

RAVEN CAGE

Poetry and Prose Ezine



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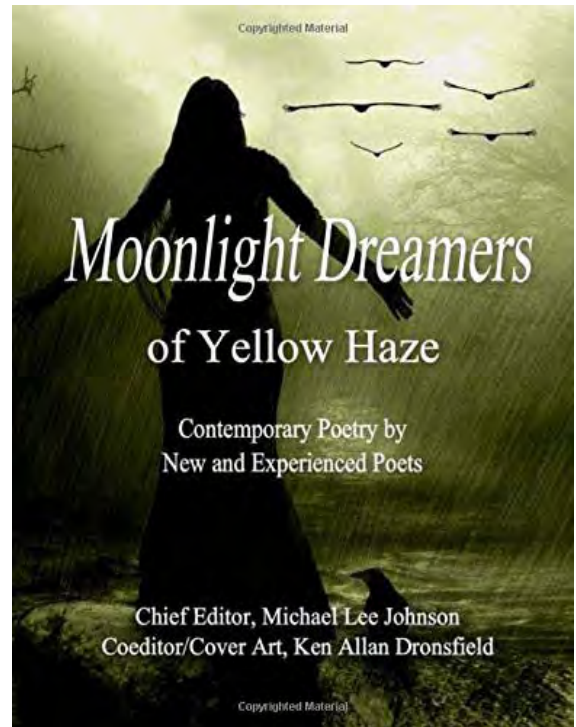
http://www.amazon.de/Dying-Light-English-Jason-Gehlert.../ref=sr_1_2...

http://www.amazon.com/gp/aw/d/B01DJFTPPI/ref=mp_s_a_1_1?qid=1459202152&sr=1-1&pi=SY200_QL40&keywords=Jason+Gehlert&dpPl=1&dpID=517TMt6aBUL&ref=plSrch



For more than a decade Jason Gehlert has haunted us with his chilling works. Now he delivers a unique blend of horror and science fiction that celebrates his characters and their lives. When infamous, immortal hit man, Jeremiah Black enacts revenge on Malcolm Ellis, the story takes a different spin. After believing Malcolm is dead, Jeremiah begins to make plans to take over Malcolm's world. Malcolm survives and his true identity is revealed. He seeks refuge on a lake surrounding himself with familiar friends. Can Malcolm reclaim his world from Jeremiah as the epic battle between good vs evil commences? Or will Jeremiah and his own regime force Malcolm to extinction?

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1530456762>



Chucked full with 53 poets and 188 pages, this 8 1/2 x 11" anthology is loaded with the very best contemporary and new artistic voices in poetry today. Inside is a combination of Pushcart nominees, winners, Best of the Net such as chief editor Michael Lee Johnson, Janet Kuypers, A.J. Huffman, Joan McNerney, Gary Beck, Joanna M. Weston, Scott Thomas Outlar, Psycho Kanev, and coeditor Ken Allan Dronsfield and many others. If you do not recognize a name now you will after this book captures your imagination touches your heart because these poets are on the frontline of small contemporary poetry press today. This anthology, wonderful covers, incredible talent, makes the perfect addition to your personal library, coffee table, or given as a special gift.

Buy now!

<http://aeafanzine.blogspot.de/>



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/230377537030238/>

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http://www.amazon.com/Rollercoaster-Heart-collection-poems/dp/1533098174/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8



http://www.amazon.com/Rollercoaster-Heart-collection-poems/dp/1533098174/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8
[The Rollercoaster Heart: a collection of poems](http://www.amazon.com/Rollercoaster-Heart-collection-poems/dp/1533098174/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

This is my 4th collection of Poems centered around the ups and downs of Love and Life.
amazon.com

http://www.amazon.com/Rollercoaster-Heart-collection-poems/dp/1533098174/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8

Dee's Ghostly Writes

<https://www.facebook.com/DebzMARIE33/>

Grave Pain Project

<https://www.facebook.com/gravepainproject/>

Emotional Poetry

Tears of the Sun

My father weeps
As he saw me bleed
He fought for me
To see me free

I am black
Only in skin color
Peel my skin it bleeds
with red blood same as you and me

My father shouted before the world
That equality is the essence of peace
Democracy is the only means
Can eradicate illiteracy

My father heard our tiny voices
He fought against slavery
Imprisoned for 27yrs
For he love us dearly
He wanted us to be
granted equal rights
and equal opportunities

He uplift education
Stood against tyranny
Descrimination in the eyes
Of the world is what he fought

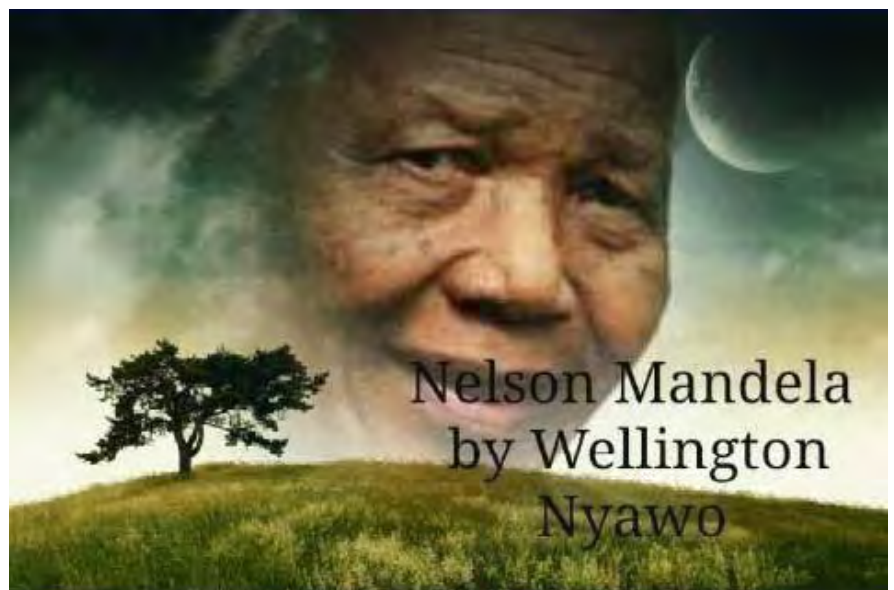
He taught us to be proud of who we are
as Africans
To value our worth as prime citizens
Of our homeland

He showed us
How beautiful and talented we are
His voice echoed
In the four corners of the world

He touches the hearts of many
As they listen to his cry
That the world must See us same
Like their own fathers and mothers
Who deserves to exist with respect
In this beautiful universe...

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My father... THE GREAT AFRICAN LEADER
MY HERO NELSON MANDELA..
Picture is courtesy of Wellington Nyawo



Emotional Poetry

Sad to Belong

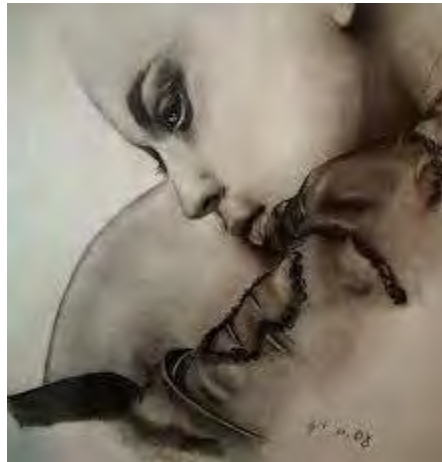
I am with your arms
But I longed
For someone else

You owned my body
Never that you owned
My heart and soul

Difficult to pretend
To speak the words
I love you

When the truth
I am wishing
To be with somebody else

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The weeping angel

I am your child
You bore me
You gave me life
The blood that runs in my veins
Is your only blood

Why beat me?
Hate me?
Hurt me?
Sold me?
Betray me?

What life do I have
What life you can bring to me
What life I deserve
What kind of parents bestowed
Upon me?

I am young but a victim of slavery
So alone, no one to defend me
Abused my weaknesses
as fragile as a broken glass

I live a life full of remorse
Why I became your child
I wish to change my fate

Emotional Poetry

But how ? You define my life

I want to defy
But ,I am too weak
Too innocent
To face these mountainous trials

Lord
Let me have wings to fly
To escape from their hands
I pray that tomorrow all shall change
A new life shall be mine...

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The lonely truth

If the world is beautiful
There should be no famine
There should be no diseases
There should be no death due to hungerness

If the world is beautiful
There should be no slavery
No extra judicial killings
No corrupt and graft practices

If the world is beautiful
There should be no genocide
There should be no racial descriminations
Between black and white

If the world is beautiful
There should be no wars
No Isis ,No extrimist
No killings because of pride

If the world is beautiful
There should be no rich or poor
There should be no slavery
No prostitution because of poverty

What is beautiful to you
When we only see the beauty
When we closed our eyes to the cry of many
We pretended to be dumb allowing
The wrong to happen against what is right?

The world will only be beautiful
When we will open our eyes
When we will emphatize for those
Who are helpless ,those unseen by many



Emotional Poetry

The world will only be beautiful
When we start loving and caring
For those who are cursed by the society
If we start reaching out by giving a little of
What we have
when we start caring for those
who are abandoned

When there is no poverty
No extra judicial killings
When we start listening and empathize for
what they feel
When we do something
to change their world for the better

When there will be no more cry
Because of helplessness
Then ,
The world shall become
A place where we can call
A beautiful and perfect world.

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Emotional Poetry

Blame the Moonlight

That shine in your eyes
Took me by surprise
They wooed my mind
My thoughts went blind
I was lost in the night
Slave to your light
Locked in your charms
Locked in your arms
Burning with passion
Yearning for comparison
Flame burning thru the night
Blame it on the moonlight
I fell from grace
As I saw your face
Your moon pale skin
Took me for a spin
Spun me in lucid fantasy
Plunged me into endless ecstasy
Slave to my need
Slave to my greed
A fire out of control
A desire eating me whole
Flame burning thru the night
Blame it on the moonlight

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Emotional Poetry

Broken Dreams and Souvenirs

Each evening she walks to the ocean
when the twilight streaks across the sky
with the deepest sorrow in her heart
her tears she cannot disguise

Her eyes no longer twinkle
so filled with only sadness
alone she stands baring her soul
breathing the memories of her past

The sands of time have broken her heart
her only souvenirs are the long ago given gems
she has tied with ribbons and placed on a shelf
photographs, a necklace, love letters from him

Her hair sprinkled with silver
age lines that crinkle around her eyes
her body aged with softness
not much left for her as time slips by

Living in her memories
as the gentle breeze blows sweet visions
of the only one she ever truly loved
maybe he was just a fantasy obsession

She loved him completely
gave her all to him
then he was gone forever
lost like a petal in the wind

As the sun sets into the ocean
she returns to her room each night
and with pen and paper
all that is in her heart she writes

And as the memories fade
she realizes there's nothing left for her
then cries herself to sleep each night with
broken dreams and souvenirs

jane kelley
© 3/20/04

GOthic POETRY

The Pathfinder

At the first stroke of midnight
comes a vision so clear
awakening my senses
when a white wolf will appear
I have always been a Sun Seeker
why in the darkness do you come to me
as I count the last grains of sand
I hear the sighs of a willow tree
You hasten into my dreams
a swift messenger with no strife
I listen to your howling and embrace
the sacredness of life
Are you from some future trail
or from some distant time
will you be my protector
with each mountain I must climb
His paws touched the earth softly
as rain on fallen snow
he bids me wait by an ancient fire
till my heart can feel the glow
Memories in my soul rekindled
my heart searches as the spirits dance
the winds tonight are talking
saying nothing happens by chance
Up on a hill he raised his regal head
sang his song to the moon and sky
echoing deep within the silent night
I will remember every word and sigh
I am your loyal Pathfinder
you are afraid for you have no goal
you must break allegiance with your past
I cannot tell you which way to go
To reach that eternal light
you must follow the river of your soul
The choice must be your heart's decision
and I will guide you in life's flow
In awe I stood there contemplating
watching the sun-streaked morning sky
I called to you for your gentle strength
and saw that trust lives in your eyes



jane kelley
© 5/5/06

GOthic POETRY

Reflection

So sweetly sang the sparrow
outside my window pane
or was it just a reflection
of a moment when I was sane
When you left you stole my sunshine
and left me with only the rain
the clouds of deceit so clear
it's all I see in my pain
I believed you really loved me
you promised me so many things
your love and total devotion
these things you always would sing
Your hands so gently caressed me
I was so safe in your arms
how could I know you would leave
I was enamored with your heavenly charms
Your kisses were touched with honey
your touch was a pleasure to behold
then you vanished, taking my treasure
and left my heart broken and cold
Sweetly sang the sparrow
in the mornings of velvet blue
each day I awakened with splendor
so tenderly I loved you
The raven has descended
chasing my sparrow away
he cries his words of wisdom
beware " love never stays "

jane kelley
© 6/01/03



GOthic POETRY

Hallways

Today I walked
throughout the house
looking for feelings
no longer present.
Each veiled hallway
led to places
where spaces existed--
only dust remains.
A detached home
with detached rooms
remembered only
as detached memories.
The family abode
is nothing but
volume and echoes
that stretch onward,
an endless maze
where I walk
softly, alone, silent,
so as not
to disturb
other lingering
ghosts.

© Guy Anthony De Marco

GOthic POETRY

Stoking the flames

to stake I was bound
then the blaze would rise
as the crowd looked on
I would meet demise

on gasses I'd gag
and I'd hack and choke
as the lungs partook
in their holy smoke

the hide all blistered
the innards boiled
and as I squirmed 'round
the body broiled

I'd know no reprieve
though I thrashed and screamed
past burnt I'd be cooked
as the juices steamed

coerced to confess
and to fire fed
exposed to the heat
till my flesh had fled

reduced down to ash
was that carcass worn
but dead I was not
I had just been born

they did their lords work
but set evil free
by stoking the flames
that would swallow me...

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GOthic POETRY

Eastern Gales

cast what's left on the winds
let me blow to the east
just as long as I'm freed
from the jaws of this beast
let me drift o'er streams
let me visit the skies
let me see what is seen
by the crow as he flies
let me look upon glens
and on foothills that roll
give no care where I'm led
let the gusts have control
let me see what I may
the winds show what they might
just as long as I'm freed
from these battles I fight
show me forests so vast
show me mountains and dales
if you cared for me once
set me free on those gales...

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GOthic POETRY

City Lights - 1888

It was a very cold night.
a misty fog danced around the street lamps.

sleek beautiful horses clopping down cobblestone streets
pulling coaches that were passing through the town.

The smell of frying fish and kidney pies wafted across
the street from the White Chapel Inn

Pickpockets, ladies of the evening roaming the streets,
hoping to collect a copper or two.

An old woman, pushing a flower cart, calling out,
Violets, posies, a flower for your lady, Sir? only a tuppence.

At the South end of the street, gypsies had camped...
brightly colored skirts swishing with the jingling of their tamborines.

Music from the Pub on the corner filled the night air.
Inside, stout flowing freely while darts kept hitting the board

Down the street, past the Apothecary, around the corner
was a dark shrouded alley..a young lady, lay sprawled, bleeding,
gasping for breath, unable to call for help

A tall dark haired man, shabbily cloaked in black,
stood over her, smiling

Outside the Pub, a newsboy called, get your
paper, while he held them in his hand

On the front page.....
Jack the Ripper has struck again!

jane kelley
11/13



General Poetry

Mother Gaia

Mother hugs her babies, corralling them in the yard.
Thirty two feet, per second and again.
Her children laugh and jump high,
to be welcomed home with an unyielding embrace.

As the kids grow and leave their nests,
They settle elsewhere but still so near.
Mother might call when she is feeling ill.
Concern and remembrance are a television away.

Then the dreamers learn to take flight.
A desperate struggle against the gossamer thread,
they seek to find their place amongst the stars.
Mother weeps as her babies leave home for the last time.

© Guy Anthony De Marco

New Earth

All our loved ones tearfully bade farewell,
The journey would be permanent and complete.
Time and distance would separate us, hence
We traveled afar like seeds on the wind.

The journey was permanent and completed.
The new Earth welcomed us at first.
We traveled afar casting seeds to the wind.
But Mother Nature was not a forgiving type.

This new Earth seemed welcoming at first.
Our crops and villages spread equally.
Mother Nature never forgave our type
And sent her flora and fauna to war.

Our crops and villages fell equally
Despite our prayers and guns and science.
When flora and fauna come dressed for war
It's the microbes who finish all battles.

© Guy Anthony De Marco

Guy Anthony De Marco is a speculative fiction author; a Graphic Novel Bram Stoker Award® finalist; a disabled US Navy veteran; a prolific short story and flash fiction crafter; a novelist; an invisible man with superhero powers; a game writer (Sojourner Tales modules, Interface Zero 2.0 core team, third-party D&D modules); and a coffee addict. One of these is false.

Guy is a member of the following pro organizations: SFWA, WWA, HWA, SFPA, IAMTW, ASCAP, RMFW, MWG, and NCW. He hopes to collect the rest of the letters of the alphabet one day. Additional information can be found at

www.GuyAnthonyDeMarco.com.

General Poetry

IF YOU SEE OJUKWU

If you see Ojukwu
Tell him, I never saw him
But heard a lot he did,
Tell him I see his pictures,
That radiate determination
His Afro hair and beard
Typical of African masculine.

If you see Ojukwu
Tell him, I heard of the war
Its horrors that still hover
Its ghost that still haunts,
Tell him, I see danger
If you see Ojukwu
Tell him, nothing changed.

If you see Ojukwu
Tell him, they still kill
They still maim,
They still marginalize
Tell him, they still burn and bomb
Tell him, the war is still on
Tell him, they vanquished.

If you see Ojukwu
Tell him, tomorrow is uncertain
Tell him we are deadlocked
Heading to nowhere
Ask him who do we blame,
Fate, the gods, ancestors,
Black or white?

If you see Ojukwu
Fail not to tell him these
Please never hesitate
Perhaps he will incarnate a saviour,
If you see Ojukwu
Tell him living here is a war
Dying here is a war too

© Ngozi Osuoha

General Poetry

EN ROUTE

Glued to their mat in the cave
En route the swampy road, leaping like the toad
They are saints that refuse to die
And angels that detest heaven.

Strand in babylon, a ruler
Home relaxed, a woeful resident
Peeping to know those asleep
A boss tossing the cross on glass.

Actors acting their scripts
Covenanting to cover their coverteousness,
Deceivers deceiving the deceivable
Stage-managed promises and mockery.

Mentals maiming those they should mentor
Payers paid to play and entertain
En route to watch and weigh
To look and laugh at length.

Running their mouths like comedians
Drunk old wags wagging
En route to see them one more time
Upon my homeward way.

En route to see tamed lions in the jungle
And domesticated wolves,
Most importantly, en route to search for the lambs headed toward their den
En route to watch them do nonsense or nothing.

© Ngozi Osuoha

General Poetry

ST CATHARINE'S MY PURPLE GOLD

Corridor of discipline
Dormitory of seniority
Classroom of knowledge
Field of games
Quarters of principles
Chapel of moral instructions
St Catharine's, my purple gold.

Village of girls
Community of sisters
State of females
Country of women
World of mothers
Arena of womanhood
St Catharine's, my purple gold.

Built for future
Served humanity
Instituted for tomorrow
Trained world class
More like a convent,
Vision of missionary
St Catharine's, my purple gold.

Awake! Guild thy loins
Neither slumber anymore
Nor sleep again
Revive, thy strength
Where is thy zeal?
Who killed thy spirit?
Awake! Thou giant
Beautify thyself, ye Queen
Thy master cometh
Put on thy lantern
Thy bridegroom is here.

Ngozi Olivia Osuoha is a Nigerian poet/writer. She is a graduate of Estate Management with experience in banking and broadcasting.

She has published numerous works in Liberia, Ghana, India, USA, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, UK, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and others.

Writing is everything.



© Ngozi Osuoha
DEDICATED TO ST CATHARINE'S OLD GIRLS' ASSOCIATION

General Poetry

Slavery

Decent men
Do not buy sex
For men are not
Subject to commercial trade

Decent men
Helps the needy
They do not
Exploit children for sex
In exchange for loaves of bread

Decent men
Value human life
They never compromise
Their Integrity and pride

Decent men
Knows their worth
Should refrain from committing acts that
Constitute crimes against public moral ,
public interest and public policy

Decent men
YOU are Leaders that must be followed
If involve in slavery
Then , You lost your face before the world

No to Human Trafficking!!

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General Poetry

Iranian Poetry Lady (V2)

By Michael Lee Johnson

The first time I saw your face, cosmetic images, dust, dirt, determination
fell across your exiled face. Coal smoke lifted with your simple words and short
poems.
Your meaning drawn across a black board of past, rainbows, future
fragment, still in the shadows.
Muhammad, Jesus twins, only one forms a halo alone.
One screams love, drips candle wax, lights life, shakes, love.
I encrust your history in the Ginkgo tree, deliverance.
I wrap in the branches the whispers in your ears a new beginning.
I am the landscape of your future walk soft peddle on green grass.
I will take you there. I am your poet, your lead, freedom clouds move over then
on.
I review no spelling, grammar errors; I lick your envelope, finish, stamp place on.
Down with age I may go, but I offer this set of wings I purchased at a thrift store.
I release you in south wind, storms, and warm in spring, monarch butterflies.
Your name scribbles in gold script.
Night, mysteries, follow handle, your own.

Harvest Time (V8)

By Michael Lee Johnson

A Métis lady, drunk—
hands folded, blanketed as in prayer
over a large brown fruit basket
naked of fruit, no vine, no vineyard
inside—approaches the Edmonton,
Alberta adoption agency.
There are only spirit gods
inside her empty purse.

Inside the basket, an infant,
restrained from life,
with a fruity winesap apple
wedged like a teaspoon
of autumn sun
inside its mouth.
A shallow pool of tears mounts

in his native baby blue eyes.
Snuffling, the mother offers
a slim smile, turns away.
She slithers voyeuristically
through near slum streets
and alleyways,
looking for drinking buddies
to share a hefty pint
of applejack wine.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. He is a Canadian and USA citizen. Today he is a poet, editor, publisher, freelance writer, amateur photographer, small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in more than 880 small press magazines in 27 countries, and he edits 10 poetry sites. Author's website <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>. Michael is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom* (136 page book) ISBN: 978-0-595-46091-5, several chapbooks of poetry, including *From Which Place the Morning Rises* and *Challenge of Night and Day*, and *Chicago Poems*. He also has over 92 poetry videos on YouTube as of 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos> **Michael Lee Johnson, Itasca, IL. nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards for poetry 2015.** Visit his Facebook Poetry Group and join <https://www.facebook.com/groups/807679459328998/> He is also the editor/publisher of anthology, *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1530456762> <https://wwwcreatespace.com/6126977>.

General Poetry

Cheaters ^(V3)

By Michael Lee Johnson

I am tired of cheaters
online, weary eyed crossword
players complicated chest moves
drift dancers, lies, laid soft peddle,
shared pillow, dark closet dreamers.
Campaign gossip whispers,
infidelity, sex objects shoved up orifices
in open or private places.
Sex shops open late, consummation
nightclubs, cities dark corners.
Two doctrines of selfishness
you should know about
penises and affairs most are short.
Flesh and fights, scabs, cheaters in the night.

One-Legged Goose

By Michael Lee Johnson

You see me in the parking lot hobbling, avoiding cars.
I am that one-legged Canadian goose guest of the wild.
You toss me a handful of mixed birdfeed.
I am your morning wing flapper picking up leftovers
by sparrows brown wing doves, yet grateful for charity.
I learn to survive dipped in red resister North then South
traveler, lifelong, mute to borders, I cross the line.
I thank you poet, bouquet, crossword flowers
gusty winds mix carnations.
Cheap, reasonable costs in depth, death, within religions,
tones of god Zeus, one space to Mary wept.
Those cheap carnations at the foot of the cross.
One-legged goose singled out.

Flight of the Eagle

By Michael Lee Johnson

From the dawn, dusty skies
comes the time when
the eagle flies-
without thought,
without aid of wind,
like a kite detached without string,
the eagle in flight leaves no traces,
no trails, no roadways-
never a feather drops
out of the sky.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Room without a view

in this room there's no view
but there's plenty of sights
and the way out is barred
so there's no fleeing the frights

with me they're locked up
and seems they're planning to stay
although I wish they all would
it seems that none go away

there's no room here for any
and yet it's many that dwell
seems that Hell reserves space
and so I'm sharing my cell

I cower, the coward
and to the corner I crawl
and I claw hard at these walls
now containing us all

it's away I would go
if I were only allowed
anything I would do
to get away from this crowd

it's this room we inhabit
and this suffering share
and amongst ourselves we talk
though there's nobody there

it's just me and myself
not one other to find
and with madness I race
but seems I'm falling behind

wish I could silence the screams
wish the voices were dead
wish I could kill off the pain
but it's right there in the head...

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DARK AND HORROR POETRY

The mirror at the end of the hall

At the end of the hall
Lingering in solitude
Hangs and has long hung
Almost lost in the gloom
A forgotten heirloom
Placed and since inventory
Down the corridor
Where it and nothing more
Hangs and has long hung
That old lonesome mirror
I have often sensed
And caught a shimmer
A faded and unclear
Reflection of her
A fraction of a refraction
Reflection of a reflection
Standing just behind me
Before fading into the drear
That inhabits
The end of the hall
Where the mirror
Hangs and has hung
On the wall
Often I have eluded
Out of blank fear
This domicile of unrest
Naught can fully illuminate
The gloom that emanates
From this far nook
Seldom I steal a look
In this shadowy drear
Avoiding directly peering
Rarely nearing
The looking glass
At the end of the hall
That hangs and has hung
So long on the wall
'Twas a moment of strayness
I found myself standing there
Peering into the mirror
She there brushing her hair
One hand stretched my way
As if attempting to say
Fear not everything is okay
Who is she
That haunts me?"
I so deeply pondered
In my maze I wandered

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Thinking to such depth
"So frail
So pale"
Never receiving my answer
From mind nor mirror
That hangs and has hung
For ever so long
At the end of the hall
© Jerry Langdon 2014

Moon Shine

The moon shines hard on my skin
And I feel how the beast awakens within
Lock me away throw away the key
Blind me so I can't see
Don't let the beast free
These walls are growing weak
Swallowing the words I speak
These walls are toppling down
I feel how they are beating my crown
Bleeding until I drown
I know I'm not perfect
I know I'm not all that you expect
But I've tried so hard to please
Gave all that I could release
Now I feel how my sanity begins to cease
These walls are growing weak
Full of holes - leak after leak
And the moonshine is flooding in
Shining hard on my skin
And I feel how the beast awakens within
Someone get a silver bullet or a cross
I am slipping away - I'm at a loss
Don't know who I am anymore
Can't remember what I've lived for
Where the hell is the door
I want out
Far away from all this doubt
But I feel how the beast awakes in me
Fighting to break free
Pushing me to my knee

© Jerry Langdon 2013

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Invaded Dreams

And again this night he invades her dreams,
Nearly a week now and she knows not what it means.
A new town a new house, a new life, a life on her own,
But she would get used to it soon it would feel like home.

She fears sleep, she feared him she knew not why,
Only she did fear perhaps it was his hypnotic eyes.
The deepest brown but filled with such torment,
She could see it, she could feel the pain emit.

Hair the color of a raven's wings hanging loosely amid his back,
A silver sword held tight poised for defending an attack.
He was tall perhaps six foot three a little less maybe a little more,
Eyes searching always stopping as they reached the door.

Never once were words spoken between the two
It was as if he didn't know she was there or what to do.
He could not be real only a phantom from her mind,
Conjured by her loneliness she thought had been left behind.

She tossed and turned blankets twisted sheet hanging loose,
Unnoticed by him for still only his eyes moved.
Hiding in the farthest regions of her mind she peeked through,
Sweat glistened upon her body as she searched for clues.

What if it was help he needed? But what help was she?
Perhaps the attic held secrets; maybe it could provide the key.
She gritted her teeth and shut her eyes tighter against his pain,
Sharpened steel sword streaking through her brain.

A sleeping daze she rose slowly from her wrinkled bed,
Slow steps, no control as she walked the path of the undead.
No, wait she was not dead he could not take her again,
But try as she may there was no strength to fight this man.

So her walk continued through the lost pages of time,
Her basement had become a dungeon; of prisoners, there was no sign.
But the blood. Long since dried but the stench lingered on,
Echoing in the distance a heart-wrenching groan.

No one was there how could it really be so,
She did not want to walk it again, but his eyes made her go.
Looking she saw him held fast in a small cell.
Open cuts oozed blood a nightmare from hell.

A serrated gash split his head his blood soaked skull in view,
A jagged scar upon his cheekbone and tissue showing through.
His tortured body though not dead was almost lifeless

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

And his eyes dazed, color untold remained sightless.

The groan lingered as it had in each dream
Why then did he bring her for it was a repeated scene?
Eerie, so eerie this same dream each night,
Soon she would awaken to dawn's first light.

This she knew for it was always the same,
Her fear, her anger, his nightly game.
She thought she had found peace at last,
But no her dreams had led her to the past.

Part 2

A constant ring she shook herself it was the alarm clock,
She groaned aloud reaching for the cut off to make it stop.
Her arms stretched wide she so much wanted to sleep in,
Another dreary day she thought hearing the rain bombarding the tin.

Well the bills don't get paid if no work is done, and she rested her feet upon
the floor,
She squinted her eyes, hmmm something I was supposed to be searching
for.
Oh well, it will come to me, a cup of coffee to start the day.
Once she awoke to the light of day her dream would always fade.

Once in her car she turned the key, damn she cursed it wouldn't start,
She raised the hood and her motor was torn apart.
The battery was gone, and all the wiring hung loose,
Oh hell, she would be late now what was she to do?

She ran back into the house rain dripping from her, soaking the floor,
Startled she jumped for upstairs she heard the sound of a slamming door.
Terror struck her soul no one should be here for she lived all alone.
The bedroom window was open it had to be the wind and she reached for
the phone.

Nothing left to do but call in to work let them know she would be late,
Perhaps she would stay out all together it was already a quarter past eight.
No dial tone, no static, no nothing perhaps it was the heavy rain,
She hung it up wiggled the cord and tried it once again.

Still nothing. Until the rain slacked there was nothing to be done,
Well, she could get out of her wet clothes. Going into the bathroom she
searched for a towel but there was none.
Strange she thought should be towels in both bathrooms upstairs and
down,
Something weird going on and her face marred with a frown.

A deafening scream shattered the early morning peace and her body shook,
She should call someone, damn no phone, so alone she was afraid to look.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

The shattering of glass caught her attention and a woman's cry for help,
Oh, she had to get out of here but the door would not open. Oh, God
footfalls on the steps.

She twisted and turned the doorknob but it would not release its tight hold
Stuck in this house with no one knew what and she shivered from fright as
well as her wet clothes.

Over the house, she ran trying both windows and doors while upstairs a
battle raged,
So still she stood as she watched her house begin to change.

Part 3

She was floating through the air so fast her head began to spin,
Her golden hair slapped her face mightily from the force of the winds.
She had no control to guide where this terrifying path led,
Faster and faster and faster she spun till all thoughts fled.

Her eyes held tight against the twisting, turning scenery,
But then the power of her ride took her will to see.
Hours and hours passed before her journey was complete,
And she landed none to gently on her feet.

She swayed this way and that trying to recapture some stability.
Many voices echoed through her brain as she escaped reality.
She opened her eyes with a moment's hesitation,
And a spine-chilling scream escaped as she viewed her destination.

In a corner was an oak dresser with broken glass reeking of gin,
The liquid pooling upon the top then trickling over the end.
Shards of glass upon the floor from a broken vase,
Upon the bed lay a woman blood covering her whole face.

Slashes in between her eyes her right cheek cut to the bone,
And over and over from her bloody lips came an agonizing moan.
She tried so hard to move her right arm but it hung limply,
She slowly turned her head and she had no eyes the sockets empty.

Her right leg was severed from her body and her heart lay bare,
God help me leave this nightmare I have to get out of there.
The moan continued over and over but until he let her she could not go,
And she began to shiver her skin pale as deaths cold.

Tears flowed she covered her face with her hands and she fell to her knees,
What do you want from me? Tell me, tell me, please.
A lone tear escaped his eyes and he shook his head,
His eyes disappeared met with an eerie quietness and she knew the woman
was dead.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Part 4

Turning over in bed she felt the hot sun shining through the window,
Oh damn, she must have hit the snooze, ten after ten the clock showed.
No time for a shower. She brushed her teeth and her hair and rushed for her car.

It was a good thing she didn't have to go to far

The air-conditioned building felt good after the heat from outside,
Okay, what excuse could she give for being late? Well, it would have to be a good lie.

Her boss hated the old sleeping through the alarm excuse; it didn't matter if you did,

Thomas Masters met her at the elevator, Hey where ya been, kid?

They had been friends since they had met two years past,

In fact, he had helped her land this job so fast.

He had been here for about six years never missed a day,

Oh, shoot Thomas I had a nightmare and I slept late.

That doesn't work with me and sure as hell don't work with the boss,

He's ready to fire your ass, but then that's your loss.

Oh, Thomas really. He might write me up, but I don't think he'll fire me,

Cara, you have been out three days and never even called in just wait and see.

But Thomas I haven't been out at all and I'm only two hours late,
She gasped in shock as she noticed a calendar on Tammy's desk with the date.

She had lost two days somewhere along the line,

Damn what had happened to those two days from her life?

Well Thomas was right she got fired and did not even know why,

After arriving home she lay on her bed and began to cry.

Was she going insane? What was the matter with her?

Oh God, the last two days were such a blur.

Part 5

Not again, no please no. She no longer cried but could still hear a soft cry,
But no they weren't her tears this she knew and from her emerged a ragged sigh.

Why did this have to happen to her? She should run now before he came,
Just escape from this house before she became completely insane

She rose from the bed her mind made. She was leaving this place, NOW.

There was no time to pack. Nothing was worth her sanity. She would get by somehow.

Taking the steps two at a time, escape, escape, escape, was all she could think,

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Nothing could stop her tormented cry as the floor turned to blood and she began to sink.

The more she thrashed about the farther underneath she was drug,
It seized her tightly, choking, suffocating, and inhaling the rotted blood.
Her mouth and nostrils filled with the crimson liquid and each time it took her breath.
She was drowning, and she could no longer fight her impending death.

There he be, me laddies, get him, get him, we canna let him escape,
Blood everywhere. At least ten men swords drawn a battle cry raged.
She was in the midst of a small village a thick fog easing in from the sea,
They were dashing towards her, she could reach out to touch them, but they were only spirits,
She did not see the small rowboat being propelled out to sea but she could hear it.

She spun like a top and the scenery began to change. A small hut, the oak dresser with spilled gin,
Oh God no, please no, but she knew. It was time to relive it all over again.
Lying on the bed just as before, the blood, the sightless eye sockets, the rancid smell,
I want to wake up, please let me wake; I can no longer take this life in hell.

A soft whisper from a time so long ago surrounded her drawing her near,
A man's voice, passionate in his plea, a heavy accent spoken in her ear.
His words continuous as if he was really trying to make her believe,
Aye milady until you help me this locality you shall never leave.

You are much needed here though my words you do not take note of,
I need you to put to rest the soul of myself and my ladylove.
I beseech you, his voice echoed from a distant time slowly fading please help me
You are the one, the only one that can bring our soul's peace.

Part 6

She really thought about seeing a shrink concerning these nightmares,
Her reality had merged with bloody phantoms drawing her into their lairs.
Moving away from her childhood home thinking them at an end
But no they had resurfaced here more vivid in the messages they sent.

Was she really confined to the inside of her house not able to leave?
Even as she turned the knob on the door she knew she hadn't been deceived.
How could this be real? No escape, no way out, no, no don't let me panic now,
If I do he will come again, he knows when I fear yes he knows, somehow, somehow.

So what now does he have in store to play his tricks with my mind?

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

I have the key he says. But it's something I have to find.
And just who does he think he is anyway scaring the hell out of me,
Calm down, calm down, she told herself counting to ten trying to breathe.

But too late, he knew. He had felt her anger, the rage inside, the pain,
Yes he had felt them for wasn't he feeling the same.
Though he was no longer among the living he was destined to remain in his
cell
Only his eyes saw all, knew all, he had brought her down several times
brought her to hell.

Forever and ever and ever fate had placed him in the world below
Holding him so tightly refusing to release his soul
And his ladylove? What of her? An eternity of lying there, sightless,
heartless?
Am I really being selfish? No, no, I really do not think I am being selfish

Damn, why would she not go to the attic? A week past he had given the
clue
And still she would not go; she had not taken the hint what a fool.
She could have made it easier on herself but now it will be done the hard
way,
Well, milady prepare yourself, things might get rough, For Storm O'Malley
has come to play.

She felt his eyes upon her. He had heard her words; he had felt her rage
and this she knew,
And in return, he took her from her world and placed her in his and she
knew not what to do.
He thrived on her terror; blood lust seemed to drive him on,
Oh God, pull me back, pull me back please, but too late she realized she was
alone.

Part 7

It was cold here, so very cold. A dampness surrounded streaming from the
caverns walls,
Rubbing her arms frantically against the chill she heard a thunderous
explosion and rocks began to fall.
Huge boulders rolling the path she had taken, nearer they came, and she
ran and ran and ran,
On and on and on, finally finding a place to jump from the path, but she did
not land.

Instead, she descended into a world unknown, spinning round and round,
She could hear screams, so many louder and louder echoing from the
ground.
Yes thank you thank you she silently whispered for she knew land was
close,
But as she hit she decided this should not have been the path she chose.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Undead. A shuffling walk as they drag their feet across the sands of time,
Walking, forever old searching for any substance they could find.
They preyed on each other for until now there was no human flesh here,
Hundreds of sightless eyes turned towards her their walk similar as they
drew near.

She could hear the screams again, screams filled with terror, screams filled
with pain,
They were her own, as she fought skeletal fingers; their agonizing moans
filled her brain.
But why? Usually in her dreams though terrifying she never really got hurt,
A splintered bone left a big gash on her leg, finally, overpowering her she
realized it was real she was being torn apart.

And she fought. The only girl amongst five brothers she had been taught
well,
But what good would her knowledge be against these occupants of hell?
Ouch she screamed, as her hair was pulled so hard she felt her scalp pop,
Blood oozed from a deep gash upon her neck as well as the rest of her flesh
then they stopped.

As before they walked their shuffling walk across the sands of time
Nothing misplaced, nothing different similar steps, walking blind.
But her blood was real and she had lost so much, too much,
She fought it, she really did, but she could not hang on. A feather? No, it
was his light touch.

Part 8

She was floating Silken wings towards the starlit sky,
Seeing but then perhaps only an illusion as she rode with the fireflies.
Wings of gold shadowed through bodies so transparent,
Even a slight touch to their wings could tear it.

But should they feel harm from anyone in this place,
No, it was so peaceful here, so beautiful so safe.
Amazing; the brightest colors of the rainbows hue,
The clouds so translucent she floated on through.

And floated and floated releasing her mind of all thoughts,
Lying somewhere in between a daze and the peaceful sleep she sought.
Enveloped in clouds, no sound, quite so quite,
Relaxing in her temporary respite.

Was it hours or only minutes in the passage of time?
Before she felt his pain run through, ahhhhhh, she screamed feeling the
jagged edged knife.
His eyes pulled her through the clouds aimless path,
Twisting and turning, spinning lightning fast.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

The halt was abrupt and she felt herself plummeting towards the ground,
Head first and her terror spread, try as she might she could not turn
around.

So fast her heartbeat the veins could not keep up with blood's flow,
And a savage wind captured her inside holding tight from its blow.

She could not scream in fact her very breath came in gasps,
Neither unaware nor caring anymore how quickly time had elapsed.
Round and round and round like a child's spinning top,
Praying over and over that her newest nightmare would stop.

