Elegant Literature

Haunted Hideaway

#013

Elegant Literature Issue #013
Haunted Hideaway

Published by Elegant Media Publishing Corporation
www.ElegantLiterature.com

Copyright © 2022 Elegant Media Publishing Corporation
All copyright of individual titles remains with the authors of each work.

All rights reserved. This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of the publisher, except as provided by Canada copyright law and fair use. For permission requests, write to the publisher "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at support@elegantliterature.com.

To the best of Elegant Media Publishing Corporation's knowledge, the stories in this magazine are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. If you have reasonable cause to believe otherwise please contact the author directly, or the publisher if the author cannot be reached, at the address listed above.

Cover art by Joeprachatree.

Edited by Creag Munroe.

ISSN 2564-4211

About Elegant Literature

Magazine & Contest

Elegant Literature is a magazine focused on publishing new writers. At its inception, there were few publications—if any—that only accepted work from aspiring talent and also paid professional rates.

We aimed to change that.

As far as we know, Elegant Literature is the only short fiction magazine willing to turn down work from famous authors. No Stephen King's or George Martin's here. This policy gives unpublished authors a significantly less competitive market to submit work to, increasing their chances of publication.

Our goal is to help discover new voices in fiction, and publish talented beginners from around the globe.

Elegant Literature publishes work from all genres, and readers can always find a free copy of every issue on our website.

Each issue of the magazine also corresponds to our monthly contest. One of the stories in the following pages has won the grand prize. But we don't reveal who it is in the table of contents. It wouldn't be fair for readers to skip over the other works.

We encourage you to read and enjoy each piece in the order presented. They have been curated intentionally. Please, discover the winner naturally.

The list of honourable mentions relates directly to the contest.

If you read something you like, please consider connecting with and supporting the author.

Click here for more information about submitting to the magazine.

Click here for more information about entering the contest.

Happy reading!

Content Warning

Work published in Elegant Literature varies widely. Some stories may deal with mature and uncomfortable topics.

Table of Contents

OUR PARTNERS 7

Issue Prompt 8

HONORABLE MENTIONS 10

Neaper the Reaper 11
Geoff Peelman

The Haunted Overlook 18
Mike Lucas

The Chat 26
D. Morgan Fields

Deincarnation 34
Gary Malone

Sovereign 42
Linda M. Scott

A Visit 51
Marley Bauer

The Mark 58
Jessica L. Hughson

Tarnish 63
Kate Michaelson

Barnaby 71
C. J. Spear

What's Your Emergency? 79
Ryn Faust

Judge's Comments 87
Jim Hull

Thank You To

OUR PARTNERS

SCRIVENER
SCAPPLE
PROWRITINGAID
TODOIST
THE NOVEL FACTORY
IRIS MARSH
SUBTXT

Issue Prompt

HAUNTED HIDEAWAY

Write a story involving a haunted place, and silver.

Do you tremble from the chill? As the weather cools and leaves scatter the ground, can you be sure it's not something… else. Which scares you more, the darkness or your own thoughts?

Certain places are known to be haunted. Asylums, crypts, and old creaky houses. The striped-tent circus turns sinister at night. You wonder what lurks inside the fog as the mist rolls through town, as the rain blankets the manor home, as lighting illuminates the deep woods. Where do you hide when the panic sets in? Surely not that cave, hotel, or empty church. An isolated cabin in the forest? Run farther, to a station among the stars, where the echoes you hear are definitely human. Perhaps you're haunted by memories, of things you've done and people you've lost. How do you escape the voices in your head, conversations replayed ad nauseam until you scream with guilt? Chased by ghosts—real or imagined—where do you hide?

This contest invites you to explore haunted hideaways, whatever that means to you. Fantasy, contemporary, romance, crime. All genres are welcome.

Head Judge

Jim Hull

Thank you to our
upcoming & past judges:

Nathan Baugh
Django Wexler
Nicky Shearsby
Max Gladstone
Creag Munroe

Congratulations to the

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Presented in alphabetical order

All Hallows Night at the Lighthouse	Hanna Rydén
An Unhappy Accident	Rachael Sicking
Ashes to Ashes	Brian Reindel
Blood in the Water	Jordan Twiss
Buying the Farm	Ann O'Mara Heyward
Changling	Katie Kelly Koppenhofer
Crosswalks and Traffic Lights	Bek Diskett
Cut Her's Ghost	Dana Stewart
Great Aunt Mildred	Steve Lance
In Remembrance	Zach Friday
In the In-Between	Rebecca Riley
Interstellar Intervention	Glenn Rosado
Killing Monsters	John Stevens
Kine House Tour, Whisper USA	SA Fletcher
Marjory Grange, Realtor of the Dead	E. R. Edmunds
New Episodes	Ben Blatt
Society of Floating Heads	Marco Angelo
The Eleusinian	Ryan Vermette
The Haunting of Marty Archer	K.F. Stoker
The Key to Mother's Love	S.I. Myrman
The Means	Ryan Smith
The Reclaimer	Ciaran Cooke
The Shore	Kevin DG Johnson
The Tale of the Fourth or Fifth Wife of Mssr. Bleue	Emma Burnett
They're Going to Get You	JJ Hanestad

