us places we might not really see unless we knew where to look for them. *The Regular* was, along with *Tongtong's Summer*, my favorite of the anthology.



*Coastlines of the Stars* by Alex Dally MacFarlane is set in a world that reminded me of classic space opera: brave pilots mapping the universe in their own starships, space containing dangers in the form of scavengers, debris fields filled with traps, and human rather than computer-controlled navigation. Its captivating voice, interesting premise, and space opera nostalgia worked together very well and brought forth a piece worth recommendation.

*Honeycomb Girls* by Erin Cashier managed to stick in my mind due to the unusual voice of the storytelling and a strangely post-catastrophic but still not negatively portrayed world. However, this story's take on cyborgs is very loose, since the closest element to this topic is replacement of humans in some roles by robots.

*Seventh Sight* by Greg Egan is one of the most "realistic" stories of the pack and one that made me imagine a brave new world of differently perceived colors. Elegantly simple, both in premise and implementation, it had a great effect and it's one of the works that had stuck in my head.

Benjanun Sriduangkaew offers one of the most distant depictions of humanity in her *Synecdoche Oracles*. It follows several of her earlier stories but their knowledge is needless for the reader to enjoy this image of far future where the possibilities of augmentation are nearly endless, but human beings also stay deeply human.

*What I've Seen With Your Eyes* by Jason K. Chapman has by far the weirdest first sentence in the anthology, one that really catches the reader's attention. While you may raise your eyebrows after reading it and wonder what on earth you've started on, the story soon takes you into a world not that far from ours and introduces a couple of sympathetic characters and interesting ideas, and is sure to make you both think and smile.

*Collateral* by Peter Watts deals with moral and ethical dilemmas and the way technological enhancements and interventions might change who we are. As is usual for the author, it offers a great deal of questions to ponder.

*No Place to Dream, but A Place to Die* by Elizabeth Bear is a tale of two cyborg miners working for different sides and forced by situation to solve a great problem together. Both main characters were believable and sympathetic and the tale itself very gripping and fast moving.

E. Lily Yu's *Musée de l'Âme Seule* began as a story of rejection of deformed, injured or otherwise "ugly" perceived people and ended with the most justified use of second person storytelling I've ever encountered, which made me remember the otherwise very good but not too prominent story.

*The Sarcophagus* by Robert Reed, set in the author's world of the Great Ship, was certainly one of the best depictions of our cyborg future in the anthology but the story itself didn't draw me in so deeply.

*Wizard, Cabalist, Ascendant* by Seth Dickinson is a rather classic take on the singularity (or avoiding it). Tobias S. Buckell's *A Cold Heart* is a simple action-packed story and the topic of gaining back one's memory is not much explored. Action is also the major part of Madeline Ashby's *Come From Away*. *Mercury in Retrograde* by Erin Hoffman represents classic cyberpunk, with a lot of action involved. Similar in this characterization, albeit less classic and much more innovative, is *Negative Space* by Amanda Forrest. Some other pieces could not have been more different from these: *Tender* by Rachel Swirsky, *Married* by Helena Bell and *Memories and Wire* by Mari Ness represent the more experimental and feeling-centered stories, the first one being the most experimental piece and the last the most "conventional" of these three. *The Cumulative Effect of Light Over Time* by Catherine E. Tobler was a thought-provoking read but its style would work for me better if the story was more concise. Genevieve Valentine's *Small Medicine* focused on personality simulation and perfect medicine and their impacts on life of a young girl and her family. The ideas and characters were strong but the story didn't really pull me in.

*Always The Harvest* by Yoon Ha Lee is an interesting and enjoyable story, rich in character building and novelty of setting but not one where the reader is drawn in deep enough to really believe in the depicted world. Somewhat similar in its mythological representation of cyborg elements is *Fusion* by Greg Mellor, where certain augmented beings are perceived as angels. *Oil of Angels* by Chen Qiufan doesn't have much in common with *Fusion* despite the angels in title; instead, it deals with voluntary choice of memory loss and its implications. *God Decay* by Rich Larson had a promising premise built on augments in sport but the execution of the ideas would be better to take us further than it really did. A.C. Wise's *Taking The Ghost* was the only outright fantasy of the pack and set in this anthology didn't work very well for me.

So how does our cyborg future look like in these stories? Most of the authors focused mainly on the negative side-effects while taking the positive side (life-saving therapies, survival in various environments etc.), which was explored countless times since long ago, more for granted. This aspect enabled a variety of views and greater focus on the characters. I would prefer the anthology to be organized to build more on the increasing level of cyborgification. Perhaps start with the very near future stories and move to the far future ones, which would give the reader a broader sense of the different ways through which our cyborg future might eventually take us. However, the order of stories in *Upgraded* made sense in terms of balancing the conventional and experimental, near and distant, optimistic and pessimistic

sides of the stories. To me, *Upgraded* was certainly an enjoyable and sometimes thought-provoking one. The majority of the stories evoked some sense of wonder, curiosity and imagination in me. That, in my view, is a marker of good science fiction.