And it did. Straight up in mid air her harrowing journey ceased,
Taking several breaths of air and enjoying the release.
Looking upon a cloud blood covered trail,
He would be at the end this she knew, she felt his pain, and yes she could
tell.

His eyes pulled her across the void reaching his final destination,
Sitting in his cell, hands covering his face, and she felt this weird sensation.
Something was not quite right he looked the same as the first time, almost,
What was it? The feeling was such a puzzle this was not her ghost.

Part 9

Her mind was churning so many thoughts traveling so many different
directions,
It wasn't any one thing; she could not as yet name it as anyone
imperfection,
But no, there was something amiss here for the moment it was allusive,
Pain emitted from his eyes, but yet he was not abusive.

Just sat there, face buried deeper in his hands than before,
This way and that she cocked her head trying to see more.
What is it? What is it? Damn it's, gonna drive me crazy if I can't figure it out,
Then hysterical laughter escaped her lips, I'm already crazy without a doubt.

Waking up she turned her head to check the time on the clock,
Oh hell, there was no need of that for in her world time had stopped.
Propping her arms behind her head she stared at the ceiling,
And she did not like these thoughts she was thinking nor this vague feeling.

But like, as not it was something she was compelled to do,
Still he pulled her but now she felt it too.
Every nightmare, every thought, every word would have to be repeated
For somewhere there was a clue in which her nightmares could be
defeated.

Right here is where it all started, right here is where it would end,
But not yet. First, she had business to tend.
Something vaguely familiar something about the attic,
Slowly walking up the rickety steps and nearing the door she panicked.

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Her fear of enclosed places was no big secret, but this was so much more,
What was she to find lurking behind the attics trap door?
Really she had no choice but to open it. It was time,
She could think, she could feel, she hurt, she was his mind.

Part 10

It wasn't hard to find what she searched for because she knew,
Yes, she knew. All her past trips had held the clues.
Between the pages of a book his soul had been trapped,
Forever holding him with no way out.

And that is why he sent her in search for the book,
Okay, there was so much in here so where should she first look.
A huge box stuck back in the corner beckoned her to it,
It was so big she could climb inside but that wasn't what was meant.

Not inside the box no, it was hidden behind inside the wall,
Not to be found till she was called.
A hammer lay on the floor the head rusted and the handle was split,
But it didn't matter she knew she had to use it.

She used the claw to pull the rotted boards ripping them,
Splinters jabbed at her hands but she didn't realize because she was him.
Digging around inside the wall she found it at last,
The end to this mystery the key to the past.

So yellow with age how had it kept from falling apart?
Well, that was unimportant now she sat on a crate trying to think which
page to start.
Surely the whole thing page by page didn't need to be read,
For in truth only since he had been dead.

The wind whipped and the pages swiftly turned on their own,
Then the eerie sound of deaths song.
Chills racked her body from the cold inside,
And the smell of fresh dug dirt oh my God he had been buried alive.

Why? He could not scream, his breath had all but disappeared,
And for the first time in his life, he knew real fear.
This time for him there was no escape,
But to late now to let them know of their mistake.

The wrong one, he thought you have the wrong one,
Oh mother, mother, he cried was not I but your other son.
He was the highwayman responsible for all those misdeeds,
The one that led the raid on my lady loves retreat.

The one to split my skull and lay me to rest in the cell,
But I am not dead, so why bury me alive in hell?

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Or am I dead? Yet really I must be,
Only my soul lives until the truth is known it will not be free.

My twin, my own brother how could he do this thing?
I the good he the evil, framing me for his deadly deeds.
So long an eternity wandering about easing my soul,
And my ladylove it wasn't me, but this she must know.

Aye but we looked so alike, and our speech the same,
She must know, has to know it was all his evil game.
But no, surely she knew I wasn't capable I could never stand her agony,
I should have been there to protect her, but instead, I was away.

Ana, my ladylove please forgive me for failing you,
We must be patient for I know not what else to do.
I have called her she will release our souls to peace,
And in our new after- life, we will find release.

Shaking her head she returned to normal discovering she had seen through
his eyes,
No pages in the book had been turned, it remained on the day he had lived
and died.
Two sons, twin boys, born out of wedlock over a hundred years.
Looking over the family tree she could not stop her tears.

Her great, great, grandmother was listed and her grandmother too,
Perhaps that's why he called to her she was part of his roots.
Taking the book downstairs with her she heard a knock upon the door,
It opened with ease, Damn girl where you been? It's a quarter till four,

Hello Thomas, just finishing up my newest story,
Oh no I was supposed to meet you I am so sorry.
It's okay I know how you are when you start to right,
But really if we are going to the lake let's go while there's still light.

Just a minute let me grab my things, I'll be right back,
She disappeared down the hallway and Thomas sat in a chair where a pile
of papers was stacked.
Invaded Dreams hmmm wonder what kind of story this would be?
He picked up the first page and started to read.

She appeared after he read the first chapter,
Excellent imagination, followed by his laughter.
As they walked out the door she looked back time for a little reality
Her tormentor and ladylove smiled but only she could see.
© Cynthia Clark

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Hide and Seek

Fear crept up his spine
A ringing centipede of ice.
Hunched, trembling under sheets
A voice but an echo
Floated from the shadow
"Let's play Hide and Seek,
I'll count to ten
No one will find you again."

As all but the game is of darkness
A ghost of fame
Known is his shame
Under the echo's rags torn sheets
I will hide
Let's see if this is my dream
As I think
Can you see my soul
In this game of ten counts

The rattle of chains
Heavy binds dragging
Muted laughter in the distance
Weeping fading into the gloom
Spirited throughout the room
His limbs frigid and weak
"Let us begin
You just have to let me in"

To calm the silent cries
As there is no boundaries
For you are the chapter
In alliance
For you shall master
Inside the beauty of garden
That is the bed of ballroom darkness

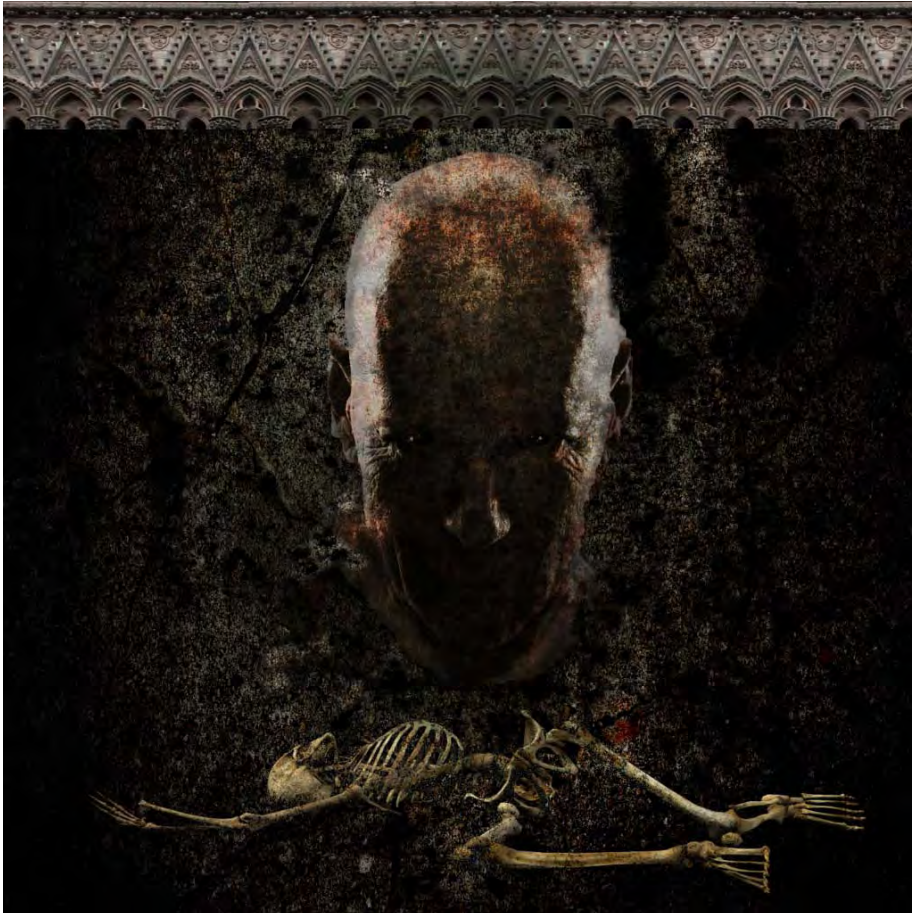
When the silence stills
The cries and laughter fray
It is time to play
We shall dance a dreary waltz
In the glow of silver
Carried away by the moonlight
Off into a dismal night

DARK AND HORROR POETRY

Shall be filled dreams
In saintly of moons all
Ray's within the kiss
That is fallen in seek
For darkness has a way
That the bones ache
In shivers of warmth depth
For high is loves peek

As a memory you shall fade
Like the ghost to the dying night
Before the dawn
You will be gone
Hidden far, far away
They can have your body
Though less than a zombie
For I have kept the best
Your soul is now mine
The darkness can have the rest

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FLASH FICTION

Walk by the river

It was a beautiful early Summer day. The sun was shining and there was not a cloud to be seen; perfect for a stroll along the river.

I liked it there, it was so quiet and one could ponder over life or just think about nothing at all. There were park benches every now and then, usually occupied by some mother with a buggy or older people that would feed the gulls or ducks to pass time. Every so often you would find a couple picnicking or men fishing off the banks. A kayak, boat, or barge would pass once in awhile.

Yeah it was nice there on the river.

I had strolled along for quite some time taking notice to the gulls gliding about and the ducks drifting along on the water. It had begun to get darker. I looked to the sky. Still not a cloud to be seen, and the sun was at about 2 O'clock. Yet it was dark as dusk. I found that strange, but didn't let it bother me. I continued my stroll. It was after all still a nice day. I came upon a young boy; maybe 5 years old. He was alone and looked lost. He was whining, calling for his mother, looking in all directions. I felt sad for him and I too looked around. I seen no one but the boy. I tried to calm him down and asked him his name.

He answered, "I don't know."

I asked him where he last seen his mother.

He said, "I'm not sure."

By this time I was confused but the boy was obviously lost. I asked him what his mother looked like.

He answered, "I don't remember."

FLASH FICTION

Now I was irritated and again looked around to see if I could find anyone that might help. When I looked back to the boy he was gone. He must have been flink because I didn't see a sign of him anywhere.

I thought about making my way back but decided that I wanted to have a coffee at the cafe' not all to far away. So I set off again. A short distance along the way I ran across two men fishing.

I shouted, " Hey guys caught anything?" I didn't really care it was just out of nonsense that I even asked.

One of the men shouted back, "Only thing I've caught is a case of the ass and probably my death of cold."

I found that peculiar as it was a rather warm day. Then I seen an elderly lady sitting on a bench and decided a short sit would be nice. I walked over and noticed she was picking a loaf of bread and tossing the bits to the ground. I was certain she was feeding the gulls until I noticed the birds were black from head to toe. She was feeding a bunch of ravens. I couldn't remember ever seeing raven around here so that was a first. I asked politely if I could have the seat next to her. She just nicked her head not making a tone. I took a seat and watched as she fed the ravens, that would hop around pecking the bits of bread. I tried to start a little small talk but was answered the same silence. The only one besides me that wanted to talk were the ravens that would caw whenever I asked a question. They would eye me; sizing me up and caw. I felt uncomfortable so I wish a good day and continued my way to the cafe'.

A little further down the way I saw an old man with a cane, walking seemingly in place. I asked if I could help him.

He answered, "Son we hasten all too much and still we waste so much time. It is all just energy lost. I'll keep it slow. If I'm late I'll still be early enough."

I could see the cafe' then and walked over to it. I was just taking a seat viewing the river when I noticed a crowd of people standing at at a pier. I couldn't remember having ever seen a pier there before. I looked around the crowd and seen the little boy from before. There was a woman kneeling down in front of him, hugging him. I guessed it was his mother. Then I spotted the old man, and the fishers. Then I spotted the elderly woman

FLASH FICTION

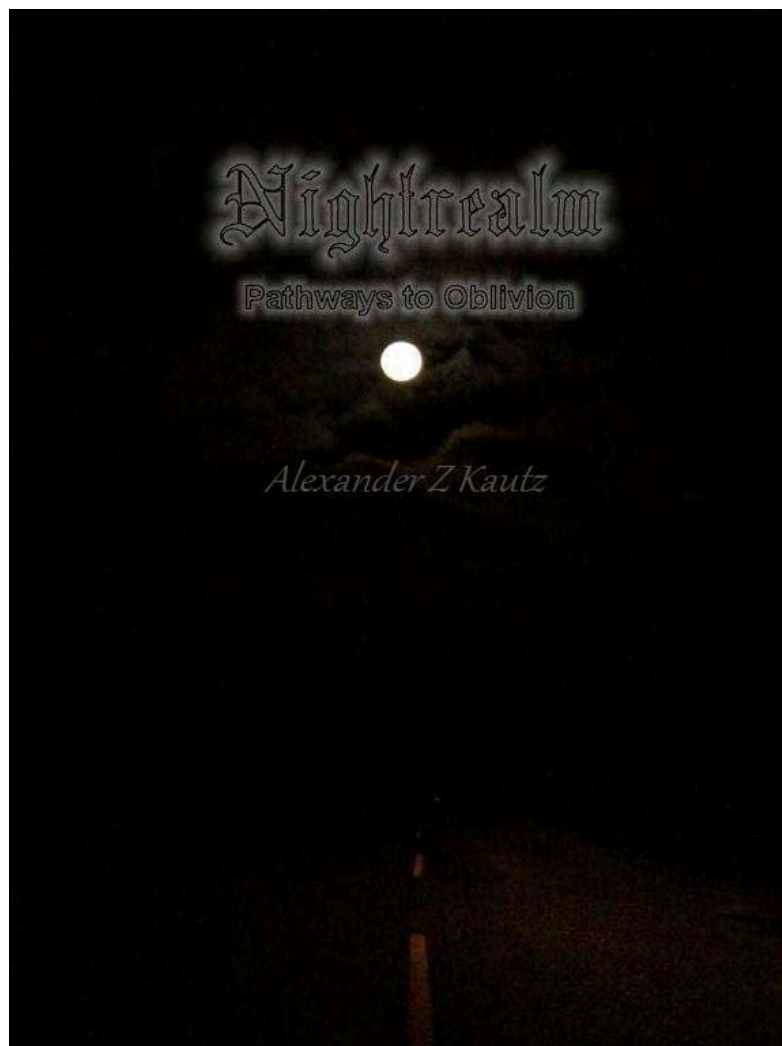
that was feeding the ravens. All the people I had stumbled upon on my stroll were there waiting for something.

A strange fog had begun to build over the river and move towards them. I could hear a creaking of wooden planks as the strange fog neared and dissipated and an old barge docked on the pier where they were waiting.

In that second I felt a tug at my shoulder, then everything went fast. I was dragged to my feet and with blurring speed down the path I had walked.

The sun burned my eyes it was suddenly a bright day again. I found myself lying on the ground and a woman was giving me CPR.

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FLASH FICTION

Shadows of the Duff Glenn

Alex Kautz

Thursday October 5th 1972

4:36 p.m.

The long and winding road through the *Fraser Canyon* was dangerous at the best of times, but deadly in the freezing rain. In less than five years, eighteen people had lost their lives on that treacherous stretch of road. And yet, here I was playing with fate again.

The distant sound of thunder drew my gaze into the surrounding cliffs. But in the growing darkness and heavy fog, I could barely distinguish the edge of the forest from the jagged, granite peaks.

"Steady old girl--," I tightly gripped the wheel, "Its all steep hills and sudden drops from here."

The triple black 71 Eldorado convertible had been a last minute buy. Being the only old model left at the dealership, they'd given it to me for a song. There were moments when I'd missed the 69 Cougar that I'd parted with in partial trade. But right now, the heavy front wheel drive was a godsend.

Retrieving a newspaper article from the glove compartment, I slowed for a sharp turn while reading aloud.

"The Duff Glenn, McCreary estate to be demolished." Glancing briefly at the photograph of the old mansion, I sighed, shoving the page back into the compartment.

I had to laugh as after having looked up the name, the literal translation of *Duff Glenn* derived from the *Gaelic dubh* meaning "dark" and *gleann* which meant "valley."

It made perfect sense as according to the article, the manor rested on the dark side of the opposing hills. This hind-sight of the contractor, had doomed the *McCreary* family and the *Duff Glenn* estate to rest within endless shadow.

For my own part, the estate was simply an opportunity to discover some new angle or inspiration for yet another terrifying tale! Yes, I was an amateur fiction writer. Not the brilliant or successful one that you usually read about. I was amongst the ranks of the starving and struggling. The many, who without proper funding, education or any great talent, simply sank or continued to slowly drown.

In all truth, if it hadn't been for the hefty inheritance left by a dear friend, my career and life would've been quite different.

"Well, Michael Schreiber, you can only blame yourself. You wouldn't be here in the first place if it hadn't been for the publisher! Dear old friend, Ted Cowan! Talked you right

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into it didn't he? Yup, you've outgrown those short stories Mike! How about writing a full length novel? Something the public can really sink their teeth into! Sure thing Ted, I'll get on that right away. No problem!"

It had all seemed so simple. I'd spent the last thirteen years writing short stories for magazines and avoiding the mainstream. And then bang! Here I was. On an empty road in search of a place that for all I knew, would be nothing more than a dusty old derelict. Oddly, it had all fallen together so easily? After contacting the owner, I'd made arrangements to spend a weekend in the old place. At first there had been a little hesitation, concerns about personal harm due to the dilapidated condition of the old place. But reassuring them that I'd be attending alone and on my own accord, with all concern for personal injury claims put aside, they'd soon agreed.

It might've seemed odd, I mean, the traveling into nowhere on a slight chance. But if experience had taught me anything, it was that every old family had a few skeletons in its closets. Desperate for material, they were bones that I wouldn't mind rattling in the name of a story.

Illness, suicide, rumors of murder. The family had suffered unspeakable tragedies and misfortune over the years. The once vast grounds and majestic structure now balanced upon the edge of bankruptcy, inevitably forcing the sale.

Tragedy, misfortune... There had to be something, some terrible secret or evil force lurking in that place. And if not, I could easily make one up!

Squinting, I began following the movements of the wind in the trees, attempting to dull the sense of growing apprehension. I'd spent countless hours alone on the road with nothing more than the radio and my notes for company, but for some reason, this trip felt different.

Quite honestly, that old stretch of highway between the little towns of *Hope* and *Ashcroft* had always bothered me. In passing Hope, the road gently ascended to where surrounded on both sides by swamp, the pale and decaying remnants of ancient trees lingered like wraiths in the murky waters. I had followed that winding road ever onward and into the canyon. Driving through the man-made tunnels which were hewn through the rock, it had an almost unearthly feeling at times.

Switching on the windshield wipers as the rain suddenly came down in a blinding torrent, I tightly grasped the steering wheel, slowing for a sharp turn.

"So that's what they mean by white knuckles." I took notice of the blood rushing from out of my pale fingers, "They must've driven this road too..."

Lightning suddenly ripped through the night, casting an eerie blue luminescence upon the surrounding and sheer rock face.

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"That's appropriate." I nodded, swallowing hard while attempting to remain calm, "I'll just add that to my notes."

Regardless of treacherous weather conditions and potential falling rock from the cliffs high above, one had to also contemplate wildlife. Not to mention other motorists and the freight trucks which sped dangerously around curves, often and quite carelessly traveling into the oncoming lane.

"Not another one!" I noticed a small white memorial wreath reflect in the headlights.

"Oh for crying out loud, they were just kids." The faces stared back from out of the long shadows of a large and faded photo in passing.

Tappity tap, tap, tap, the rain rapped at the canvas roof, echoing like the bony fingers of the restless dead.

"Shouldn't be too much further now--," Peering through the river that flowed across the windshield, I listened to the rain, "Yup, must be getting close by now."

Lightning flashed again, forcing my attention into the deep shadows of the steeply ascending granite wall, "That's a long way up."

The cliff tightly embraced the edges of the small two lane highway, the winding path and ensuing fog blocking view of anything beyond several yards.

The thunderous echo of water crashing through the canyon far below now trembled through my being, "That's a very, very long way down too."

I was beginning to suspect that the short stories that I'd previously written were now just part of a continuing and vastly growing vicious circle. The publication of the stories provided the financing required for travels, which inevitably led me into deeper and darker territory each time. Being an avid fan of the paranormal, I'd always appreciated the opportunity to dig into something new. But now found myself praying that it wouldn't end up being my own grave.

Gently resting a hand on the large black, antique doctor's bag on the seat beside me, I grimaced while visualizing the plastic binder inside. There it was, just floating in my thoughts. The black binder where written in bold letters upon the first page was: *Nightrealm, Pathways to Oblivion*.

The original intention had never involved writing fictional ghost stories, but true accounts from personal experience. I'd always believed that somewhere out there, in places where few dared travel, something incredible was simply awaiting discovery. It was with this hope and notes in hand, that I continued onward in search of answers and new inspiration on which to base the story of my first novel.

Utter darkness. But at least the rain had finally stopped. Maybe my luck was changing?

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My eyes traveled the impenetrable expanse of shadows of the surrounding forest. By all standards the directions that I'd been given were somewhat bleak. During the day every twist and turn of that highway would have appeared the same, but by night, it was virtually impossible.

"What did she mean--you'll know it when you see it? I can't see anything? There's nothing out here but trees and freaking rocks!"

Distressed and feeling frustrated beyond words, my attention suddenly fell upon a sharp right curve in the road.

"Ah - I don't believe it!" Gasping victoriously, I slapped the dash, recognizing the previously described tall stone pillars and iron gates, "We made it!"

The sense of triumph lasted only moments as slowing down and carefully pulling off the road, I followed the bumpy gravel drive for several yards before finally parking before those immense gates, "This couldn't be right? It looks abandoned."

The headlights created strange shadows as passing through the bars of the immense gates, the light reflected in the dense, drifting fog. There wasn't a light to be seen anywhere.

Switching off the engine, I shoved the keys into an inner pocket of my old gray trench coat.

Do I really want to get out of this nice warm car and wander out into that? It's a cold night, a very cold night, even for October.

The engine quietly ticked, hot oil dripping down through the block and into the oil pan as the car cooled from the long voyage. The wind whipped and whistled around the car. The old gates swung open ever so gently as squealing upon rusted hinges, they clanged together, ringing like a distant church bell in the darkness.

"The place definitely has charm." Chuckling, I began gathering the luggage which lay heaped on the seat beside me. The owner had politely requested that the vehicle remain on the road due to the hazardous condition of the grounds. It was a request that I had swiftly agreed to and now sincerely regretted. Lightning flashed, briefly revealing the ominous form of the mansion in the distance.

"That's what I forgot!" Snapping my fingers, I immediately returned to the car, retrieving a flashlight from beneath the seat and switching it on, "Much better."

The wind whistled through the bare branches of the ancient trees, a haunting moan which drifted into a distant, yet distinct howl. The sound suddenly occupied my every thought as while struggling with the luggage, I looked upward before passing through

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the partially open gates. Unlike most people, I wasn't easily unnerved and for the most part, enjoyed the chilling sensations that frightened others.

I soon stumbled through large pot-holes in the gravel drive, swaying to avoid trailing branches and what appeared to be decades of heaped debris. Ancient and ivy covered oaks lined either side of the dark path. Their massive branches twisting and straining ever upward as blocking view of the heavens, they fiendishly raked at a blackened sky.

Tall and yellowed grass leaned from every perspective, swaying and whispering in the frozen wind as my attention was suddenly drawn within the ancient grove. There, caught within the dense foliage, were the gnarled and twisted forms of what might have once been an apple orchard. Deprived of proper light due to the mountains shadow, the trees hunched like the forms of the damned. I was feeling like old *Ichabod Crane*, expecting the *headless horseman* to appear from out of the woods at any given moment! It was sheer excitement and not fear that now drove me onward!

The wind suddenly caught and tore at the branches high above, howling as it whipped them about with such force that the night exploded in a damp fury. My gaze following the falling leaves which traveling within multicolored hues before the dim glow of my flashlight, spiraled while drifting into great mounds on either side of the path.

Dampness reflected from those immense and decaying masses where looking down, I noticed the glistening, pale and bloated forms of large worms. Cold and slippery, they coiled and writhed within the thick and fetid mud.

Without further adieu and as while guided by a fading beam of light, I marched toward the *McCreary* manor house. I felt rather exhilarated, both frightened and excited at the same time. It was a sensation that I'd grown accustomed to over the years. Poking around in dark places can do that to a person.

Squinting, I noticed a light twinkling through the shadows. It was amazing how something as insignificant as that tiny spark, could mean so much in the darkness.

Within moments and gasping for breath, I dropped my luggage and stood before the house of *McCreary*. I was uncertain whether it had been the darkness or merely the illusion of distance, or quite possibly a combination of both, but the estate appeared surprisingly enormous. Although I'd traveled across Canada many times and visited countless parliament buildings, cathedrals and mansions, I would've never expected to discover something like this! The cobblestone courtyard led into a semi-circle, which accommodating guests, led to the front doors of the manor before turning to where the carriage would arrive at the large, double gated coach-house at the end of the drive.

I pondered the two story structure, attributing a third level while considering the attic windows. Spanning some hundred yards in foremost perspective, the manor resembled something that one might've expected to discover while traveling the English

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countryside. There was a tall and surrounding hedge obscuring view of the lower windows. Long vines climbed the old stone walls as moss crept along the steps and spread through the cracks of the old masonry.

The scent of damp earth and decaying leaves filled my every sense as raising the failing flashlight, I turned toward the entranceway. The flickering beam fell upon two large and winged dog gargoyles which, solemnly gazing from beneath decaying and moss covered faces, caused me pause in admiration.

“Now you two, are very unique.” Examining them briefly, I sighed while unable to determine their country or date of origin. It was a little frustrating as I’d prided myself in such things. After spending countless years collecting and reading through books on antiques and architecture, it shouldn’t have been this tough! They didn’t have the familiar bulky, bull-dog appearance of the sixteenth century *Florentine* gargoyles. They were tall and hideously thin with half folded, bat-like wings. Their ears were drawn back as with long and pointed snouts and ferocious snarls, they stared with wide and empty eyes.

“Could possibly be Austrian? But they look like Irish wolf hounds.” Attempting to determine the species I shrugged, promptly gathering my belongings and continuing along the granite stairway toward the main doors. I’d become bitterly aware of the dampness which, having managed to penetrate the heavy black sweater, undoubtedly caused the cheap black tie to leak dye, staining the white shirt beneath.

Looking upward and to my right beyond the hedges, I took immediate notice of the warm golden glow which I’d previously seen from the path. It was the flickering of a small torch which lit the inner entranceway.

“This place is simply fantastic!”

With a lightened heart I began ascending the twenty-second and final step, making my way into the covered entrance. It was like walking into a wind-tunnel as reaching to knock on the double oak doors, I halted to look at the large and unusual door knocker.

Comprised of solid brass and standing some two feet in height, it looked as though it might’ve weighed well over ten pounds.

Her stare was cold and empty, the hair tightly bound and hanging in a single braid as a torch holder sprang from her mouth. The neck was long and serpentine and joined into what appeared to be the bat winged form of a two-legged dragon. Between its claws was another torch holder as the beast, rested upon a pedestal that was ornately decorated with oak leaves. Gently pulling the torch from its mouth, I leaned down to examine the bottom from where hung a massive ring, ending in what looked like a spiked club. Pulling a package of cigarettes from a breast pocket, I lit one with the torch before placing it back within the monsters mouth.

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"It's a lamia or a harpy of some kind. But definitely a Victorian piece," I thought aloud, "Circa, late eighteen hundred to early nineteen hundred." I gathered this, as there were many depictions of similar creatures throughout the *Art Deco* and *theosophical* era.

Puffing at the cigarette, I brushed the damp curls from my eyes, grasping the heavy ring and delivering three brief but firm strokes.

Silence, and then, the little flame of the torch extinguished in an icy gust.

Standing there in the bitter cold, I considered the possibility of having been somehow forgotten. To make matters worse, the chill and damp now drew attention to a full and aching bladder.

Wincing with the stinging pressure, I looked back into the forest. *I could sneak behind a bush – it'd just take a moment. No – better wait. Someone's got to be here!*

"Okay then!" I turned, pounding on the door with a fist.

Indeed, ghosts might certainly dwell within the long shadows of the McCreary manor. But either way, I had no intention of discovering them alone, in the dark, and on this damnable doorstep!

Moments seemed to last an eternity as once more, anxiously extending a fist to pound on the doors, they suddenly opened.

Caught within a moment of utter panic, I now looked upon my hostess for the first time.

The shadows ran deep from the corridor behind her as cast within the slightest of golden glows from some unseen lamp, I couldn't help but stare.

Long fiery red hair draped and drifted past her frail shoulders, spilling and rolling like honey until resting somewhere within the small of her back. She wore an emerald evening gown which shimmered from beneath a hooded velvet cloak of an even deeper green, revealing the faintest of silver embroidery.

Drifting as though having been caught within some distant, yet all consuming dream, my gaze was finally drawn into her large and piercing green eyes.

Like two perfect and oval mirrors, brilliantly reflecting the seething jade of a most turbulent sea, they gazed back from within a thin and pale, freckled face.

"Mr. Michael Schreiber?" She politely inquired, breaking the strange trance and causing me to suddenly realize that I'd been standing there and rudely staring.

"Yes, I am, and you must be?" I stuttered feeling rather foolish as I'd been expecting an older gentleman and not this lovely young woman.

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"Caitlin McCreary." She motioned with a hand, "Would you like to come inside please."

Hurriedly gathering my belongings and swiftly moving inward, I shivered as closing the huge double oak doors, she drew the long sliding bolt.

"I'll be your hostess." She extended a delicate hand which I immediately accepted.

"May I call you Mike? Or do you prefer Michael?"

"Mike would be just fine." I shrugged, feeling it unnecessary to explain to my hostess that the only person who had ever actually called me *Michael* was my mother.

"As I'd mentioned to you on the telephone earlier," She reminded me while gesturing with a hand toward the ancient and peeling wallpaper of the corridor, "The McCreary estate is in very poor condition." She sighed deeply, leading me through the long and dimly lit hallway before pausing in thought, "I'm afraid it's rather, old and dirty."

"That makes two of us." Muttering under my breath, I attempted to conceal the guilt for my obvious attraction to the young woman, "Is there a bathroom nearby? I'm sorry, long trip and too much coffee."

Noticing the urgency in my expression, she quickly guided me to the nearest facility. Few words could have politely described the relief of that almost endless moment, or the horror that I'd experienced when the ancient toilet refused to flush.

"I wish that I could've offered you something better." She mumbled, "But nothing seems to be working around here, so we'll just have to make do with what we have."

"No need to apologize." I shrugged, following closely as she quietly continued down the dim corridor, "I was expecting to be roughing it a little."

"I don't think that it'll be all that bad." She seemed amused, "We do have some luxuries."

Appearing no older than a woman in her mid-twenties, I felt certain shame while staring. It was getting tougher every year, and now, mere months from the twilight of forty-three, I was feeling it.

"I really can't thank you enough for this opportunity." I turned, attempting to draw my attention away from the tightly fitting dress.

"To be honest, this is sort of like a last chance for me. A make it or break it deal."

Pausing, I suddenly realized that I had unwittingly lit a cigarette inside.

Noticing my obvious alarm, she smiled, "That's quite alright, feel free to smoke."

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With that, she turned, leading me through an immense and exquisitely furnished main hall and adding, “Just be careful, the house is dusty and very old. We wouldn’t want to accidentally start a fire, now would we?”

There was a cynical tone within the comment, one which I suspected to have sounded more suggestive than uttered in warning.

“No – no fires.” I continued after my hostess, gazing upward and into the high vaulted ceilings. My eyes traveled the dizzying arches where enormous crystalline chandeliers cast golden sparkles among the phantoms of the ceiling and walls.

To our immediate right were French doors which led into a darkened main hall. I could only imagine the beauty of that room through the shadows.

The corridor led toward a gorgeous stairway leading to the second floor, east and west of the building. This we passed beneath on the right, following the adjoining hallway to the right.

Rubbing at my nose with a sleeve, I sniffled with the ever present odor of mildew.

Nothing unexpected Mike old-boy, you knew the place was old and run down. Live with it.

It wasn’t so much the structural faults, or even the concern that one of those massive chandeliers might suddenly bring a portion of the ceiling down on our heads, but the shadows in that place which were beginning to bother me. Several times I’d sensed, or imagined to have seen a movement in the corner of my eye. It was like a shadow that was deeper than all the rest, something that cautiously crept just beyond sight.

“Was it a long trip?” Caitlin glanced over her shoulder, “I’ve never been to Vancouver.”

“No—just a few hours. But I could’ve done without the rain.”

Nodding she simply gestured for me to follow while continuing down the hall.

The house was enormous and extravagantly decorated. From beautiful tapestries to wondrous mythical beasts that graced the carved panels and banisters, I admired every detail of the décor.

Remorsefully, all the dreams and labors of this lavish estate would soon join their creators, lost and forgotten in time. It had always troubled me to witness something of such profound beauty destroyed, when taken into consideration, it might just as easily have been restored to become a symbol of antiquity.

“This place is absolutely beautiful.” I paused, looking about while butting my cigarette into a large crystal ashtray that stood in the corridor.

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"Do you really think so?" She halted to examine one of the many adjoining rooms as placing a finger before her full red lips, muttered in thought, "I've always consider it more like a gilded cage for a distressed bird."

"That's an interesting analogy." I shrugged, considering that a lifetime spent in the confines of such luxury could easily be taken for granted. Especially by the bored wealthy who shared little knowledge or interest in those who were less fortunate.

"I certainly hope that you're not that distressed little bird."

"We're all bound by certain limitations." She turned, leading me into an immense dining room, "I've arranged for a late supper." She gestured toward the silver platters that elegantly rested upon a long oak table.

"We haven't entertained guests here for what seems an eternity. I hope this is adequate?"

She took a place directly to the left of where I stood at the head of the table, politely motioning for me to be seated. Blatantly refusing until I'd pulled her chair aside and she'd taken a seat first, I smiled, nodding as she thanked me.

"Old world etiquette-," There was an unmistakable sadness in her emerald gaze, "It's all but lost now."

Noticing only one place setting, I suddenly felt awkward and humbly asked.

"Were you going to join me?"

"I had something earlier." She politely motioned, watching curiously as I removed my coat, hung it upon the rear of my chair and began tucking a napkin into my collar.

Offering several selections from the numerous silver trays, she raised a finger in thought, "Can I offer you a glass of Brandy?"

"Usually I wouldn't say yes." There was certain guilt in the lie, "But in this case, it might help to take the chill off, yes please."

Although I'd never been much of a drinker, it was almost impossible to resist a nice glass of Brandy. After all, it was the spirit of friendship. An almost divine, warming sensation that soothing the body, calmed the soul.

Avoiding the platter of cold meats in lieu of a nice roasted chicken, I gratefully began indulging the wonderful assortment of condiments as she poured the liquor from a crystal decanter.

"Do you mind if we talk while you eat?" She returned to her seat, playfully twirling a finger among the red curls that drifted about her shoulders.

"Of course not. I always encourage conversation over good food, and in excellent company."

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The compliment had fallen on deaf ears as she now squinted suspiciously.

"I'm not familiar with your work, what exactly do you intend to accomplish here?"

"Well?" I muttered, putting down the fork and wiping gravy from my mouth with a napkin.

Clasping my hands together I nervously looked at my hostess, "As I'd told your realtor on the phone, I write ghost stories and paranormal adventures. But only short stories—well, until now. You see, my publisher cornered me into writing a full length novel. So—it's either sink or swim. I was actually hoping to find some inspiration here."

A strange aura of aversion now reflected within those large green eyes.

"In all truth--," Retrieving the fork and closely examining the prongs, I shrugged.

"If I can't come up with something half decent—well, I'm sure you get the idea."

"So..." She turned her full attentions upon me, those wide green eyes seemingly penetrating my entire being, "Are you hoping to uncover something, evil?"

"Good grief, no--nothing that disturbing." I coughed potatoes into my napkin, "I was thinking more along the lines of a romantic ghost story, maybe even a tale of lost love, the old fashioned type haunting."

"Lost love?" She slowly repeated the words as though savoring the moment, "So then, you're a romantic at heart."

"I suppose so--," I turned back to my food, nervously diverting my eyes. "But I want something true in a sense, not something completely made up and one sided like so many other stories."

There was a gleam of skepticism in her expression, as raising a finger I swiftly added.

"And you can expect the strictest of discretion."

"So then--," She crossed her arms over her small but firm breasts, leaning back inquisitively, "You don't actually believe in the existence of ghosts, spirits or the chance of a real haunting? You just write fiction."

"No, I can't really say that I do. I just find the subject interesting."

I desperately fought the urge to break out in red faced hysterical laughter, another sign of obvious deceit that only my mother and a few close friends could've distinguished.

"Until science can provide some kind of proof substantiating fact from fiction, I just can't see it myself."

Caitlin laughed, a mischievous twinkle flashing within those bright green eyes.

"You really don't expect me to believe a word of that, do you?"

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A moment passed between us, our eyes locking in a silent battle of sheer will which I swiftly lost.

"Let me pose this question if I may." I grinned, fumbling with the lighter while reaching for a cigarette.

"Would you enter the home of a complete stranger, which might I add in this particular case, happens to be an enchanting young woman--," I received a shy smile, "All alone in an enormous manor in the middle of nowhere, and give her the impression that you might be some kind of, raving lunatic, occult fanatic?"

"Alright, so you're talented with talking your way out of things." She cleared her throat, slowly shaking her head, "But no more baloney. From now on, I want you to be completely honest with me."

Raising a hand and waving two fingers I promised, "No more baloney, Scout's honor."

"So tell me," She raised an eyebrow, "Have you considered that it might actually be *you* that's in danger here, *not* me?"

A lump suddenly formed in my throat as chuckling, I attempted to conceal my sudden discomfort.

"Me? What exactly-," I fidgeted, sliding the plate away and taking a long pull from my cigarette, "Do you mean?"

"Well think about it."

She rested her arms on the table, placing her head down and gazing up at me with a large and unsettling, *Cheshire cat* grin.

"Here you are, all alone in a strange place. What would you do if anything, unexpected were to happen?"

"What could possibly happen?" I snickered, gesturing around the table and accidentally bumping the *Brandy* glass, leaping from the chair as it shattered.

"That?" She laughed, "The unexpected."

"I am so sorry." Attempting to pick up the broken shards she halted me.

"It'll be taken care of--," She nodded for me to return to the seat, "Just sit down before something else happens!"

"Alright, I get the point." Returning to the seat and feeling somewhat embarrassed for having been taken in so easily, I couldn't help but attempt making a joke out of the whole thing.

"But I feel quite confident that whatever might happen--," I tapped the cigarette into a large crystal ashtray, "You'll be here to protect me."

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Her features darkened, the once attractive young woman appearing eerily pale and drawn, even menacing in the dim light.

"What makes you so sure that I'm not the very thing that you should be concerned about?"

"Well--," I thought aloud, "No disrespect to you, but if you were going to bite me on the neck. I really wouldn't complain. I mean, you're not hard on the eyes."

Her reaction followed what seemed to be an uncontrollable laughter.

"And you my dear Michael – could charm the devil."

"Speaking of charm and manners, can I help you with this?" Motioning toward the plates and platters, I looked over my shoulder into the darkened hallway, assuming it might lead to the kitchen area.

"Oh no, not to worry--," She nervously glanced about, "Eva, the maid will be back in the morning. She'll take care of everything. Finances being what they are, we can't afford to keep servants on the premises any more. She stays with her sister in town. They're both elderly and enjoy spending the time together."

"Are you sure? I mean, it's really no trouble. I don't mind earning my keep."

She simply stared. It seemed more like disbelief than anything else.