Neaper the Reaper

Geoff Peelman

EDWIN NEAPER SAT HUNCHED OVER the workbench in his garage. Even though the arthritis was starting to lock up his fingers, he was determined to finish the work at hand. This was important. He held up the silver object, pinched between tweezers. It was small and rectangular, one inch by half an inch, and sharp on each long edge. He caught his reflection as he looked at the miniature razor blade. His face was old and gaunt and fixed in a scowl. Wispy white eyebrows hung over blue eyes that were now bloodshot from the many hours he'd been toiling in the garage. But he was almost done. This was the last one.

Laid out before him on his workspace was a chocolate candy bar. It sat there alone, a desk lamp shining on it. A mini operating table. Neaper pushed the blade up through the bottom of the bar, careful to make sure it didn't poke through the top. He likened it to surgery. When he pierced the outer chocolate layer, it was like piercing skin. The tender nougat was like going through muscle and when he hit a nut it was like hitting bone. Three Musketeers were the easiest. They were just nougat inside. Forget about Almond Joy with that big almond blocking the way. But now he was working with Snickers and had to navigate through random peanuts. Once he got the blade nestled inside, he used a lighter to slightly heat the bottom of the bar and smoothed over the chocolate. It wasn't perfect, but he figured it was less likely for someone to examine the bottom. Especially an eager child. The blade was hidden inside with the sharp sides facing up and down. When the kids would take a bite, they'd get a nice surprise.

The kids were Stevie Barkus, Bobby Sterling, Corey Minter, the Hendricks twins—Paul and Greg, and a girl, Sandy Forrester. This neighborhood gang, which Neaper dubbed "The Hendricks Gang", started out some years ago riding their bikes through his yard. He'd find their trash—baseball card wrappers, soda cans and wads of bubble gum. So one time, he waited by the window until he saw them, then released his black pit bull named Striker. The dog chased them away. They ran screaming. But then later he'd find little things they did. Bubble gum on his car door handle. Maple syrup poured in his mailbox. Little childish things, that's how it started. They annoyed

Neaper but he swallowed his annoyances. And they only built up inside him during the years.

The kids became teenagers. One day Neaper released Striker on them, and one of the Hendricks twins swung his bike and hit Striker in the head with the wheel. Neaper was ready to call the police or go talk with the parents, but instead he swallowed it. Let it seethe. Fester. Then he found their bikes parked outside and he loosened their brakes. Next time he saw them, they had cuts and bruises and Sandy Forrester's arm was in a cast.

Halloween became the night that the kids would get their revenge. Edwin Neaper never gave out candy. He would shut the lights off and take his dinner into the living room to watch TV. He'd never married nor had children. His encounters with the neighborhood kids only reinforced his conviction that he had no use for children. At sixty-five years of age, he was tall with sunken eyes and white wispy eyebrows. He kept to himself and rarely spoke to people, but when he did speak it was in a low growl. One of the earlier Halloweens was when Neaper first heard the kids using their nickname for him—The Reaper. They wouldn't come up to his door. Instead they would go past it talking about him, daring each other to go up, and speculating on how Neaper the Reaper would kill them, usually by fantastically gruesome means.

On last year's Halloween, the one that came after the brake loosening incident, his house got egged and toilet papered, his car got keyed and they even took a dump on his driveway. He'd heard it happen while watching TV with his dinner from the living room. A couple loud grunts and then a teenage male voice, which he thought was Corey Minter's, call out, "There you go Reaper! Trick or treat!" Then a girl's voice, Sandy Forrester no doubt: "Good thing we brought toilet paper." Then laughter that faded into the night.

Edwin stretched his sore fingers as he carefully applied glue to the candy wrapper and sealed it shut. There. Good as new. He placed the Snickers on top of the basket full of Snickers, Three Musketeers and Almond Joys. He shut the lights off in the garage and watched through the window, locking in on a house two hundred yards down

the street. Around five o'clock, Hank and Terry Lawson left their house as they did every Halloween night around this time, got into their car and drove off. Neaper grabbed his basket, put it inside a plastic bag and opened the garage door.

He made his way down the street to the Lawsons. He made sure no one was looking and went up to their front porch where a basket of candy sat by the step. Neaper had made this same trip to the Lawsons at this same time the last three years. Each time before he saw the basket with the same three types of candy. And this year, to his delight, the tradition continued. Snickers, Three Musketeers and Almond Joy. Neaper smiled and took out his own basket. He dumped the Lawsons' candy into the plastic bag. Then he dumped his doctored set of bars into their basket. The switch was complete. He thought of the Hendricks gang and how they were the types of rotten kids that would raid the whole basket and leave nothing for anyone else. *Trick or treat*, he thought, and turned back to his house.