© by Julie Novakova

# Movie Review: The House That Dripped Blood (Peter Duffell)

Katharine O'Neill

As a film studies student I watched a variety of films on my university course. One of the modules was Horror and Nation, and it was about that time I first saw 'The House That Dripped Blood', a 1970s film made by Amicus Productions. Since then, despite having nightmares from that particular film, it has given me a certain fascination for the old horror movies within the Hammer Horror era. As a result, I have revisited the same film again. And again. And again. I just can't get enough of it. Despite the fact it still makes me look at the bedroom door to make sure it's closed and under the bed for any monster at the ripe old age of twenty-five and a mother of one, it is easily one of my favorite films.

There is certainly something to be said about the classic British film and that it has something that more recent horror films do not have: the 'horror' music. You're thrown straight in to the deep end, not given a false sense of security waiting for a scare toward the end. And how do the creators do that? The music. That and the fact their first shot is of a deserted house in the dead of night. The 'horror' music older films use sends a tingling down your spine, warning you of what is to come and to be prepared for a scare. The music has an ominous ring to it, using a range of percussion instruments, similar soundings to what you would hear with scenes of voodoo. And it is this music that sucked me in before anything happened.

'The House That Dripped Blood' was right in the middle of the Hammer Horror era. It is different as in it is not a Dracula movie, which was also the rage in that time - more so than it is today - and it wasn't a Frankenstein film, another story that has become famous through the screen as well as the book. It has its own twist on the haunted house theme. Think of it as a 70s version of 'The Grudge' - whoever goes into that house and stays will suffer a grotesque fate, usually depending on their personality and attitudes when they go in. But instead of a ghost haunting the place, the house is haunted without any help from external forces.

Because the film is based on four short stories all linked together, it is told in flashback. We are told the story about the house in the same sequence as the main protagonist, the Scotland Yard detective, who is increasingly skeptical about the happenings. He doesn't believe in a haunted house and that it might be responsible for the disappearance of a missing film star he has been brought in on. That role of the film star, played by Jon Pertwee, was certainly an interesting view for myself, having seen him in more comic roles such as in the 'Carry On'

films and listening to him on the radio in 'The Navy Lark'. He pulled off a serious actor brilliantly, and it was worth the wait to see him.

The film is certainly advertised well with an array of actors that everyone would recognize nowadays.

Denholm Elliot starts off the ensemble, and he would later go on to star with Harrison Ford in Indiana Jones; Peter Cushing comes next, one of Hammer Horror's most distinguished actors and unfortunately typecast; Christopher Lee, the six-foot-four giant known for Frankenstein's monster in the 1958 film and predominantly Dracula; and Jon Pertwee, who filmed his scenes in between the first and second seasons of Doctor Who. For me, any one of those actors make the film worth watching, but at the forefront would be Peter Cushing, who is one of my favorite actors within the horror genre.

All four stories are portrayed with brilliance, and the supporting cast pull off their parts well. Even though I do my normal check for discrepancies within a programme—I adore 'The Sooty Show' but I constantly tear it to pieces because it shatters my illusion that the puppets are real and I can see where the puppet ends and the hand begins—I could not see anything off with the makeup. And you could certainly praise the makeup artists, for there was a lot of it to go around: from make-believe villains to waxworks to vampires.

It seemed to have a lot of aspects that are common in horror stories but with their own twists, both macabre and inventive. It certainly scared me and after the first time I watched it I kept looking at the shadows, sure that there was someone moving about. And it was all to do with the lighting, the music, and the still camera shots that seemed to be frozen in time as the audience would be, holding onto their bated breath.

Naturally, the inspector is very skeptical and doesn't believe that there is something wrong with the house. If we were in his position, neither would we. Whenever my fiancé is watching a film with me, he would scoff and accuse the character of being stupid if they do something that would inevitably be the wrong choice. He would go on to say what he would do in that situation but then I would point out that if we were put under pressure we wouldn't think rationally, either. Besides, rational thinking in a horror film doesn't make a very good plot.

The end shows that common phrase we hear so often: 'don't go in alone'. Of course, what does the inspector do? He goes to the house alone, even after everything he's heard about it. And in the dead of night. In the world of the horror film, this is a classic, especially since most of the horror we get in films, old and present, are carried out at night. And it certainly works to scare everyone. This is the part that had me scared the first time round. Going into

an old, creaky house in the dead of night and coming face-to-face with a nightmare. Since my parents' house was old and creaky, it had me awake for hours whenever anything creaked and groaned during the night.

To me, this film is not just a horror film. It appears to be a set of twisted love stories, with its own new ideas and creativity on how love goes wrong or how it is a major problem even it's not in the forefront of people's minds. Horror is a creative genre all on its own. It can turn the most beautiful of things into a nightmare and make us remember it shaking with fear.

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**IMDb Rating:** 6.6 / 10

**Rotten Tomatoes Rating:** 78%

**Film Credits:** <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065854/>

**Official Trailer:** <http://youtu.be/MYiiHEjE83U>



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