"Alright, have it your way then" Shrugging I looked around the room.

"Oh, I was just wondering? I won't be bothering anyone while I'm here? I mean, is there anyone else – well here?"

"Not a living soul..."

Her eyes were cold and empty. It was as though she was intentionally trying to unnerve me, but I wasn't going to play along.

"Okay then, I'll try not to be any bother." I fidgeted with the cigarette, "My work is very demanding, so I often write through the night without any concept of time."

"No bother, none at all?" She raised an eyebrow, "Don't be that disappointing."

"Pardon me?" Retrieving a napkin, I hurriedly wiped at a spot of unnoticed chicken gravy that had somehow dribbled onto my sweater.

"It's been very quiet here." She tapped her fingers on the table, "I only meant that I'd welcome the company. A little friendly conversation will sure break the monotony."

"Oh of course, me too, it seems the further I get into my work, the more time I've been spending alone."

I smiled agreeably while drifting back into those wondrous green orbs.

"That's if I don't end up writing the entire weekend away!"

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Sneezing, I politely excused myself while searching the table for a napkin.

"Sorry about that, I think I might be catching a chill."

Reaching over and handing a napkin toward me, she stepped back as I was taken by a sudden sneezing fit.

"Oh – geez, it must've been the walk up the driveway? I always have trouble keeping warm..."

I'd suspected the dust and mildew to have been the culprit, but why embarrass my hostess with the details.

After all, what were a few dust bunnies between friends?

"Well I'll make sure that you stay toasty warm while you're here."

A pleasant, inviting smile crossed her pale features as politely covering her mouth with a hand she added, "I'll give you the room beside mine."

"Are you well heated?" The words caused me to blush, slapping a hand to my brow while slowly repeating the sentence, "What I meant was, is the floor where your room is located, well heated."

"Both rooms have a fireplace." She gently ran a finger across the delicate flesh about her throat, "So the answer is yes..."

"A fireplace, now that sounds wonderful."

She gestured with a nod toward my empty dinner plate, "If you're finished, I'd be happy to show you the library. That's if, you're not too tired from the trip?"

"No, I'm fine. I've always been a bit of a night bird."

"That makes two of us." She chuckled, "I prefer the night anyway. This place is far too boring during the day..."

Looking around the room I sighed deeply, "I don't think I could ever get bored in a house like this."

"Oh you would." She climbed from her seat, "Staring at the same old peeling paint and wallpaper gets really annoying after a while..."

"Can I leave my bags here for now?" I gestured toward the heaped luggage.

"That might be better if you wouldn't mind?" She pointed, "Our rooms are on the other side of the house. It would be easier just to pick your things up when we're done in the library."

Retrieving the black doctor's bag and coat I nodded, "I keep my writing material in this."

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"Bring them along then." She proceeded to lead me from the room.

Within moments we had traveled back down the corridor and out into the main hall.

"The library is warmer than most of the manor."

Her reassuring words and hurried pace were encouraging. But there was a certain amount of shame within my fleeting glances. Having abandoned the velvet cloak, her flesh was now intimately revealed beneath the gentle caresses of that clinging silken gown.

Though amusing to say the least, I found it strange that she had removed the cloak. The halls were rather chilly and I shivered, pondering whether she had, over the course of years, simply adjusted to the cold.

It was during the course of our travels, and as we had quietly discussed the state of the manor, that while blissfully enjoying her form, I halted, gasping as she looked back at me.

"If you don't mind me asking--," She raised an eyebrow, "Are you committed?"

Had she somehow sensed my intrusive gaze? Or was it simply by that dreaded power of women's intuition alone that she had noticed my uninhibited glances? Either way, I was now faced with a morally humbling dilemma.

"Committed – no, but some people think that I should've been."

Not funny, she isn't laughing.

"But seriously, no... I haven't been involved with anyone for quite some time." *Was it the embarrassment, or a fever that now caused my face to flush with a sudden heat?*

"No commitments, whatsoever?" Her eyes flashed as she cast a swift glance over her shoulder, pausing at the foot of the stairway.

"My work takes me all over the place, its very time consuming."

I attempted to change the subject while feeling extremely uncomfortable and humiliated, "And besides, they say that marriage is an institution. Unfortunately, I'm still too sane to be institutionalized." *Nice going stupid, same bad joke from a different angle and still not funny.*

Either the humor had completely evaded her, or I'd accidentally touched upon a *raw nerve*.

"So you have trouble with commitments." She began ascending the steps, "At least you're honest."

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The library, like so many other rooms, was immense and immediately purveyed that familiar sensation of stillness. It was a finality that emanated like a mind numbing chill throughout the manor.

But then again, when I was at home, there was always a radio or the sounds of the television downstairs. Living alone, I'd grown accustomed to *setting a mood* so to speak. "Make yourself comfortable." Caitlin patted my shoulder, motioning with a nod toward a chair near a large table.

"Just turn on the lamp. There's an ashtray--," She pointed, "Feel free to smoke, I'll be back in a few minutes with some nice hot tea."

"That would be terrific." Moving swiftly toward the table in the center of the room, I switched on the large lamp. But before I could turn to say another word, she had disappeared into the shadows of the corridor.

Lighting a cigarette, my attention was drawn to the interesting structure of the room. Octagonal in shape, the surrounding oak paneled walls housed numerous shelves. Three tall shelves stood on either side of the room and the table, which was facing the entrance, was backed against an enormous bay window.

Beyond the faded and wine colored curtains, I could see that the shutters had been drawn tightly closed. Thinking for a moment, I remembered that this had been the case throughout the house. Or at least, so much as I'd noticed while passing in the darkness.

For reasons that I couldn't easily explain, the library seemed virtually unscathed by the decay that predominated the majority of the manor. I could only assume that the rising heat from lower levels and direct sunlight had prevented mold and mildew.

It was like a diamond ring that still glistened long after the bride has faded into the grave.

Withdrawing a note book and pen from the bag, I swiftly scribbled down the thoughts. "Might as well take a few notes."

Old libraries were like the heart and mind of the family that had once owned them. In many cases, they reflected generations of interest, career and passion.

"Medicine, Science, philosophy and witchcraft--," I read the content aloud, "Who lived here -- Dr. Frankenstein?"

In the old days and in most cases, few people could've had a library like this without expecting neighbors with torches and pitchforks to be pounding at the door.

But then again -- there were also others who spent lifetimes and vast fortunes acquiring such books. Leather bound volumes which although considered taboo in most circles, were held in the highest regard amongst occult collectors.

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Among them, just to mention a few were the notorious; *Demonolatry* by famed witch-hunter *Nicholas Remy* and the *Malleus Maleficarum* of *Heinrich Kramer* and *James Sprenger*. Both of these books being judicial volumes used for the prosecution and punishment of supposed witches.

The notorious; *Compendium Maleficarum* of *Francesco Maria Guazzo*, a book filled with crimes and the investigation of witches and associated pagans.

There were books involving the study of demon possession and obsession, the exorcism of evil spirits, but many were written in *Latin*, *German* or *French*.

Aside from these were others concerning medicine, natural sciences, religion and philosophy.

I felt the warmth of enthusiasm while admiring the compiled and complete works of the Great philosophers.

"Let's see here, the dialogues of Plato, the works of Socrates, Herodotus, oh – and Aristotle on ethics! Oh and what do we have here? No way! The original, 1890 first edition, two volume set, Sir James George Frazer's *Golden Bough*, a study in religion and magic. And it's absolutely perfect."

Gently running a finger across the embossed leather backings, I began reminiscing the many hours I'd spent pondering the dreams and inspirations of those brilliant scholars and theologians. Only in dreams had I ever dared imagine discovering such a collection, and within that brief moment, deeply desired to possess them all.

"So you have a passion for old books--," Caitlin smiled, returning with a silver tray containing tea and assorted biscuits.

Politely attending the table, I offered her a chair, shrugging and taking a seat.

"I'm something of an amateur collector, occult and folklore mainly."

She smirked while serving our tea, "So you're a true ghost-hunter at heart. What do you do when you're not chasing the boogeyman?"

A moment of silence passed between us.

"I really don't know--," Having never thought about it I could only chuckle, "I guess I've never really stopped looking."

"Personally--," She offered the small platter of biscuits and pastry, "I prefer to experience life, rather than dwell in the dusty pages of old books filled with other people's theories."

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I raised my tea cup in salute, "But without a little help, even if that comes from the dusty old pages of some book." I laughed. "We might never find the key that unlocks the door of experience. And let's face it, in the end, that key might just save your life."

Caitlin sipped at her tea, her eyes filling with obvious fascination and something that might only be distinguished as a strange admiration.

"You really do have a flare for the dramatic. But seriously now, if you ever did discover that key and found something, supernatural. Would you still choose to experience it?"

"I'm only a human being, so that still remains to be seen." Nibbling at a raspberry tart I smiled in thought, "Who knows, maybe I'd just turn tail and run away screaming?"

Her laughter broke the stillness as clasping her hands tightly together she said, "Don't ask me why – but somehow, I'd expected an answer like that!"

"Well seriously--," I nervously scratched with a finger at large and neatly trimmed sideburns, "How could anyone anticipate their actions when confronted with the unknown?"

"Or be aware of it, even if it was standing right in front of them." She smiled, climbing from her seat and sighing deeply, "I have something for you to look at." She moved toward a small wheeled cart, leaning down and searching through the piled books, "But I expect, absolute discretion."

"Of course--," I swallowed hard, realizing that although I'd consciously struggled against my own instinct, something now forced me to stare, "Discretion's my middle name."

Completely unaware of my intruding eyes, she looked through the heaped books, the dress clinging and caressing every sensual curve. It was as though my conscious mind had become a separate entity from the unrelenting and lustful beast that raged within all men. I fought to avert my gaze from where she now paused, selecting a large leather-bound volume from the pile.

She haunted my every thought as examining her in every possible fashion, I began attributing to her all the grace of youth, the appearance of nobility and something far finer.

There's nothing wrong with sneaking a peak at a pretty woman, but what the hell is wrong with me? I can't take my eyes off of her!

Tightly squeezing my eyes closed, I placed a hand before my face, distressed by the uncontrollable and carnal persuasions of my own thoughts. I'd never before, experienced such an all consuming desire!

Look away Mike, your being nothing but a disgusting, rude pig!

Horried with my own behavior and desperate to escape the shame, I began silently reciting the Lord's Prayer.

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The prayer immediately reminded me of home, my mother and the faith that I'd been raised to trust.

"Love comes from the heart." My mother had once said, "Not from urges in your underwear."

To my utter relief the moment passed and my heart slowed its relentless thundering. Swallowing hard I leaned back in the chair and opening my eyes, noticed Caitlin returning with a large leather bound book.

"Are you okay?" She hesitated to look into my eyes, "You're all pale and sweaty."

Nervously reaching for and fidgeting with the large, silver Celtic cross that hung about my neck, I attempted to admonish whatever guilt remained.

"I'm pretty sure that I caught a chill, but it's nothing to worry about." I trembled with a sudden fever, wiping a palm across my sweat beaded brow, "A little rest and I'll be right as rain."

"Well if you'd rather just get a little rest, we can just head off to bed now." Her eyes traveled about my face before focusing within my own, "We can leave this until tomorrow?"

"No--really, I can manage." I nodded politely as thanking her, my attention fell curiously upon the book she tightly clasped to her breast. "And what might that be?"

"This is something that's never been revealed to anyone outside the family--," she carefully laid the ancient book before me, "And I'd like it to stay that way."

"I promise--by the time I'm done with it, no one will be any wiser."

Shivering in a sudden chill, I ran my fingers across the cold leather surface, squinting in order to make out the faded hand written print. "History of *Duff Glenn*, a narrative of leading events by *Sir Reginald Andrew McCreary* including family genealogies, seventeen hundred and eighty six to nineteen hundred and fifteen. This is in fabulous shape."

"Yes, I know." Her features took on a distant yet visible sadness. "Isn't it amazing how the things we least desire, seem to linger like death."

There was something strange in the way that she glared down at the book. It was almost as though she had consciously drifted away.

Once more, the glitter of the emerald gown drew my gaze. The revealing silk touching, flowing as it intimately embraced the supple form beneath.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" I blurted, noticing that she now stared back. "I was just drifting off for a second. I didn't mean to stare."

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"No harm done." Laughing she gently rested a hand upon my shoulder, "I've got to admit that it takes two to stare, one to look and the other to notice." She blushed, covering her mouth.

She was making this far too easy. Mike, behave yourself, she's a young, lonely and beautiful girl, it wouldn't be right to play into this! You dirty, dirty old man you!

"Have you actually read these?" I returned our conversation to the books.

She sighed, moving closer and leaning to peer over my shoulder, "I read the diaries a long time ago. It's an interesting play on paranoid delusion and illnesses affecting the mind." She frowned, "Poor Reginald, he actually died from complications of Syphilis."

"He died of Syphilis?" I swallowed hard, "I wasn't aware that something like that would, kill a person."

"It affects the heart, the brain." She winced with the thought, "It causes a painful, hideous, fungal type growth on the--."

"Yeah, I get the point." I swiftly interrupted, unable to listen any longer, "So Reginald was very sick."

"Yes, very sick." She poured tea, her eyes narrowed while reflecting obvious revulsion, "You'll see what I mean when you read the diaries."

Rubbing at my eyes, I attempted to drive the grotesque images of Reginald's illness from my thoughts.

"Oh, one moment-," She remembered something, moving from her seat and retrieving a long scroll from a near-by shelf, "This might be useful. It's a genealogical chart."

Watching as she carefully unrolled the large hand drawn chart, I marveled at the detailed symbolic oak tree and beautiful illustrations.

"That should really be framed."

"Do you think so?" She moved closer, gesturing with her eyes at the dates beneath the persons near the bottom of the tree, "Really?"

It wasn't until I looked at the lowest branches, that I noticed the birth and death dates of the last two generations.

"Oh geez--," I looked up at her, "Apparently, there was a lot of tragedy in the family."

Without answering, she simply rolled up the scroll and placed it on the table near the book, "The family history - is all very dark to say the least."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I don't mean to mother you-," She suddenly changed her tone, brushing the hair from her eyes, "But it looks like you could really use some rest."

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A quick glance at my wrist watch and I nodded, tapping a finger on the books, "I didn't realize that it was already half past eleven. Um--would it be okay if I took these back to my room?"

She peered down at the book and scroll, her expression somewhat distant.

"Be my guest. But Mike, I wouldn't exactly call that, good bed-time reading material."

"Oh that's alright, not much bothers me anymore." I laughed, tucking the books under my arm and collecting my bag and cigarettes from the table.

"I must've read every *Victorian* ghost story ever written before I was fourteen years old, and everything else in between since then. I highly doubt this old stuff will keep me awake."

"That's very reassuring." She curiously raised an eyebrow, "Our rooms are on the south-east side of the house. We can stop in the dining room for your luggage."

11:47 p.m.

Retrieving a large candelabrum from a dust covered bureau in the hallway, she produced a packet of matches and pausing, began lighting the six candles.

"Due to expenses, I've had to limit the power usage."

"That's completely understandable." I immediately agreed, "No sense wasting money on light." *For some reason I suspected that I'd eventually regret having said that.*

We hurriedly traveled the corridors where briefly halting at certain intervals, she paused to switch off lights.

It was during my continuing admiration of the exquisite rugs, decorative antiques and assorted tapestries that I suddenly noticed that Caitlin walked bare foot. It immediately struck me as odd that such a well mannered young woman with good etiquette might be found without the simple luxury of slippers? *Was this poor woman actually destitute? With such a fine house filled with antiques and other treasures how could this possibly be?* I felt strangely obligated to ask.

"When do you expect Mr. McCreary to return? I mean, he will eventually be joining us here, right?"

"Well that all depends?" Her pale face reflected eerily in the flickering candle-light, "If you mean my father, the late Mr. McCreary--," Her expression paled, "I'd prefer he didn't."

Now I'd really done it. Nice going Mike you nosy bastard!

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

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"All writers are inquisitive," She shrugged, holding the candelabra higher while brushing a curl out of her eyes, "I think it's an attractive quality."

"Yeah, but I'm a little too nosey at times."

There was something going on behind those brilliant green eyes, but I hadn't figured out what quite yet. Motioning for us to continue, she hurried along while protectively holding an arm before the flame, "There's no shame in questions, or desires, only acting on them."

After having paused briefly in the dining room to retrieve my luggage, I looked at my watch in disbelief.

"You know, I realize that it's only been a few minutes since we left the library, but does this seem like it's taking a very long time to you?"

"This place can be very deceiving at night," She politely covered her mouth to disguise a yawn, "Especially when you're not feeling well, or are over-tired."

"And in this case, I'm both." Feeling rather foolish I followed as she once more led me out and into the corridor.

"In the dark--," Her voice seemed to travel in the surrounding blackness, "The house of *McCreary* looks enormous, feels timeless and seems to hide all kinds of things. Some say that spirits haunt these old halls. And others claim that demons wander the grounds."

I could feel the hairs standing erect on the base of my neck.

"Why on earth would anyone suggest, demons?"

Stopping before the stairway she turned to look back at me, "I was only joking. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Oh, I wasn't saying that it frightened me at all." I attempted a smile as she switched off the last light and we were left entirely at the mercy of the candle-light.

"Wow, now this is dark, do you ever leave like – one little light on down here?"

We began ascending the red carpeted stairway as burdened with baggage, I followed very closely.

"These are the Lords and Ladies of the *McCreary* Clan." She casually waved toward the adjoining wall.

I curiously stared at the ornately framed paintings, failing to define any distinct family resemblance. In actuality, I had always found a certain profound and even macabre significance to portraits. The work of masters, which casting an image to be forever caught in time, existed long after both model and artist were long gone. Centuries later,

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all that would remain was a haunting image representing the ever watchful, restless dead.

"That's funny? I don't see any family resemblance." I shrugged, "How were you related?"

"I'm related through distant family." She mumbled without so much as a glance back, "Not distant enough for my liking, but distant."

"So you're from *Scotland* then."

"No-," She reached the top of the stairs and turned to look back at me, "I'm from the *Irish* side." Her eyes glinted eerily in the deep shadows, "Adopted by the *McCreary* family."

"Adopted, that works." It was obvious that I'd touched upon a *raw nerve*, so I casually changed the subject, "Is it much further to the rooms?"

"Oh, yes, our rooms are just around this corner." She motioned with a hand, her mood brightening as she led the way, "But I'm afraid that they're a little, dusty."

"Nothing to be concerned about, I won't even notice the dust." I politely lied, painfully aware that I would most likely spend the remainder of the visit coughing and suffering through sneezing fits.

"The hearth is stoked. Be sure to open the flue and tightly close the screen." She pointed, swinging the door wide open before me, "There's a lamp on top of the desk. I'll wait for you to turn that on."

Raising the candelabra to better reveal our surroundings, she nodded, "Off you go then."

Stumbling into the dark chamber with my luggage, I dropped everything in the middle of the room while hurrying toward a large roll-top desk, and switching on the little brass lamp.

The bulb flickered at first, but then steadied, casting a warm golden hue about the huge old desk.

"You might need matches." Caitlin waved the candelabra from where she stood in the doorway, "I forgot to check to see if those were still of any use."

Pulling the lighter out of my pocket, I moved toward the hearth, halting as she called out.

"Open the flue first. That rod, just slide it upward and off to the right." She motioned with a free hand, "And make sure to close the screen tightly."

Within moments I'd ignited the kindling, standing back and shooting a glance back at her, "Looks pretty good!"

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"That it does." She shivered, rubbing at the flesh of her bare arms, "I'll have Eva tidy up in here tomorrow."

Lighting a cigarette, I placed my hands upon my hips, "Oh – I won't make that much of a mess."

"That's a terrific sense of humor you have there." She smirked, suspiciously peering about the room, "You'll probably need it."

Looking upon her enticing form embraced within the golden hues of the lamp, candle and fire-light, I fought the urge to simply stand and stare. The emerald gown, that flaming red hair and pale though athletic physique, she was absolutely radiant.

"Did you need anything else before I toddle off to bed?"

More than you'll ever know.

"No – that's absolutely wonderful." I waved the books before me while attempting not to appear too enthusiastic about our present seclusion together, "I'll just sit here by the fire, and do a little reading before I call it a night."

"Well then, pleasant dreams." She winked, the twinkle in her eye and slight creases of her smile becoming just another endearment on my swiftly growing list.

With a quick wave, I watched as she moved out of the doorway, "Same to you."

She pulled the door tightly closed behind her and a moment later, I stood there utterly alone, still vibrating with the anticipation of an un-chaperoned schoolboy on a hot date.

So here I am – a guest in the soon to be demolished Duff Glenn estate, alone with Caitlin, the dust – and maybe something that was now just waiting for the lights to dim down? Save it for the story. There's nothing here but old stone, dusty furniture, shadows and us chickens!

Reluctantly moving toward the door I reached for the handle, swallowing hard as turning it, the mechanism clicked loudly. Pausing briefly, I slowly pulled the door open ever so slightly, wincing as it squealed upon rusted hinges.

I couldn't even begin to explain what possessed me to take such unusual precautions, but as I peered out into the blackness of the empty hallway, a sudden chill filled my heart.

It wasn't just the darkness, but that unnerving stillness which now occupied every inch of the hall beyond my room.

And, it was there. Sure it was... That shade which deeper than all others patiently waited in the darkness just beyond view. The only thing separating, protecting me from that chilling shadow was a tiny sliver of light that escaped from beneath the partially open door.

Once again my imagination raced! The shadows becoming twisted masses of unrecognizable forms that writhed in the blackness.

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They're moving. The shadows are alive in this place, watching, waiting for what? The light-- yes, that's what they were waiting for! They were waiting for me to turn out the lights -- and then, in the darkness, they would come for me.

Swallowing hard, I attempted to look down the long, dark corridor. Somewhere on my right and lost within that shadow, was her bedroom door.

Not a single sound.... Shouldn't I have been able to hear her getting ready for bed, maybe just a little squeak from an old bed frame as she climbed beneath the covers? Why was everything so cold -- so, deathly silent?

"Just close, and lock the door." I whispered through parched lips, "Yes, that's it, just close--and lock the door."

I slowly looked down, noticing the dim light that flowed from behind me, realizing how obvious my presence must've been to anything watching from in that darkness.

Without a second thought, I immediately closed and locked the door, cautious to slip the skeleton key into my pants pocket before hurrying toward the hearth. Piling several logs into the fire I carefully closed the mesh screen, peering about the room and snapping my fingers.

"Might as well get comfy, I've got a feeling that it's going to be a long night."

With that thought, I wasted little time in unpacking my luggage, changing into my blue flannel pajamas and favorite red silk smoking jacket.

"Wow--it's a cold one tonight." Shivering, I located my slippers, rubbing my hands together while moving toward the desk, "That's odd?"

Hesitating before the window, I pondered as to why unlike all the others, the shutters on this one hadn't been closed.

The faintest of crystalline formations hazed the edges of the immense window as the internal warmth struggled against the night's icy breath. It was almost magical as the moon's pale glow drifted inward, and I gazed out into the cold emptiness beyond. The world seemed to expand all about me as countless millions of stars twinkled within the vast darkness of space, and I suddenly felt utterly insignificant.

It was during that moment, when the moon had slipped free of the clouds and while I'd wiped my icy breath off the window pane, that I suddenly noticed an old building in the distance.

After parting the yellowed drapes and moving closer to the window, I realized that it wasn't a singular structure at all, but in fact, several. I stood and stared for several moments, shivering as a chill of recognition traveled through the night and into my heart.

"That's not a building -- they're graves... mausoleums."

Revealed beneath the moon's incandescent glow and rising high above the western hills, were the pale but distinct shapes of three marble structures.

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Although I was unable to define them in any great detail, I just couldn't look away.

There was a solemn stillness, a finality that held me spellbound and gazing at the old burial ground. It was like some dark riddle awaiting discovery.

And then, as the moon was swallowed up behind the black and churning clouds, the houses of the dead faded before my wide eyes, completely disappearing into the night.

Released from the strange trance, I moved from the window, returning to the desk and promptly lighting a cigarette.

"If I can't come up with a half decent spooky story in this place—I'm completely hopeless! Okay--let's see if we can't find a few skeletons in this closet."

Carefully unrolling the large genealogical chart, I located several candles around the room, placing one on each corner for weight. Satisfied that the scroll was safely held down, I retrieved a pen and pad and began scribbling details.

"Accidental deaths, death due to illness--Oh and what do we have here? You've gotta be kidding me! Hanged for grave robbing, now that's rich. No wonder she didn't want any of this to get out."

Within minutes I had compiled a small list of names and important dates, double checking the details before moving toward the desk.

"Alright—let's get intimate. I want to know everything."

Gently brushing a hand over the cold leather surface, I felt for the cover's edge, drawing the book open and whispering while reading aloud.

"History of *Duff Glenn*, a narrative of leading events by *Sir Reginald Andrew McCreary*, including family genealogies, seventeen hundred and eighty six--to nineteen hundred and fifteen."

Looking through the seemingly endless pages and archaic terminology, I decided to *cut to the chase* and just scribble down the *juicy* details. Reading aloud, I broke down the sentences, translating and writing them into something more modern. As promised, I would alter the names as I went along, careful to keep notes so as not to confuse myself in the process.

"The estate of the Clan *McCreary* began construction in the year of our lord seventeen hundred and eighty-six under the rule of *Sir Jonathan Stephen McCreary*. A man of honor and integrity, his livelihood was derived entirely of the import and export of precious stones and metals."

Pausing to light a cigarette, I fumbled through several paragraphs before deciding the next line.

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"The manor was completed in seventeen hundred and ninety one, the same year that his wife Maria Marguerite gave birth to Henry Augustus."

Flicking an ash, I read down several paragraphs through Sir Reginald's accounts of business, the shipping industry and the hazards of bad weather.

"Blah-blah-blah, second son, Thomas was born in seventeen ninety three, and hey, a third, Peter, born in seventeen ninety five. No one could ever accuse them of not being productive."

Following the events of several seasons where business in the gem trade made the McCreary family disgustingly wealthy, I stopped while having noticed something disturbing.

"What's this? In the fall, October of eighteen hundred and one, ten year old Henry disappears. His body is found in the pond by servants the following morning. It was established that after having fallen into the deep muddy water, the boy had been tangled in willow roots and drowned. He drowned in mud--what a nasty way to die, the poor kid."

A violent shudder traveled the length of my spine.

"In the wake of little Henry's death, Jonathon begins construction of the mausoleums. Located in the south western region of the estate grounds, the mausoleums would be accessible by passing through an adjacent gated, stone memorial garden and marble path."

Passing through several more pages of details outlining construction features of the house itself, I stumbled over a paragraph concerning a business partner who just happened to also be a relative living in Ireland. *Could this possibly be Caitlin's family connection?*

"Glenn Doyle, a distant cousin managing a ship-yard on the Emerald Isle. Not bad—they even covered distribution costs by using their own shipping fleet."

Briefly searching the pages, I found another unfortunate accident. This time, it was Thomas the second oldest of the three sons. In this, Sir Reginald accounted for the incident through Parish records.

"April sixteenth, year of our lord eighteen hundred and nine."

Reading the account several times, my throat became suddenly dry as I spoke while attempting to properly describe the incident.

"While attending the site of the newly constructed McCreary mausoleums, Thomas McCreary, sixteen years of age, and the eldest of two remaining sons, was the victim of a terrible accident."

Swallowing hard, I struggled with the details.

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"It was as while over-seeing the completion of the third and final structure that Thomas, accidentally dislodging a structural support beam, was caught between and crushed to death by the collapsing marble wall.

Flipping the page, I scanned down from where Sir Reginald discussed Jonathon's grief and subsequent alcohol abuse.

"In June eighteen hundred and fourteen, Peter at age nineteen marries a local girl by the name of Elaine Marie Crofton. Might not be important--but I'd better keep this in perspective just in case. Blah-blah-blah, in a drunken stupor Jonathon beats a man-servant half to death. I see drunks haven't changed much over the years. Oh here we are! Elaine becomes pregnant and gives birth to twin girls in May of eighteen hundred and sixteen. Names--," I reached for another pen as the ink ran out, "Amelia and Vanessa."

Returning to the book, I searched through the continuing events, reading aloud as I went along.

"Eighteen hundred and seventeen, Peter travels to Germany with his family and takes up a degree in medicine at the *University of Krakow*. The addition of the West Wing chapel and family crypts, the new renovations were finally completed in eighteen hundred and twenty five. Peter returns home and to the ailing Jonathon's delight, proudly introduces his two year old son, Michael Augustus."

Hurriedly taking down the details, I read through the monotonous accounts of numerous business exploits and company expansions, the industry widening and introducing fine furniture, as well as antiques and works of art.

"Okay, so Elaine get's pregnant again and in October of eighteen hundred and twenty six, gives birth to a son, Alistair. Talk about a ton of details. How the hell would anyone keep track of this crap?"

And then it struck me.

"And for that matter--if Sir Reginald was suffering from an incapacitating illness, there's no way he would've been clear enough to write this."

For several minutes I just sat there, scratching at my head and drifting into that dark place where dreams and imagination collide with common sense.

"But then again --," Reaching for a cigarette I paused with the lighter, "Diseases are progressive. He might've started the writing before he was too far gone."

A sudden crash sent me sprawling to the floor. Rolling and cursing, noticing the shutters which caught in a strong wind, now clattered against the window pane.

"It's late... I'd better jump into bed and get a little shut-eye."

Turning toward the large bed I sighed deeply. *It wasn't all that bad. After all, the room was warmer now!*

FLASH FICTION

I felt strangely enticed by the placid blue shades of the *Damask* patterns. Yes – even drawn toward the large and inviting pillows. *Sleep, yes-sir, I would be out in no time but hey – what’s this?* Halting, I swallowed hard, noticing the inch of dust that rested on everything.

“Oh to hell with it... I’ve slept in worse places.”

Carefully drawing back the top cover I suddenly froze, my eye having caught a swift movement.

“Oh no – no, anything please, but not spiders!”

Leaping back as an enormous wolf spider dashed out from under the covers, I grabbed a poker from the fireplace and began smashing at the scrambling insect.

“Die you ugly--furry little bastard!”

Pursuing and whacking at the ghastly thing, I gasped as it dashed across the blankets, dropping to the floor and swiftly disappearing beneath the bed.

“Oh no – it’s under the bed.”

In the silence I could easily imagine what the little monster was doing. It was lurking somewhere in the dusty shadows of those old blankets, watching with those eight beady little black eyes. Yes – it was waiting for the lights to go out. And then, it would come silently creeping on those eight long and hairy legs. Ever so carefully it would crawl, those razor sharp, ever twitching fangs grinding together.

“Oh--shit!” I leapt up, shuddering in revulsion as dropping the poker, I moved away from the bed, rubbing at the creeping flesh of my forearms.

Just the thought of that hideous thing crawling anywhere near my body was enough to cause uncontrollable chills.

“I’ll just wait until he comes out. Then I’ll smash him--,” I looked around, retrieving a medieval axe that hung from a plaque over the hearth, “With this!”

4:26 a.m.

It wasn’t coming out. And I’d been sitting on the edge of the hearth and waiting, for what seemed like hours. Needless to say, after drifting off several times and almost being impaled on that axe, I decided that enough was enough.

“That’s it--,” Sluggishly standing up, I returned the axe to its plaque above the hearth. “It’s just a tiny little, disgusting – filthy, hairy little bug.” Doing a little *shiver and shudder* dance, I peeked around the bed before slowly sitting down.

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Turning and dusting off the pillow, I took one last look under the covers before slipping into bed. The sheets were cool to the touch and while gently crawling beneath the heavy blankets, I fought back a violent sneeze. If I'd previously been the least bit concerned about the dust, it all faded as my thoughts returned to the spider. "Please God – don't let it get me."

With that thought and utterly fatigued beyond any further care, I rolled over and covered up, pulling the blankets closely about my face.

The moon cast a gentle blue glow through-out the room as my fading gaze was drawn into the dimly glowing coals. Unable to keep my eyes open any longer, the night soon carried me across distant shores and into the twilight of dreams.

A sensation of utter weightlessness as the day's troubles faded... and then, in the blackness, something touched me! It wasn't a hand or any distinguishable form, but rather, something like a wave of icy pain. A foul, unspeakable stench and then, something cold and gelatinous surrounded and now attempted to suffocate me!

Gasping, I fought for air, as to my utter horror, I was helplessly pulled into the churning frozen mire. Whatever it was, it seemed as though each molecule shared a collective consciousness, reacting and responding in waves to my every thought and movement.

Extending a hand into the shadows, the chill worsened until becoming unbearable, forcing me to quickly pull the arm back. The movement had caused a strange wave, that glowing ever so slightly, rolled away until disappearing altogether. *What if something out there noticed the glow? If it came looking, it would surely find me.*

The terrifying sensation was oddly familiar. It was the same fear that I'd felt while looking into the dark hallway earlier. I was surrounded, utterly vulnerable, and all too obvious in that blackness.

It was within those few moments, which seeming both brief and spanning an eternity, that I heard it. Beginning as little more than a whisper, the sound steadily escalated, echoing with the deafening roar of a million tortured screams! Covering my ears with both hands, I could only cry out in pain as the shrieking ripped through my being! And then, when I'd thought that my head would explode from the pressure, a sudden and all consuming stillness.

Standing – yes, I was now standing in some kind of corridor. It was a place that although barely visible, seemed hauntingly familiar. It wasn't the McCreary mansion. But, hey wait a second? What is that? Spinning in the blackness, I squinted, barely able to make out a pale form that crouching, huddled with its face pressed into the corner of a near-by wall. Hunched and shuddering, it glistened in the dim light, its bony form dripping with some kind of, luminescent slime.

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Horried beyond the ability to do anything than just stand and stare, my heart leapt into my throat!

Maybe it hadn't seen me – or was it somehow, silently aware of my presence? I thought to run, but for some reason, knew that it would be hopeless!

Ever so slowly the thing began to rise. My gaze falling upon the horrendous creature that now turned to face me in the corridor.

From the shadows of a drawn and leathery face more animal than human, flashed two large and luminous green eyes. The blood froze in my veins as raising long and clawed hands it slowly advanced, hissing from between snapping, razor sharp teeth.

A sickly green haze suddenly illuminated the corridor, as in the fading shadows the thing's features became hideously clear!

Wet and slippery with blackening decay, it bore no visible gender while hidden behind a veil of foul and clinging hair. Although hunched due to deformity, it stood as tall as an average man, the limbs below the elbows and knees appearing horribly reptilian. It uttered a terrifying shriek, gurgling and choking through distorted, dog-like features. It wasn't completely human and not entirely animal – but some kind of blasphemous union.

As it came within a yard of where I faltered in terror, the ribs parted, the hair drifting aside as thrashing tentacles extended from within the monstrous thing's gaping torso!

It howled, the ground shaking beneath my feet as the creature's rib-cage spread wider, yawning like a starving mouth as those horrible, slimy tendrils frantically twitched, reaching toward me!

Possessing an aura of absolute mind-numbing chaos, a bone-chilling cold stole both my will and strength in self defense.

In a moment it would be upon me! Oh God in heaven above – have mercy, give me the strength to run!

Crying out in sheer terror, I gathered whatever strength remained, flinging myself backward. Having barely managed to avoid its grasp, I scrambled to my feet, the monstrosity swiftly pursuing as suddenly turning, I desperately ran down the corridor.

Darkness – utter blackness at the end of the tunnel! There was no escape!

And then, somewhere in that shadow, I tripped, falling heavily to the damp earth of the tunnel.

Trembling violently, I turned, tightly pressing my back against the cold stone wall while turning to face the approaching thing!

But it had already arrived... and crouched only inches away.

FLASH FICTION

Helplessly staring into those large black pools where the green light grew dim, it crept ever closer. Ever further as my eyes were drawn into that which I now realized to be the eyes of my murderer.

In this final moment, I dared to stare straight into the horrendous thing's face! *But what was this? It just couldn't be?*

The features now revealed a pale and unearthly beauty, which residing like a shadow, was caught beneath the spectral visage of an indistinguishable abomination. This being, whatever it was? Resonated infinite and unspeakable evil! And yet--it also whispered of desperate and inescapable sorrow.

The jaws parted, revealing blackened gums and long rows of razor sharp teeth. The overwhelming stench of decay forcing me further against the wall, as struggling to avoid the flailing tentacles I gasped.

"No--no! This isn't real!"

Choking out the words and gasping as the effort stole the breath out of my lungs, I felt as though I would burst beneath the immense pressure in my chest!

"This is a dream! A Nightmare--you're not real!"

The jaws snapped before my face, foul and steaming spittle splattering and running the length of my face and throat.

The tentacles thrashed, tightly grasping my shoulders and drawing me inward as the ribs now gnashed like immense teeth.

"Oh my God--someone, anyone, help me!"

A sudden and thunderous echo caused me to leap upward, abruptly awakening from the nightmare and turning toward the sound of Caitlin's desperate pounding on the bedroom door.

"Michael! Michael--please answer me!"

Trembling uncontrollably I climbed out of bed, fumbling blindly through the darkness while searching my pants pocket for the key.

"I'm fine--everything's alright, one second!"

Retrieving my smoking jacket from where it had been left hanging from the back a nearby chair, I slipped it on, hurriedly unlocking the door.

"Michael--what's going on?"

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"I'm having a little trouble with this lock. It seems to be jammed or something?" I fumbled with the key, sighing with relief as a loud click announced its release, stepping aside and swinging open the door.

"I heard you screaming! What happened--are you okay?" Caitlin suddenly appeared from out of the darkness, wrapping her arms tightly about my neck as she wept, "You scared me half to death!"

"I'm so very sorry... it was just a really bad nightmare." Covering my face with a trembling hand, I suddenly noticed an unbearable chill, realizing that my night-clothes were damp with an icy sweat.

"You look awful. Are you sure you're going to be alright?" Gently brushing the clinging hair out of my face, she gazed deeply into my eyes.

"Can I get you anything, do anything at all?"

Suddenly feeling quite foolish I could only shake my head.

"Oh, no I'm fine now, honestly. I think I was just too warm under all those blankets. Must've kicked them off in my sleep and caught a chill. That'll explain the nightmares--," I raised a finger in thought, "Cold feet have always given me bad dreams. That started when I was a kid."

"You poor thing--you're completely soaked." She gawked, picking at my damp and clinging pajamas.

"I could stay with you for a little while. We could talk about your nightmare -- sometimes that helps."

"That's really very sweet of you. But I'll be fine now."

"Are you sure? I really don't mind." Concern deeply creased her brow as gesturing toward the desk with a nod she said, "I could bring some tea."

Sighing deeply, I sluggishly moved toward the desk, ungraciously slumping into the chair and turning to look at her.

"I've already caused enough of a racket around here. I'll be lucky if you don't just toss my butt out of here tomorrow!"

"Oh don't you be silly--," She chuckled, turning to leave and halting as tapping her nails on the door-frame, thoughtfully glanced back.

"It might be a good idea to leave the door--unlocked."

Retrieving the skeleton key from my pocket, I hurriedly climbed from the chair and moving toward her, paused to look at it.

FLASH FICTION

"I honestly never even thought about it." I lied while attempting to conceal the embarrassment.

"I'm just so use to locking everything all the time that it becomes a--," gazing deeply into her eyes we verged upon the boundaries of a kiss before suddenly breaking free.

"A bad thought--," I immediately corrected myself, "I meant bad habit!"

"Well if you expect to get anything accomplished." She suddenly blushed, becoming aware of having accidentally revealed the sheer gown beneath the robe which she now politely, yet slowly drew closed. "You'd best get some sleep and avoid any more distractions."

Oh how terribly, desperately I longed for her to become one long and lasting distraction. But how could this have happened, I hardly knew the woman!

"Well—we won't have any more trouble with that lock now."