Neaper had all the lights off as usual. But this time he had his dinner early and retreated to the second floor where he watched the evening unfold from a dark window. He heard them coming first. "Reaper! Reaper!" Then he saw them. They had coordinated their costumes so they all looked the same. He watched as five grim reapers pranced onto his lawn. "Neaper the Reaper! Reap this!" An egg exploded on the window in front of Edwin's face. He didn't flinch. He only smiled. What the kids didn't know was that Edwin Neaper had sold this house. He closed the deal in the morning and the new owners were set to move in the next day. That's when Edwin would be taking Striker and just a few possessions onto a sailboat across the Atlantic to his new home in Bermuda. Striker snarled at the sounds of the kids wreaking havoc outside, but Neaper petted his head and said soothingly, "Don't you worry this time. I took care of things."

Weeks later, after settling into his cozy two-bedroom hideaway, Edwin decided to take a look at the news articles from back in the U.S. There was a boy from West Grove, Pennsylvania, where Neaper had fled from, that died from eating a Snickers bar which contained a razor blade. *Died?* Neaper hadn't expected that. The boy was Bob-

by Sterling. He was part of the Hendricks Gang, although he was the least offensive of the bunch. According to the story, Bobby had sneaked down at night to feast on some candy. He swallowed the blade which got caught in his throat and he bled to death on the kitchen floor while his folks slept through it.

"Oh well," Neaper said. "I'm sure you deserved it." He smiled as he realized the kids had been prophetic with their nickname for him. He was the Reaper now.

Later stories focused on a "person of interest" the police were zeroing in on. Neaper's heart started racing when he saw that. But the last story he read revealed this person was Hank Lawson. Neaper chuckled. He then took Striker for a long walk on the dazzling white sand beach.

The next Halloween was the first one that Edwin Neaper had looked forward to. There were practically no children on the island, so in addition to Edwin himself, trick-or-treating was also retired. Neaper made a nice dinner for himself: T-bone steak. One for him and one for Striker. He set up his plate on a tray in front of the TV and settled in. This was to be the first of many great Halloweens here.

As Neaper sank into his chair, he heard something clattering against the house. *Not trick-or-treaters*, he thought. As he walked to the front window, he thought if there were any kids out there, he'd make sure they'd never come back. When he got there he saw what was making the noise. The wooden shutter was loose and was flapping against the stone wall outside. He determined he'd fix it tomorrow. He turned away, but then there was another sound. A sort of low whisper. The wind, he guessed. But there was something strange about it. It sounded more like a voice than wind. He heard it again, and this time it sounded like, "Reeeeaaaaper."

He shook his head as if to shake the imaginary sound away. But one look at Striker, who was fully alert, made him think this was not imaginary.

"Neeeaaaper the Reeeaaaper," a boy's voice rang out.

"What?" Neaper said, mostly to himself. "No. No!"

"Are you in there, Reaper?"

Edwin Neaper leaned close to the window to peer out. He couldn't see anything outside. Something exploded against the window, making him jump back and shriek. Striker started barking like mad. Neaper gathered himself and watched as the yellow runny yolk of an egg dripped down the glass.

"No! It can't be. They can't be here!" Then he turned to his trusted pooch. "Get him, boy."

Striker obeyed the order and rushed out the doggy door. Edwin listened as Striker barked and snarled. But then the dog let out an odd sound. A sort of high-pitched squeal that became a sorry whimper.

As soon as Edwin got the idea to check on Striker and leaned toward the door, there was a knock. This was a first. No kid had ever dared knock on his door.

Neaper opened it. There was one kid there. In a grim reaper costume.

Edwin managed to get the words out through a shaky growl: "I don't got any candy."

The little grim reaper stood there staring at Edwin. Then he slowly lifted the mask off his head. The boy had a dark mop of hair. And Edwin recognized him as the same boy whose picture he'd seen in the news story a year ago.

Bobby Sterling met eyes with Neaper and said, "I already got your candy." He then opened his mouth wide and a river of blood spilled out. It ran down his grim reaper robe and poured out onto Edwin's hardwood floor.

Neaper screamed and turned to run, but slipped on the blood. He cowered back against a wall as Bobby Sterling entered his home. The boy stood over him. He reached his hand into his own mouth, to the back of his throat, and pulled something out. As the red dripped away from it, Edwin saw the silver underneath and he knew what it was. And when it pierced his skin and drove its way through the side of his neck, he thought of it piercing a chocolate skin and gashing through the nougat center and then striking a peanut, or as Neaper realized in that final moment, was not a peanut but his spine.

Geoff Peelman

Geoff Peelman has a BA in Film from Penn State University and focused on screenwriting. He lives in Pennsylvania and is currently writing his first novel.

The Haunted Overlook

Mike Lucas

ALONG THE TOP OF THE seawall where I run my daily run lies the overlook, jutting proudly into the sea like the bulwark of some ancient crusader castle. Folk say it's been haunted for decades. A venerable ghost gathers newspaper scraps in the corners of the granite railing, and wails mournfully into the small hours of the night.

Me, I never put stock in any of that. The wind is the more likely culprit. Yet the overlook haunts me regardless.

I am not supposed to be there that morning. Just two miles into my Sunday long run, marathon training, my ankle tightens up. Pain makes running impossible. So I hobble back along the sandy lower trail, the one at the base of the seawall that ends below the overlook, where steep, terraced steps take you up to the esplanade.

Approaching those steps, I happen to look up and spot Rachael. She stands near the overlook's edge, dark hair twisting in the wind. I recognize her silver-blue jacket before I see that her posture is all wrong. She backs away, arms raised defensively against an attacker I can't see.

I sprint, sore ankle be damned, taking the steps two at a time. The wind bears her screams to my ears. Near the top the overlook comes back into view.

"Rachael!" I cry. Her struggles have grown more desperate, while some trick of the light obscures her assailant.

Then without transition her slender body is over the guardrail. She plummets forty feet, to where sharp rocks at the base of the overlook break her and give her up to the thrashing sea.

After that, I remember little. My cries for help echo off the lonely stone, mournful in my ears. At some point I fly back down the steps, stand in the surf and call her name, search the whitecaps and black water for any desperate sign of life.

I don't understand why Rachael was even here. She should have been at home, sipping her morning coffee on the deck.

Who in God's name would throw my sweet, lovely wife over that guardrail? Who would have the strength, and why would they want to?

In the quiet of the night, under a waxing three-quarters moon, awareness comes to the ghost. It stands—if it can be said to stand—upon a stone abutment that reaches out into the sea.

Who am I? Why am I here? It does not like this place and so it flits away, toward the little shops across the street with their quaint awnings and broad windows. But as soon as it steps into the street, everything becomes blurry and indistinct.

Afraid, it returns to the overlook, where its memories begin to clarify. *Something terrible has happened*, it thinks. *I have been trapped here since. How long has it been?* It spies a shred of newspaper down the street, and sets upon it, trying to bring it out of the haze enough to read. *The date. I must know the date,* it thinks, not understanding its own urgency. But the ghost can only muster the faintest of breaths, barely enough to flutter the curled corners of newsprint, whose words it cannot read.

"But I would *never* hurt her." My voice is raw. An image of Rachael's face appears, all big brown eyes and freckles. I blink back tears. "Sure, we were going through a rough patch. That's no reason to *kill* her."

Greta, my lawyer, shrugs carefully. "They've seen this before. The unhappy marriage, the wife who dies under mysterious circumstances…they'll make a case for first degree."

I close my eyes, retreat into myself. Rachael's absence is a weight upon the world.

Greta's hand on my arm brings me back. "Do you remember a bystander? A man in a grey coat?"

"Yes." I'll never forget the look of horror on the man's face. "He was across the street when I reached the top. I shouted to call nine-one-one, but he just froze."

"His name is Chris Haddison. He's going to testify." The lines of Greta's face turn grim. "He says he saw you push Rachael over."

"What? But I wasn't…I was still on the stairs!" Greta flinches at my shout, and an awful thought occurs to me. "You believe me, don't

you?"

"Of course." She touches my arm again, but the gesture feels overdone. "Don't forget, the prosecutors have to prove *their* case, not the other way round. I'll keep reminding everyone of that."

"Okay," I say, trying to find my calm. "Thank you."

She nods, but I wonder. If I'm really presumed innocent, why isn't she doing more to find Rachael's killer? Why isn't anyone?

The ghost understands now. The world beyond the overlook, indistinct as it was, confused it for a long time—especially the cars, old and strange as they were. But it has found a way, in the quietest part of the night, to coalesce and draw loose items into the overlook, where it can see them. Receipts, newspapers, once even a whole *Time* magazine.

The years pass in gloomy solitude. Yet the ghost waits patiently, because the terrible thing, it knows, will happen again. It must be there to witness, to understand—and perhaps, if it can learn to move more than papers, to affect the outcome.

Chris Haddison's testimony convicts me. Greta tries to poke holes in his story, but I think part of her believes his account more than mine.

I get second-degree murder, ten years minimum until parole. All through my prison sentence I cling to two things: my innocence, and my burning need to uncover what happened to Rachael. Who killed her, and why?

In my darkest moments I fear my mind is playing tricks on me, that my image of Rachael being thrown from the overlook is false. Could the eerie, almost impossible way she fell be my own mind hiding her suicide from me?

Even worse are the nightmares where I'm at the top of the overlook, and just like Haddison tells it, I hurl Rachael over the railing myself. Her hair flies up, reaching for me as she tumbles through nothingness, and I wake in a cold sweat with the satiny feel of her jacket on my fingers—the silver-blue jacket that my hands had clutched tight

before heaving Rachael away. In the darkness of my cell I murmur to myself that this is only imagined. A bad dream, not a memory. But I don't know if I can trust my own words.

I keep my head down, the model prisoner, and after ten years I get parole. I hunker into a crappy job and an even crappier flat, and try to hide from Rachael. From my memories of her.