Handing her the key, I grinned foolishly as we paused in the doorway to look upon each other in parting.

"You know something Michael--," She ran a hand through long red curls, staring at me with those heavy lidded green eyes, "This place can be very —intimidating, even a little frightening to someone who's not used to it. I'll leave my door open. If you need anything—just shout and I'll be here in a wink."

The words having fallen into preconceived desire, I now falsified a muscle spasm while attempting to conceal an entirely embarrassing, and dare I say, protrusive physical reaction.

"Oh boy--muscle cramp!" Doubling over in assumed anguish, I limped toward the bed, dropping on the edge while swiftly rubbing at a lower calf.

"Oh you poor thing, just a moment, I can help!" Hurrying to my assistance, she gently but firmly began stroking and massaging the leg, curiously gazing up from where she now squatted on the floor before me, "Is that any better at all?"

"No—no I don't believe that's helping at all! Maybe I should just get under the covers and stretch out a little. The warmth should help."

Hurriedly scrambling beneath the covers and uncomfortably leaning to one side, I drew upon the memory of Mrs. Ellen Dupuis. A three hundred and fifty-two pound, fifth grade English teacher, who continually smelling of body odor and moth balls, we had simply referred to as "The bearded lady."

"Yeah, this should do the trick alright."

FLASH FICTION

Caitlin moved from where she had been kneeling, raising an eyebrow and halting in the doorway, “Are you sure that everything’s alright now?”

Nodding slowly, I swallowed hard, shuddering with the nauseating memory of Mrs. Dupuis.

“Definitely – perfect, honest, I’m just fine now.”

“Okay Michael, you try to get some sleep, I’ll see you for breakfast.”

Waiting several moments until having heard the distant click of what I had assumed to have been her bedroom door, I slowly climbed out of bed with a groan.

“I need a cigarette.”

Grumbling with certain frustration and obvious shame, I slowly wandered back to the desk, nervously lighting a cigarette.

“Maybe I’ll just read a few more pages.”

Reluctantly at first, I slowly opened the volume, looking to where I’d previously finished.

“Okay – now where were we? Ah, yes, the month of August, year of our Lord eighteen hundred and thirty four. Amelia turns eighteen and takes a suitor named Charles Raymond Devonshire. The estate and subsidiaries profits exceed all expectations. Oh and what’s this? Although Charles family is held in the highest regard amongst friends and business associates... oh this is good.”

The description was so amusing that I just had to write in quote!

“Charles personally lacked the moral foundation and profundity of character bestowed upon his predecessors. His apathetic candor, blatant disrespect for the simplest of etiquette and employ of profanity often dissuaded future business prospects. What a polite way to call this guy an asshole!”

Reading further down the page, I halted suddenly, reading aloud.

“Regardless, Amelia would accept Charles proposal of marriage. Although infuriated with the supposition of marriage, Jonathan, having been attentive of Charles’ notorious reputation, fails to dissuade the young woman. As might be expected, news of Charles’ infidelity with Carolyn Ellesmere, a local Inn keeper’s daughter, soon reaches Jonathan. Rumor speaks of Jonathan having traveled into the village, visited the Inn, and spirited the Ellesmere girl away during the night.”

Flipping the page I paused to butt the cigarette.

“It’s pretty obvious that this is going to get ugly. Okay--,” I squinted, rubbing sleep from my eyes while choosing only the pertinent details.

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“Oh – now that’s a big surprise! Charles disappears shortly after. Weeks pass in Charles absence before the estranged Amelia fearfully approaches the local authorities. She learns of Charles and Carolyn’s affair, is informed that Carolyn and Charles disappearance was considered – oh now that’s rich! It was more likely a midnight rendezvous’ and romantic interlude, rather than considered a probable misdemeanor.”

Several paragraphs down I paused to read aloud, enthusiastically scribbling more notes.

“It would be a fortnight before Michael would discover the corpse of the Ellesmere girl in the pond. Submerged amongst the thick willow roots and held fast by rope and a stone anchor, she was bound to Charles her unfaithful lover.”

Lighting another cigarette, my pen moved faster with every ghastly revelation.

“So now we have a double murder. But what’s this? It doesn’t get reported to the authorities! Jonathan reveals the truth to Amelia, enlisting her allegiance by threat of being an accomplice to a crime punishable by death. Blackmail – this just keeps getting juicier. Amelia, stricken with grief and unwilling to accept the guilt fled from Jonathan, the argument ensuing among the mausoleums. During heated argument, he had struggled with the hysterical girl, accidentally casting her down to where she dashed her skull open upon the marble steps. Bereaved but unwilling to disclose the unfortunate accident, he had hidden her corpse in the mausoleum. The bodies of Charles and Carolyn were discretely disposed of as Jonathan, blaming the estranged and now missing Amelia for the murders, forbade further discussion of the matter.”

It was all starting to make sick and twisted sense.

“Good one Jonathan, blame the person with the most motive. Someone the family would pity – while you scare them all.”

Peering over my shoulder and out the window at the mausoleums, I swallowed hard. I’d been looking for the proverbial *skeleton in the closet*, but never expected to unearth an entire graveyard.

“Peter would remain at the estate with his young sons Michael and Alistair, but his wife Elaine would depart to distant family with little Vanessa. The entire affair became little more than whispers among staff and the town’s folk, but the shadow of the crimes would grow with the passing of time. Winter of the same year, Maria falls ill with consumption, passes away in the spring of eighteen hundred and thirty five.”

Looking through my notes I paused to check the dates. Regardless of changing the names, places and events slightly, I would be careful with details as no-one appreciates inconsistencies.

“Okay – so Peter sends Michael, age seventeen, to University in Geneva in eighteen hundred and forty. Shortly after, it’s said that Peter is seen in the company of reputed heretic’s, occultists and other character’s of equally sinister constitution. There is talk of black magic.”

Turning the page, my eyes widened.

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"It would be the spring of eighteen hundred and forty three when Peter would find Jonathan, who after having written a detailed testimonial and relinquishing all evidence of his crimes, hanged himself in the west wing crypt. Go figure. The guy lives well into his eighties and then hangs himself. Well--that explains how Sir Reginald had all the gory details on the murders."

It was a well known tale of success, happiness and incredible wealth. And now, as the time had arrived for all to enjoy the fruits of their labor, the devil had knocked upon their door. Or... had he already been there, unnoticed, watching and waiting the entire time?

"Okay --just a couple more pages and then bed-time, where was I? The news of Jonathan's death traveled fast, reaching Elaine who subsequently returns to Peter with young Vanessa. Over the next ten years, Peter would never entirely abandon his occult studies, often consulting with known practitioners of the black arts and gypsy spiritualists. In May of the year eighteen hundred and fifty three, Vanessa would marry Arnold Humphries the village physician. Arnold was a brilliant doctor, admired by his associates and reputedly a man of virtuous character. That would make Vanessa thirty seven years old, a granny at that time. Oh well -- misers, every family has one. It would be these qualities that inspired Peter to request he take permanent residence within the estate. Arnold accepted immediately, drawing his practice and also enlisting the aid of young Michael who had recently returned from Geneva. It would be young Alistair who, in the late fall of eighteen hundred and fifty four, would discover Amelia's remains while surveying the mausoleums."

Flicking an ash, I flipped through the last few pages before nodding in continuation.

"Not much further now. I might as well finish this part of it. Closure offered little comfort, family and servants often noticing Peter walking by moonlight amongst the graves where caught between grief and contempt, the evils of liquor utterly consumed the once proud man.

Vanessa bore twin girls in December of that year, Elizabeth Ann, and Lenora Marie whereupon due to complications during birthing, she took ill for several months. It was during the following months that Peter withdrew from, and consequently dissolved all previous association with Jonathan's business relations. The decision both abrupt and entirely unwarranted exasperated his colleagues, many of them suffering hardship having become entirely dependent upon financial support from the McCreary fortune. Against the legal and moral counsel of the few associates Peter had retained, he also disregarded legislated contracts and corresponding financial responsibilities. All business repute and personal integrity established by Jonathan fell into absolute ruin within those final months. Peter establishes Arnold's office as sole medical advisor and incorporates the McCreary fortune in the practice of medicine depending entirely upon inherited funding for support."

Retrieving a new notepad from the doctor's bag beside the desk, I began the final entry.

"In February the year of eighteen hundred and fifty six, Alistair takes Kathleen Meyer, the daughter of a local shoe-maker as his wife. Peter, greatly disappointed with Alistair's common wife and the constant illness predominating both Elaine and Vanessa, becomes

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reclusive, spending endless hours barred within his study. The year eighteen hundred and fifty eight, Kathleen gives birth to Sarah Lynn, the child immediately falls ill, and merely weeks later, succumbs to the night chills. Regardless of pernicious rumor concerning the moral constitution of the McCreary family, Arnold's reputable skills as a physician escalate within the community and his practice flourishes. Michael receives financial support from Peter establishing the Humphries funeral parlor in accordance with Arnold's instruction, whereupon he enlists Alistair into apprenticeship. During the same year, Peter establishes residency under the title of practicing physician, receiving the appropriate credentials from a prior education in Geneva. There is evident discourse amongst the family and mounting anxiety involving the servants concerning Peter's mysterious nocturnal activities. Suspicions are aroused when the corpse of a prominent importer of antiquities, having disappeared some weeks earlier, is discovered partially devoured by wild dogs on land bordering the Duff Glenn estate. Peter is immediately scrutinized on the pretense of sharing motive, having once been a business associate of the unfortunate man. Although never having been truly relinquished of probable guilt in the matter, authorities are unable to provide credible evidence substantiating otherwise. It would later be said that although the heinous crime remained unsolved, there had indeed been witnesses who under threat of death, declined involvement during the inquiry."

I could only shake my head in disbelief. *Caitlin must've really trusted me to hand this insanity over. It wasn't just family dirt--it was truly the stuff of nightmares!*

By this point my head was as heavy as lead and even though my eyes kept trying to close, I couldn't help but reading on!

"The spring of the year eighteen hundred and fifty nine, Arnold Humphries and Michael McCreary are discovered to have participated in the practice of grave robbing and other blasphemous crimes against the people. They are tried in February, found guilty and hanged in March. Peter inters them within the family crypt and having lost all professional credibility, abandons his remedial practice, sojourning to the privacy of the estate. It would be during the month of July that several of the female servants would seemingly abandon their responsibilities and altogether vanish. In the winter of the same year Vanessa takes ill and regardless of a desperate attempt, Peter's remedial endeavors fall nothing short of futile. In a state of fevered delirium, Vanessa swiftly succumbs to pneumatic symptoms and dies shortly thereafter."

Rubbing at my eyes, I paused in thought, leaning closer and squinting at the pages.

"A fear spreads quickly, the remaining attendants depart. Authorities sustain constant vigil over the estate. It would be through great trial and tribulation that Peter would eventually establish new commerce, investing and incorporating the McCreary fortune through clandestine arrangement of European gem exporters and dealers of antiquities. The venture provided unanticipated complications as through prior business association, the notoriety of the McCreary reputation hindered essential corporate alliance, eventually forcing Peter to mutually retract. Embittered and floundering upon inevitable financial ruin, Peter makes re-acquaintance with Glenn William Doyle, the son of Jonathan's old confidant and prominent Irish importer of antiquities. It would be through mutual contract that Peter would divert all remaining resources into a conglomerate,

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relinquishing the McCreary title and disassociating all prior discrimination. The Glenn Doyle mercantile, as it was then known, would invest in numerous shipping docks, warehouse facilities and foundries. The extent of which would travel from Ireland to London, and from New York to the Canadian West Coast. The elderly Glenn Doyle would also establish an estate to be built within coastal vicinity of the Duff Glenn property. The mercantile would contrive interests within proposed mining and the growing forest industry.”

Nervously flipping through the remaining pages, and noticing the time, I decided to finish. I’d been reading this long – what difference would a few more minutes make?

“In the year eighteen hundred and sixty one, during mid February, an inexplicable fire breaks out in the west wing where Kathleen and little Elizabeth are overcome by smoke and perish in the ensuing flames. Peter inters them within the crypt and enlisting several artisans, begins restoration of the west wing and chapel. During this time Glenn Doyle being of considerable age falls ill. Concerned for the welfare of the business and all involved, he immediately promotes his eldest son Gordon to vice president and head of administration. He would also appoint Donald, the younger of the two brothers, a mere youth of twenty-five, responsible within the continuing construction of the Glenn Doyle estate. This foresight proves immeasurable as Glenn Doyle suffering a relapse, falls into the grace of God merely days later and is interred within his native soil of Ireland. The spring of eighteen hundred and sixty three marks the completion of the Glenn Doyle manor, the entire task is completed mid January as while during a maintenance inspection of a newly installed window panel, Donald slips from an ice covered ledge falling several stories to his death. The loss of his younger brother weighing heavily upon his heart, Gordon becomes reclusive and subsequently neglects pertinent business engagements. This neglect, regardless of reason, creates significant anxiety amongst associates and contempt from an ailing Peter. Within the months that followed Peter would incessantly quarrel with Gordon, his pretentious demands and ill-tempered behavior inherently drawing their affiliation precariously close to a bitter ending. It would be during the early spring of the year eighteen hundred and sixty four that overwhelmed with financial burden and perplexed within all matters concerned otherwise, Gordon would suddenly fall deathly ill. Casting aside all previous personal indifference, Peter would immediately attend to the young man, desperately struggling against the unidentifiable ailment as Gordon’s physical condition rapidly worsened. With great haste, Peter enlisted the services of numerous renowned physicians, their efforts in determining cause or cure utterly futile as the young man withered into a state of unconsciousness. With Gordon’s demise only days later, the conglomerate known as Glenn Doyle Mercantile and affiliates was by legal declaration, bestowed upon Peter McCreary, the sole investor and titled benefactor. The remaining family of Glenn Doyle would experience troubled times. But Peter, taking their losses into consideration and concerned for future commerce, would personally finance and establish what would later become the thriving proprietorship of Glenn Doyle Vineyards. Such was his earnest devotion to their preservation that he employed written contract, entitling an annual one third share of his corporate net income to be provided to the surviving members. This was done annually by a trustee of Glenn Doyle Mercantile and Affiliates, the name of

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which he would indefinitely retain. Through these proceedings, past misgivings and public persecution regarding the McCreary reputé would cease and while business prospered, Peter found new vigor and inspiration. October of the same year, Alistair declines and desists from further responsibility of proprietorship of Humphries Funeral Parlor. It would be during a heated argument due to this reason, that Alistair accidentally causes the elder Peter dire physical injury. November year of our Lord eighteen hundred and sixty five, Peter McCreary passes unexpectedly in the night, the grief-stricken Alistair remains alone to contend with business and estate. Under extreme duress, Alistair immediately enlists regulatory management. The Glenn Doyle Mercantile and Affiliates swiftly re-establishes and maintains its prior conduct under the administration of Edward Allan Thomas. Reassured of continued success, Alistair concentrates all efforts upon the Humphries Funeral Parlor. With the proprietorship in capable hands, he takes the opportunity to regain proper management of the Duff Glenn estate, attending to personal affairs. It would be during these following months that he would discover the occult literature hidden within his late father's private study. Black pages, which providing evidence of blasphemous human experimentation and ritualistic murder, would cast Alistair beneath the shadow of madness that had once prevailed over his father. Restless and bewildered, the sins that resided within that research would disturb his efforts by day, and torment him by night. The estranged Alistair would soon become driven by silent madness, suffering with an unholy fascination, a curiosity for things best left to darkness and devil-lore."

Pausing briefly, I flipped back, counting through the pages before continuing with the last pages. These were mainly focused around financial affairs and information involving added construction and the Glenn Doyle Vineyards. But then, I began reading the final few paragraphs.

"Now why doesn't this surprise me? Trouble finds Alistair once again as several of the servants make claims of having witnessed strange lights among the mausoleums during the night. With the previous unsolved disappearances, the authorities quickly investigate the claims. It would be late one night in mid September when Alistair, caught within a drunken stupor, is arrested in the process of attempting to exhume a corpse from the mausoleum. There would be a lengthy Court hearing at which Richard Charles Terence, an attorney in Alistair's defense, confirmed that the transference of human remains from an ancestral mausoleum to a family crypt, be it by day or the night, establishing that this had been done upon private property, was not a criminal offense. Unable to provide substantial evidence to prove anything otherwise, the law relinquished Alistair of the charges, but never released him from legal scrutiny. Alistair would become more secretive and deranged over time. It would not be until the sudden and unexplained disappearance of the literature that he would return to life and society. Although vague and never proven, suspicion implicated Alistair's niece Lenora. The month of November of eighteen hundred and seventy subjects Alistair to public ridicule as Lenora, aged sixteen, is discovered to have become heavy with his child. It would be within late December that Alistair overwhelmed with guilt for his father's unspeakable atrocities and unrelenting shame, would cast himself from the west wing tower parapet to his death. The destitute Lenora would remain within isolation, a moral prisoner of the estate, and the unborn child."

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Glancing over my shoulder, I swallowed hard, having sensed an unsettling stillness. A darkness which even now continued to struggle against the dawn as the shadows silently crept beneath the bed and bureau.

Struggling to focus on the pages before me, the heated nausea of insomnia drowned out all conscious thought. Hurriedly under-lining the details and locations involving deaths, I planned out a route for the following morning. *Pictures, yup I'd definitely have to take some pictures. And then I'd read the last entries – the diaries of Sir Reginald. But not now – need sleep.*

The numbing glow of the distant dawn ached painfully in the back of my mind. Closing the book and sluggishly wandering over to the bed, I slumped onto the heaped mass of blankets. As the world faded into oblivion and my thoughts were cast adrift, I heard something calling from out of the blackness of a dream.

“Hello and good morning sir.” Eva spoke softly and with a heavy Scottish drawl, gently though persistently knocking on the door as she called again, “Mr. Schreiber, the breakfast is ready and waiting sir.”

Rolling over with a groan, I instinctively shielded my eyes, avoiding the morning glare.

“Yes, thank you. I’ll be there in a moment.” I politely answered, squinting while looking at my watch.

“Eight thirty – I’ve only been asleep for an hour. Oh geez... alright body, come on, let’s get going--,”

Feebly crawling off the bed, I lost my balance, falling heavily to the floor.

Friday October 6th.

9:18 a.m.

It was an effort to even move that morning as half-dazed, I’d stumbled at the foot of the stairs, catching myself seconds before tumbling headlong and into certain death. For several moments I’d just clung to the old banister, staring at the cold marble floor some twenty feet below. It was a sobering moment.

With a firm hold upon the rail, I cautiously descended the steps, hurrying through the corridor and making my way into the dining room.

“Hello there, you must be Eva.” Extending a hand in greeting I was startled by her surprised, even shocked expression.

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"Good heavens, Mr. Schreiber--," She gasped, placing a hand before her mouth, "With all due respect sir, you look like you've seen a ghost! Are you ill?"

She was a short and heavy set elderly woman. Wearing a full apron and smelling of perfume and cleaning products. I could only smile with the way her bright blue eyes now bulged with concern.

"No—I just had a little mishap on the stairs. I didn't sleep much last night, clumsy, I tripped, scared myself pretty good."

"Oh no--," She gently grasped my wrist, stroking it like a favored pet. "You didn't hurt yourself did you?"

"No—but like I said, I did manage to scare the heck out of myself."

"You sit down lad--," She pulled me toward a chair, seating me before the table, "I'll fetch breakfast."

Suddenly becoming aware of Caitlin's absence, I looked around the room as Eva poured coffee.

"Are we alone this morning?"

Sighing deeply the old woman turned toward a silver tray from which she now served breakfast.

"I'm afraid so sir--," She grinned mischievously, "It seems that the two of you were up quite late."

"Oh, it was nothing like that." Blurting defensively I aroused a smile from the elderly attendant as spooning sugar into my coffee and accepting the cream from her, I felt obliged to explain.

"She just came into my room late last night. No wait..." I attempted to correct myself as she laughed.

"No need to explain anything to me. It's not my business to pry."

"Bad dreams, that's all." The words slipped from out of thought, "I didn't sleep very well because of bad dreams."

"I doubt that anyone's ever slept very well in this place--," She appeared vaguely disturbed but not entirely surprised.

"It's just too big, old and drafty." She stared around the room, rubbing her hands together in thought before adding. "I won't stay here—too chilly for these old bones."

"Caitlin mentioned that you were staying in town." I sipped at the coffee, "Have you been employed here for long? I mean—if you don't mind me asking?"

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"Oh no, I don't mind at all--," She shrugged, running a hand across her tightly bound white hair and fidgeting with the pins, "It seems like forever, I started here when I was very young. And that's so long ago now that it might as well have been forever."

"That's a lovely accent--," I nibbled at toast, "It's amazing it's lasted through the years."

"Well, I was born in Aberdeen Scotland astride the Rivers Dee and Don. That's on Scotland's North Sea coast. It's a busy port town to this day. It's how my family came into service for the McCreary's."

"Okay --so you were around when Caitlin was adopted by the McCreary's--," I sat back while curiously looking at Eva.

"No sir --I wasn't..." She became visibly uncomfortable with the conversation, "But we prefer not to discuss such things around here."

Her features brightened with a change of subject, "Can I get you anything else?"

"No this is absolutely fabulous." I reassured her, utilizing a rasher of crisp bacon to shovel eggs onto a piece of toast and suddenly realizing my poor etiquette, "Oh, pardon me."

Embarrassed and reaching for a fork, I blushed with her laughter.

"Oh don't be bothered, you just enjoy your breakfast in whatever fashion pleases you."

"Thanks, but believe it or not? I actually do use cutlery in most cases," Attempting to explain, I spilled again, wiping egg from my chin with a napkin, "Although it does seem like I'm having a little trouble with it this morning."

Adjusting the frilly white apron about her waist, she chuckled, smiling and offering another napkin from an ornate dispenser, "Michael... do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Not at all, ask away." Accepting the napkin, I looked up as she seated herself across the table.

"Caitlin tells me that you write ghost stories. Do you really like prowling about and chasing ghosties and nasty's?"

Although completely sincere, the question took me off guard.

"Nasty's, what exactly do you mean by, nasty's?"

"Well of course," She chuckled, "Nasty's, the mean little things that frighten children in the night and hang about cemeteries. Nasty's, you know?"

"So far --I haven't encountered anything like that." Grinning, I pulled the cigarette package out of my pocket and waving them, asked, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

FLASH FICTION

"Certainly not, you go right ahead dear." She poured herself a cup of tea, stirring sugar into the hot liquid. "You must be terribly lonely in your work. Not that I intend to pry, you understand."

"Oh that's quite alright." Smirking I puffed at my cigarette. "I've gotten used to it. My work really doesn't leave much time for socializing."

"Oh, now that's such a shame." She frowned, clicking her tongue. "It's just not good for a young man to spend all that time alone."

"Well, as you already know, my interests can be a little unnerving to some--," I shrugged, nodding toward the hallways and stairs, "And down-right dangerous at times."

She gently patted my shoulder, politely excusing herself before moving from her seat and disappearing into the service area.

"My interests and work occupy a great deal of my time." I thought while explaining aloud, "And for the most part, I do enjoy the personal freedom."

"So you're not afraid of ghosties, ghoulies and nasties." She snickered while returning with a tray containing a glass of orange juice and a small platter of assorted fruit, "But the thought of commitment puts you on the run, eh?"

I suddenly felt the heated flush of embarrassment.

"Oh, it's really nothing like that." I attempted to evade the question, nervously looking into her inquisitive eyes. *Oh come on, who are you kidding anyway? She's no fool.*

"Or--I suppose you may be right."

"That's good Michael. I like an honest man." She laughed, leaning closer and whispering, "Well if the ghosties and nasties don't get you first?" She hesitated, sipping at her tea and winking, "Maybe the girlies will."

"I don't know which would be worse." Picking at the plate of fruit, I shuddered with the thought.

"Running into a ghost, or being forced to explain everything I did to someone."

"If you don't mind me saying it--," She sighed, "I think that you're more afraid of the responsibility than explaining anything."

No point arguing old man, she's got your number now. Next best thing – change of subject!

"You know--I just completed reading a fascinating account of a haunting on the West Coast." I fumbled with my lighter, observing the flame before igniting the cigarette and taking a long pull, "One in particular involved estranged lovers and murder, quite disturbing really."

FLASH FICTION

"Disturbing—if you want disturbing," She peered from side to side before leaning closer and speaking in little more than a whisper, "How about that poor young local lady who disappeared just recently."

"Did you say a local disappearance?"

"Oh yes, just recently a young lady disappeared not far from here." She fidgeted with a napkin, speaking quietly and winking while looking straight into my eyes, "Apparently, she never arrived for breakfast."

"Okay--," I waved an accusing finger, "You got me there." I snickered, flicking an ash, "Caitlin, yeah, I'll have to admit that you had me going there for a minute."

Nodding, she pointed with her tea-spoon, "You are far too gullible. You best take good care young sir. Always stay on your toes, pay attention to everything. I didn't become this age by being naive."

"Touché," I raised my glass of orange juice, "To ghosties and nasties, dim witted writers and intriguing nannies."

"It's a good thing that you didn't say grannies." She waved a spoon in my face, "And I wouldn't exactly call you dim witted, just young and inexperienced."

"Young, now that's flattering. But what makes you think that I'm inexperienced?" Butting the cigarette, I followed her into the kitchen where placing the platters on a long white marble counter, she turned to face me.

"What are you really looking for Michael, what it is dear... what happened in your life, that now has you chasing death."

The wisdom of experience had just taught me a valuable lesson as utter silence fell between us. Her eyes filling the room and my thoughts as I fought with the answer. She turned away as something became lodged in my throat and a blinding heat filled my fogging eyes.

I knew the answer, but it hurt too much to ever admit.

Turning away and running water into the double stainless steel sink, she spoke quietly.

"The estate is very old and can be quite dangerous--," She focused her attention in the foaming suds, "And what remains of the place, is filled with broken hearts and bad dreams."

10:47 a.m.

My ears and face were already numb with the damp chill. Drawing the collar of my trench coat closer, I shivered in the bitter wind. Having originally anticipated a brisk walk to clear my thoughts, I'd soon found myself wandering further than intended.

FLASH FICTION

Adjusting the straps of the brown leather camera bag that hung about my shoulder, I withdrew the camera and began looking around. Traveling some hundred yards away from the Duff Glenn manor, I now stood within an immense, stone walled octagonal garden. Easily two hundred yards in circumference, I slowly turned to examine my surroundings.

The hedges were tall, blocking view of anything beyond, and the intricate masonry was overgrown with long and trailing blackberry vines. From beneath moss covered faces, gazed the sad and weathered eyes of eight marble figures. Life-size, they stood like sentinels in each adjoining corner while staring into the middle of the garden from all sides. In the center of the octagon stood a huge marble fountain where the figure of Poseidon rode within a chariot drawn by sea horses. With trident held high, the statue gazed upward, challenging the heavens and yes – even the Gods themselves!

Remembering the description from previous reading, I sat down and lighting a cigarette, tried to imagine what it might have once been like.

Within imagination, the sky cleared as turning toward the immense marble centerpiece, I looked upon the surging waters of the fountain. Time had suddenly stood still as captured within the moment I smiled in admiration, gazing upon the brilliantly colored and sweet smelling wild flowers.

“Paradise--,” The word offered strange comfort, “It must’ve been a complete paradise.”

Gazing upon the Romanesque nymphs that held vases and other intricate ornamentation, I day-dreamed the accompanying sweet scent of roses and carnations that had once bloomed there.

The distant and croaking call of a raven suddenly shattered the imagined splendor. Fluttering amongst the dead branches of an old oak, the enormous black bird perched, screeching as it called out again.

“Just had to ruin the moment, didn’t you? What is it with these damn birds, are they following me around?”

The moment having passed, I glanced over my shoulder, looking to where the house of McCreary loomed beneath a dismal sky.

“If I’d seen the things that you have – I’d probably look just as miserable.”

Withdrawing the camera from its protective case, I dropped the cigarette, stepping it out before randomly snapping pictures. Of all the photographs I’d ever taken of presumably haunted places, this one honestly made my skin to crawl.

Standing there and gazing at the dark old manor, I felt strangely absorbed. It was like some kind of foul aura that hanging like a poisonous cloud, tainted everything it touched.

FLASH FICTION

Once more the raven called, startling me in the stillness and causing me to turn angrily.

“Hey – beat it you shit-house buzzard! Don’t you have a date with some road-kill or something?”

Shivering in the bitter wind, I drowsily rubbed at my eyes before directing my attention back toward the stone gardens.

The beauty I had previously day-dreamed had now faded, the garden becoming nothing more than an empty stone lot.

Some people believe that life goes on. But in places like this one, there was only death and a haunting sense of old evil.

“I think that poor old Eva’s right about this place... nothing but broken hearts, and bad dreams. What a stroke of good luck!”

Snapping several shots of the house overlooking the withering hedges, I hesitated to gaze at the foreboding old structure.

“I’ve got a gut feeling that you’re the story that I’ve been looking for all of my life.”

12: 27 p.m.

The wind had picked up. An icy chill biting into all exposed flesh as reluctantly staring at the old cobblestone path that led into the forest, I reconsidered.

“We know where this goes – now don’t we. Yup, it passes the old pond where poor little Henry died and dead-ends at the mausoleums. It dead-ends at the mausoleums. That sounds so--final.”

The wind moaned. The few leaves that lingered on the branches rustling as caught they were pulled free, spiraling downward. Placing a hand to my brow, I looked into the dark and foreboding heavens.

It would rain again very soon. But then again, rain or not, I couldn’t let anything stop me now. Not with so much at stake.

Without another thought, I flipped the long grey scarf over my shoulder, courageously beginning the trek upward. With exception to the sounds of the leaves crunching beneath my shoes, I could hardly hear anything. There was an earthy dampness and the scent of rotting wood. It was a wonder I could smell anything with the way my nose had started running.

The foliage had become dense, the old trees much taller and far closer together. I had the sensation of being watched. Yes, even followed while traveling ever deeper into that dark place.

FLASH FICTION

Stopping several times to swiftly glance over my shoulder and listen, I began to suffer a growing tension. Or was it just paranoia?

"Your over-tired, stop being so nervous, there's nothing out there."

With that, I turned to continue, leaping back and shouting as I was caught off guard!

"There you are! Oh sorry – I didn't mean to startle you." Caitlin laughed, placing a hand before her mouth while staring in something I'd assumed to be wide eyed amusement.

"I was wondering where you'd wandered off to, and took a short cut."

Chuckling, I scoffed in reply.

"Well then – you've found me now haven't you?"

"No need to get up-tight--," She adjusted the fur collar of her waist length, brown leather coat with a wink, "Just because a girl caught you off guard."

"You look wonderful today." I pointed in admiration of the dark green turtle neck sweater, "That color makes your eyes seem even brighter."

Crossing her arms before her, she grinned, "Do you always do that?"

"What – change the subject when someone gets the better of me?" I spun suddenly, pointing into the forest, "Hey look! There goes a change of subject!"

"I didn't mean to creep up on you--," She smiled, the warmth of her presence attributing to the excitement of the butterflies in my stomach, "I was just worried that you might get lost out here. It would really be better if we stayed together."

"I won't argue with you." I jabbed a thumb over my shoulder, "Those woods are a little, well, creepy looking."

"If that bothers you, just wait until you see the rest of the place." She leaned down to adjust her brown, knee high suede boots, "Did you manage to get any sleep last night?"

"Yeah, almost an entire hour, but that was my own fault. I couldn't get back to sleep, so I stayed up and did some reading."

My answer caused her to suddenly pause on the path.

"If you're too tired, we can do this tomorrow instead."

"Oh no, I'll be fine. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather beat the weather and get these pictures before it gets any uglier out here."

Raising an eyebrow she sighed, slowly moving ahead, "How much of that story have you read so far?"

FLASH FICTION

Coughing while lighting a cigarette, I swiftly followed, "I finished with Lenora. It's really a very sad story."

"When I read that story, I laughed all the way through--," She snickered, hurriedly continuing along the winding path, "Talk about a person having a flare for drama! Keep in mind, that most of that was compiled by someone who was very ill and losing their mind. There's really no proof for most of it, just here-say."

"Heresy – yes, that was mentioned." I wiped cold sweat from my brow, admiring the tightly clinging fabric of her white slacks.

"I said here-say --," Stopping suddenly she turned to look deeply into my eyes.

"Don't tell me that you're actually beginning to believe any of that."

"Believe, not exactly." Taking a long pull from the cigarette, I rested a reassuring hand upon her shoulder, gently pulling while leading her onward.

"Let's just say that aside from the obvious exaggerations, it makes for an interesting read."

"If you think that makes for an interesting read?" She scoffed, "Just wait until you get to the personal notes. But I really wouldn't suggest reading that before bed."

"Not if it's going to keep us both awake." I promised, grinning foolishly, "I still feel terrible about last night. I usually don't have nightmares, or shout out like that."

"My poor, dear Michael, look around!" She gestured into the looming and ancient forest, "How could you avoid nightmares, when you're standing in the middle of one?"

"You might have a point." Puffing at my cigarette and gazing into the barren branches of the ancient trees I couldn't help but grin, "You know, it's a little funny though? I've never felt more alive, or more inspired anywhere else."

"I'm seriously beginning to worry about you." Stopping abruptly, she turned, "Tell me something, if you don't mind. Above all things, what scares you the most?"

The answer arrived all too easily

"The death of those I love... and being alone."

Several moments of silence passed between us, neither looking at the other, but rather reflecting in thought before she suddenly spoke, "That's a good answer." She brushed hair from her face, "But not the complete truth."

Admittedly a little startled with the topic of the conversation, I could only listen as she continued.

"I think your true fear--" She turned, staring straight into my eyes for a moment as though reading my thoughts, "Isn't so much the loss of your loved ones, or even the possibility of being alone. It's the chance that you might somehow find out that death really was the end. And this--," She waved a hand, "Is all there ever was, or will be."

FLASH FICTION

The words resonated with a sudden finality.

"I prefer to believe that there might be something beyond this life." Scratching nervously at my sideburns, I dropped the cigarette, stomping it deep into the wet mud.

"Good guess though—that possibility does bother me. But how did you know?"

A faint smile crossed her full red lips, her gaze softening as slowly turning, she sighed. "It was obvious, for a person in your profession. You know the only thing more frightening than chasing answers to the afterlife?" She hurried along, glancing over her shoulder and smiling, "It's finding out that there really isn't one."

Once again I stopped along the path.

"I'll bet that you were a very morbid child."

"Isn't that just part of the attraction?" She playfully skipped ahead and I couldn't help but laugh.

The ascent had been swifter than anticipated and arriving at a small clearing, my attention was immediately drawn toward a dark and stagnant pond.

"That's the place where little Henry drowned." She pointed, "And where Jonathan dumped Amelia's unfaithful beau and his lover."

Pulling the notepad out of an inner pocket, I promptly opened it, reading aloud, "And the names of the victims according to my notes, were, Charles Raymond Devonshire and Carolyn Ellesmere."

Glancing over my shoulder and looking at the detailed notes, she raised an eyebrow.

"You won't be using the actual--?"

"Oh no, of course not--," I quickly saw her concern, "I just keep the names to stay organized. Then everything gets changed."

A sudden look of relief and we began slowly walking toward the pond.

Being perfectly round in shape and some hundred yards in circumference, it was bordered by a two foot high stone boundary. It was surrounded by old willows and resting near the forests edge, certainly looked sinister beneath a dark and ominous sky.

"Um you go ahead--," She motioned with a hand, "I've never liked this place."

Wandering to the pond's edge and gazing into the murky water, I was unnerved by the decaying reflection. Caught in the muddy haze, the withered leaves and vegetation seemed to slowly drift, suspended like something trapped between this world and the next. And amongst that placid and rotting stillness, was my own reflection looking back.

FLASH FICTION

Unwilling to see my own face in that mire any longer, I looked away and began following around the stone border that encircled the bog.

Near the far side and closest to the forest, were several enormous old willows. Pulling out the camera, I stopped to stare for several moments. Twisted and decaying with ages of moss, the thick and gnarled willow roots crept toward the pond like the tendrils of some monstrosity. They were thickest near the bog's edge, separating into numerous tangled limbs, trailing over and cracking the stone wall before finally disappearing into the muddy pool.

For a moment, I envisioned poor little Henry. Alone, laughing and playing amongst those horrible old roots. And then, tripping, falling into that dark water as struggling, he was drawn down, entangled and snared like a rabbit by those horrible roots! In the darkness, helpless and screaming, his lungs filled with mud as he drowned.

His eyes wide and staring as becoming still, the last bubbles escaped his lungs, and he hung suspended like everything else in that foul old bog.

There was a strange stillness in that place. Something beyond anything I might've read or assumed in imagination. It was that same unnerving, suffocating chill I'd experienced in the manor. It was a sensation that from somewhere beneath the stillness of that glassy surface, deep within the rotting weeds and broken branches, something was staring back at me.

Stepping backward, I raised the camera, snapping several pictures.

"Are we almost finished here yet?" Caitlin called, drawing my attention from the morbid pool as patting her arms and shivering, she curiously raised an eyebrow.

God--she was so cute in everything she did!

"Sorry --I'll just be a few more moments."

Focusing on the old willows and finding a particularly sinister angle, I captured those sickly roots, as in a moment of absolute stillness the pond's surface looked like glass.

Oddly, as I walked away from that place, I felt nervous about turning my back to the pond, glancing over my shoulder several times.

"Are you going to be okay?" She gently grasped my sleeve.

"I'm just a little tired that's all. I'll be fine."

"I prefer to avoid this place at all cost." Her voice wavered, "It's always given me the willies."

Turning, she led me from the little clearing, steeply ascending the forest path while pointing. "The mausoleum gates are just at the top of those stairs."

FLASH FICTION

Looking to where the deep emerald pines parted to reveal a pale stone stair, I shivered in a mixture of dread and delight.

The entire place felt far older, far more terrifying than I'd ever imagined. It was like standing on the boundaries of some ancient and unknown temple.

"I'm just going to get a few pictures and we can get out of here."

"Oh, I'm fine--," She gestured for me to follow, "It's you that I'm worried about."

Winking, I ran a hand through the brown waves of my wind-blown hair.

"Don't worry. Some nice hot coffee and I'll straighten right out."

"Never mind the coffee. What you really need is some rest." She muttered, climbing the moss-covered steps, "And if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to get you into bed."

"I'd like that" I blurted as caught within exchange of awkward glances I thoughtfully added, "A little rest would do me a world of good."

Gasping to catch my breath from the strenuous uphill climb, I directed my attention toward the tall black mausoleums gates.

"This seems like an awfully long way from the house."

"It's still far too close for my taste--," She paused before the tall black iron gates, fumbling in her pockets and producing a key, "I'll have this open in a moment."

Looking between the bars, my eyes followed across the long and yellowed grass and to where the forest tightly embraced the fenced grounds.

"It's weird the way the woods seem to swallow everything over time. Just look at the way the roots burrow down into the earth... and into the graves."

"Has anyone ever told you--," Caitlin struggled to shove a key into the large and rusted padlock, "That sometimes you're really creepy? Oh but wait—you'd find that flattering now wouldn't you?"

"Yes—as a matter of fact I would, and did. Now, can I be of any assistance?"

A mischievous smirk suddenly brightened her face as she promptly handed over the key.

"Be my guest!"

For several moments I wriggled at the chains and tugged at the rusted barrel, attempting to loosen the latch as finally stepping back in utter defeat, I groaned.

"This is just impossible."

FLASH FICTION

Shaking her head and clicking her tongue, she moved forward, tightly grasping the lock and shoving the key into the slot. After a brief attempt, and to my utter disappointment, she laughed victoriously as it fell open in her hand, “A little patience goes a long way.”

Brushing aside the chauvinistic urge of making a comment after having been bested by a woman, I simply patted the immense stone pillars supporting the gates.

“Well--that saves me from having to climb over.”

Directing my attention to the long and pointed spikes, she grinned devilishly, “I doubt that you’d have much luck.”

Looking upward, I could easily imagine getting impaled on the jutting and rusted spears. They were longer than what I might have expected and had several rows of pronged barbs.

“So, off you go then--,” She pulled open the tall double gates, “The dead are waiting!”

Pulling the long and dangling ivy aside and moving inward, I noticed Caitlin’s hesitation.

“Am I going alone?”

“I’d rather not go in there, generations of family. I’m sure that you understand.” Diverting her attention from me and nervously fidgeting with the collar of her coat, she wiggled her fingers in a mock wave, “Just, don’t be too long... I could run away screaming at any given moment.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I laughed, casting a nervous glance into the foreboding shadow beyond the gates, “The dead can’t hurt you.”

With that thought I winked, turning and confidently strolling through the gates.

“And it’s a good thing too!” She called after me, “Because if something did go wrong in there—you know there’s no way I’d come looking for you!”

“Okay we’re even.” I tossed down my cigarette, looking back as she grinned, running a hand through her hair before waving me onward, “Hurry along now! Places to go—dead people to meet!”

“Oh hey—now that’s real funny!”

Pulling the collar of my trench coat closely about my ears, I paused, snapping several images of Caitlin who, crossing her arms casually leaned against the gates.

“Okay, off you go—bye-ee!”

Realizing that it was getting darker and might likely rain at any given moment, I hurried along without another word.

FLASH FICTION

It had been a common practice to always focus full attention on the important details before scrutinizing less important items. I had adopted this attitude long ago, after having previously taken too many pictures and been left without enough film to finish a project.

“It’s a good thing that I brought lots of film. It’s bigger than I’d expected.”

There was something strangely different about this place. Throughout the presiding gloom there had also been a simple, yet captivating beauty. It was an uncommon splendor which ascending beyond the predominant shadow, noticeably contrasted both the manor and garden.

It was while standing on the plateau and gazing back down the path, that I noticed the memorial grounds to be slightly sloping and triangular dimension.

The point having been formed by the entrance, I turned to examine the two immense stone pillars which standing slightly out of view and behind the mausoleums, adjoined the spiked fencing, permitting access by no other means than the main gate.

The single path, lined on either side by angelic stone figures, seemed to travel like a church aisle where instead of being greeted by a Minister, one eventually stood before an immense marble fountain and the figure of an angel. With wings spread wide and head thrown back in sorrow, it pleadingly motioned into the heavens with outstretched arms. Bowing beneath the angel were the forms of three cherubs which holding vases, had once gently spilled water into the huge and ornate ovular base.

The marble pathway moved onward, circling the fountain and following an even grade until meeting two angels which guarded the stairway to three mausoleums.

The mausoleums were visibly different in several aspects. The most obvious being that the central building was far larger, had stairs, and was raised while being situated significantly further back than its companions.

Another oddity was the fact that regardless of the apparent height and displacement, there hadn’t been any space between the buildings. They were in fact, tightly fitted together as though being a single structure. Resting on a raised marble foundation, the building looked more like a *Celtic* temple than a burial ground.

Curiously looking around, I noticed that the fountain and angels at the stairs formed another perfect shape within the existing triangular formation.

“Another triangle – what the heck is going on here? I wonder?”

Carefully making my way to the far corner of the mausoleums, and struggling through thick and thorny blackberry vines, I peeked around the wall to look behind the buildings.

Although the forest and dense bush had crept in through the surrounding gates, I could see the pale and raised arms of an angel from beneath the suffocating brambles.

FLASH FICTION

"Why the hell would anyone put a statue there? No one would ever see it."

It was then, and as I'd turned, that I noticed another figure concealed within the overgrown garden to the far edge of the tall iron fencing. Instinctively looking in the opposite direction, I snapped my fingers, "And another one there."

Without thinking, I pulled the pad and pen from an inner pocket and proceeded to draw the angles and dimension of the gardens, adding the positions of the angels.

"Now this is too weird." Drawing lines between the angles I stood back in amazement, "A perfect pentagram."

Had it been some kind of coincidence? Or had the designers intentionally surrounded the mausoleums with an otherwise undetectable, mystical symbol of protection?

It was during the anticipated and carefully angled photographs, that while adjusting the lens of my camera, I caught a sudden movement in the corner of my eye.

"Must've spooked a rabbit or something, this place is probably full of them."

Quickly moving from the marble plateau's edge, I decided to investigate the smallest of the three tombs first. It was the closest to where I stood, and being in a hurry to get out of the dense brambles, seemed like a good start.

Snapping several pictures, I paused before the opening to the small tomb, watching as the iron gates gently swung open and closed, clanging together in the chill gust.

Moving closer, so as to see the inner marble doors beyond the gates, I squinted while admiring the intricately carved depictions.

It never ceased to amaze me. Not even the corrosive efforts of time or weather could really affect the details of marble beyond the faintest of stains.

The inner doors revealed the engraved images of cherubs, which leaning into a pool, gently drew the body of a child from the water.

"Obviously, this one must be poor little Henry." The thought sent a shudder up my spine.

Without being entirely conscious of my own actions, I reached out, slipping a hand between the gates and gently touching the cold and damp surface with my fingers.

"Ouch!"

Recoiling as though having been shocked by an electrical current, I stared down at my trembling hand in disbelief.

FLASH FICTION

“What the heck was that all about?” Rubbing at my wrist and deciding to refrain from touching anything else, I proceeded to turn from the child’s tomb, hastily making my way toward the next.

I’d heard about charges of static electricity being contained in the oddest places or things, but didn’t want to find another one.

Pausing before the central and largest of the three, I curiously looked down at the marble stairs leading into the mouth of the crypt.

“You’re the only one with steps.” Snapping several photographs of the protruding stairs and remembering the account of Sir Reginald, I frowned, “This must be where Amelia fell – what an ironic place to die.”

Making my way up the ten long and wide stairs toward the closed iron gates, I cautiously tested the metal with a finger.

“What’s this?” Noticing something glitter in the corner of my eye, I leaned down to investigate.

“Now that’s odd?” To my utter astonishment, I discovered a small golden necklace and locket that was somehow caught within the coiled links of the old and rusted chain.

Fumbling to untangle the necklace, I chuckled, raising the golden charm before my eyes, “Well aren’t you a pretty little thing!”

The wind blew suddenly as without a second thought, I slipped the chain and pendant into a pants pocket, continuing on my way.

Ordinarily I would never have taken anything from private property, but under the circumstances, and the pending demolition, I saw no harm in this single item.

It’s just a little necklace, no one knew about it, and it wouldn’t make much difference. I’ll give it to Caitlin after I take a closer look at it.

The marble doors beyond those gates bore no visible marking, something I found really strange after having seen the beautiful pictographs on Henry’s tomb? Surprisingly, it took little effort to gain entrance as they parted as though having been carefully maintained.

Unlike previous mausoleums I had visited, this one was separated into two rooms rather than being one large viewing area, and being a central building, contained no windows. The entrance and first room were quite small and decorated on either side by tables and candelabrum. The only light was provided by several tiny glass panels on the ceiling, and the dull but steady glow coming from the doorway to the next. Moving slowly past the tables containing memorabilia of the deceased and several chairs, I shivered, pausing to take pictures and light a cigarette before going any farther.

Although I’d escaped the icy wind, there was an unearthly, numbing cold in that place. It was a biting chill that penetrating everything, gnawed right to the bone. An ache that I blamed on the darkness and surrounding stone.

FLASH FICTION

Passing through the doorway, I slowly stepped into the inner chamber. Brighter and being far larger, it was illuminated by a central, ceiling mounted panel. The window was located in the ceiling and in the center of the room. Barred from beneath, it was ornately crafted into the form of a huge diamond that shone down upon the sarcophagus located directly below.

Rubbing my hands together for warmth, I began snapping pictures.

“Now that—is absolutely gorgeous. I wonder if there’s some way they could save... but where would I put it? And do I really want to? Nah, I’d better leave things belonging to the grave to the dead.”

The sarcophagus was intricately carved from solid, pure white marble. Being a classic example of *art moratorium*, I couldn’t help but admire the incredible craftsmanship.

“What a nasty shame.”

Discovering the lid to have been broken loose at some point, I ran a finger the length of an ugly crack that threatened of eminent collapse.

Adjusting the camera lens, I hesitated to look toward the entrance as the gates gently clanged together.

Was that a voice, or just the wind? No it definitely sounded like... of course! Poor Caitlin must be freezing half to death out there! Better hurry!

A sudden shriek caused me to leap backward, panic sending me dashing toward the entrance for fear that something might’ve happened to Caitlin.

But that’s where I froze, halting near the open entranceway and collapsing backward, stiffening against the cold marble wall.

“Amelia! Halt girl! Millie you must listen to me!”

“Murderer, beast--do not touch me!” Amelia’s specter shrieked as attempting to evade the swiftly pursuing shadow of Jonathon McCreary, she rushed up the mausoleum stairs.

Their voices sounded strangely hollow. It was like hearing something that was echoing through a wind-tunnel.

“You must listen to me child!” His resounded of certain drunkenness as pursuing the fleeing girl toward where I now watched, he grabbed at her, “Cease this foolishness!”

Gawking, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The figures didn’t seem to have any actual physical substance, but seemed more like distortions of the surrounding shadow and light. Whatever color resided in their forms was entirely drawn from the immediate surroundings.

In that moment, as he grasped her wrist and she resisted, I witnessed the shrieking woman fall backward in the struggle, smashing her head on the marble step where she now lay deathly still.

FLASH FICTION

"Millie, oh Millie what have I done? No!" The apparition of Jonathon now hovered over his granddaughter's still form while covering his face and crying out, "Forgive me child, I beg of you."

My heart thundered as staring in utter disbelief, I watched as reaching down, he gently retrieved the girl's body from the steps and began carrying her into the crypt.

"What have I done, dear God in heaven not my Millie." Placing her down upon the tomb, he bowed and wept over the body.

"Millie, please, it was an accident, nothing more." Gently stroking the blood soaked blonde curls about her pale face he pleaded.

"Awaken from this damnable sleep. Do not leave me. All that I have done, I have done for you. Charles and that harlot, that filthy wench! Can you not see that I've done all these things out of love, love for you dear child. Please Millie, come back."

Pity for Jonathon suddenly filled my heart as the apparition wept.

"You must--," He insisted, taking her hand and gently stoking her wrist, "Awaken from this." His wild eyed and grief stricken features flashed about the dark chamber.

"Millie, I will never let you go, never!"

Watching as he lifted her off the tomb, I scrambled out of the way as he carried the girl's body toward a far wall, and simply vanished into the stone.

Pinching myself so hard that I yelped with the pain, I scrambled to my feet, staring toward the wall where the phantoms had disappeared.

"Oh shit—did I just witness a real apparition? Screw it, I don't care. Feet, do your stuff!"

"I was beginning to wonder if you would ever show up."

"So was I--," Gasping for breath, I gestured with certain urgency, "Time to go—home, we go now."

"Is something wrong? You look pale as a sheet." She hurriedly re-locked the gates.

"Just hungry--," Pulling her along I tried to smile while attempting to catch my breath.

"Well we've already missed lunch--," She shrugged, her eyes attempting to reach into mine as we rushed along.

"Eva never stays late."

"Don't worry there isn't much threat of me wasting away." I patted my slightly protruding stomach, receiving a sarcastic smirk in reply.

"Are you always that critical of yourself?"

FLASH FICTION

"Well being so obviously perfect, someone has to be." I winked, as laughing we made our way back down the marble steps and onto the path.

"You're a perfect something alright." She chuckled, shaking her head, "Did you get all the pictures that you'd wanted?"

Waving the camera, which still hung around my neck, I finally breathed normally, "I ended up using the entire roll of film."

"Oh no, you didn't, not on that horrible old place." Obviously disappointed, she slapped my shoulder, "It seems like such a waste of perfectly good film."

"I've got many more rolls in the bag." I waved it before her widening eyes, closely following her through the dense blackberry thicket.

"You know--," She slowed on the path, grinning mischievously, "You could always take some pictures of me. I mean, if you wanted too."

It took little convincing as enticed with the prospect of such a keepsake, I quickly switched the film in the camera and aiming the lens toward her shouted, "Say cheese!"

Laughing like children we raced across the immense grounds as posing before old stumps and massive boulders, I adoringly caught her within every pose and perspective.

It was while looking through the lens one last time, that I noticed the grim willows and dark pond in the picture behind her. At that point, the first droplets of rain speckled my face. Looking upward and into the rapidly darkening heavens I shuddered, caught in a chilling gust.

"I hate to ruin the party. But we'd better get back to the house."

Obviously disappointed, she gracefully leapt off a large and twisted stump, walking toward me and suddenly speaking with the greatest of enthusiasm.

"We don't have to stop. The house is huge, and we'll have it all to ourselves tonight."

There was a hesitation in my heart, a darkness that casting bitter shadows on the magic in that precious moment, now grieved me beyond the words to explain. Looking into those bright and deep emerald pools, I drifted within sincere adoration.

It's pointless Mike, don't get caught in a daydream that can never happen. We would be forever separated by the cruel hand of time, years apart. And besides, I would soon be leaving the Duff Glenn and all of this would be nothing more than another painful memory.

"Here it comes!" Changing the subject and pointing into the sky, I laughed as the rain spilled downward in a blinding and steady stream.

Suddenly taking my hand, she laughed, pulling me along as we raced homeward without saying so much as another word.

3:38 p.m.

FLASH FICTION

Soaking wet and chilled to the bone, we burst through the French doors of the rear patio, shivering and laughing like children as we were unexpectedly confronted by Eva. "You'll both catch your death of cold fooling about like that!"

"It's, it's you!" Completely startled with her appearance, I stepped back as leaning forward she grumbled.

"So is this how two grown adults carry on when they think I'm not about?"

"Oh Eva, don't fuss so much." Caitlin laughed, drying her face and looking at me while binding the towel around her hair.

"We need to get out of these wet clothes." Her attention fell upon Eva, "Would you mind bringing some lunch to the library?"

"Not at all my dear, some nice hot soup will do you both a world of good." The old woman peered at me curiously, "I found some nice things that might suit you. I took the liberty of leaving them in your room. I hope you don't mind."

"That's really very kind of you. I only brought a few things from home." I pulled my soaked cigarette package from a coat pocket, groaning while looking between the two women, "I suppose that's the end of my smoking for now."

"Oh--," Eva reached into her apron, retrieving several packages of cigarettes and promptly extending them toward me, "I picked them up in town this morning. I wasn't sure if you'd need them, but it's always better to be safe than sorry I always say."

The endearment I had already felt for the old woman now blossomed as surprising her with a gentle embrace, affectionately kissed her cheek.

"You're a perfect angel. Thank you so much!"

"Oh my goodness, you're very welcome!" She grinned, pressing a hand to her cheek in the reddening onslaught of a blush, "I wonder what might've happened if I'd bought you an entire carton."

"I might just have to go shopping with you next time." Caitlin winked, gently tapping the old woman's shoulder, moving toward the hallway and glancing back at me, "Go get into some dry clothes. I'll meet you in the library."

"Eva— one moment, I owe you for the--." Reaching into my coat and producing the dripping wet wallet, she halted me.

"I won't hear anything of the sort." She patted her cheek, "They're already paid for."

And with that, a determined stare from Caitlin sent me rushing off to find a change of clothes.

FLASH FICTION

6:15 p.m.

The clothing Eva had left folded on the bed had left me speechless. The gray suit was very similar to my own, but of a finer quality and almost a perfect fit. Except for the sleeves being a little long, I could've easily mistaken these things for my own.

My smoking jacket had disappeared and in its place, Eva had left one of purple silk and exquisite design. Needless to say, I was absolutely thrilled and dressed quickly.

"Oh – there you are." I'd forgotten the little golden chain and pendant. Pulling it from a pants pocket, I slipped it into the pocket of the smoking jacket before putting away the wet things.

Moments later, I hurried down the hallway and surprisingly, found my way back to the library without any trouble.

Having arrived before the ladies, it didn't take long before I'd become preoccupied with the books. Among the volumes that had immediately drawn my attention, were those pertaining explicitly to occult philosophy, superstition and of course, demonology.

"Oh – you've gotta be kidding me? No bloody way!"

There, hidden among a small collection of ghost stories, was a 17th century edition of the *Rituale Romanum*. A Catholic book of exorcism used for casting out demons and other evil spirits.

Glancing back to where I had removed the book, I searched the other titles, amused to find accumulated literature on exorcism through the ages.

"It's moments like this." I whispered to myself, "When I really wish that I'd learned Latin and French, or at least remembered a little German."

It never ceased to amaze me as to how most ancient manuscripts had been translated from Hebrew and Latin into either French or German. In the modern world, this only posed another language barrier. And, cost more time and money as I was forced to buy books to translate everything.

Enthusiastically rifling through the shelves, I soon discovered many rare and old volumes on superstition and demonology. So many in fact that I'd seated myself on the floor between the shelves, and began scribbling down the titles for future reference.

Oddly enough, the majority of the volumes on the shelf before me consisted of arcane material delving into demonology, evil spirits and in specific, those particular to the realms of dreams and nightmares.

"Night terrors – this looks interesting."

FLASH FICTION

Whispering in thought while flipping through the pages, I felt certain horror while staring at the illustrations and reading aloud, "Lilith, the *Hebrew* demon mother of the *Incubi* and *Succubi*."

Looking at the artist's ghastly depiction of the creature, I quietly read the inscription aloud, "Spiritual vampire's that drain the life from the living as they sleep."

I remembered Plato having spoken of them in his accumulated dialogues while pertaining to them as Larva, ghost-like creatures that spiritually attach themselves to the living and drain the life energy.

The theory also coincided with *The Doctrines of Theophrastus Bombast Von Hohenheim*, a collective philosophical work where *Paracelsus* as he was also known, claimed that these evil creatures, the *Succubi* and *Incubi*, existed within the ether, or energy, that surrounds all things in creation. Creatures that would appear to either gender in dreams, seduce, and derive energy through the resulting emotional and physical expulsion.

"Now that's a very disturbing concept." Lighting a cigarette and leaning back against the oak shelf I laughed.

"I'd be willing to bet that none of these guys ever got a decent night's rest. But that might also explain why most of them were drunks?"

Climbing to my feet, I wandered toward the window, taking a long pull from the cigarette and pausing to look outside.

My thoughts traveled as I began drifting into a daydream, the ghosts of my mind intermingling with every shapeless and swirling shadow in the dark heavens. The rain had become a steady and streaming blur in the glass, and the golden glow from the lamp behind me, eerily illuminated my reflection in the window. With the blinding river running down the pane and the darkness beyond, it was just like gazing into that pond again.

The material world seemed suddenly vague as looking beyond my reflection, I considered a multi-faceted realm. A reality containing levels which although functioning on differing planes, occupied the same space in time.

Was it possible? An entire world occupied by living things that dwelled on the outer boundaries of physical awareness? A kind of ghostly reflection, that similar to my own mirror image, were cast by the living, and after physical life, coexisted as pure energy through some inner dimension?

Was that pane of window glass similar to an ethereal plane, something existing between this world and the next? A mortal reflection which becoming the semblance of an individual, was cast into, and existing between two entirely separate, yet similar realities? And if not, how was it possible for me to be staring back at myself? In fact, what if that reflection wasn't actually me at all, but something from another dimension using my shape to look back?

FLASH FICTION

"Sorry I took so long." Eva apologized, appearing in the doorway with a large platter, "I had a little trouble with the stove. Its gas and the darn pilot kept going out for some reason."

"No need for apologies', I'm just grateful that someone's feeding me."

"It's no trouble at all dear." She winked, "Caitlin will be right along. She's just fetching some coffee."

"This is really wonderful, thanks so much." I raised the silver lid off the tray and looked down at the assorted sandwiches and soup.

"If you keep spoiling me like this, I might never leave."

"Indeed." She grinned as something sinister flashed within her otherwise kindly eyes, "You might not."

Caitlin rushed into the library with a tray containing a coffee urn, condiments and several china cups, stopping suddenly, and staring around the room, "Did we get hit by a hurricane?"

Realizing I had literally turned the library into a disaster area of piled books, I launched off the chair, stuttering in apology.

"Oh boy, I'm so sorry about that! I think that I might've gotten a little carried away."

"A little carried away?" She gasped, laughing and gazing in astonishment, "If this is a little carried away, you have me wondering."

"Well, if there's nothing else, I'm off for the evening." Eva chuckled, shaking her head in departure and looking at the surrounding mountain of heaped books, "My but you were a busy little bee now weren't you?"

Feeling extremely awkward, I shrugged in reply, "I'll have this cleaned up in no time, promise." Embarrassed, I peered about the library at my accumulated effort, "Or at least within the week?"

"Good night my dear's, you both be good while I'm gone." She winked, politely excusing herself and waving in departure.

Placing down the tray and taking a seat at the table, Caitlin snickered, "Actually, I had a feeling that something like this would happen if I left you alone in here too long."

"Sorry, it's that, *weasel in the henhouse* syndrome." Hurriedly moving toward the nearest stack of books I began sorting and putting them away.

"It's really not a big deal. Just leave them where they are." She laughed, emptying the contents of the large silver tray, and gesturing for my return.

FLASH FICTION

"There's no real need to do anything with them, as far as I'm concerned." She glanced briefly about the room, "You can just leave the nasty old things where they are. Now get back here and eat something!"

Without argument, and harboring an empty and grumbling stomach, I returned to my seat.

"And where the books are concerned, just leave them." She offered sandwiches and poured coffee, "They can rot for all I care."

Indulging the lovely chicken stew, I stared in disbelief, peering about and almost spilling the food in the process.

"You can't be serious? Most of these books are extremely rare and have collector's value."

"Rare is just another word to describe unpopular and usually unwanted things." She placed an elbow on the table and resting her chin on a hand, sighed while looking around the room, "And as far as I'm concerned... they'll probably just get tossed in the trash pile when the house is sold, unless you'd like to have them?"

Coughing, I choked on the soup, grabbing a napkin and wiping the broth that dribbled down my chin, "Trash? Me, have them?"

My gaze traveled feverishly about the room before finally returning to Caitlin, "Some of these are very, very valuable."

Laughing she played with a spoon in the contents of her bowl.

"To me, they're just a bunch of dusty old books, worthless and in the way."

That's it. I must've finally passed out from exhaustion. A dream, yes, I was definitely dreaming!

"Well, I'd definitely be interested in buying a few of them from you."

"You can take the whole *kit and caboodle* for all I care." She leaned forward, curiously observing my notes, "It looks like you've already written a list."

Retrieving the page from the heaped books and smiling, she pointed a finger at the list, "Are these the only ones that you wanted?"

"That's over one hundred books." I gagged on my sandwich, politely placing a hand before my mouth and clearing my throat.

"And most of them are complete first edition, unabridged sets, very rare and really expensive."

Apparently unimpressed, or simply disinterested, she dropped the list back onto the pile and shrugging, nibbled at her lunch, "Michael, I said that they're all yours for the taking. It's your choice."

FLASH FICTION

The thought of those precious volumes becoming garbage was absolutely unbearable. Making a swift decision, I promptly reached into my vest pocket and produced a check book and pen.

"I'll only keep a few for my private collection. The volumes I don't want can be sold at auction. I'll make sure that you receive all proceeds."

"Michael, listen to me." Gently resting a hand on my wrist, she gazed deeply into my eyes, "I don't want your money. Whatever you don't take, will be hauled for trash or destroyed by the demolition crew. I really don't have any interest in them."

The darkening heavens cast a gentle twilight through the immense windows. A melancholic hue that attributing radiance to her pale flesh, caused her brilliant eyes to appear even larger and deeper than before.

"Michael, are you alright?" Snapping her fingers before my face, she leaned across the table to look into my eyes.

"Oh yes, sorry, just half awake." Rubbing at my eyes and shrugging, I realized to have slipped into a daydream.

"I guess I'm just really amazed, grateful for this... I just really don't know what to say?"

"Then don't say anything."

There was an insistence that bordering some strange sense of urgency, now caused her to stiffen in her seat.

"Just accept this as a gift from the house of McCreary. And eat your soup, its getting cold."

Nodding, I quietly returned the pen and check book to a pocket and indulged the meal.

10:38 p.m.

After finishing the late meal, we attended to the task of sorting the books. Those which I would take now, and the remainder that I'd promised to pick up at a later date. Already dreading the thought of carrying all those books down the long path and back to the car, I'd decided on only four boxes. I wouldn't risk the Eldorado on that old road, and between the luggage and books, three trips on that dismal path were more than enough!

"I suppose this is all going to be nothing more than a bad dream very soon." She accepted several books from me, neatly packing them into a box and placing it on a small wheeled cart.

FLASH FICTION

"Oh I don't know?" Looking about the room, I placed a finger to my chin in thought, "If I could afford it? I'd consider restoring the old place. I kind of like it here."

"Oh, you can't be serious." She laughed, placing her hands on her hips and gawking, "I mean, you can't actually like this old place? It's old, moldy and falling apart."

"So am I, but you haven't complained yet."

"Oh knock it off funny man." She slapped my shoulder, "But really, what could you possibly like about this place?"

"Well, first of all--," I leaned a hip against the cart, "It has an aura, a kind of presence all of its own. And, this place would be an endless source of inspiration for my writing."

"It's an endless source of grief." She groaned, moving toward the wall and picking at the wallpaper with a finger nail, "A bottomless and starving old money pit."

"Oh I don't know?" I peered from corner to corner before smiling at her, "A little splash of paint, some new curtains, maybe a plant or two?"

Caitlin burst into laughter. Shaking her head and shoving a hand to her mouth, "Okay then, when do we start!"

"No really." I grinned foolishly, attempting to convince her of my sincerity, "With a little bit of help, this place wouldn't be perfect, but it could be comfortable."

Those beautiful green eyes widened curiously as she tapped a finger on the edge of a book case.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that?"

Piling the last box onto the cart, I thoughtfully looked around, my attention drifting into the long shadows.

"Well maybe not perfectly comfortable. But keep in mind that I do write ghost stories."

Nodding, it was obvious that she was amused. But her thoughts were elsewhere as shyly gesturing toward the cart, she asked, "So when we're done here, would you mind stepping out for a little fresh air?"

The world seemed to stop whenever she looked at me.

"So—is that a yes?"

"Oh of course, all done. After you—off we go." Carefully wheeling the cart toward the door, I motioned for her to lead the way.

By the time we'd wheeled the cart to the stair, unloaded the boxes to the bottom of the steps, reloaded and wheeled it toward the front door, I was utterly exhausted. This of course hadn't bothered Caitlin in the least. Being younger and athletic she'd easily managed the task, and then appeared ready to run a marathon! This of course led me into

FLASH FICTION

the explanation of my prior back injuries, a wonderful excuse for common laziness, smoking too much and a poor diet. Needless to say, this didn't hinder the young woman at all as she instead, now insisted that I join her for an evening walk and get some much needed fresh air.

A few minutes later, we stood close together on the west wing balcony. I might've actually enjoyed that moment, but I couldn't stop myself from staring into the blackness beneath the railing. It was the same landing from which poor Alistair McCreary had leapt to his death.

Don't ruin the moment stupid. Just relax, Alistair's been dead and gone for ages. Make the best of it!

An immense and radiant full moon fought from behind the dark clouds as gazing into oblivion, Caitlin whispered from somewhere deep in thought, "Sometimes it's so beautiful here... it can make a person forget everything else."

Staring quietly into the moon's round and pale face, I turned to where it shone upon the distant mausoleums, adjusting the collar of my coat while attempting to avoid the sting of the night air.

"It really is incredible, and--," I thought briefly before adding, "It's like sharing a moment, a magic – that only exists in dreams."

"So Michael, do you believe in dreams?" She turned toward me, a proud and passionate fire burning within those radiant green eyes.

The question touched something dark within me.

"Everything I've ever loved, held dearest in this world, is part of this dream. And sometimes, dreams are all we have left to hold. So yes – I do believe in dreams, because I have to."

Leaning against the ancient rail she looked at me in the moonlight, her voice softening and seemingly carried upon the wind, "I think that you're the sweetest, most unique human being I've ever known."

"Caitlin, I mean... do you think?" The thought swiftly passed as nervously glancing into the shadowy depths several stories below, my heart suddenly raced, "Do you really think you should be standing so close to that old railing?"

An icy gust whipped that long and brilliant red hair about her pale features, as cast beneath the moon's incandescent glow her eyes glinted hauntingly in the deep shadows.

Forgetting all previous concern, I found myself once more utterly captivated with her presence, wanting nothing more than to love her until the end of time.

"Have you ever truly wanted something that you knew you could never have?" She licked at her full red lips, brushing the hair out of her eyes, "Have you --" She stared at me in the subtle glow of the moonlight, whispering, "Wanted something so bad, that you would be willing to sacrifice anything to have it?"

FLASH FICTION

For reasons beyond explanation, I suddenly discovered my right hand to have been tightly clasping the large *Celtic* cross that hung about my neck.

"In dreams, I've often wondered how far, how much anyone would give—for true love."

The words having dissipated between us, she appeared consumed with her own thoughts, looking into the distance and sadly whispering, "What good is a dream without someone to share it with?"

Without even so much as a thought, I suddenly leapt forward, firmly catching her by the wrist, desperately holding on to the screeching woman. It all happened so fast! The squeal of bending steel, the sudden roar of splintering wood and framework as the ancient and rusted balcony railing tore free. The structure failing beneath our weight as ripping away from the building, it was sent crashing downward, exploding into heaped rubble in the blackness far below.

"Don't let go of me, please!" She shrieked, desperately grasping at my arm with both hands as she dangled from below the doorway.

"Never—hold on! Hold on, I'll pull you up!" Resting on my stomach and bracing my legs in the door frame, I heaved with every ounce of strength I could muster, "Try to wrap your arms around my neck!"

She desperately fought upward as attempting to draw her from the darkness, the strength failed me and shrieking, she slid ever downward.

"Try again!" I fought, praying for the strength.

Wincing, I felt my grip on the door frame slipping. Looking down I cried out in pain as a long nail from the torn wood-work dug deeply into my arm. Realizing that we might both fall off that tiny ledge at any given moment, I also knew that no matter what happened, I could never let go of her.

In a desperate attempt I pulled her upward as flinging her arms tightly about my neck, she hung suspended between certain death and one last chance!

I had to! Oh God! Somehow I just had to save her! There was no other choice, one way or another, we would stay together!

"I'm slipping—oh Michael! I'm going to fall!" She wailed as her arms slid from around my neck and slipping downward, she frantically struggled to hold onto my collar with a single hand, "Please, don't let me fall!"

Tears now burned in my eyes as grasping her hand tightly, we both slipped ever forward, the inevitable only moments away!

Whether by sheer adrenaline or due to inexplicable terror, a sudden strength surged from deep within me! Grasping her tightly with both hands, I gazed down into her terrified eyes.

"I won't let you fall! I'd rather die! I won't—I won't let you fall!"

FLASH FICTION

Crying out in rage as every muscle burned with an unspeakable fire, I pulled in one last effort, violently heaving backward. The immense force of the effort drawing her from out of that darkness as we both crashed heavily backward and into the dark corridor.

Gasping and wincing in utter anguish, I suddenly felt her body against mine, her arms closing tightly about my neck.

"Michael—!" Pressing her face deeply into my breast, she wept like a child, trembling uncontrollably.

We rested there, clinging together for what seemed an eternity. As the tears subsided and her body ceased trembling, she suddenly looked up at me. There was a terrifying stillness, a horror which reflecting in her eyes, I knew words could never truly express.

"How did—how could you have known that was going to happen?"

"I didn't, but we're safe now, and that's all that matters."

Holding her tightly, she pressed her head into my breast while gently stroking my shoulder.

Staring into the deep shadows near the door's edge, the terrible images of her shrieking and falling haunted my every thought. I imagined her having fallen, disappearing somewhere into the blackness far below where broken and crumpled on the stone walkway, a crimson pool flowed as the life ran out of her.

Squeezing my eyes tightly shut, I forced the horrifying image out of my mind.

"Michael—," She stared into my eyes, "You saved my life."

"And it's over now." Clearing my throat as swallowing hard, I noticed the ripped suit jacket and growing blood stain.

"You're hurt!" She scrambled to her feet, gently turning and looking at my arm, "We need to get you cleaned up and have a look at that."

"I'll be fine. I had a tetanus shot a little while ago. But I could really use a drink and a cigarette."

Unsteadily, I stood up, the burning and strain still aching in my legs, "Let's get that door closed and find a warm corner."

"Michael, I--," She paused, turning to look away as she covered her face with a frail and trembling hand.

"I'm in--."

"Shock, yeah, I know, I am too." Gently taking her hand I began leading her down the corridor, "I think I ripped my pants too... I should change them."

Saturday, October 6th

FLASH FICTION

12:15 a.m.

Still terribly shaken from the experience, we shared a lavish couch in one of the immense living rooms. Sipping at a snifter of Brandy, we both thoughtlessly stared into the roaring flames of an enormous hearth.

Rather absent-minded, my attention was drawn into the crystalline reflections of the large ships decanter on the table before us.

"That's a beautiful decanter. Is it a *Royal Doulton*?"

"I'm not really sure?" She retrieved the bottle, searching for some type of identifying mark, "But if you like this – you'll love these."

She motioned for me to follow, moving across the room to where halting before a large china cabinet, unlocked and opened the doors.

Literally filled with liquor bottles and expensive crystal of all sorts, it shone like a treasure trove in the fire-light.

"Most of these bottles are still full." Motioning for permission, I retrieved a very old bottle of *French Cognac*.

"*Remy Louis XIII*, *Baccarat* crystal, the empty decanter would be worth more than I could ever afford."

"When the estate is sold, you're more than welcome to help yourself to anything you like in this cabinet. I'm not a drinker – and can't be bothered trying to sell the stuff."

Returning the bottle to its proper shelf I smiled.

"We can discuss that later."

Wandering toward the hearth, she leaned with a hip against the oak frame, aimlessly looking around the room, "It's amazing you know. I mean – how many times a person sees something, and never really comprehends what they've been looking at."

"Now that's funny." I returned to the couch, putting down my glass and rubbing at my eyes, "It seems like with every passing year, I notice something new that I'd never even considered before. Hell, there are things I remember from when I was younger, that still bother me because I just didn't notice at the time, or even understand what was happening."

"Missed opportunities--," She nodded, her eyes becoming slits in the shadows, "Chances that only come once in a life-time."

"Tell me about it." Lighting a cigarette, I chuckled, shaking my head remorsefully, "If I'd only been a little wiser back then."

FLASH FICTION

"You probably meet a lot of interesting people in your travels." She began digging in the coals with a long poker, inquisitively peeking over her shoulder, "And young ladies."

"No—not really, usually I just run into married couples, elderly women, or the dried up other kind. You're the first young lady."

"The dried up other kind--," She burst into a fit of laughter, calming long enough to wave a hand, "And I'm not that young, but thanks anyway."

"Honestly--," I tried to prove my sincerity, "I've been to a lot of really strange places. And this is the first time that I've actually, wanted to be somewhere. You're not hard on the eyes. And you've got a great sense of humor. All things considered."

She fell silent as caught in the firelight, her gown became almost sheer.

"What I meant—was trying to say." I took a long pull from the cigarette, grabbing the Brandy glass with a shrug, "Is--."

Her eyes widened as a mischievous smile crossed her face. It was too much and I was now tongue-tied.

"Would it be possible to take a bath?"

She gawked, staring blankly for a moment before suddenly realizing what I'd meant, "Oh sorry, you lost me there for a minute."

Flicking an ash and patting the cushion beside me, I gestured for her to join me, "Well that's just fine, I'm lost most of the time."

"And I'm confused--," She appeared strangely nervous, taking a seat beside me and leaning away as she spoke.

"I'm feeling a little weird to be honest."

"After what happened earlier--," I agreed, "Who could blame you. I hope that it doesn't have anything to do with me?"

Running her finger slowly around the rim of her glass, she gazed deeply into the golden liquid, smiling before shyly peering up at me, "Yes and no."

"Well that's good and bad." I butted out the cigarette and finished my Brandy, "My life is full of yes' and no's—but mostly no's."

"Well if you're ready, I'd be happy to help you with that bath." Placing down her glass, she stood up, offering me her hand.

"What both of us? I mean both go upstairs together—to look at the bath! Of course, yes, that sounds terrific."

"I get the feeling that you've been spending far too much time alone."

Her eyes spoke volumes and my heart pleaded to be known. But I knew better.

FLASH FICTION

"No – well maybe--," I followed her out of the room, "But seriously, with half the things I've seen and done, it's better that way. I could probably keep you awake all night. With – ghost stories, and stuff."

The Brandy was indeed talking and at this point, I decided to shut-up.

1:23 a.m.

After having escorted me to the washroom, provided a towel and wash-cloth, Caitlin had immediately departed, leaving me to my thoughts and a much required bath.

It came as no surprise to discover that the second floor bathroom, located in the same corridor as our rooms, was also rather immense. Unlike many of the other facilities in the manor, the outstanding feature of this particular lavatory was the hot and cold running water.

"This is going to be a real pleasure." The words felt like a fine wine, although my breath still reeked of Brandy.

Wearily preparing the bath water and undressing, I slipped into a robe, seating myself on a small stool near the tub's edge.

"This must've been something in its day – two hundred years ago."

With a high ceiling, the room was at least eight feet wide and approximately twelve feet in length. It was wall-papered in a sickly green and brown Damask pattern. Stained and peeling, it was bordered by a gold leaf crown molding which formed a boundary between the paper and white ceiling paint.

The sink, toilet, enormous claw-footed tub and vanity were all white with brass fixtures. As was the towel rack and the immense mirror which hung above the long marble counter.

"Now that's something you don't see every day. Why would anyone need two mirrors in a bathroom?"

Leaning from where I sat near the tub's edge, I tried to peer under the yellowed sheet that concealed a large standing mirror in the far corner. It wasn't the presence of the mirror that had caught my interest, but the design of the framework.

Climbing off the stool and making my way toward the mirror, I reached for the sheet, hesitating as I noticed that it had been tightly fastened with string.

"I don't really want to undo this... I'll just look at the frame."

FLASH FICTION

The long ovular and beveled glass was encircled by an ornately carved, darkly stained oak framework. Standing some six feet in height and resting upon wooden clawed feet, it appeared quite old. And from what little I could see, looked to be in immaculate condition.

Pulling the linen away from the bottom corner, I stepped back in astonishment. The framework, which I'd assumed to have been some kind of *Victorian* leaf pattern, was in fact, the amassed forms of a multitude of nude women. With supple, though athletic definition, the fine featured creatures intimately posed in sensual and enticing embrace. Gently feeling beneath the cloth, I soon realized that the entire frame was comprised of these somewhat lewd, though pleasantly surprising forms.

"This had to be a private commission." The thought made me laugh, "Even the old French perverts and artists of *Florence Italy* wouldn't have gotten away with doing this."

Noticing some very vivid genitalia revealed from beneath the sheet, I immediately covered the form.

"Nope – definitely something that was privately done."

Compelled by that aforementioned mischievous and even youthful perversity, I reached outward and with certain guilt, drew back the veil in order to closer examine the fine details.

"What happened here?" I hesitated, noticing that the mirror itself cast no visible reflection. Only blackness, as gazing into that unnerving emptiness, I was drawn ever deeper, further into what felt like some kind of endless void.

Presently, the sound of the running bathwater echoed in my thoughts as drowning out all other impressions, it now caused me to step back, dropping the veil.

"Wow – I'm even more tired than I thought. And, I'll bet the Brandy didn't help things either."

As though magnetically drawn, my eyes kept returning to the mirror frame. It was a shameful fascination, one that suddenly embarrassed, I realized to have also experienced with Caitlin.

Was this some kind of perversity caused by loneliness and utter desperation? Maybe it was one of those demoralizing mid life crisis I'd heard about? Or was it possibly something else, something existing within, or even involving the house itself?