But I start jogging again, and one morning I let my route take me past the overlook. Someone has left flowers by the guardrail, at the exact place where Rachael fell. Gerber daisies—Rachael's favourite. Curious, I run by several times a week.

Rachael died on a Sunday. Three Sundays in a row I find colourful new daisies lying against the dreary stone.

Who would leave flowers once a week after ten years? A friend? Rachael's family are all hundreds of miles away. The next Saturday I shrug into two old sweaters before donning my coat, hoping it's enough to keep me warm through the night.

Maybe the ghost is real and the flowers are bait for its trap. But so what? If the ghost strikes me dead, or tosses me out to sea like Rachael, at least I'll finally know.

I'm half asleep on one of the overlook's benches when the noise of an engine rises above the constant murmur of the waves. I sit up, blinking. A man gets out of a compact car, yellow daisies in hand.

It's Chris Haddison. He sees me and stops short. "You."

"What are you doing here?" My voice is gravelly, more menacing than I intend.

He hesitates, glances back at his car, and for a moment I think he's going to run. Then his shoulders sag and he approaches, sits down next to me. "I have trouble sleeping, after what I saw." He holds up the daisies. "Sometimes this helps."

"What did you see?" I ask. "Who killed my wife?"

He looks out at the sea and says nothing.

"You know it wasn't me. Why did you lie?"

He shuts his eyes. When they open they're filled with remorse. "I'm sorry. No one would've believed me. They'd have assumed *I* killed

her." He shakes his head. "I didn't think one lie would convict you."

"What happened, Chris? Who killed her?"

"The ghost," he says, and swallows hard. "It came out of the shadows, almost invisible, and grabbed your wife. She fought, but it flipped her over the edge like a sack of potatoes."

I want to protest, but I remember the horror on his face that morning. He has the same look now. Presently he stands, places the flowers by the spot where Rachael fell, then waits a moment, gazing out to sea as though daring the ghost to take him, too.

He returns to his car without looking back.

Maybe I should stop him, force him to recant his testimony. Prove my innocence. Instead I pace over to the guardrail and look down into the darkness. I can just make out the sharp rocks that claimed Rachael's life.

The next thing I know I'm climbing onto the wide stone ledge of the guardrail, then standing to face the sea. I'm only toying with the idea; I won't go through with it. But up here in the breeze, the salt air in my face and the waves crashing below, I feel closer to Rachael than I have since she died.

"I didn't want to," whispers a voice, startling me. "She betrayed me."

I turn my head. No one is there. But in the dim light of the street lamps on the esplanade, I begin to see...*something*. My legs grow weak. The something is vague and incorporeal, yet somehow its face looks exactly like—

I lose my footing, and fall.

The ghost has waited a lifetime for this morning. Two lifetimes, really, repeating all the years of its prior life. Death had brought it into the past, to begin its new existence on the very night the person it had been first drew breath.

Normally the dawn banishes it, but today it focuses its determination and remains, stretched out in the dark places between the stones.

At last it will know the truth.

She arrives, dark hair tangling itself in the wind. The light of an

overcast sky draws the freckles from her pale skin. *Rachael.*

For the ghost, it's been almost forty years. It is so lost in Rachael that it almost doesn't notice the man next to her—the man whose hand touches hers intimately.

"We should go inside," says Rachael. "We're usually so careful. What if someone sees us?"

"It's early," says Haddison. "There's no one around."

"My husband..."

"Didn't you say he's on his long run? He's ten miles away by now." Haddison smiles. "It doesn't matter anyway. I want you to leave him."

"Chris, I..." She hesitates.

But the ghost can see how her face has lit up.

"I love you, Rachael," says Haddison. "Say yes."

"Okay. Yes," she says, and stretches up to kiss him.

With an anguished snarl the ghost materializes, powerful in its wrath. Its vision blurs, but it attacks anyway.

Haddison! He destroyed me. I will kill him.

But in the haze of the ghost's rage it sees that the shape before it is silver blue. Did it seize Rachael by mistake? It can barely see...

Or maybe it isn't a mistake.

With all the bitter fury of my broken life, I hoist Rachael over the guardrail, and give her to the rocks and the crashing sea.

Mike Lucas

Mike Lucas is an avid runner, writer, and father. He and his wife Kristen have raised $150,000 in support of Spinal Muscular Atrophy, in memory of their daughter Georgia. Mike lives in Winnipeg, Canada with his wife and three children, and dog Cocoa.

storyrunner.houseoflucas.com/

The Chat

D. Morgan Fields

HIS FATHER HAD GONE MISSING five days earlier, although the flies would find him by tomorrow morning. It was also true that his mother would, as she always did, demand he go off and search for him.

Robbie Neely held a cellphone to his ear. “Yes, mom. In the car, driving as we speak. Franklin.”

He switched the phone to his other ear, taking a sip of two-day old coffee as he listened.

“Yeah, I’ll check in Clinton after, but first the baseball field.” There was a short pause, before he responded sharply. “You know why.”