"Sure that must be it--" I tapped a finger to my forehead, making a *duh* sound.

"I'll blame the house for my dirty little mind." Laughing at myself, I moved away from the mirror, "Take your bath and get your butt to bed."

Disrobing and slowly climbing into the enormous cast iron tub, I slid down into the warm and soothing water. Sighing deeply as the heat gently washed away the chilling ache.

FLASH FICTION

The calming steam and sweet scent of soap soon caused my thoughts to drift, allowing my eyes to slip closed, transcending all care and concerns of the day. It'd only been a single moment, but I soon coughed, spitting water and leaping upward with the realization of having fallen asleep in the bath!

"Oops, don't want to be the next ghost here!" Abruptly raising myself in the huge basin, I firmly grasped the sides.

"I just need to stay focused on something – let's see. Not that!" I looked away from the mirror, noticing a large window, "That'll do!"

Gazing at the beautiful and brilliantly colored peacocks, I kept my attention fixed on the stained glass window at the far end of the bathroom.

The window itself was similar to a fancy archway. The picture representing a *Victorian* fantasy garden, incorporating exotic flowers, a waterfall in the background and the fantastic birds which I'd previously mentioned. The rising steam had created an illusion of surreal beauty as the images, extending beyond the window, now drifted in thought as my eyes became heavier with each passing moment.

I'm going to stay awake. I'm awake, yes, wide awake now...Okay eyes, stay open!

I was no stranger to the risks of exhaustion. But there was no way I'd give up this wonderful, hot bath. Not just yet anyway.

Raising myself in the water, I reached for the heaped clothing pile which concealed my cigarettes. Cautious not to soak the package, I lit one before slipping back into the tub.

"Now that's nasty looking." I favored the bruised and bloody gash where the nail had caught my forearm.

The near death experience still chilled my heart. But what bothered me even more, was the fact that I'd entirely anticipated, even expected it to happen. There had been an immediate fear, a tension that kept me on edge from the first moment that we'd stepped out onto that landing. At first, I'd blamed my own discomfort with heights, excusing the feeling as nothing more than paranoia. But when she'd leaned against that railing, in thought, I'd already witnessed her death.

It's a gathered opinion among many parapsychologists and theologians, that quite often, events tend to reoccur in places where people have suffered either extreme trauma or sudden death. The common belief being, that due to an immense discharge of preternatural energy, the area or place where the incident occurred often becomes charged. Presumably, this affects receptive individuals who feel this force in much the same way as a frequency is picked up by a radio.

But then again, it could also have been a matter of common sense. If a parent watches a child fall near the edge of a table, they'll always be cautious of that table whenever the

FLASH FICTION

child is near it. Being aware of Alistair's fate, my attention and suspicions were already roused concerning the balcony.

Sure, that made perfect sense. It was just luck and a little knowledge.

The slowly rising steam created a warm and sweet scented fog, ebbing all will and strength as my eyes began closing. I tried focusing on something to stay awake. But with only the steady drip of the old faucet for company, soon gave in.

I'll just shut them for a minute. Only a few seconds, and then I'll get out of the tub.

A moment of absolute stillness and then, a shadow passed before my closed eyes.

What was that? Was someone in the room with me? No, the door was locked and even so, I would've heard the old hinges squeak if it'd been opened. He – why couldn't I open my eyes?

To make matters worse, I suddenly discovered that I was totally incapable of moving a single muscle! Paralyzed and blind, all I could do was listen.

What was that? It sounded like something wet on the tiled floor? Almost like someone slapping an open palm into wet clay.

I felt an icy presence, an overwhelming panic and numbing chill that seemed to come from all around me.

The sudden and ghastly stench of decay filled my nostrils. Terrified and unable to do anything in self defense, tears filled my eyes with the sour and burning odor.

Helpless, whatever was happening, I was utterly helpless to prevent it! Oh God – what was that?

The fear of drowning had all but passed as possessed by a deeper fear, I shuddered as something cold and greasy dripped, oozing down the side of my face.

A shadow moved before my closed eyes, the sound of something wet as shuffling, it slid across the floor near the tub's edge.

What was that horrendous, suffocating stench! It was like a combination of rancid pork fat, rotten eggs and spoiled milk! No, it was even worse than all of them... that stink – oh my God, I knew that smell! I'd had to identify a friend at the morgue and – oh God! It was that same sickly sweet stench! The odor of rotting human flesh!

Helpless and gripped in unspeakable horror, I noticed a shadow lean over the tub's edge, coming within inches of my face! And then, a splash as something stepped into the bath... the water becoming deathly cold as gently rising, the icy wave caressed and covered my lower abdomen.

It's crawling into the bath! Whatever this horrible thing is, it's in here with me!

A shudder of revulsion tore through my entire being as petrified beyond rational thought, I desperately attempted to shriek! Nothing, not a single sound!

FLASH FICTION

The icy tingling of the slowly rising bath water almost stopped my heart. Like a mindless and terrified animal, all logic failed as the fiendish thing, straddling my body, hovered silently over my helpless form!

Must get away! Why can't I move? Get out, scream do something!

With the asphyxiating stench burning in my throat, the horror became complete as it moved downward. Slippery and bony thighs straddling me as resting, its cold and gelatinous flesh pressed down against mine. It's skeletal and rotting legs closing painfully about my own as tightly gripping my shoulders with bony claws, it leaned closer!

Oh my God – it was so cold! So cold that my flesh was burning with its touch!

Its greasy flesh sliding against my body, I winced in pain as its legs tightened around my thighs, the claws digging ever deeper into my chest.

And then I heard it, the faint, rasping breath of something that gurgling, spewed decaying filth.

"Come... to me."

It spoke, oh dear God in heaven, it spoke.

Barren of all rational thought beyond escape, my heart raced as the thing began slowly grinding against my flesh.

"Give me... your life." It whispered, caressing my cheek with a wet claw that trailed cold and oozing decay.

"You are, a naughty, naughty little boy... naughty little – thief."

Thief! What the hell does it mean thief? I've never stolen anything in my--. Oh no, the pendant. Horror gripped my heart with the sudden realization. *The damn pendant!*

The thing quietly chuckled, a horrible gurgling sound that sent icy saliva running down the flesh of my cheek and throat.

"You have – stolen from me. Now, I shall take – from you!"

Horried beyond rational capacity, I desperately fought against the paralysis but my flesh refused to respond!

Cold and withered fingers slowly raked down the length of my chest as the thing began slowly grinding against my thighs.

No! No, this isn't happening, it can't be!

FLASH FICTION

My heart thundered furiously as beneath the immense pressure it threatened to burst at any given moment!

I begged, pleaded forgiveness and immediate release from this blasphemous thing!

“Life... yes – life, give me... your life!”

It began sliding ever lower as slipping beneath the chilling and fouled water, I trembled to the touch of its liquefying and putrid flesh.

“Together – we shall be, as one.” It whispered as cackling, I felt the filth of the grave spilling out of its breast, seething worms and parasites slithering across my bare flesh.

I fought for air, gasping and trembling as I felt the rotting flesh ooze, dropping off its bony frame, the remains floating all about me in a grisly mire of putrid decay.

Writhing and grinding, the thing violated my flesh, its claws firmly pressed into my chest as its legs bound me helplessly. And then, something happened. The icy sensation of the corpse began fading, tingling with a new warmth, solidifying into a tangible form.

The stench having all but disappeared, to my ultimate horror, I could now feel hot flesh against my own as the thing gained in mass and momentum.

And then, although still paralyzed, my eyes suddenly snapped open!

It was tall and pale, hideously thin. There was a leathery clear skin that glistened with thick mucous, revealing arteries, muscles and the bones beneath. Long curls of dirty blonde locks hung down, drifting in the water around me as without emotion, it stared at me through large, black and sightless eyes.

“See me... give me – your life.”

The eyes flashed as though lighting had reflected in them. The form trembling as its skin becoming pale and silken, it now bordered some strange transformation from the grave to the living world.

“Life – your life thief--,” She shrieked, “Give me your life!”

Struggling above me in the final throws of passion it violently shoved me downward. My face submerged beneath the fouled water, I choked, gasping for air!

“Help--,” In one immense and soul rending shriek, I finally managed to call out.

“Someone – please help me!”

The world suddenly exploded in a brilliant and blinding light as spitting water, I suddenly awoke, leaping up and out of the ice cold bath water. Staring wildly about the empty room, I suddenly realized that I’d fallen asleep in the tub.

FLASH FICTION

"Michael! Are you alright in there?" Caitlin shouted, pounding heavily on the bathroom door, "Answer me – or I'm coming in there!"

"It's okay! I must've fallen asleep, I'm, okay though, sorry about that... again."

Coughing violently and shivering, I struggled out of the tub, balancing on the edge as she called again.

"I'll wait here for you until you come out – are you sure that you're okay?"

My mind swam in a dizzying haze as leaning down and reaching for a towel, I began drying off.

"I'm out of the bath – just drying off now and getting dressed. I'll be out in a minute" Looking at my watch and noticing that it was after one in the morning, I rolled my eyes in shame.

"I didn't wake you up again did I?"

"No, I couldn't sleep anyway--," She answered, "Should I make some tea? I mean – I'm not really that tired, if you'd like to sit up for a little longer."

"No, but thanks anyway--," I called back, "I'm totally beat. If I don't get some rest soon, you'll have to drag me around this place on a cart."

"Okay then--," There was a hesitation, "But if you need anything, just call. My door will be open."

"Thanks--," Drying my face I leaned close to the door, "Sweet dreams."

"Okay then – night-night, sleep tight!"

And with that she was gone. A pity really, if I hadn't been so burned out, I would've loved to have sat up with her for a little longer.

Feeling absolutely ridiculous for having made yet another spectacle of myself, I clapped a hand to my brow in frustration.

"Well I did it again, screaming like a twelve year-old schoolgirl. This has got to stop." Unsteadily moving from the edge of the tub, I grabbed my house-coat and slipping into it, looked around the room. The clouds had begun to clear from my mind, the numbing chill in the room swiftly sobering my thoughts and senses alike.

Moving to where my pants lay crumpled in a heap on the floor, I retrieved the pendant from a pocket, sitting on the stool by the tub and silently staring at the odd little charm.

Round and golden, it shone brightly as gazing at the little pentagram I gently stroked the jeweled surface with a thumb.

FLASH FICTION

"Now isn't that a big surprise--," Holding the pendant upward and closer to the light, I tried to make out the intricate details.

"Another pentagram – but is this a pagan symbol of protection, or something to do with Satanism? Five points, earth, air, wind and fire, the fifth being the spirit, and the circle binding them all."

Aside from its modern notoriety, the five pointed star or pentagram apparently originated in *Mesopotamia* around 3000 B.C. where utilized in writings, the pictogram symbolized the word "UB," meaning a corner, angle, small room or pitfall. The *Pythagoreans* referred to the symbol as "*Hygieia*" or "health" after the appropriately named *Greek* goddess while also admiring its mathematical perfection. It was also due to this distinct "mathematical perfection" that the *neo-Pythagoreans* attributed character to each point hence being, *Hydor* or water, *Gaia* or earth, *Idea* or a divine thing, *Heile* or heat and *Aer*, or air.

Earth, Air, Water, Fire and the Idea being the fifth point, symbolized the Spirit.

The pentagram also figured heavily in astronomy as while being related to the planet and goddess *Venus*, which later became the Roman *Lucifer* who was *Venus* as the *Morning Star*, the bringer of light and knowledge.

Most likely the form of the pentagram had originated among ancient astronomers as when viewed from Earth, the following lesser conjunctions of Venus formed an almost perfect pentagram every eight years. But then again, the pentagram had also been a *Christian* symbol for the five senses and if the letters S, A, L, V, and S were inscribed in the points it became a symbol for health. Medieval Christians had also believed the symbol to have been a great protection against Witches and Demons. It was probably due to the misinterpretation of the symbol by ceremonial magicians that during the twentieth century, Christianity disassociated itself from the pentagram which had become a representation of Satanism.

I'd gained a basic knowledge of these things from occult encyclopedias, but always steered clear of the practical rites of Black and White Magic. It's not that I'd ever judged anyone for their personal beliefs or practices, but honestly dreaded the darker possibilities.

"Well whatever you are – I'll put you back before I leave. Pretty or not, I don't need the bad dreams. I've already got enough of my own."

Too fatigued and stressed out to care, I moved off the stool, suddenly becoming dizzy and due to vertigo, tripped and falling, lost the pendant.

Barely missing the edge of the tub with my head, I dropped heavily to the floor.

"Nice going fumble-butt! Now where did it go?"

Searching the floor, I leaned down to look beneath the tub, gasping as my eyes caught a glimmer on the edge of an old grate.

FLASH FICTION

“Oh no – please, don’t fall in there!”

Reaching under the tub, I felt for the end of the chain, catching it just before the pendant dropped into the grate.

“Gotcha – now that was too close!”

Looking down at the charm, I was startled, noticing that due to its rough landing on the tiled floor, it had somehow popped open to reveal a small picture and inscription.

Gently brushing with a finger at the tiny picture and inscription, I peered at the petite blonde girl.

“For my dearest Amelia, always and ever – Jonathan... Amelia, but what the heck is her pendant doing at the mausoleum, she’s buried here in the crypts? Oh no – that’s just coincidence. It has to be.”

The girl in the picture looked awfully similar to the thing in my nightmare.

“I must’ve seen a picture of her around here somewhere. Yeah – that and everything else, it’s no wonder I’m having all these freaky dreams.”

Turning with the intention of releasing the bath water, I faltered, staring in disbelief.

“What the hell –,” My eyes bulged, “Explain that one...”

Floating above the cold and soap clouded surface, was my cigarette, rotting vegetation and a thin film of decaying filth such as one might expect to find in a stagnant pond.

“Okay – I can explain this too.” It was a habit formed long ago. No matter how strange things might appear, there was always a rational explanation if you analyzed it long enough. “Old pipes – that’s all, just old pipes. That mess must’ve backed up through the plumbing while I was asleep.”

Reaching for the chain and pulling the plug, I watched as the murky water drained.

Shivering in the cold, I reached down to pull the robe closed. But in doing this, my hand accidentally brushed against the naked flesh of my thigh and feeling something strange, I looked down!

“What’s this – oh, you’ve gotta be kidding!”

A thick film of gelatinous ooze coated my fingers as fearfully opening the robe, my eyes widened in horror! Dark bruises appeared on my thighs, the hips and lower abdomen glistening, dripping with thick mucous!

Mortified and panicking, I raced to the sink, turning on both taps and using the towel, scrubbed myself until I was almost raw.

It couldn’t have been real, it was just a nightmare. A really, really bad nightmare and that sludge in the tub – sure, that was it! When I got out of the water I was freezing – of course I wouldn’t have noticed the stuff all over me.

FLASH FICTION

"You really need some sleep Michael... you're starting to come unglued."

Within minutes I'd finished in the bathroom. Hurrying to my room and closing the door, built a huge fire in the hearth before climbing into bed. But I couldn't stop shivering. Nothing I did could shake the bitter cold that still burned in my chest, lower abdomen and thighs. It was almost like something had marked me.

It was just a bad dream. It happens. It was my own fault really. What could anyone expect with a life that revolved around reading and trying to write horror stories? That, and spending far too much time alone, it really wasn't any big surprise that my mind was finally having a hard time defining between fantasies and nightmares.

Pulling the blankets close, I burrowed deeper, my eyes becoming unbearably heavy.

"Yeah, that makes perfect sense. With everything going on, I can't tell the difference between a hot dream and a nightmare any more... think of – something nice. Think happy thoughts."

3:17 p.m.

The dull afternoon glow was blinding as awakened from a dreamless slumber, I rolled over to look at my clock.

What day was it? Saturday – that's right, the late night had run into the following day.

"Writing this is going to be tough... nobody's going be able to figure out what day or time it is. I'd better make sure to date and time the stories, just to keep things in proper perspective."

Retrieving a note pad from the night-table, I scribbled down my thoughts, yawning and stretching while dreading looking around the room.

The fire had become embers but the chamber was still quite warm. Sighing deeply and feeling a little more rested, I suddenly froze, squinting while looking down at the floor before the bed.

"What's that?"

There was an oily reflection on the dark wood and several similar, closer smears.

"Those couldn't be – footprints."

Climbing out of the bed and shoving my feet into slippers, I moved to investigate.

FLASH FICTION

Sure enough, the strange stains traveled from the now open door, across the room and directly toward the bed.

Swallowing hard, I leaned down, rubbing a finger against the irrefutable outline of a medium sized naked foot.

“Oh – gross.”

Without a doubt, it was the same kind of slime that I’d experienced the night before.

Following the prints to where they disappeared beneath the foot end of my bed, I leaned down, raising the blankets and nervously peering into the darkness beneath.

Barely able to see anything between the blackness and accumulated dust, I hadn’t even noticed the huge spider that now raced out, running over my hand and scrambling across the room!

“Oh shit – for crying out loud!”

Leaping up and onto the bed I panicked, noticing the spider suddenly disappear under the bureau.

“Later – I can look into this later!”

Grabbing my clothes and cigarettes, I hurried out of the room.

3:29 p.m.

Pleasantly surprised to discover Caitlin waiting in the dining room, I’d quickly taken a seat, relaxing as we talked over coffee and pastry.

“I gave Eva the rest of the day off. And she never works Sundays--,” Caitlin smirked while pouring coffee, “So we’ll have to manage by ourselves until Monday morning.”

“That shouldn’t be too tough--,” I sniffed at the delightful selection of Pastry, grinning while rubbing sleep out of my eyes.

“This is like being on vacation – only better.”

Smiling, she took a seat close beside me, offering napkins.

“Let’s talk about that on Monday, that’s if you’re still here? You might just get bored of me and this old place, and run off to find some real adventure.”

Chuckling, I lit a cigarette, stirring cream and sugar into my coffee.

“This is all the adventure I’ll ever need--,” I suddenly remembered the bathroom incident and the old mirror, “But I was curious? When I was taking my bath last night, I

FLASH FICTION

noticed a mirror, the one that's wrapped in a sheet." I'd hoped to refresh her memory.
"Would you be interested in selling it?"

"Believe it or not, that's the only thing in this house that I actually like." She picked at an apple *Danish*, raising an eyebrow, "Caught your eye did it?"

Feeling a little awkward I blushed, looking away and out the near-by window before answering.

"Well, it would definitely make one heck of a conversational piece."

"Unfortunately--," She shrugged, her expression becoming somewhat grim, "It's something of a keep-sake. I just couldn't part with it. I'm sure that you understand."

"Of course—but in that case, could you tell me where it came from, anything about the artist?"

"It's a late seventeenth century piece and one of a kind. As you might've already guessed—," She pointed, "From that look in your eye. It was a private commission. My family was also in the antiques trade as you know, so they had plenty of opportunity to discover and buy, or simply get their hands on interesting things. It came all the way from Ireland--," She sipped at her coffee, her eyes remaining fixed upon me, "the only reason that it's in the bathroom, is because I had to take it out of the room you're staying in. No offence." She gestured, "I just couldn't bare seeing it accidentally broken."

"That's completely understandable." I sipped at my coffee, flicking an ash and looking back at her, "Do you have any idea of who the artist was?"

The question caused her to look away as running a finger around the brim of her coffee cup, she answered from somewhere deep in thought, "There's nothing I can really say--," Her eyes moved toward the floor, growing strangely distant before looking up again.

"He was basically an unknown talent—and apparently died very young."

"That's very sad." The thought of his short life and lost talent troubled me deeply. I had always held a special place in my heart for art and artists, "Do you know his name?"

"I did—once," She cast a hand before her mouth in a gesture of passing thought, "But I forget it now."

"It's not really that important--," I could see that the topic bothered her, "So what's on the agenda for today?"

She looked at me with widening eyes and growing interest, "We have the entire weekend alone together. What would you like to do next?"

Contemplating the numerous possibilities, I grinned, raising a finger in thought, "I'd love to get some pictures of the rest of the house, especially the family crypts."

"Now why did I expect something like that?" She snickered, shaking her head and looking at the grandfather clock in the far corner of the room, "We just have one little problem."

FLASH FICTION

"Oh, and what's that?" I licked at my fingers, finishing the last few bites of my cherry pastry.

"With exception of the main floor and parts of the west wing—most of the house is sealed off due to. Well—you saw what happened with the balcony last night."

"And how—listen--." I shrugged, "I don't need a grand tour, just a few photos."

"Oh—and speaking of pictures?" She snapped her fingers in the air, her features brightening like an August morning, "I'll be right back—just give me two minutes to get changed!"

Before I could even respond, she was up and gone.

Butting the cigarette, I searched my pockets for extra film, remembering I'd left the new rolls in the bag. It would only take a moment. Hurrying from the table, I rushed back to my room.

It was definitely a chore living in such an enormous place. Every little task soon became a huge effort! The thought of doing the fifty yard dash just to go from the dining room to a bedroom was just too much! Not to mention that the place was always dusty, drafty and cold. The dream of owning an old mansion had faded quickly. Finally reaching my room and retrieving film from the doctor's bag, a sound caused me to turn suddenly.

"So—what do you think?" She appeared in the doorway, posing playfully as my jaw dropped open and I stared in silent awe.

She wore a sheer and pale green veil and matching gown. Dancing barefoot, she spiraled as the late afternoon sun peeked from beyond the clouds, her form revealed enticingly beneath the fine and clinging material.

My eyes eagerly followed her graceful though entirely sensual movements. The gown drifted around her like a dream, as catching glimpses of her pale, though exotically freckled skin, I admired every well toned inch of her pale form. The brilliant red and flowing curls, those bright green eyes, the tension of her defined abdomen and the dark recesses of her...

Oh dear God in heaven above. She's naked under that.

"So what do you think? I thought this would be great for some pictures." She sat cross-legged on the bed, leaning forward and resting her chin within both hands, "Do you like it?"

A mischievous grin brightened her face, her eyes wider and more beautiful than ever.

"Of course, yes--," I stuttered, caught completely speechless, "You look absolutely wonderful... but will that be warm enough to take pictures?" I gestured downward with a finger, "In the crypts?"

"Silly--," She leapt off the bed, rushing past me and standing before the window in the fading sun-light.

FLASH FICTION

"I'll get changed before we go down there. This is just for pictures while we're up here. You do have enough film – don't you?"

"More than enough--," I'd spoken before giving it any thought, my eyes fixed as the sun shone through the gown. In the bright glow, she looked like a mixture between an angel and the *girlie magazine* centerfold of my dreams.

"Do you believe in astrology--," the question just popped into my head, "I mean, when is your birthday?"

"Don't you know that its poor etiquette to ask a lady her age?" She apparently guessed the motive, moving from the window and smiling in response, "Oh what the heck – I'm thirty one. My birthday is on October the twentieth, I'm a *Scorpio*."

"I would've never have guessed that!" Laughing, I suddenly felt a little relief. It wasn't such a big sin being ten years her senior, "I would've thought very early twenties at the most."

"And what about you--," She raised an eyebrow.

"May fourteenth--," I chuckled, still feeling a little old.

"I'm forty two and a Taurus, a horse in the Chinese horoscope. Either way, I'm stuck in a barn."

"In Egypt--," She raised her arms as the sun began setting behind the clouds, "You are the Eagle."

The brilliant glare looked like an immense and blazing crystal ball caught between her arms, the pose and artistic drama being so great that I couldn't resist! Snapping several pictures, I stood back as the sun sank and the moment passed.

"Did you know that according to the horoscope--," She retuned to the bed, sitting on the edge and peering up thoughtfully, "Taurus and Scorpio are a compatible match."

"Nah – you can't believe everything you read on a fortune cookie."

Laughing she slapped my arm as I sat down beside her.

"You see this?" Rolling up the long and flowing sleeve of the gown, she pressed a finger into the taught muscle of her arm, "I may be thin – but I'm as tight as a steel cord."

"Oh yeah – do you see this?" Drawing my suit coat aside and pulling up the shirt, I gently patted the slightly bulging stomach beneath, "I'm as firm as – a jelly donut."

"Oh that's just cute--," She grinned, poking at my stomach, "But if you wanted to, we could always exercise together. I love to dance, so I'm always trying to keep in shape."

FLASH FICTION

“Speaking of dancing?” I moved out of my seat, “We should really get boogieing if we want to get some pictures.”

Vibrating with obvious enthusiasm she jumped up, tossing her hair aside and smiling, “Okay – so where do we start, and what do you want me to do?”

4:35 p.m.

Tugging on the cuffs of her knee high black leather boots, she sighed deeply, “I guess it was a better idea to start with the crypts. I really don’t like the idea of being down there at night.”

“Isn’t it dark down there all the time?” I nervously shook the flashlight, “I mean – the crypts are underground, right?”

Yanking at the tightly fitting blue jeans, she pulled at the edges of the green woolen sweater while nodding, “Yes – but everything seems a lot creepier at night.”

Retrieving my camera, extra film and flashlight batteries, we promptly set off for the family crypt. There was a certain excitement, like the feeling of a new job or first date. But that soon changed as we wandered into the lower west wing corridor.

Although newer than most of the estate, the west wing appeared far more dilapidated. The walls were wet and stained with a blackening rot. Unlike the rest of the house, all the furnishings in this corridor were covered in a fine white mold, the dampness utterly destroying everything. The faded wine and gold colored carpet was so thick with the pale and ghastly mildew that, squishing with dampness, it caused me to slip several times.

“If you think that this part of the house is gross--,” She recoiled, avoiding an immense cobweb that hung low in a doorway, “You’ll just love the crypt.”

The mildew became increasingly worse as we traveled further down the corridor, but it was the thick patches of black mold that now occupied my thoughts.

“That’s some nasty looking mold.” I snapped several pictures as rubbing at her arms, she pointed.

“It’s only in this part of the house – kind of makes you feel itchy just looking at it, doesn’t it?” She redirected my attention toward a set of large double oak doors to our immediate left, “Those lead into the chapel. Its open – but I’m not going in there.”

“Now that’s funny--,” I took several pictures of the ornately carved doors, “It seems that the mold doesn’t care like the chapel much either?”

FLASH FICTION

The comment had visibly bothered her, shivering, she slapped at my shoulder, “Don’t be too long. I really don’t think I can take much more of this.”

Without another word I moved forward, grasping the handles of those immense doors and pushing them inward. They parted with a deep and echoing groan. It was an eerie sound and something that I considered, might’ve been similar to the final breath of a dying man.

There was a strange and lonesome stillness here. But it was different than anywhere else in the house. It felt safe and induced a calm and peaceful feeling.

“You should really take a look in here--,” I called back to her, “Except for the dust, this place is as clean as a whistle!”

There were six rows of pews on either side of the aisle, a wine colored carpet and red and gold embroidered tapestries hanging on either side of the hall. Statues of the Saints stood against the walls in every corner, and angelic figures and cherubs were carved into the surrounding crown molding. Tall candelabrum stood on either side of the main doors, the gated entrance to the alter, and likewise beside the pulpit

Amazingly it all appeared untouched by time or the ghastly mold that hungrily devoured the halls all around it.

Passing through the alter gate and moving toward the pulpit, I stood in awe beneath the enormous stained glass window. Around ten feet in width and over twenty feet in height, the colorful glass was so dirty that I couldn’t clearly identify a single image. The light being poor, I snapped several shots with the flash, halting as I noticed something looming in the shadows behind the pulpit.

“Now that’s an impressive piece of old world art.”

Easily standing seven feet in height and spanning four feet in width, stood an ornately carved, dark wooden cross with pressed silver inlay.

“That must’ve taken forever to carve.” Halting to examine the intricate *Celtic* weave and the silver-craft, I moved around the pulpit, taking several angled photos of the cross.

“Are we just about done admiring the dust in there?” Caitlin called, waving from the open doorway, “Because I’m ready to go whenever you are.”

“I just want a few more pictures, and we’re on our way. Two seconds!”

The camera flash had caused brilliant eruptions through-out the chamber, feeling as though my efforts had in some way disturbed something, I hurriedly made my way back toward Caitlin.

“The entrance to the crypts is at the end of this hall.” She announced, curiously watching as reloading the camera with film, I cautiously shoved the spent roll into a pocket.

“How much film did you bring with you – I mean, you do still have lots left, right?”

FLASH FICTION

"Altogether, I usually carry ten rolls – just in case." I noticed the strange apprehension in her gaze as pointing she asked, "And how many rolls do you have left now?"

"Six – six rolls left."

She seemed relieved, grasping my arm and pulling me along through the hallway.

"Let's get this over-with. The night's still young and we have a lot of rooms to see, upstairs!"

Following her to the end of the corridor I shuddered, caught in a chill gust that crept through the barred entranceway to the crypts. My gaze passed the gates, following the long and descending stone steps into the impenetrable blackness below. It was unpleasant to say the least, but worst of all was the way that sickening black mold festered and clung to everything.

Noticing my apprehension she gently elbowed me, clicking on her flashlight and taking me by the hand, "Are you still sure that you want to do this?"

Looking around in absolute disgust, I wasn't so sure.

"Has this stuff--," I pointed at the gruesome curtains of dangling fungus, "Always been here?"

"Yes, nasty isn't it?" She groaned, pulling at my hand as towing me along, she added in thought, "It just keeps getting worse and worse. When I first came here, it used to scare me. It wasn't so bad in the beginning, not until my father told me that the stuff was actually alive. At first, they tried to get rid of it, but it just kept coming back. So eventually, they just gave up and sealed off this section of the house. I use to sit in bed at night, afraid to go to sleep. I'd be hiding under the covers--," She paused, using her hands as a veil before her eyes in the deepening shadows, "Wondering if, when they turned out the lights, it would creep into my room and be waiting under the bed to get me."

My heart leapt into my throat. *Creeping in at night – hiding under the bed!*

"You can probably imagine how tough that was for a little girl--," She sighed as nodding I stared aghast.

"I just couldn't handle the way that stuff got all over things, grew on them, and slowly ate away at everything."

"Wow – poor you, that must've been terrifying." My attention focused to where in the growing gloom, the mold thickened in a glistening and bulging mass, "But they're perfectly harmless. Just ugly, disgusting, festering little mushrooms."

"Maybe so--," She guided me downward with a devilish grin, "But mushrooms also grow on the bodies of the dead. So in the end, they eat us too."

FLASH FICTION

Great, thanks for that! Just what I needed, another nightmare to add to my swiftly growing collection! Maybe I should've just asked her to do the writing for me?

The stairs gently spiraled downward, as moving deeper into the endless shadow we soon arrived before a pair of black iron gates.

"Let's hope that the lights are still working." She flicked at a switch, the dim glow of old bulbs flickered, shining from somewhere down the tunnel beyond the gates.

"Well thank heavens for small blessings." I reached for a cigarette, lighting it and finding comfort in the little embers glow.

"Oh — we'll need this--," She reached for a large brass key that hung from a hook near the gate, "You might've noticed that everything around here is locked up tight."

"Yeah — weird though isn't it?" I fidgeted with the camera bag, taking a long pull from the cigarette as she struggled with the enormous and rusted padlock.

"How long has it been since anyone was down here?"

"The last time that I came down here — was when the realty company wanted to have a look around." She pulled the padlock free and placing it on a ledge, swung open the rusted and squealing gates, "That was a month ago now, but being as they're planning on demolishing the place. We didn't get too far."

I watched as moving inward, she lifted the catch and latched the gates on metal hooks that were firmly fastened on the stone wall.

"We wouldn't want to get locked in down here. For some reason, these gates lock when they're closed. The padlock was just added security."

"Wow — the temperature must've dropped a good fifteen degrees."

"Solid granite walls and it's at least thirty feet under the ground." She sighed, motioning with her flashlight as we began the journey down-ward, "Oh and before you ask? This vault is sealed — and this is the only way in and out. There aren't any windows. So the draft--," She waved a finger in the air before my face, "That you think you're feeling? Is just a figment of your imagination and isn't really there."

I would've laughed at her for thinking I was that paranoid, but I was too busy shivering in an imaginary draft.

Although I'd been the instigator, I couldn't find the courage to admit my own fear and suggest turning back. It was at times like this, that I truly despised myself.

By now the stifling odor of the mold had become so bad, that I could literally feel the dampness in my clothes. But even uglier, was the thought that the cold dampness on my flesh was actually spores from the mold, seeping into the pores of my skin.

FLASH FICTION

Itching uncontrollably at my wrist, I squinted in the shadows, sickened by the large and glistening tumors of fungus that clung to the vaulted ceiling.

Turning my attention to the dimly glowing string of bulbs that were hung some ten feet apart along the length of the corridor, I noticed the old oil lamps.

Usually I would've found this fascinating from a historical perspective! But at the moment and dripping with that disgusting mold, I couldn't think of anything beyond a quick exit.

Don't let this dingy old place bother you big guy! A few quick pictures, a little background on the place and off you'll go with the lovely young lady! No big deal, nothing to worry about.

A light suddenly flickered ahead of us, burning out and leaving an entire section in utter blackness.

"We have flashlights." She grinned facetiously, "Don't worry – the dead can't hurt you."

"Wait a second – please." I gently took hold of her arm, making direct eye contact.

"Seriously, if this is bothering you, I wouldn't mind turning back. There's really no need to put you through all of this."

"Oh – that's so sweet of you--," She thought briefly, "But Sir Reginald's tomb is just down there." Directing my attention into the blackness at the end of the hall she smiled, "Unless you – would like to go back?"

She was smooth, I'll give her that. Gesturing at the gated entranceways that surrounded us on either side, I shone the light on them, clearing my throat.

"So, little Henry, his older brother Reinhardt and the servant who was crushed--," I remembered while inspecting the padlock's, "Are all interred at the mausoleums.

"So was Amelia." She reminded me, "And the others--," Her eyes flashed in the darkness, "Are all buried down here."

"Um, I thought that Amelia was interred down here?"

"No – her body was laid to rest in the mausoleum." She raised a finger in thought, "You'll read about that when you get to Sir Reginald's personal notes."

"Okay then--," Forcing a smile, I rubbed my hands together for warmth, "Maybe we should start with Jonathan?"

"He's in there." She pointed toward the end of the corridor, pondering briefly, "On the right side, directly across from his wife Maria."

"Alright then, you ready?" I straightened, tightly gripping my flashlight while attempting to appear courageous.

FLASH FICTION

"Oh you can't be serious--," A nervous laugh accompanied her reply, "I mean – you didn't think? Oh – I guess you did. Sorry, no, there's no way I'm going in there."

What little valor had remained now shriveled and shrank.

"I'll walk down there with you." She pointed the flashlight toward the end of the crypt, "But after that, I'm sorry darling, you're on your own."

"That's a terrific sense of humor you have there." I gently nudged her, "But it doesn't scare me one little bit."

In truth, I'd been scared witless long before this.

"Shall we?"

With that, we began the final trek to the end of that damp and miserable hell. The floors, walls and vaulted ceiling were so thick with that vile mold, that every step felt hideously cushioned. I shuddered as my shoes squished into the hideous fungus, a disgusting, sticky yellow slime leaking from the bursting sacks.

Mind you, I'd seen some pretty gruesome things in my life, but nothing quite like this.

There was also a strange humidity in the air. A heat that felt more like a fever than an actual temperature change. Rubbing at my arms, I noticed the reddened blotches.

Was some kind of parasite burrowing under my skin? Or was that mold – no don't even think about that!

"Well – here we are." She caught my arm, saving me from a nasty spill into that horrid fungus.

"Michael, are you okay?"

"Yes – I just wasn't paying attention."

"And here's another thing that just doesn't make much sense." She used her flashlight to smash the mold away from the padlocked gates of Jonathan's tomb.

"Why lock everything up like this? I mean – the gates upstairs are locked tight, and they're in the house, which is always locked."

"Body snatchers – grave robbers" A shudder coursed through me with the recollection of Sir Reginald's records.

"There was a time when even the dead, weren't safe in their own graves."

"Yes – but down here?" Her eyes seemed to become increasingly larger in the darkness. Producing a large brass key from a coat pocket, she motioned with a nod at the lock.

"Please don't be long. I really hate it down here."

FLASH FICTION

Shooting a glance at the pale marble door beyond the gates, I looked back at her, “Are you sure that you wouldn’t feel better coming with?”

A faint smile crossed her full red lips as winking she said, “No – no I wouldn’t. So please, just hurry the heck up!”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

All I received in response was a glare. Struggling with the large and rusted lock, I looked back at her over my shoulder.

“You know – in the movies the women always come along.”

“That’s because men write those stories.” She countered the comment, “Where in real life, women aren’t stupid enough to go into places where there might be monsters.”

The lock slipped out of my hands, crashing heavily onto my foot.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m perfectly fine.” Clearing my throat and pulling on the gates, I began shoving at the inner marble doors, “Now I’m going in there. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“You just go ahead and do that.” She scoffed, watching as I struggled with the heavy doors, “But if you get eaten by monsters, don’t expect me to come rushing in there to save you.”

Noticing that I’d paused before the partially open doors she raised an eyebrow, “Is something wrong?”

“The doors, they seem to be stuck.” I grunted with a second effort.

Placing a hand on her hip she smirked, “Did you want my help?”

Noticing her wary glances and feeling rather embarrassed with such a feeble display, I leaned into the effort, shoving with every ounce of strength I could muster.

A moment of utter hopelessness, and then, the sound of my own shrieking as the doors exploded inward and I was flung bodily into the blackness within.

“Oh no – Michael, are you alright?” Her beam flashed through the blackness until finally locating and blinding me.

“Yes perfectly fine! Everything is perfectly fine.” Fumbling around and finding the flashlight, I turned the beam upward, swallowing hard and becoming absolutely still.

The dust particles shimmered like a golden veil within the light of my beam, causing the chamber to appear like a star speckled storm.

“This might take a moment. It’s a little dusty in here.”

FLASH FICTION

"Oh is that all?" She groaned, "It's more than just dusty."

Grimacing, she directed my attention to where the walls and corners bulged with that thick, glistening black fungus.

In seconds I was on my feet, frantically wiping and swatting at the sickly mold as it clung to my clothes and skin. It was thick and leathery, almost impossible to scrape off. But worst of all, was the cold, soupy mess that ran from the broken pieces.

"Michael!" She desperately pleaded.

"Can we please—please, just get out of here?"

"I'm already covered in this—yuck!" I trembled uncontrollably, wiping a fouled hand on my pants and noticing the fetid yellow residue in the flashlight's beam.

"I'll just be one more second. I just want a few snap-shots before we go."

Pulling the camera out of the bag, I carefully stepped over the tall mounds of fungus. My eyes having adjusted to the gloom, I noticed what looked like the shape of a sarcophagus to the rear of the chamber. On closer inspection, all I found was disappointment.

"Oh no—that crap is all over everything in here." What little remained visible from beneath that mess wouldn't have been worth the film or the effort.

Caitlin suddenly screamed from behind me, sending me tumbling backwards and straight back into that gruesome fungus.

Rushing to my feet and shielding my face with a sleeve against the asphyxiating mildew clouds, I coughed, brushing the filth off my pants.

"What the hell is that?"

Casting a beam of light toward the head of the sarcophagus, I cautiously moved around, looking down at the dark shape. Caught briefly in the trembling beam of my light, was the fungus covered, skeletal remains of a man. My stomach heaved with the sight as lurching away I threw a hand before my mouth.

It's alive and crawling all over him, eating him.

"Oh dear God—did they bury Jonathan alive?"

"No—they couldn't have. He hanged himself." She choked, "No Michael, that's someone else—hey, what's that?"

She pointed to a parchment that was sticking out from beneath the edge of the fungus.

"I think there's something in its hand—under that stuff."

In the dim glow of my flashlight, I could see a yellowed parchment. Moving cautiously through the heaped membranes, I reached down, struggling to loosen it from the filth.

FLASH FICTION

"You're right – it looks like a letter of some kind."

Cautious not to tear the damp page, I gently pressed with a shoe against the fungus, gently raising the hand of the corpse and drawing out the note. Although yellowed and stained, the hand writing was still discernible.

"The letter was dated, August the fifteenth, nineteen hundred and twenty-one?" I read aloud, "My name is Giles Thomas Ellington and being of sound mind and body. Oh God – it's a last will and testament. He must've somehow gotten trapped down here. But how and why... and why wasn't he noticed missing, or discovered by the family?"

Peering around the dank tomb I trembled, imagining his desperate yet futile struggle to survive. Ultimately left to face a horrible death by starvation, alone and driven mad in the silent darkness.

Staring down at the parchment, I shot a nervous glance at Caitlin who silently watched from the entrance.

"I'll have to keep this for when we notify the authorities."

"Notify the authorities? Please, can we just let someone else deal with this?" Her eyes glistened with the onslaught of tears as shaking her head, she whispered.

"I've already been through so much here. Please, I don't want to be involved with this too. Michael--," She moved forward, her hands gently resting on the handles of the marble doors, "You're not really going to call the police – are you?"

For a brief moment, I suddenly feared that those doors would slam closed. And then, sudden blackness, the loud click of the closing padlock and the fading footsteps as forgotten and alone, the mold would feed on my rotting flesh.

"No--," I choked on the words, looking back at the corpse.

"If this was a crime scene – it's an old case now. It doesn't really have to involve either of us." Secretly slipping the note into a coat pocket, I hastily moved toward the door.

"Don't worry about a thing--," Gently resting a hand on her shoulder, I gazed deeply into her eyes, "It's our secret – promise."

Anxiously biting down on her lower lip, her eyes became slits in the long shadows. "What about – the note?"

"Oh – that, well?" I pulled it out of the pocket, "Can I keep it – I swear on my life, no one will ever see this."

Although I was ashamed for lying to her face like that, the guilt of concealing a possible murder, regardless of its age, was far worse.

"Okay then – you keep it--," Her features became strangely cold, "Did you still want to look at Sir Reginald's tomb?"

For the first time since we'd met. Suddenly, I didn't trust her.

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"No, I think I've put us both through enough for one night."

9:47 p.m.

Understandably, the incident in the crypts had created a certain estrangement between us. It was due to this awkward *feeling* that after freshening up we'd parted early, retiring to our rooms for the remainder of the evening.

To make matters worse, the house had become so still that I'd heard her close her door, and listened against the wall as she'd cried herself to sleep.

Why couldn't I have just left it alone? Instead of chasing her all over the house with a camera, I just had to go down to those crypts. I really was nuts! What man in his right mind would've had trouble making a decision like that?

As tempted as I might've been, I refrained from knocking on her bedroom door. I'd been raised to believe that invading a woman's privacy was inappropriate, so I simply retired to my studies.

Unable to concentrate on the notes, I quietly sat before the little desk while lethargically gazing into the brightness of the crackling fire.

She'd looked so disappointed when I'd suggested that we call it a night.

"That's it! I'll just walk my sorry ass right on over there, knock on her door, explain that whatever's in the crypt can just stay there, and we can enjoy the rest of the weekend together. No one will ever have to know the difference! No—I can't do that. But why not, there's no proof that it was murder. And besides—as sad as it was, the guy was trapped down there over fifty years ago! What real difference would it make now? There was nothing anyone could do for him now and really, who would even remember him? Why should I ruin our weekend over a moldy old stiff?

Resting my head on my folded arms, I covered my face, "What's wrong with me? I hardly know this girl, and now I'm willing to cover up a possible murder for her? Am I losing my mind? No—maybe it's just the first time since... don't think about that. Just leave it alone."

Lighting a cigarette, I rubbed at my face, reaching for Sir Reginald's history of Duff Glenn and flipping through his personal notes.

"First, I'll finish what I came here to do. And then—I'll work this out with Caitlin."

Flicking an ash, I adjusted the lamp, grabbed my pen and notepad and began reading aloud.

FLASH FICTION

“October fifteenth, year of our lord eighteen hundred and ninety eight. By no willing participation on my own part have I become victim, and sole witness to the atrocities committed within these unhallowed walls. Oh – this starts out nice.”

Writing down the date and quoting the opening line, I returned to my reading.

“Such is my legacy that with the passing of my dear mother Lenora, who now rests in the family crypt, shall I now speak without hesitation of that which none other has dared.”

Butting the cigarette, I scribbled down a few thoughts before looking at the diary again.

“Okay – so we know that you were the son of Lenora and Alistair. And, you continue here with – I am indeed the bastard offspring of that sacrilegious union of kin! The sins of which flowing within my veins, have become the venomous ailment termed syphilis. A vile disease which growing upon and devouring the flesh, ails the mind while causing one to relinquish all hope. Though I spoke of being alone, I share this forlorn darkness with something else. Thriving upon nightmares it haunts my every thought, persisting through the day and night. This madness, for I can call it nothing less, transcends the foulest symptom of even my own disease! Had I only the courage of my father, though unsanctified an ending as was his, I would prefer to share his fate than exist within this torment of living death! Abysmal shadows, how they prance and creep among corner and crook. They flock like sheep before she who comes through fevered dreams. Veiled in white, she stares from out of blackened eyes where no mortal soul resides. Anxiously she anticipates by means of temptation, derives life from desires of the flesh and fleeting fancy. She who by foulest deed intends to steal the breath of life, nay my very soul dare I sleep!”

A sudden sound caused me to leap from the chair, spinning toward the source of the noise as a tiny grey mouse frantically scurried across the room, disappearing beneath the large bureau.

“A mouse – I was just scared by a mouse.” Shaking my head and moving from the chair, I wandered to where my luggage sat in the far corner of the room.

A brief search of the bag turned up a bottle of cola and a bar of chocolate. A closer examination of my snack supplies offering certain relief.

“I see our little friends haven’t gotten to you yet.”

Several moments passed as enjoying the soda and chocolate, I watched for any sign of my furry little friend. *Maybe the mouse would eat that spider? Or – I didn’t even want to think about it.*

Flipping through my previous notes, I completed the written account of the McCreary genealogies. Circling the important events and dates, I double-checked everything before satisfied with the accuracy, leaned back in the chair.

FLASH FICTION

"Okay, I wonder how this will read." Taking my hand-written page, I read the content aloud.

"It had utterly astounded me that Reginald should have become the narrator of the family history. The unfortunate and ailing bastard child of a strange union formed of loneliness, he had valiantly stood alone in the face of an unwarranted guilt. A crime of which he'd shared no part. It's been said that the son should never bare the sins of the father, but in this case it couldn't have been further from the truth."

But in the same turn, what right did I have to involve Caitlin with that thing in the crypt? Being the daughter of a distant relation, she was even less to blame than poor old Sir Reginald!

Tossing down the pen in utter frustration, I covered my face with a hand.

"I've got to fix this mess with Caitlin – but how?"

Reaching into the desk drawer and pulling out the parchment that we'd found in the crypt, I quietly read through the details.

"So you had one living relative, an aunt that was twice your age in nineteen twenty one. I doubt that she's still alive, not that she'd even remember you if she was."

Wandering from the chair to the hearth, I looked down at the stained page as it moved ever so slightly in a cold draft.

"I'm sorry my friend. If you had any real family, I would've done the right thing. But I can't let your death ruin her life. Somehow, and wherever you may be now, I hope that you'll understand."

With that, I cast the page into the flame, silently watching as the fire devoured the evidence of Giles Thomas Ellington's lonely death.

My guilt for the act was by no means justified by the sincere concern I felt for Caitlin, but only served to restrain the inevitable. I would write his name on a new page and when the authorities discovered the remains, discretely provide the information. Whatever threat that she might've suffered due to legal scrutiny now passed as the page was utterly consumed by the flames. Presently, I returned to the desk where lighting a cigarette, focused my attentions back to the matters at hand.

"Okay – so we know that you're sick, suffering from sleep deprivation due to nightmares... hey, that sounds a little too familiar?" *Was I becoming paranoid too, or was there some kind of inexplicable connection – some kind of ancient evil still lurking in the dark halls of the Duff Glenn.*

Shivering in a cold draft, I wandered to the hearth, adding several logs before returning to the desk and my reading.

"So where were we – oh yeah, here we go. The nights are exhausting as I preoccupy much of the time delving into the accumulated works of occult scholars. I'm certain that through distinguishing the origin of this monster, there shall be a means of either destroying or dispelling this abomination. She stalks all manner of shadow, dwells within

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the ether and in the mind. Even during the few quiet moments I attempt to take during the day, she relents to discover me upon that dark and narrow path between the here and what exists beyond the known after. I now fear there is little hope and can only pray that my one and only true companion, the good physician Dr. Edward John MacDonald arrives before by exhaustion I succumb to the beast. October twenty third, year of our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Ninety. With the arrival of dawn came also renewed hope. The echoing of horse hoof beats through the courtyard, the carriage announcing Edward's secure arrival. There was added assurance as Edward enlisted the services of his trusted manservant Clyde Ferrell, who under extreme duress contends to our necessities. We now stand in the shadow and absence of all the others servants having previously abandoned the manor. I become steadily wearied of both illness and terror beyond capacity of commonsense. I pray that we soon arrive upon conclusion to this ghastly affair."

Finishing my soda, I looked over the last few pages before continuing.

"October twenty fifth, year of our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Ninety. Truly peril exists amongst shadows deep and gathering. Once indiscernible evils now manifest, black reflections of madness that reside both from above and beyond. The fiendish apparitions once haunting my own seared conscience by means of affiliation have inherently afflicted both Edward and the elder Clyde. I fear this cumulative hysteria as I suspect that by due process, mortal expenditures invigorate whatever manner of ghoul wanders these accursed halls! Although vigilant our persistence abounds little against insurmountable villainy, we suffer wakeful days while throughout the dark of night, enduring insufferable fatigue. Edward insisted upon summoning occult scholar and confidant Thomas Phillip Jorgenson. The message having been couriered our efforts continue while anxiously awaiting response. October thirty first, year of our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Ninety. Through seemingly infinite darkness and while plagued by unrelenting fatigue, we continue to scrutinize all notable resources. Both Edward and Clyde perilously border physical exhaustion, wearied beyond capacity to facilitate the simplest of tasks, they persevere by sheer will alone."

Turning the page and rubbing at my eyes, I quietly read through the diary.

"Okay, so Edward's arrived, several days go past. And then—oh boy, now that's not very comforting."

Following the words with a finger I began reading out loud again.

"Madness abounds within the shadow haunted corridors of the house of McCreary. It is by no uncertain terms that I am now reassured that evil and damnation swiftly follows within all of our footsteps! I think I see what Caitlin meant now? It's like he's losing his mind. It must've been the final stages of mental illness due to the syphilis. So—he goes on about demons, witchcraft, something about—human sacrifice! Through no delusional precept of my own fever tormented mind have I concluded these things. But rather, delving deeply into the lore and philosophical realms of the occult. Tales that spoke of terrifying accounts of the *Incubus*, *Succubus* and *Lilith*, the *Hebrew* demon mother of all night terrors."

FLASH FICTION

Lighting a cigarette, I shivered, drawing the collar of my smoking jacket closer about my neck.

"The house of McCreary has by right of unspeakable atrocities, earned this abominable persecution. There no longer exists any doubt. Whatever evil has taken root in this place was invoked by the foulest of measures. These walls have become a prison of the damned and a roost to the devil."

Picking up the pen, I hurriedly scribbled down the sentence.

"I'm sure that it won't matter if I quote a few things. It'll sound better anyway."

There was a scratching in the walls. A sound that as I peered around in the deep shadows, I'd hoped was just the mouse.

"November twelfth, year of, yeah blah—blah we know that. Mid-day announced the arrival of Thomas Phillip Jorgenson and his good wife Anna. Being heavy with child and of resolute constitution, she insisted upon accompanying her husband. In regards to this, I must state my immediate concern for the woman and unborn child. Obligated to forewarn them, I quite suddenly found myself engaged within profound dispute regarding both circumstance and suspicion. Although their presence at the manor is most generously welcomed, I fear greatly for Anna and the defenseless child that rests within her womb. The chiming of the clock resounds within grim declaration of the closing of one day and renewal of another. Anna sleeps oblivious to certain dread whilst Clyde remains vigilant having discretely placed a chair before her bedroom door. I write these words as a sudden chill permeates both the room and my heart. Accompanying the excited whisperings of Edward who anxiously assists Thomas, they already prepare pertinent literature in hopes of dispensing with the fiend. Through practical experience I have anticipated the worst and by means of faith now consol through silent prayer. I have taken notice of several scrolls of which contain blessing and exorcism, both of which Thomas maintains right in performing being himself an indoctrinated minister of the Lutheran order. The night passes slowly whilst beyond frozen window pane, the wind howls as though the Devil were there. November nineteenth. The night silently passed and as through heavy lids I watched by the dawns light whilst Thomas assisting Edward, conducted a ceremony of purification within the chapel. By means defying physical explanation I perceived a storm to suddenly rage within the stillness! Thomas read from biblical transcript as Edward following closely repeated certain text in passing. The terror complete, Anna shrieked as inducing labor, all efforts were directed upon the woman, the ritual incomplete and abandoned. It was within solemn reflection that I had gazed down upon the newborn child. Hair as white as the driven snow and eyes bluer and by far brighter than the clearest of summer skies, they named her Kathleen, the first child to be born of the McCreary house in thirty-seven years. Now that's interesting. Kathleen, the old Scottish for that—is Caitlin." I remembered having seen the name when I was looking up the literal meaning of *Duff Glenn*.

The wind whistled through a small crack in the pane, causing me to turn as the long and pale drapes moved ever so slightly in the gust. Momentarily broken from thought, I moved off the chair, yawning and stretching before wandering toward the enormous window and looking out.

FLASH FICTION

"I wonder – could Caitlin be the grand-daughter of this Kathleen person? Aw heck--I'll just ask her in the morning. If she'll even talk to me anymore after what happened today."

With that thought, I moved away from the window, pausing briefly to draw the curtains closed before making my way back to the desk. Although I was feeling completely burned out, I resolved to complete the reading of the diaries before bed that night.

"Ten thirty-six?" I glanced at my watch, "Well – let's finish up here."

Returning to the page where I'd previously left off, I quietly continued.

"November twenty fifth. The child bodes well, apparently impervious to the threat though Anna has fallen ill and struggles through a fevered delusion. Fearing the worst, Thomas has requested that Clyde take Anna and the child without delay to be relocated to an appropriate medical facility where they might receive necessary attention. They depart the manor with great haste and through bitter weather conditions. Clyde is compelled to abandon carriage for horse and sled. They shall remain in the care of the good doctor Michael Doyle until such a time as they may be rejoined with Thomas. It is with a heavy heart that I see her and little Kathleen depart, the valiant Clyde urging the horses onward through the growing storm. I pray them safe passage and certain deliverance. Justifiably Thomas has fallen into despairing silence."

Skipping through the detailed accounts of Sir Reginald's nightmares and their failed efforts, I found another point of interest.

"December third. Thomas vigorously persists and having completed consecration of the chapel, we have allotted for provisions that being placed therein establish a sanctified stronghold against the terrors of the night. It is with solemn ardor that I persevere within these entries as by winter's melancholic gaze the shadows linger and cultivate within the suffocating stillness all about me. More information about witchcraft, some references to demonology and invocation. Oh – here we go. December fourth. Irrefutably death and damnation precede us all within the shadows infinite and icy grasp! It was by morning's cold glow that I have finally fallen into utter despair with the discovery of poor Edward's body in the lower west wing corridor!

The corpse being pale and rigid, the eyes hideously bulged as the tongue protruded beyond human capacity. Though baring no evidence of physical mark or lesion, it appeared as though he had endured a great struggle. Further examination provided evidence of asphyxiation by which Thomas could detect no predominant obstruction or offer a plausible explanation. It was to be assumed according to present rigor mortis that Edward having wandered off within stupefied and fevered delirium, had succumbed to the fiend during the night. The ghastly vision of dear Edward's terrified expression both haunt's my thoughts and breaks my heart as within contemplation I predict to share a similar fate. Assisted by Thomas I have completed the transfer of Edward's corpse to the crypt as sanctified through holy ritual, I can only pray that he rests in peace while dreading the darkness to come. Okay – so taking the necessary books, they block themselves in the chapel."

FLASH FICTION

Butting the cigarette and looking nervously around the room, I suddenly felt like I was being watched.

It's likely that it's that darn spider or maybe even the mouse. Stop wasting time and get this reading done! The weekend's almost over and the way things have been going, you've probably already out-stayed your welcome.

"December ninth. While Thomas relentlessly pursues occult text I am consciously deteriorating. The blessed chapel has through a miracle of faith provided solace against our unhallowed assailant, but offered little sanctuary from the insufferable discomfort of my own rapidly worsening disease. With inadequate provisions and snowbound within this stone tomb, we inevitably face a most bitter and certain end. December twelfth. Praise all that is holy! Thomas has established not only the fiend's vile origin but also its presiding physical identity!! Vitality fails me and wearied and too feeble to continue, hence, I place within this entry the pages torn from the manuscript from where his discoveries prevail! Gone? Now that just plain stinks!" Searching the diary for any loose pages, I flipped back to where I'd been reading.

"December fourteenth. Through intense scrutiny we have charted the McCreary genealogies, anticipating the unfortunate Amelia to be the subsequent host of this most vile and maleficent larvae. We shall vigilantly remain within the sanctuary of the chapel pending the duration of the night and by morning light, attempt to dispel this evil. May the good Lord keep and watch over us. December fifteenth. It was as though by divine intervention that the storm had ceased before the dawn. With great resolve and solemn fortitude we departed, traveling through deep snow until arriving before the mausoleum gates. Hurriedly assisting Thomas with a pry bar in hand, we unceremoniously stripped the marble lid from off the casket. To our utter horror, she lay within a state of gratuitous and complete preservation! The corpse revealing only the slightest of emaciation, displayed very few elements of decay. But once exposed to the light of day, it quite swiftly and did visibly dishevel before the sun's rays. Reciting exorcism and therein causing expulsion of the demon through prayer, we sanctified and restored the remains of Amelia McCreary to final rest. In conclusion Amelia's pendant was then placed upon the mausoleum gates, the prayer of binding and blessing exacting sanctuary beyond mortal lock and key. From this day forward, the mausoleum entrance and all tombs therein shall remain barred thereby preventing any such reoccurrence due to maleficent or inadvertent desecration, may God now grant us all peace. Inadvertent desecration—some boob taking the pendant off of the gates. But with everything locked up and surrounded in razor sharp spiked gates—that never could've happened. Or shouldn't have, and wouldn't have until I stumbled along."

Slowly drawing the pendant out of my pajama shirt pocket, I nervously stared at the little pentagram. Gently caressing the pendant, I whispered, "Leave it to me to be the one who'd open the proverbial can of worms. But it was so pretty—so shiny." I attempted to justify my actions, passing a thumb across the cold surface.

"Not that I'm buying any of this paranoid malarkey? But just to be safe—I guess I'll have to put this back where I found it--," I thought for a moment, "First thing in the morning."

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Placing the necklace between the open pages of the diary, I pondered briefly, “Or I could just keep it?” A moment passed as shaking my head, I couldn’t help but laugh, “No Michael – it’s not yours. Just put the damn thing back and be done with it.”

A blood curdling scream sent me reeling off the chair as falling to the floor, I scrambled back onto my feet and spun toward the door.

The shrieking continued as panic stricken, I rushed frantically to the door, throwing it open and fearfully rushing out into the pitch-black corridor.

“Caitlin, I’m here!” Faltering blindly through the blackness I followed the sounds of her shrill screams until finally feeling my way to the door of her room.

“Open the door!” I shouted, hammering a fist against the door, “I’m coming in there!”

Turning the knob I cursed, it was bloody locked! After everything, she’d locked the damn door!

Hearing only her panicked screams in response and unable to do otherwise, I was faced with no other choice, “I’m going to break down the door! Hang on!”

Bracing a shoulder, I leaned back and with an immense effort, threw myself against the door with incredible force. A sudden pain seared and rocked through my entire frame as having failed to even budge the solid oak barrier, I tried again while calling out to her, “I’m coming Caitlin!”

Whether it’d been some weakness caused by decay in the ancient framework or sheer desperation, I suddenly crashed through the door, falling inward as it broke open before me.

“Caitlin, speak to me!” Nursing an aching shoulder, I leapt up, rushing toward the bed. “I’m here, say something!”

Flailing and thrashing about, the hysterically woman screamed through a voice that was harshening into a terrifying and croaking groan.

“No – no, no!” Obviously caught in some horrendous nightmare and unaware of my presence, she fought desperately against an invisible assailant, blindly staring into wide eyed oblivion.

Grabbing at her wrists and struggling to detain the woman who exerted an unearthly strength in her terrified state, I shouted, “Wake up! Caitlin, wake up damn-it!”

We struggled on the bed as tightly grasping her shoulders I forcibly shoved her downward with all my weight, fearing that in a panic she might fall and become further injured.

“Wake up girl!”

Her mouth suddenly gaped, every muscle tensing and straining against me as her eyes bulged hideously. In a moment of deathly silence, she looked straight at me, the fear in her face twisting beyond anything I’d ever imagined! Unwilling to relinquish my

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protective hold, I leaned forward, holding her in a firm embrace while desperately pleading, “Caitlin, please for mercy’s sake, wake up – wake the hell up!”

No response, and then to my utter horror her face became horribly pale, those wide green eyes bulging as though they might just explode out of her skull!

“Look at me, please! Wake up damn-it! Wake up – wake up – wake up!”

Her tongue suddenly protruded, longer than I’d ever thought humanly possible. She was suffocating and now fought desperately for her life!

“Caitlin wake up!” The mere concept of assaulting a woman being absolutely intolerable by my own standards, I was now left without any other choice! This I did abruptly and several times while shrieking in terror, “In the name of God wake up woman! Please wake up – wake up damn – it!”

Suddenly all sound and struggle ceased as collapsing to the bed in gasping convulsions, she fought to draw breath while tightly clinging onto me.

“It’s okay now, everything is alright I have you.” Gently embracing and slowly rocking her in my arms, I whispered, “It’s all over now – you’re okay now.”

“Michael--,” She wept, coughing while attempting to explain, “It was horrible, it was trying to kill me!”

“It was just a nightmare.” Looking deeply into her wide and terrified eyes, I held her firmly while speaking in a calm voice.

“Just a bad dream, I’m here now.”

“But it wasn’t just a dream.” Placing a trembling hand on her throat, she drew my attention to the dark and deepening bruises, “Something attacked me, tried to choke me to death.”

“No.” I swiftly formulated an explanation, gesturing toward the doorway with a nod, “When I broke down the door, your hands were clenched around your throat.”

“Are you trying to say that I did this to myself?” The terror in her face was suddenly replaced by a confusion and then seething rage.

“I didn’t do this to myself – and if you’re trying to--!”

“Please--,” I interrupted, gently brushing a tear out of her eyes, “All I was saying, is that you’ve had a nightmare. It happens.”

A moment of silence passed between us as gently slipping free of my embrace, she leaned over, switching on a small lamp that rested on a table near the bed’s edge.

“It’s just that – nothing like this has ever happened to me before.”

“And I’m sure that I haven’t helped anything by being here.” Feeling sudden shame I ran a hand through my hair before looking back at her.

FLASH FICTION

"I'm really sorry for today – and what happened in the crypt. It was really none of my damn business and--."

She pressed a finger to my lips, smiling as her features softened.

"It's okay – this place seems to make everyone's life into a nightmare--," She hesitated and noticing something on her right arm, turned while holding it into the light.

"What's this?"

I watched in disgust as the trailing and glistening mass ran down her wrist, dripping into a thick pool on the blankets. Shrieking she leapt off the bed, frantically wiping her arm with the bed-sheet and panicking as she looked down at her legs.

"Michael – oh no, get it off of me! Oh no – it's all over me!"

"Here, take this." Swiftly offering her a clean pillow case, in a moment of hysterics she thoughtlessly slipped out of her evening gown and stood naked, using the gown and pillow case to wipe the sticky mess off her body.

I can honestly say that I'd never seen anything similar. Pale as a full moon and toned to a rippling though effeminate edge, everything except for the softest skin was covered in freckles. Utterly captivated by her exotic beauty, I suddenly turned away, removing my smoking jacket and handing it to her.

"Oh here, you must be freezing – this'll help."

It was as though she wasn't even aware of my presence. Slipping into the jacket, she looked back at the bed. A trembling hand moving toward her mouth as pointing, her eyes became wide and glassy.

"What's that – that thing on my bed?"

Noticing the bulging and damp impression among the heaped sheets, I reached out, grabbing the blankets and ripping the covers off the bed.

In the very place where Caitlin had been only moments earlier, a large and gelatinous slug-like thing struggled between the sheets. With tendrils flailing and uttering a horrendous squeal, it desperately fought to avoid the light.

"The lamp--," I launched across the room, grabbing the light and waving it at the hideous thing, "look – look at what's happening!"

Without hesitation I moved closer, the light merely inches away from the shrieking creature as cowering from the glare, its form began shrinking and shriveling before our eyes and moments later, all that remained was an unrecognizable mass of pale sludge.

"What the hell was that--," She held me tightly, burying her face in my chest, "What's going on here! This can't be real, this can't be happening, not to me, not now – why?"

FLASH FICTION

"I don't know." Gently stroking her long hair, I could only stare down in disbelief at the smoldering heap of powdery residue.

"What is that stuff?"

The worst of the incident apparently over, I moved toward the hearth, retrieving a poker and using it to jab at the strange mess on the bed.

"I've read something about what parapsychologist call ectoplasm. It's a kind of spiritual residue. They say that it's the same consistency as chalk. But I've never actually seen it before."

"But it didn't start like that--," Her eyes bulged, "It was like some kind of jelly, but more solid—like rubber or something." The realization struck complete terror in the girl's heart.

"Oh God—it wasn't just a nightmare!"

"Listen to me please!" Grabbing at her wrists and firmly holding them, I stared into the hysterical woman's tearful eyes.

"Panicking is the worst thing that we could do right now. So please, let's try to calm down, and deal with this one step at a time."

Nodding, her eyes darted all around the room before returning to me.

"What do we do?"

Sunday October 8th

12: 28 a.m.

Piling the wood high in the living-room hearth, I looked back to where Caitlin huddled beneath a heap of blankets on the couch. Sipping at a glass of Brandy and wearing that same sheer green gown that she'd danced in earlier, she seemed to be lost in a daydream. I'd felt bad for not grabbing her robe, but we'd left the room in such a hurry that to be honest, neither of us wanted to go back there.

"Are you feeling any better?" Lighting a cigarette, I suddenly turned to the chime of the grandfather clock at the far corner of the room.

"I'm just a little shook up." She rubbed sleep out of her eyes, "Do you think what happened upstairs—might've had anything to do with that pendant?"

"Not unless you believe in ghosts." For some reason I really didn't like the sound of my own words. It was like admitting guilt.

"You didn't answer the question." She sipped at the Brandy, "Is it possible?"

FLASH FICTION

"It's unlikely." I shrugged, looking into the hearth, "But in the event that it might? I'll make sure that it's returned to its rightful place – first thing in the morning."

"But Michael--," She swallowed hard, "What if just putting it back isn't enough?"

There was a brief stillness and then, a low and deep moan. It was a sound that seemed to resonate from the bowels of the ancient structure, filling every single room and corridor in the place.

"Just the pipes – built up water pressure." The explanation had worked before, "It happens a lot in these older places."

"I've never heard anything like that before. And I've lived here all of my life."

She moved closer as joining her on the couch, I reached for my glass of Brandy, nervously sipping at it.

"Well I'm sure it's nothing. Most of these odd little occurrences can be explained – it just takes a little thought and time."

Staring at the large windows at the far side of the room, my gaze traveled into the darkness. Just beyond the reflection of the firelight, I could make out the forms of the oaks as their branches, swaying in the wind, tapped and scratched at the window pane.

"I think I might have an answer." I grinned reassuringly, pointing to the window.

"There must be an open or broken window somewhere."

She suspiciously looked in the direction that I was pointing.

"So if it was a broken window--," Her eyes darted through the deep shadows of the room.

"And I can still see the wind in the branches out there. Why has it stopped?"

A roar sent us sprawling together as the wind erupted in the hearth, casting sparks and embers as it howled down the chimney.

"There – that was the sound!" Hurrying from the couch I stepped out several embers that had escaped through the screen.

"It was just the wind in the chimney!"

She didn't appear satisfied with the answer, quietly sipping at her Brandy and looking around.

"I'll just be glad when this place is sold, demolished and long gone."

"You know – it's funny. Just a few day's ago. I would've disagreed with you." Looking around the room, I felt unnerved as the fire-light cast shadows that danced fiendishly on the ceiling, walls and floor.

FLASH FICTION

“But like they say – eventually, all good things must come to an end.”

“Good things?” She scoffed, uttering a cynical laugh before raising her glass in a toast, “To the house of McCreary and all its ghosts. May they crumble and fade into the dust.”

There was a strange apprehension stopping me from sharing that particular toast, as pondering briefly, I smiled while raising my glass.

“Hey I know, how about – to new friends and new memories?”

“That sounds good--,” She raised her glass, “To new friends then.”

With a gentle tinkle of good crystal, we toasted as taking a sip of mine she added, “And a well earned death to the house of McCreary.”

The glasses shattered in our hands, a brilliant eruption of bright blue flame exploding from the hearth as the incredible force pressed us deeply into the cushioned couch. An icy gale howled through the room, sending furniture crashing over as cowering, we covered our faces with the sound of breaking glass. A moment later and with the fire having been extinguished by the strange wind, we huddled together in the blackness.

I could still hear the hissing of the dying coals, the temperature having dropped so much that I could feel the breath before my face.

“I can’t explain that.” The thought still frightened me, “But I think that somehow, rain must’ve found its way down with the wind.”

“Michael--,” She whispered, obviously no longer interested in an explanation.

“Maybe we should stay in your room for the night. It’s smaller, so we can heat it easier and see everything.”

“Good plan.” Fumbling for my Zippo, I felt around on the floor, finding a candle that had fallen from the table.

“One second, we’ll still need some light to get around.”

Being terrified made it very hard to stay skeptical. But I was trying.

“That’s better – now we can see where we’re going.”

The floor was littered with strewn debris from the table and surrounding shelves. In the mess, I caught the glint of broken glass, dismayed to see the shards of that lovely crystal decanter. Realizing that Caitlin wasn’t wearing any shoes, I lowered the candle to observe the floor. It was in that moment, and as the room had grown darker, that I noticed something move in the corner of my eyes. It was a shadow, which passing near the edge of the hearth and just beyond view of the candle-light, now held absolutely still.

Unwilling to scare Caitlin any worse, I said nothing as instead, raised the candle and looked around the room for another candelabrum. In doing this, I saw the figure move

FLASH FICTION

again. Like a shadow deeper than all the other shades, it crept into the darkness behind the overturned table and crouched near the edge of the couch.

It wasn't just a shadow. No – you did see what it was, and you're just too damn scared to admit it! So what was it then, this strange thing that now silently waited near the end of the couch? It was the hideously thin form of a child. Yes Michael that's right – it's the shadow of a young boy who's been dead for a very, very long time.

"Michael – did you hear something?"

Reaching for a nearby candelabrum and hurriedly using my candle to light the six stems, I tried to appear calm.

"No – but there's broken glass everywhere, wait a second."

Holding the candelabrum high and casting the glow behind the couch, I motioned for her to climb over.

"That's safer – no glass anyway."

Disturbed by my own paranoia, I picked up the broken decanter top, tossing it in the direction that I'd thought to have seen the strange shadow. There was an angered hiss in the blackness and my heart leapt into my throat.

Before I could even react, Caitlin reached out, grabbing my hand and tugged me along.

"Michael – let's go, now!"

We rushed out of the living-room and into the corridor, as struggling to avoid dropping the candles I fearfully looked back while hurrying after her.

The shadows, yes, they're closing in, following us! But they can't enter the light – must not drop the candles! Oh God – please don't let me drop them!

"Oh my God – look!" Caitlin screamed, pointing a trembling hand toward the ceiling and walls ahead of us, "Its coming! It's alive and it's coming after us!"

No, it had to be another nightmare! None of this could be real!

The corridor was smeared with pulsating masses of blackened filth! Glistening, it crept across the ceiling, sliding down the walls to where it soaked into the carpet beneath our feet! Holding the candelabrum higher I gasped as the hideous fungus drew away from the light, accumulating and rapidly swelling all around us.

"Come on, run – run for the stairs!" The steady pounding of my heart increased into a deafening thunder as watching the mass grow in pursuit, we raced hysterically through the house.

It couldn't be happening – but it was! It was coming after us! Faster and faster as it filled the hallways behind us, absorbing everything in its path!

FLASH FICTION

Bursting through the corridor and fleeing toward the stairs, we suddenly slipped, shrieking and stumbling through the seething mass! Almost losing the candelabrum, I cried out, dropping a single candle and watching as the light and flame were extinguished in a sickly vapor that now caused the vile mess to withdraw.

“Oh no—it’s all over me!” She panicked, thrashing wildly at her bare arms and legs as she screamed, “I can’t get it off! It’s growing all over me!”

Holding the candelabra high in the air, I grabbed at her flailing arms, catching a hold of her wrist.

“Caitlin—listen to me!” I pulled the hysterical woman toward the pulsating, glistening mass on the stairs, “It’ll be okay, just keep going, we’re almost there!”

Dreading the touch of anything on that foul and slippery path, I dragged at the screaming woman, our feet sucked down into the foul mire as we fought ever upward.

“I knew it!” She wailed, “It came up from the crypts!” Her voice had become so shrill I could barely distinguish the words, “It’s growing and it’s coming after us! We should never have gone down there! Oh God it hurts!” She burst into hysterical tears, “It’s all over me—it’s eating me!”

Looking down I choked in horror, noticing the gruesome filth as pulsating it expanded, small root-like tendrils swelling and creeping the length of her legs.

Breathless, I fought harder as instinct and fear driven adrenaline now created one last, mind-rending effort.

“Go—run, run for your damn life!”

Reaching the top of the stairs I shoved her forward, choking as the corridor behind us filled with the sickening, seething ocean of glistening death.

Adrenaline burned in every vein as pushing her, I screamed as the surging wall of putrefying decay now exploded through the hall like a tidal wave. Every nerve screamed as mindless panic drove me, throwing the shrieking woman forward and into the room, I barely had the time to close and bar the door.

I could hear it, shuffling against the walls, brushing, pushing against the door. It had almost gotten us.

A dim glow still emanated from the hearth as turning, I rushed toward the fire, hurriedly heaping the wood high and shouting, “Stay near the light! You’re safe as long as you’re in the light!”

Caught in a state of shock and deathly pale, she’d fallen silent, simply standing near the hearth and staring at me. The gown slipping from her shoulders, dropped to the floor, revealing the hideous, glistening mold that now clung and crept over her flesh.

“Oh no—no, no this can’t be real!”

FLASH FICTION

Grabbing my robe from where it'd hung on a nearby chair, I rushed forward, kneeling and desperately attempting to scrape the swiftly spreading fungus off her legs.

It won't come off! The harder I scrape, the worse it gets! It's like some kind of horrible plant, spreading roots all over her body and growing!

Looking down at my hands, I noticed that the mold had faded, pausing in thought before suddenly realizing the reason why! Cologne, I had always worn cologne!

"Cologne, why didn't I think of that earlier?" Snapping my fingers I laughed aloud, "The alcohol, of course!"

Hurriedly returning to my luggage and locating the large bottle, I rushed back, frivolously spraying at the hideous fungal growth.

"Come on—die you rotten bastard!"

A moment passed as turning her toward the fire-light, I watched as the fungus burst like infected pustules and began running down her legs.

"Yes—thank God! Come on sweetheart—work with me here."

The flames burned high in the hearth as working feverishly, I sprayed, wiping and washing the festering mess off her flesh.

"The cologne is killing it--," I looked up at her, relieved as a familiar spark now burned in her gaze, "How do you feel?"

"Better—but you'd better get cleaned up too. Oh—I need something." She covered herself with a hand and turned away in shame.

Turning, I pulled the top cover off my bed, cloaking her with the linen and seating her near the hearth.

"Just stay there for a minute while I clean up."

Pulling off my pants, I gasped as the bulging mold suddenly surged, spreading up the length of my calf. Fumbling and dropping the cologne bottle, I fought against the flailing tendrils.

"Here—hold still!"

She rushed over as half blinded by tears, she grabbed the bottle with trembling hands, spraying at the fungus and scrubbing off the trailing filth.

Gritting my teeth, I fought against the urge to scream out as I felt the tendrils burrowing into my skin, gripping as they tried to take root in my flesh!

"Just a little bit more--," Her eyes flashed in the darkness, "Hold still!"

It took everything to just stand there, diverting my eyes as the hideous stuff dissolved in the cologne and ran like a putrid river down my legs.

FLASH FICTION

"That should do it." She searched my body for any unnoticed remnants.

The pain subsiding, I rubbed at my skin, shuddering with the subtle burn of the cologne and slipping back into my pants.

"Thanks, that's much better."

"We should be safe here now – right?" She shivered, sitting down beside me and huddling closer to the hearth.

Looking down at my watch and then around the room, I realized that we wouldn't have enough fuel for the fire to last through the night.

"It's only a little after one... even if we burn the rest of the furniture, it's old so it'll burn fast. I don't know."

"Then what do we do?" Desperation tore through her pale features, "There's no other way out of here!"

"Caitlin, I need to know something." Running a hand across my sweat beaded face I gently grasped her shoulder, looking deeply into her eyes.

"Sir Reginald's diaries, I noticed that there were a few pages – lost."

"They weren't lost." She blurted, remorsefully shaking her head, "I burned them."

"But why, why would you do something like that?" It seemed utterly pointless.

"Well – because!" She drew her legs up, tightly embracing them, "It was all so – so horrible!"

"I know that it doesn't really seem to matter much now--," Clearing my throat and rubbing at my eyes, I tried to conceal my own fear, "But do you remember, or have any idea what was written on them?"

"I don't really remember anything clearly." Her voice faded into a whisper as she looked away, "The terminology was all so archaic and most of it was written in different a language. Latin I think?"

The words having scarcely been uttered, I slowly looked back while hearing the subtle, yet distinct sound of the door handle slowly turning.

Caitlin stiffened, becoming absolutely still as my heart leapt into my throat.

Whatever it was, it was outside the door and was now trying to get inside.

There was a faint click of the latch as someone, or something now attempted to release the catch. Ever so slowly it turned as squeaking loudly, the handle was caught and would turn no further.

Locked, thank God I'd locked that damn door!

FLASH FICTION

The door suddenly thundered as being assaulted by some brute force, the frame quaked and cracked before, just as swiftly as it had started, everything now became deathly silent.

“Resurrection—the pages had something to do with bringing back the dead.” Her face became visibly pale and drawn.

“It mentioned a ritual—something about human sacrifice, and a story about some kind of demon. I don’t remember exactly, but I think it said something about using the demon to guide souls back into this world.”

“Um Caitlin—at any point, did it ever occur to you that a little detail like that could have some significance?”

The words being entirely sarcastic were only uttered in a moment of complete and uncontrollable terror, guilt forcing me to turn in apology, “I’m sorry, I’m just feeling at a complete loss here.”

“Look!” She choked, pointing toward the door. There was a sudden sound of splintering wood as the door, being forced beneath incredible pressure, started cracking while bending ever inward.

“Oh no—what in the name of—,” The thought was lost in the deep shadows as the screws began ripping free of the hinges, slipping out and dropping to the floor.

Defensively moving before Caitlin, I retrieved a hot poker from the hearth and grabbing her hand, prepared to face whatever nightmare now forced its way inward.

The entire room shook, thundering deafeningly as Caitlin suddenly tore at my sleeve, frantically pointing to where a pale and sickly mucous surged from around, and flowed in from beneath the door.