He let the cellphone fall from his shoulder, thudding against something metal between the door and driver’s seat. You go looking, mom, he thought. Keep looking, until I’m gone.

Half a mile outside the town of Franklin, Robbie saw the mountains of his childhood. These mountains were nothing more than mounds of crushed rock called chat piles that dotted the horizon; remains of a frantic rush to mine material for bullets manufactured during an old war. Remembering his first and only plane ride, the chat piles looked to him like grayish, silver-white deserts laid over the earth like a blanket. Those piles had a history of covering things, burying.

He came to a stop and then turned onto Main Street. The remains of a concrete wall with the spray-painted image of a gorilla in football pads was still partly visible. Robbie remembered when that paint was fresh. He started to drive slowly.

He made a left turn at East County Road Three, thankful that he didn’t have to witness the piles of debris left downtown from the tornado three years ago. No one was left in Franklin to be hurt by it. No one was around to clean up the mess afterwards. Truckers had, over time, simply cleared whatever lay in the roadway by continuing to just drive through it.

Robbie turned right at Greek Street, although the street sign was only a green nub. He knew it was Greek Street, because he knew the way to the field. He could feel himself getting closer to it and his father. He slowed down, crawling forward in the car.

A pile of dolls and liquor bottles lay discarded at the base of a pecan tree. The ballfield, with a three-story tall chat pile hovering like a frozen tidal wave behind the visitor's dugout, was abandoned and overgrown.

He stopped in the middle of the gravel parking lot and got out, recovering his cellphone from the floorboard as he did. He took a final sip of his coffee, looked down for a moment, and dropped his cup to the ground. He took a glance at the chat pile, turning quickly away as he felt his stomach tighten from the sight of it. The field was depressing, but he couldn't stand the sight of that pile. It brought back memories. Mostly, it brought back a name and a face.

"Come on," he said. He turned, looking up and down Greek Street. "You're here. Somewhere."

A breeze brought the momentary smell of fresh cut grass and honeysuckle. He turned toward the smell, took a few steps forward, and found a new, overpowering odor immediately present. It was the scent of an unclean litter box combined with other things he couldn't discern. There was only one intact house nearby, about two hundred yards up, where the road ended behind the ballpark. He started to walk in that direction.

As Robbie passed the dilapidated concession stand, he saw it still had a number of advertising planks hanging at the top from brass hooks. The bright green cross of First Baptist Church was the most prominent and least faded. Again, he started to have negative thoughts about being here. Robbie quickly decided to go back to his car and drive straight to Clinton, to the bar there. This was his plan, until he caught a glimpse of something familiar at the end of the road.

His father's white minivan was parked in front of the house, with its front bumper haphazardly pressed into the side of a Large Oak. The vehicle appeared damaged from the collision.

Although the day was cloudy, a reflective glow came from each window of the old one-story home. Robbie thought it was aluminum foil at first but, as he approached closer, he realized they were multiple car sunshades that had been nailed in place.

He walked up the outer concrete steps. A plastic skeleton man seat-

ed in a bench, with a small box of crayons melted against the forehead, welcomed him. The front door was gone. A fish tank, algae coated with a few living fish still inside, was the only source of light in the living room.

Robbie walked in and, as he prepared to call out for his father, his breath was stolen by the overwhelming smell inside the house. The add-mixture of cat feces, cigarettes, stale beer, and bleach cramped his stomach with an immediate, extreme nausea. When he stopped breathing through his nose, he regained composure. A weak voice was coming from the kitchen.

"In here," said his father. "I am right here."

The kitchen was all he thought it would be, although the smell seemed to dissipate on account of the tobacco smoke. Robbie instinctively took a cigarette off the table, sat in the vinyl chair across from his father, and lit his smoke.

"You've been here the whole five days?"

"It was a rainstorm from a week ago," said his father. "It called me here. I am guessing your mom called you."

"Yeah, she called. Saw your parking job. You're drunk or you were drunk." He felt strange saying something obvious.

"I drive better drunk, although I can never park," said his father. He chuckled, wincing from pain as he did. He turned himself sideways and his face was illuminated by the fish tank light.

His father's eyes were bloodshot. Although he wore a ballcap, rivulets of dried blood could be seen on his forehead. A deep gash ran down his right cheek, running against the grain of his wrinkled face.

"Your face? You got in another fight." Robbie stood up.

His father sipped his beer. "No fight. My face isn't the real problem."

"Come home. You need a shower. That cut needs stitches."

His father motioned with his hand toward the kitchen sink. "I ain't done talking with Eric yet."

Robbie felt a shooting jolt in his stomach at hearing the name out loud, although he had thought about Eric several times that day. It was like another smell entered the kitchen but not really a smell at

all; a sense running over his skin but also just below his skin. A sort of truthfulness had resounded in his father's voice. His father seemed sincere. This was new to him.

Robbie glanced around for Eric, trying to imagine what his face looked like. He closed his eyes. He attempted to picture him alive on that Tuesday afternoon, riding his bike out of the driveway. Yet, he could only picture the body they found on that Friday evening, cradled in a tractor's scoop under the indirect light from the baseball field.

"Well, sit down and talk with us some," said his father, lighting another cigarette and opening a fresh beer from off the floor.

Robbie sat, feeling tears start to come. "Eric's dead. He's been dead. You just had to say his name."

"He's dead, son. I forgot that we had found his body, after the rainstorm called me here in a dream. So, I went looking for him behind the baseball field, on top of the pile."

Robbie recalled his brother's face. The image came back all by itself. Eric's face was coated in a layer of rock-powder, bulging and bloodshot eyes. He remembered how long he stared at his body, waiting to see him breathe. "How could you forget?"

His father nodded. "A man is old. But Eric looks better now. He looks like himself."

"Stop it."

"I think I know why I can see him so clearly."

"Stop it! Or just die already."

"Soon enough." His father stood up carefully, grimacing as he raised the right side of his t-shirt. This revealed a dark purple bruise running from his armpit and down below his belt. As his father turned, the light illuminated multiple broken ribs protruding sharply underneath the skin. "I fell down."

"From where? How?"

His father lowered his shirt and seated himself slowly, carefully. He accidentally dropped his cigarette in the process. "From the top of the pile over there. Landed right on the back of the bleachers, on my ribs."

He asked from instinct. “You want the hospital?”

His father lit another cigarette. “No. I can talk to Eric, since I am closer to it all. It’s nice. You understand?”

“I don’t believe.”

“I don’t blame you. I’ve got a lot to make up for with him. Eric was always good, until I killed him.”

Robbie lit a cigarette, putting the pack and lighter in his pocket. “It was only an accident.”

His father attempted to stand but fell to the floor. He grunted from the pain and coughed several times, before he regained the ability to speak. “No. Your mother was an accident. Eric was divine punishment. I’ve still got to make it all up to him.”

“You can’t make up for anything now.”

“How would you know?” His father looked at the kitchen sink again, then closed his eyes. His next words were softer, weaker. “How would anybody living here really know?”

Robbie took out his cellphone. There was no signal.

“You’ll have to go outside to make a call. I put up all the reflectors to keep your mother from tracking me.”

Robbie got up and walked toward the door.

His father placed a hand on the table. Realizing he didn’t have the strength to stand, he laid himself gently down on the floor. “Was I enough of a father?”

Robbie paused at the doorway, surveying the top of the chat pile that loomed over the ballfield. The sun was sinking now. He turned halfway. “I am still alive.”

He walked out, leaned against his father’s minivan, and called his mother.

“I couldn’t find him. Not sure where he could be this time.”

Robbie lowered himself to the ground, pulling his knees up and resting against them. “Yes, I’ll look in Clinton before nightfall.”

His bottom lip started to quiver. He spoke very quickly. “I’ll get chicken and fries. See you and Emma tonight.”

The setting sun lingered just over the ballfield, warming his face as he looked at it. He finally allowed himself to weep, knowing who it

was for. He knew it was real.

Robbie Neely stood up and walked to his car, ignoring the soft cries for help coming from inside the house.

D. Morgan Fields

D. Morgan Fields lives in Texas and works as a teacher. He and his spouse have two children, one dog, one cat, and a great life. He enjoys chess and biking. He loves reading and writing.

Deincarnation

Gary Malone

Contest Winner

DON'T EVER LET ANYONE TELL you that death is the end. If anything, it's interminable. I should know. I died in this stupid Airbnb years ago and I've been stuck here ever since. Week after week, I have to watch a parade of unintelligible non-English-speaking tourists, trysts of wildly varying quality, and—on one occasion—a husband insisting to his wife that he could rewire a plug, with poetic justice dangling predictably over the averment. It was afterwards, when the couple were plunged into peremptory darkness and had to go groping for the fuse box, that I stepped forth to greet them. There followed shrieking, fleeing, and—presumably, for it happens offstage—lacerating online reviews. They didn't come back. Unlike me.

Scaring people is one the few pleasures left to me in death. As in life. I was an executive at a pharmaceutical firm notorious for hostile takeovers. I personally became known as the CFO who would rob his own grave. When I got sick after eating a birthday cake sculpted as a bust of me, a columnist quipped: 'He deserves himself.' But I've heard worse. I like to think that some of those people on Twitter who expressed disappointment that my first coronary wasn't my last might at some point stay here for the night. Their turn to have a coronary.

While you're alive, the hovering specter of death at least gives you a sense of impending closure. But in the hereafter, I have found, the abyss yawns. Everyone tells you that they fear death: they should fear eternity. Too late have I learned the truth of Kafka's dictum: that the meaning of life is that it ends. For my current existence may never end. I might be haunting this location until the cottage has been torn down, until inland erosion removes the very hill it is nestled against, or until the heat-death of the universe. There's no way to know.