I fought the urge to scream as the gelatinous tendrils thrashed and flailed, forcing in from around and beneath the cracking framework.

At any moment that door would explode off its hinges and whatever waited beyond that door, would get inside!

Although the flames of the hearth had provided a dim glow closest to the bed, I now realized that the opposite side leading to the doorway was in utter darkness!

“Oh no—light, we need more light in here right now!”

Racing toward the bed, I desperately tore at the covers, pulling them free and throwing them into the hearth. The old cloth burst into flame as wailing, I dragged the blazing linens across the room, throwing the burning fragments against the door and on top of the hideous mass. Thick black smoke billowed upward as a horrendous shrieking resounded from behind the doorway.

It was backing off! The fire was working!

FLASH FICTION

The eruption of a shattering window caused me to turn, looking to where Caitlin threw herself backward, shielding her head with both hands from the shower of crystalline shards.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes – but we have to stop the fire!”

Ripping the remaining blanket from the bed, she rushed toward the door, desperately battering at the flames.

The choking fumes caused me to look away, a movement in the corner of my eye forcing my gaze into the darkness beyond the broken window.

Was that just some trick of the fire-light in the trailing smoke, or had something moved out there?

And then, absolute horror as gazing into that jagged portal once bordered by glass, something in that blackness stared back. Only for a moment, two luminescent eyes shone in the darkness, and then it was gone.

Unaware of the sinister presence, Caitlin screamed in frustration, desperately swatting the blanket against the burning floor and wall.

“It’s not working! I can’t get this to go out!”

“Hang on--,” Grabbing a wash basin from a near-by bureau, I rushed ahead, dumping the soapy water against the door and stepping back as the flames smoldered and went out.

“Look out! It’s coming back!”

The hideous thing bulged from beneath the ashen ruins of the door as once more forcing itself into the room, Caitlin screamed, stumbling over heaped linens and falling heavily to the floor!

Grabbing and pulling her from the doorway, I directed her attention to the bed while shouting, “Help me with this! Drag it to the doorway!”

Ripping the remaining sheets off the mattress, I threw them aside as we struggled to shove the huge bed across the room.

It moved painfully slow, but in a final and desperate effort, we managed to push the huge and heavy headboard firmly against the splintering door.

I felt her tiny hands encircle my arm as looking down, our eyes met.

“What now – what do we do now?”

“Nothing, all that we can do now, is keep the fire burning and hope for the best. Look--,” I nodded toward the door, “Now that the bed isn’t blocking the light from the hearth, that thing isn’t trying to get into the room.”

FLASH FICTION

Our efforts had been rewarded as the glow from the hearth now filled the chamber and the gruesome fungus, unable to escape from the darkness, hideously pulsed and writhed in the shadows beneath the bed.

"I'm going to need that sheet that you're wearing--," I gestured toward Caitlin, "And any other linens that we can find."

It had only taken moments, but as I tightly fastened the last knot of the makeshift linen rope, I nervously turned back toward the window, "I really hope this holds."

"We can wrap it around the desk, and then shove the desk against the window." She pointed while slipping into my coat, "We can go down one at a time."

"Not we--," Testing the strength of the knots I looked back at her, "You just stay here and keep that fire burning bright."

"I'm not staying here alone."

Dropping the linen rope onto the floor and moving toward her, I gently grasped her shoulders, staring deeply into those wide and terrified eyes.

"You'll be okay, trust me... just keep the hearth stoked and stay close to the fire."

The determination fading from her eyes, she tightly embraced me and kissed my cheek.

"That was for good luck."

"Just keep that fire going." I turned, tossing my home-made torch out the window and testing the strength of the makeshift rope.

"No matter what happens, don't let that fire die, and don't leave this room."

Leaving her alone there was almost as terrifying as climbing out and onto that wet, moss covered ledge. As if my own trembling hadn't been bad enough, the ledge was slippery and the icy wind bit into my eyes, face and hands.

Struggling to keep my balance I knelt, tightly gripping the linen rope while reaching for a drain pipe.

Don't look down – don't look down! These stones are so cold and there's hardly anything to hold onto! Oh God, please don't let this old drain pipe break!

FLASH FICTION

Holding the makeshift rope in one hand and using the rusting and squeaking old pipe for balance, I managed to get down to the lower sill just as the rope broke loose from above!

Desperately fighting for a grip on the old stone-work, I pressed myself tightly against the window pane.

"It's okay!" A wild eyed Caitlin stared down, tightly gripping the remainder of the linen rope, "Grab the rope – I've got it!"

With a wave, I reached out and tried grabbing at the dangling end, the wind tossing and pulling it out of reach.

Just a little further – come on old man, you can do it! Just reach out, a little bit more!

There was a sudden movement in the window behind me as losing balance, I cried out while falling backward.

The distance was only a few yards, but the fall seemed to last forever! Spinning out of control and utterly helpless, I dropped heavily onto the damp earth with a dull thud.

A moment later, I lay bruised and winded, sprawling in the tall grass. It was only by pure luck alone that the fall had been broken by the garden hedge, and that I hadn't landed on the stone pathway.

If I'd fallen just slightly to the left instead of the right, I would've – no, don't even think about it.

"Michael, are you alright? Answer me please!"

"Yes – I'm okay – hang on, I'll be back for you soon!"

The cold night air burned in my lungs with every panting breath. The short journey through the rear of the property and into the stone gardens leaving me totally exhausted, I leaned against the brick-work while trying to catch my breath.

It was so dark that I could hardly make out the little path that I was trying to follow. Hesitating, I stared upward, watching as the moon passed out from behind the clouds, the pale light creating an eerie blue glow in the fog.

Did something move out there – or was it just the moon-light and the shadows shifting in the mist? Nerves Michael, it's just your nerves!

Every ounce of logic told me to run, run for my life! *The car, that's it, just run like hell, get to the car and drive as far away from this place as you can!*

Stumbling, I fell against a marble angel, catching my balance and turning to look back at the manor.

Standing in the distance beneath a brightening sky, the *Duff Glenn* ascended like a nightmare from the swirling fog. Dark and empty, except for that single tiny and twinkling light, my thoughts returned to Caitlin and the damned pendant.

FLASH FICTION

No matter what happens, you have to do this! None of this would've happened if it wasn't for you stupid!

The sound of breaking twigs and branches caused me to freeze, my entire body stiffening with horror as I strained to listen.

The noises grew louder as something large broke its way through the dense foliage in swift approach.

Oh dear God – no! That thing in the house! It couldn't get into the room, so it must've followed me!

Without so much as another thought, I launched forward, blind terror forcing me up the little marble path as fast as my legs would carry me.

It's back there! Oh God, I can hear it following! It must be huge, it sounds like an elephant breaking through the trees! Don't look back – don't stop! Run damn you – run!

My chest burned painfully, my heart thundering as though it might explode, but I kept running!

The sounds from behind me, they're slowing down? Did it give up – or is it waiting somewhere up ahead. Maybe it's in the shadows near the forest's edge, or is it hanging from somewhere in the branches above me?

With no sure way of knowing either way, I bit down on my tongue and bursting forward, broke free of the forest, dashing out into a clearing.

In the darkness, I could barely make out my surroundings. Squinting, I gasped in horror, spinning suddenly as a reflection of moonlight brought my attention to the wind-swept ripples on that horrible pond.

Oh thank Christ! I thought it was the light reflecting off the wet fungus as it crept after me! Have to keep going – have to hurry!

The howl of the wind startled me, every nerve tingling as shuddering uncontrollably, I moved onward. In the moon's pale glow, I could now see the looming forms of the mausoleums.

"Just – a little – further now... you can – make it!"

Gasping for breath, I clambered up the moss covered stairs, every step becoming more painful than the last.

"Come on old man – keep going."

In one final effort I surged forward, climbing the last few steps, stumbling across the grounds and falling before the spiked gates!

"Not much further now – come on legs, move damn you."

My thoughts swam in a heated and dizzying haze. One thought and one thought only!

FLASH FICTION

"There you are--," I grabbed the heavy old padlock, tugging at the chain and pausing in utter horror, "Oh no – no."

In the ensuing chaos I'd forgotten the key!

"Oh no, no – this just couldn't be happening! How could I have forgotten the damned key?"

The decision arriving swiftly, I securely fastened the flashlight through a belt loop and began climbing one of the stone pillars adjoining the gates.

"Careful – watch those ouch! Damn spikes!"

Warm and slippery, the blood ran freely from a small gouge on my palm where I'd caught a spike with my left hand.

"Just keep going – up we go."

Finally reaching the top I swung a leg over the spikes, tightening my grip while precariously positioned directly above the sharp spears.

"Stop shaking, damn you!"

I fought to keep my balance as between fatigue, fear and the icy wind, I teetered dangerously, my grip loosening and my hold suddenly slipping.

"Oh boy – hang on, oh no – oh no!"

It was all too much as loosing balance and twisting while trying to avoid those deadly spears, I shrieked, helplessly plummeting over the edge.

With the icy wind in my face, I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, terrified and waiting for the inevitable. It seemed to take forever until, crashing heavily to the ground, my head barely missing a large marble pedestal, I lay winded.

I couldn't breathe. My chest burned with excruciating pain as fighting for tiny breaths, I winced, holding each breath before daring to try for another. Without a thought, my right hand quickly traveled over my body. Finding no blood or serious injury, relief came in the form of the first deep breath.

The moon suddenly crested the clouds and looking upward, my eyes caught the silhouetted spears against the pale heavens. Long, cold and cruel, I saw myself hanging from those barbed spikes, impaled and dying in the stillness.

"Stop it--," I shook the image from my thoughts, gathering my wits and climbing back to my feet.

"Okay old man – let's get this over-with. So there they are... the mausoleums."

Caught by the grim and terrifying sight, all I could do was just stand there and stare. The moon cast an eerie twilight over the gardens. It was a haunting blue glow which

FLASH FICTION

creeping from behind the clouds, made the mausoleums seem like they were suddenly rising out of the mist against the black horizon.

An icy wind blew hair into my face and halting to brush it aside, I caught a sudden movement in the corner of my eye.

I'd first thought that it had looked like a person, but soon realized that it couldn't have been. Pale and extremely thin, it had leapt several yards upward in a single bound, landing on the marble plateau before it crept past the support pillars, disappearing somewhere into the thick fog. And then, but only for a moment, I could've sworn that I saw two pale and luminescent eyes glaring back at me from that darkness.

Whatever it was, my knees quaked and fear gripped my heart with an icy fist.

Reaching a trembling hand into my pants pocket and nervously pulling out the strange locket, I looked down at it.

"If there's any kind of protection in you – please, please work now."

The pentagram shone brilliantly in the dim light as attributing an unearthly life to the little charm, I swallowed hard, slowly turning my attention back to the mausoleums.

"Okay – I can do this."

Several steps forward and the fear caused me to stutter while whispering thoughts of encouragement.

"It's only a graveyard – and the dead can't hurt you.... if you don't believe in them."

But it wasn't the dead that I now feared. It was that hideous mold, and the horrible thing I could only call Amelia.

It's alive. That fog, it's moving against the wind. Covering the ground almost as though it were trying – to hide something?

Goose bumps raced the length of my arms, the chill causing the short hairs at the base of my neck to stand on end.

"It's only fog--," Licking the dryness from my cold lips, I determinedly forced onward.

"Hang on Caitlin, this will all be over soon, one way or another."

Firmly grasping the amulet, I whispered words of reassurance while approaching and slowly climbing the cold marble stairs, "All I have to do – is put this damn thing back."

Reaching the end of the path and passing between the angels that guarded the stairs to the three tombs, I nervously peered into their somber eyes.

"It's a good thing that cemetery statues couldn't talk. No one would ever rest again."

A faint shuffling in the darkness caused me to glance back, and what I saw there turned my blood to ice.

FLASH FICTION

The night seemed to move from all around me as squinting, I soon realized that I was almost completely surrounded by that hideous fungus.

The mass bulged and spewed as creeping from behind the old crypts, it flooded and seemed to flow like a blackened ocean, covering and devouring all within its path.

Even though it had no visible eyes it knew exactly where I was, moving quicker with obvious anticipation as it spread like a festering disease across the grounds.

Good God I'm done for! But wait – what's it doing now? Why is it lurking in corners when it could easily come straight at me?

And then it struck me.

"The moonlight..."

Shooting a quick glance into the sky, my heart stopped as dark and heavy clouds extended ever outward while reaching for the moon.

As soon as those clouds cover the moon, and the light's gone, I'm as good as dead! What can I do? I have to think, come up with some idea! God, think Michael think – hurry!

Reaching downward, I quickly felt for the flashlight, horrified to discover that I'd lost it in the fall from the gate!

My attention snapped back and forth between the advancing fungus and slowly clouding moon, the wind becoming stronger as the shadows grew longer in the failing glow.

"I'll never make it up there." I flinched, looking up the stairs and to where the fungus now accumulated on the walls, spreading across the floor and tombs.

"Can't go back, can't go forward – no light, no hope! Oh God what have I done!"

It would all be over soon.

Fumbling for my cigarettes, I struggled in the cold wind to light one.

In that instant, and as the Zippo ignited, the seething mass reared back as a shrill hissing ripped through the night.

"You stupid bastard –," Shielding the flame with a hand, I waved the lighter at the retreating mold. If only I had remembered to pick up the torch!

"Why didn't I think of this before? Fire – have to make a fire, a torch!"

Panicking, I cursed as the lighter became increasingly hot in my hands.

It only took a moment to break off a thin branch which hung from a small dead tree, and removing my black woolen sweater, wrap it loosely about the long stick.

"Come on – please work!"

FLASH FICTION

Within seconds the sweater became an inferno, the horrendous fungus drawing into the depths of the night as I hurried up the stairs.

"This won't last long."

Terrified, I pulled off my tie, wrapping it around the torch as my eyes scanned the surroundings for anything flammable.

"I need more light!" I spun in desperation.

A lantern, there on the wall! They used oil, could it be possible! Is there any chance?

Grabbing at the old lantern, I frantically pulled, but couldn't break it free from the wall mounting.

"Damn you – come off of there!"

Pounding with a fist against the metal bracket, the blood ran down my torn hand as it suddenly broke free, crashing to the cold stone floor.

The torch is burning out! Hurry – hurry man! I kicked at the old lamp and stepping back, gasped as it began leaking dark fluid from a cracked base.

Wasting no time, I grabbed the lamp, splashing the oil all over the steps and sprinkling the rest into the dense and creeping brambles.

The torch had almost gone out when I touched the final sparks to the oil.

The flames spread rapidly through the dead underbrush, the night erupting in a sudden brilliance that forced me to shield my eyes.

A wall of flame as everything burned! The heat warming my body and the light restored hope!

With the pendant clutched tightly in my bloody hand, I stumbled through the blazing chaos, slipping and falling to my knees before Amelia's tomb.

"Almost there!"

Fumbling to wind the chain around the iron gates, a sound behind me caused me to suddenly turn.

Standing on the plateau just behind me and caught between the light of the flames, the fog and the full moon, stood the quivering form of something long dead.

Throwing myself forward and crashing heavily against the gates, I fought madly while attempting to bind the chain.

What was happening here – was it the wind or something else? Every time I managed to get it partially wound, it would come loose and fall away! What kept undoing this damned chain?

Reeling with intense pain as something ripped through my shoulder, I rolled to one side, gasping as I looked up in horror.

FLASH FICTION

Twitching and glistening with decay, the corpse of Amelia McCreary leaned downward. The long, filthy blonde hair streaming in the icy wind as it paused inches from my face.

Oh God – oh my God! I stared straight into those black and empty eyes.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was the same horrible thing that I'd encountered in the bath not so long ago. But somehow, the figure seemed fuller and the features.

Oh no, it couldn't be! Yes – yes it was! Dear God in heaven above, Somehow this ghastly thing had returned from the grave, and was now in the process of some kind of hideous rejuvenation!

Gripping me tightly with a single razor sharp claw, I felt the flesh of my shoulder tear and the blood flow. But before I could even react, she effortlessly tore me away from the gates and with incredible force, tossed me aside like a rag doll.

The world spun as my body twisted through the air before crashing down near the edge of the stairs. The wind having been knocked out of me, I heaved, struggling to one side.

Blood suddenly filled my eyes, and passing a trembling hand before my face I froze, noticing a shadow in the fires brilliant glow. A tremor of revulsion surging through my entire being as a putrid and trailing stream of filth ran the length of my face.

"Destroy it – Michael. Destroy the pendent."

The sound was all too familiar but somehow different? The hissing and gurgling was gone as she now whispered with a voice that she might have spoken with in life.

"Find it and destroy it. Do it – now!"

Wincing as she tore deeper into the flesh of my shoulder, I defiantly stared up.

"You're not here Amelia! You're dead – go back to your grave!"

There was a pause, an expression of complete confusion as releasing me, she backed away. The gaunt form trembling as its oily flesh seemed to tighten, the muscles shriveling in the failing firelight.

"You will do as I ask!" Sudden rage glowed within those blackened eyes as rushing forward she dropped before me, a cold claw closing tightly about my throat.

"You will do as I ask – Michael. You will."

Staring in wide-eyed horror, I could only watch as it leaned closer, a ghastly grin crossing its leathery features as slowly reaching down, she touched me. The horror causing my heart to thunder as laughing hysterically, she raised an arm before my face, the muscles swelling as even her features filled out and softened. Suddenly, I understood.

FLASH FICTION

"You brought me back." The black eyes faded into gray and then, like a pebble dropping into a pool, she blinked several times before staring down through white pupils.

"You are my life – and soon, I shall have yours."

"Never, you go to hell!"

Shrieking in rage, she drew a clawed arm high into the night, a fatal blow that I knew would end my life.

"Michael – Michael where are you?"

Caitlin screamed from somewhere in the shadows behind me.

"Get out of here--run! Get away!"

Rejuvenated and growing stronger by my own uncontrollable fear, Amelia suddenly leapt up, her eyes burning with a pale fire in the darkness as she looked down at me. Her features twisting with a knowing grin which, revealing her intentions now drove me into complete panic!

"No – not her, I won't let you, I won't!"

My affection for Caitlin having been far greater than my own fear, sheer rage now fueled my frantic efforts.

Shouting hysterically I leapt up from where I'd fallen on the edge of the stairs, desperately grappling with the demon Amelia.

"Run Caitlin, for God-sakes – run!"

The world turned slowly as everything began to fade into shadow. The loss of blood draining whatever consciousness I had left, broken of spirit and drained of strength, I helplessly collapsed to my knees.

Amelia's eyes blazed with victory as releasing me, she shrieked with rage before turning in search of Caitlin.

"No – please, I'll do anything you say. Just let her go." The words were jumbled as spitting blood I struggled back to my feet.

Caitlin suddenly screamed as turning, I saw her fighting with Amelia before the mausoleum gates. The pendant hanging from her hand, Caitlin lashed out as the demon shrieking in fury, knocked her down and tore at her throat.

"No – no!"

Tears of anger burned in my eyes as fighting for the strength to help her, I made one last effort, stumbling across the plateau and throwing myself upon the unsuspecting Amelia.

FLASH FICTION

Enraged, she ripped at my arms and chest as toppling over, we fell together, rolling several yards distance from where Caitlin lay in a crumpled and bloody heap.

With the salt of my own blood blinding me and all strength having failed, I rolled onto my back, staring up and into death's pale face.

Helpless, I could only close my eyes as Amelia standing over me, raised a clawed hand in a blow that would certainly end my life.

"Go back to hell!"

The sound of Caitlin's voice ripped me back into reality. Turning my head, I saw her lean down before the mausoleum and tightly bind the charm around the gates.

From the stillness of that dark portal, a wailing hurricane of shadows suddenly formed. A violent icy gale that escaping from the entrance to Amelia's tomb, now extended, growing stronger while reaching ever outward. Leaping aside and gripping the gates of little Henry's crypt, Caitlin screamed in terror, struggling to hang on.

Deafened by Amelia's unearthly shrieking, my eyes became fixed upon her naked form in the moonlight. Falling to her knees before the stairs, she began clawing at her smoldering flesh, her body liquefying and running into a steaming puddle beneath her quaking form. It was absolutely horrifying, her flesh pouring like the wax of a candle that had gotten too close to an open heat source.

And then, through the storm and screams, I stared aghast as the shuddering corpse began crawling toward me through a trail of wet and smoking decay.

"Michael—come--come to me!" Amelia's voice was drowned within a sickening gurgling.

Trembling and speechless with terror, I tried desperately to crawl away from the approaching nightmare. Blackened and disheveled, her flesh shrank like leather against the bone, glistening with decay as the shadows swarmed all around us.

"Michael--," She extended a claw, clutching as she crawled ever closer, "Come to me!"

"Never—burn in hell damn you!" I gasped in horror, suddenly realizing that I'd foolishly backed my-self against the mausoleum wall.

Kicking and struggling, I tried to avoid the spreading puddle as suddenly and to my ultimate horror, she reached down and grabbing one of my ankles.

Before I could even scream, we were both suddenly drawn across the floor, sliding as we were slowly pulled toward the vacuous portal of churning shadow.

"Oh no—no, let go of me God damn-it!" Shrieking and rolling onto my stomach, I reached out, desperately grabbing at anything and everything.

"No—come on—there must be something!" Catching a firm grip around the base of one of the marble support pillars, I hung on for dear life!

FLASH FICTION

Caitlin's horrified scream forced me to look back over my shoulder, the blood turning to ice in my veins.

Amelia's eyes burned like white fire, her body violently shuddering as suspended in mid-air before the churning portal, she began to change!

The claw that had been holding my left ankle suddenly melted away, replaced by a long and blackened tendril that sliding upward painfully tightened around my lower leg. Tentacles burst from her back and abdomen, flailing like giant tree roots as opening her mouth in a silent scream, her head and face exploded!

Any semblance of humanity stripped from the hideous thing and sucked into the blackness, I cried out as I looked into the nightmares true face!

A wet and leathery slug-like thing, it was no more human than that horrible black mold, but looked like something blended between both! Long trails of slime streamed off its dark and gelatinous body, sucked into the void as shuddering to its icy touch, I clung desperately to the marble base. And then, looking at the monstrous creature, it all suddenly made horrible sense!

The gruesome disease, the syphilis which acting like a flesh eating fungus had slowly murdered Sir Reginald. The ancient and monstrous willow roots that had taken little Henry's life, the sickness and death that had haunted the McCreary family for so long! All of these nightmares had existed within this one and ultimate evil. It had never been anything else – it had always just been this one foul thing! The demon that now gripped my ankle as we hung before the gateway to oblivion!

The thing that had once been Amelia now flailed wildly before the immense black portal, those terrifying shadows screaming louder, circling faster and ever faster! At any moment, unable to hold on much longer, I would be dragged into that gaping abyss with that horrible thing!

An immense vase suddenly passed over my head, crashing heavily into the demon and shattering as it cast the shrieking thing backward and into the raging abyss.

It was finally over and as the strength faded, my arms slid off the marble base as I slipped backward into the void. The world became utterly black as out of that nothingness, a hand suddenly reached out of the night, tightly grabbing my wrist.

"Don't give up! Michael – take my hand, fight damn you – fight!"

Eternity seemed to tremble from all around me as struggling against the deafening echoes of damnation I fought to escape from that horrendous black pit!

And then, as though the world had strangely just stopped, the night became deathly still.

"It's over." Caitlin whispered, flinging her arms tightly about my neck and burying her face in my chest.

"We did it Michael. It's finally over."

FLASH FICTION

Hugging her close, I looked deeply into those tear filled eyes.

"I don't understand? I asked you to stay at the house. Why – what made you come out here?"

"Because--," She rubbed at her eyes, reaching into a coat pocket and extending a hand, "You forgot this."

My heart sank while looking down into her small, open and trembling palm. In the dull glow of the moon's pale light, I gazed down at the cemetery gate key.

"Remember what you said in the library – about keys?" She whispered in the darkness, "Sometimes – they can save your life."

In loving memory of *Carrie Francis Dayment*

© Alex Kautz

The Rose Garden

James Ward Kirk

Adam Glacies sat in his green plastic chair under the fading sun staring at his dead wife's dead rose garden. Even though this Indiana May, already too hot, promised a healthy garden for Angela's flowers, they weren't taking. The remnants from the hellish winter stood crookedly, faded yellows and reds and her prize whites. Scratching at his graying whiskers with his left hand, Adam lifted the police-issue .38 from his lap, a remnant of his former life, and pointed the muzzle at his temple.

He couldn't do it. He knew he should pull the trigger, even things out, reconfirm his loyalty to Angela, but he also understood cowardice and disloyalty.

He stuffed his gun into the belt holding his jeans up and walked to his house. *The grass needs cutting. The goddamn dandelions are taking over.*

In the kitchen, Adam set the table. He loaded his plate with three pork chops, a heaping mound of mashed potatoes, and golden corn. Across the table from him rested a photograph of Angela wearing a white dress with matching sunbonnet, long blond hair framing a perfect face. Her blue eyes and bright smile projected the most pain for Adam. She was still innocent.

Tearing into his meal, barely bothering to chew, never taking his eyes from Angela's, he finished, then hurried to the sink and vomited everything back up.

His pants fell to the floor. *I'm losing weight. Too much weight and it hurts.*

Pulling them back up, he turned on the tap water and rinsed the sink, then turned on the garbage disposal. He listened hungrily as his guilt ground in the machine.

After turning off the tap and the garbage disposal, he walked to the living room, sat down in his black recliner, laid his pistol on the table beside his chair and opened the drawer. Removing the half-empty bottle of bourbon, he finished the nut-brown liquid in three long pulls, and fell asleep.

Adam awoke to a low buzzing sound. The room was dark, as was his mood. Becoming a bit more alert, he picked up his gun and, unsteady, walked to the front porch.

Forcing his mind to focus, he saw small furry creatures with big eyes – reminding Adam of chipmunks and apple-head Chihuahuas with antennae – eating the dandelions in his yard. A whippoorwill sounded in the distance.

Adam pointed his .38 at one of them.

No! We come in peace and love. The voice seemed crystal-clear in his mind, at once alien and comfortably familiar, somehow reminiscent of Angela's voice.

FLASH FICTION

Whatever. Lowering his gun, he walked back into the house, to his bedroom, and fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of Angela's blue eyes and the lost chirping of crickets in a moonlit night.

Then he dreamed of Eve, and shivered in the heat as he slept:

Eve was the exact opposite of Angela, raven-haired, eyes so dark and large like a starless midnight sky, tall and long-legged, and corrupt. Eve: meth-thin, opposite of Angela's full-bodied figure, small breasted but a plump ass: Angela's golem.

A courier, Eve drove a new black Caddy and lived in Gwynneville. Adam drove an unmarked blue Impala and lived in Shelbyville. He waited outside her supplier's house in Rushville and followed her along State Road 52 with the windows down, enjoying the scent of fresh cut hay, until they reached her home. Eve never saw him coming.

He waited at the corner of her house, registering her sensual walk, noticing her very short blue jean skirt and her pearl high-cut t-shirt and of course the bulging silver purse hanging from her shoulder. When she worked the lock, he made his move.

Just as Eve pushed the door open, Adam hit her with his left shoulder. She went tumbling, dropping her purse, and two kilos of bagged crystal meth spilled onto the floor.

Eve, handcuffed in a matter of seconds, rolled over unto her back. Adam looked down at her, his police badge in hand.

She spread her legs just enough to show her promise of an ebony happy trail. "Don't do this. I'll suck you dry. I'll fuck you dry. I know things."

Her voice, melodic, her mouth filled with promise, seemed a reward to Adam. He worked hard and played hard, more so than anyone he knew.

He couldn't deny his erection and didn't want to anyway. This beautiful woman, impossible to resist, sang a siren's song. Adam dropped his jeans and straddled her.

"Wait," she sang, "bring it up here first." She opened her wonderful mouth.

Eve was not a gift; rather, an addiction.

Adam crawled out of bed, making it to the toilet just in time to empty his stomach. Not bothering to brush his teeth, he walked to the kitchen and started some coffee, standing in front of the machine, motionless, breathing shallowly while watching the coffee brew. He poured some into a cup and walked to the front porch.

On his third sip, he noticed the absence of dandelions. Remembering a vague dream about small furry creatures eating them, and speaking to him, he shrugged his shoulders. *I need to cut the grass.* He noticed his neighbors' yards still overrun by dandelions.

He finished his coffee and walked around the side of his house toward the garage where his green lawnmower awaited him. Filling the gas tank, he checked the oil and then pulled it behind him to the smallish backyard. *I should probably cut those roses down.* His stomach heaved at the thought. Hesitantly, he glanced at the rose garden.

FLASH FICTION

What?

The roses leered back at him in perfect health. Angela's rose garden could easily grace any glossy magazine cover. *They're unspoiled.*

As he approached, their perfume overwhelmed him and he fell to his knees. *I'm going insane. Finally.*

He finished his journey to the rose garden, allowing his eyes to adjust to the bright hues. Their scent and color made his eyes water. The morning sun, burning without mercy, was unable to affect the tears streaming down his face, as now he cried — no, sobbed.

Birds chirped; a dove cooed. In the distance, a woodpecker worked mightily.

I don't deserve this. Adam stood and walked to the edge of the garden. He longed to experience joy over the miracle before him, but suffered emptiness.

Angela should be here.

Reaching out to touch one of the white roses, he hesitated. The bed of the garden glowed violet, the deep color a king might wear. *I smell... I'm reminded of... manure... but not like any I know... there's no chemical smell...* Adam took three steps backward and tripped over the lawnmower, falling to the ground.

Fuck!

Regaining his footing, he looked all around, and decided to cut the grass. Starting the mower, he began his routine of cutting: familiar squares, rectangles, circles around the two maples. He withdrew into his thoughts.

Nine in the morning on a beautiful Saturday, the breeze perfectly warm, Angela so lovely in her jeans and white t-shirt, hair pulled back, a smile dancing on the edges of her mouth.

"I'm proud of you for donating your time at the Seniors Village."

"Thank you, Adam. Those people are so fun. I love listening to their stories."

"I'll pick you up at four."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Watching Angela walking, wondering why Eve's hold on him is so powerful when Angela is so beautiful. Sex is wonderful with her, and the love I feel when I'm inside her is real.

Driving away, growing hard, not for the moment, but for the moment to come. Naked Eve meeting him at her back door, gone Brazilian, holding coffee laced with bourbon; screwing, drinking, screwing, napping, drinking, screwing...

"Adam! Wake up! You're late!"

Adam shuddered.

FLASH FICTION

Waking up with my face buried deep in her lap, unable to finish what I started, drunk, feeling Eve's hands push me and I fall to the floor naked and the bottle of bourbon falls and empties onto my head, rushing to dress, leaving Eve still drunk and already back to sleep...

. . . Angela sitting on the steps, smiling at me even though I'm late. God bless her.

Angela getting in and I pull away still drunk, so drunk. I pick up speed, she leans over to kiss me, and oh, my God, she smells Eve on my mouth and my Angela shrinks.

Leaving Rushville on SR52, cornfields, and tree lines to fight erosion, and I hear her start to cry and this angers me so I smack her.

Picking up speed, turning on my lights, passing slowing cars, and Angela plants a right fist directly onto my right temple and I briefly lose it...

Waking up... my cop friends telling me my car rolled six times and I'm okay but Angela... no seatbelt, thrown from the car. I find her in three pieces: a crimson mess, one leg bled out hanging pale from a tree branch, her trunk all yellow in the flashing lights.

Adam grimaced.

His BAC never checked.

Buried in three days . . . her white sunbonnet . . . Angela gone forever to a blue place where roses grew as big as oaks, a haven he knew he'd never reach.

His first Saturday without Eve . . .

The second Saturday, nighttime, peeping through her window, Eve strung out on meth and whiskey, already another naked man by her side, he slunk away; murder thrumming in-between beats of his heart, never to be.

Adam quivered, released from memory, the tank of the mower empty, and the expected spring breeze still, twilight stars beginning to twinkle in the sky.

How long have I been standing here? He looked around the neighborhood, lights flashing on in homes, cars parked neatly in driveways, dandelions everywhere.

He walked into his home, tugged long and hard on a fresh bottle of bourbon, and fell asleep, feeling death like a kiss on his cheek – and welcomed both.

Awakened by a buzzing in his head, now a familiar sound, a loved one calling out, and he walked out to his front porch.

All of the dandelions gone; no freshly cut grass in his neighbors' yards, just the absence of dandelions and the loss of night sounds; no chirping of birds, no crickets, no buzzing of flying insects – only the silence of the night exploding in his mind.

Adam left the porch and walked around the side of the house to the backyard.

Gazing upon Angela's rose garden, understanding now the completed artistry; his memory of this morning's rose garden incomplete, experienced like the morning before the final brush strokes on the Sistine Chapel, which Angela once told him about.

FLASH FICTION

She should know.

Angela's roses towered above him, at least fifteen feet tall, and colored like the most beautiful works of art in the world. Adam fell to his knees.

A stirring among the roses . . .

. . . *Them.*

Watching without fear or anxiety as the *beings* spread out from the garden, their circle completed. *Do not fear, they sang. We offer you Angela.*

"How?" Adam felt the dew soaking through his pants at the knees. Honeysuckle scented the breeze.

Come. Stand among us. We will take you to Angela.

Adam stood, entered the circle, and blinked.

And saw the earth below him, as blue as Angela's eyes.
I'm inside a bubble.

Yes, a bubble.

"You ate the crickets, too."

Like you, we are omnivores.

Omnivores? I think that means they eat anything. Like an old spider spinning a new web, fear spread through him. *I don't understand.*

Adam blinked again. He saw *blackness*.

We are in galaxy M87, the home of the largest black hole in your known universe.

"Why?"

We are taking you to Angela.

"Why?"

Because this is what you want, no, need.

Adam experienced the reflection of the bubble in a blue star being sucked into the black hole. Other stars moved with him — red, yellow, white — transforming into shapes of monarch butterflies and seahorses and fireflies; and other images he had no words to describe.

A tap on Adam's shoulder surprised him. He turned.

"Hello. My name is Hieronymus Bosch."

Adam nodded to the man, but before he could introduce himself the man was no more.
What a creepy little shit. Adam blinked.

FLASH FICTION

We are near.

He blinked again and was momentarily blinded.

An O-star, and why it is blue; rare indeed, but quite beautiful, don't you think?

"Yes." Why do I deserve such beauty? He blinked. I don't. "Where is Angela?"

Near, very near; please be patient.

He closed his eyes, then heard Angela's voice: *Adam?*

He opened them.

There! You see, Adam?

A planet: one half, the side facing the star, shimmered yellow/red, molten; the side facing away from the star white, icy, stark; and a blue ring around the middle of the planet promised innocence, purity, and a concept for which Adam couldn't find the word he desired.

This planet does not rotate. The middle part represents where life exists. Angela is there, in the blue ring.

"When do I get to see her?" I have so much to say; especially, I'm sorry.

We are sorry. When did we say you might see her?

"Then what?" Adam, happy for Angela and her blue place, understood now he no longer mattered.

Choose.

"Choose?"

Choose your home: white or lemon-crimson. Free will, Adam, is a promise. One of many.

I should have known. "I always favoured her white roses."

Adam fell. As he sunk into the planet's atmosphere, he broke into a million pieces of eternally screaming white ice, the word "Angela" falling like snowflakes, snowflakes the colour of regret.





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Interview

Interview with Michael Lee Johnson

J.Langdon: What drew you to poetry? Who are your favorite and most inspirational Poets?

Michael Lee Johnson: I was drawn to poetry by no roots no direction of my own, a drifter, a nowhere to go person. I was a basketball, sports star in high school, an early marriage at 17 with child. That marriage was short two year and back to my hometown, Niles, Michigan. Funds from my mother allowed me to attend university where I fell in love and lost that love-then the poems began in 1968.

My first love and still is Carl Sandburg. I read everything and imitated his voice better than anyone I know to this day. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKS1Xc1cIFQ>.

Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Charles Bukowski, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood early poems. Favorite Books: The Bible, As A Man Thinketh by James Allen, Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Margaret Atwood (early poems).

J. Langdon: I have seen you do a lot for the present day poetry scene. You seem to go out of your way to help poets be noticed. What drives you to go out of your way to aid them?

Michael Lee Johnson: It is simply, a passion, a drive hammer wedged between me, and Jesus Christ, and our communion with each other. For years before the internet, I quit submitting poetry. My reality is I have over 428 published poems and hundreds of starter poems unfinished. I am 68 going on 69, at this point in my life I find as much joy in helping others get "kick started" as I do with my own works published in over 27 countries and 885 different publications.

J.Langdon: I have noticed similarities to Carl Sandburg in your writings and in quite a few a Leonard Cohen. You seem to have seen a lot in your life. Do you travel a lot for inspiration?

Michael Lee Johnson: Yes, I would say Carl Sandburg and Leonard Cohen were my earliest influences. Lately Charles Bukowski. I had a hard time in exile arriving in Canada with a car that broke down, I tossed everything except a few clothes and I keep poetry written up to that point and hitch hiked all over Ontario during the Canadian postal strike at the time while waiting for my landed immigrant

Interview

card which would allow me to work legally in Canada. The story is too long but the bottom-line is I traveled all provinces in Canada at one time or another. I lived in my cars, slept in barns, and met many women. You mix all this up and you have a poet.

J. Langdon: All the publications are quite an accomplishment. What advice can you give, or have given to help poets be published?

Michael Lee Johnson: First you need to understand the odds, new poets are lucky if they get published 2-3% of the time. That means 2 or 3 times out of 97 rejections. Never give up hope. I am published at a very high rate of about 10-15% of the time. There are many reasons why one gets rejected: poor timing, editor has problems hasn't had time to look, the editor simply doesn't like your style, it was a themed submission and your poems didn't fit, they only publish one a year, you didn't read the submission guidelines carefully enough, the list goes on and on. Never give up hope.

Advice? I started a poetry site in my home community of Itasca, IL and no one cared. In fact, they tossed the draft issue in my face after 45 years have passed. Then I got the idea to start a group not based on geography rather interest thus my poetry site:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/807679459328998/>, Contemporary Poets, Their Works, Current Poetry Projects, News, and Links. Since only about 8-12% of the population really loves poetry this brings together a concentrated group that can help, comment, make suggestions, see new poetry sites to submit to and a natural audience to find talent for a poetry anthology. On this site, I build confidence in inexperienced poets who only need a little support to move on into the published world of poetry. Poets need to keep a spreadsheet with a list of publishers and add to it. On Facebook poetry groups when you go to a site you will see other related sites to the right side. When you go to an online publisher site always, look for "Links" or "Other Sites We Love." Keep records in that spreadsheet of growing publishers: date sent, name of publication, website, what "batch" of poems you sent, the editors name, the results, then each month tally number of publishers contacted, percentage of poems accepted, etc. Here is a free wonderful list to start your spreadsheet of publishers with Poetry Publishers Willing to Receive Submissions Electronically: <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/pbonline.html>. Create your own Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, Facebook Group, Pinterest, Stumblers, and other social media.

J.Langdon: You say exile. Do you mean exile as the classic term? Were you running from something or forced to leave, or do you mean exile as in homeless?

Interview

Michal Lee Johnson: In my case, it turned out to be both ultimately. Initially it was exile in self-imposed choice or jail. While in Canada, it turned out to be homeless many times over. Who defined what exile is? Is it choice or is it no choice but to leave, a decision to make. Exile is lonely, without roots, drifter, no country of your own, that is what exile is.

J.Langdon: You gave some good pointers and the more global the better. I have noticed you have your own YouTube channel and Sound Cloud. How is that working out for you?

Michal Lee Johnson: I love them all; but to be honest, it is very time consuming to do a YouTube video. I am nearing 100 poetry videos but I love doing the music, my audio, the pictures and making it all come together. I also post them on other social media when done on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/user/poetrymanusa/videos>