The afterlife has taught me that privacy is starkly asymmetrical: being hidden from people means that they hide very little from you. On one grotesque occasion, a young couple decided to make love on the fleecy rug at the foot of the bed. They ignored the rhythmic squawking of the floorboard beneath them, blissfully unaware that it was making that same noise when the paramedic kept slamming one heel of his interlocked hands into my sternum, trying to restart a

heart that had stopped for the second—and definitively final—time. I can still see Melanie, swept by the great gale of reality into one corner of the bedroom, pinned in terror against the wooden paneling. Half of her terror, I knew, stemmed from her realization that my wife would finally find out about her. I don't blame the woman: if Melanie was my psychopomp, Helen was my psycho.

My final memory, as the light of life faded, was seeing the urgency deliquescing in the paramedic's eyes. He knew I was a goner. The last fifteen lunges he made at my chest were just for show. When I awoke, I wondered where everyone had gone. It took me a while to realize that I too had departed. At the age of fifty-one.

Anyway, onto this weekend's occupant of my quondam *bai-sodrome*. A fortysomething brunette—quite toothsome actually; she even looks like my type. She arrived at dusk, excitedly unpacking and fussing over her silver-striated hair. She keeps trying on lingerie and glancing with mounting excitement at the clock. She's expecting a man. It is only when you have seen your hundredth liaison that you realize how they all look wearisomely the same. And tonight I want to be alone. So, time to scare this woman out of her wits and be done with it. Make of thyself an apparition.

When I materialize in the doorway of the bedroom, her back is to me and she is pivoting before the full-length mirror, wearing a diaphanous robe opened over lacy underwear. When a person senses that they're not alone, it always happens in the Hemingway manner: gradually, then suddenly. Sure enough, the woman slows her pivoting, freezes, then quickly turns to look at where I am standing.

Immediately, she jumps back, gasps. Her hand flies to her chest.

'Jesus! You frightened me.'

At this, it's my turn to freeze.

A pall of confusion now descends on me. It is indeed the métier of a ghost to frighten people. But people do not usually *tell* the ghost that they have been given a fright, much less make it sound like an indignant complaint. (And still less usually does this casual indignation emanate from a half-naked female confronted by a strange

man in an empty house.) This woman should be fleeing the building screaming. Instead, she now does nothing more urgent than close her robe and fasten its silky belt, as if trying to repack a beribboned present I've seen prematurely. She looks at me and says:

'I didn't hear you come in. How long have you been here?'

Stunned, I want to say to her, *five and a half years.* She peers quizzically at me.

'You look … different, somehow.'

An astounding role-reversal is now taking place. This woman is frightening me—me, the ghost. For I have never seen her in my life before, and yet she is speaking to me as if she knows me. Then she says it.

'Eric, what's wrong with you? Say something.'

Dear God. *That's my name.*

Say something? The woman has rendered me speechless.

Before I can recover my tongue, from down the corridor I hear the familiar four bleeps as the keypad combo is punched into the front door. The door swings open and a male voice calls out.

'Nice Porsche, Stephanie. Shame there's no back seat.'

I know that voice. So does the woman. And now I watch as she truly begins to fill with fright. So do I. Backing away from the doorway, I begin crabwalking across the bedroom, out of sight of the corridor. The woman pulls her robe closed tighter, steps slowly backwards. In thickening fear, she gazes both at me and the man I can hear striding toward her.

The voice says, 'Steph, what's the matter?'

And a moment later, I step into the room.

Yes, me.

Now, the screaming begins—starting with me. Then this Stephanie, then me again—the other me. The three of us stand there, pressed against our respective walls, beholding each other in terror.

Even when the screaming subsides, the room remains pulsing with it. A storm has swept through. The sound of tripartite gasping is broken only by Stephanie suddenly wailing:

'Eric! What the *hell* is going on?'

I have no idea which of us she is talking to. But I do know why this guy's girlfriend looked like my type: because I *am* this guy.

There follows a semi-farcical scene. The other-Eric lunges at me, sails right through me, and bashes his head against the wooden paneling, leaving a painting askew. Stephanie's screaming rises to a shriek. Eric tries again, this time colliding with the wardrobe. In the brief, breathless caesura during which he nurses his temple and tries to process what has just happened, I stand before him and shout:

'*Stop!* It's useless. I'm dead.'

He stares at me. I repeat:

'I'm dead.'

My opponent's eyes go distant. I can actually *see* a realization descending on him; the fog of it veils his vision. He looks through me as easily as he ran through me.

Then, like Stephanie, I notice that something is different about this incarnation of me. There is a certain enhanced cragginess, a greater concentration of silver in that black hair. I feel like Dorian Gray gazing at his portrait, now somehow reified and minatory. The confusion thickens. Then suddenly, as if a switch has been thrown, a realization of my own pierces the gloom.

'Oh my God.' I can feel my speech going viscous before I even say what I'm about to. 'That paramedic. He brought me back to life. Didn't he?'

The living Eric gazes at me. The silence slowly inflates. Finally, he says:

'I'd hardly be here to say so otherwise.'

'Eric!' Stephanie yells.

'Yes?' both of us reply.

'What in *Christ's* name is happening?' Starved of answers, her romantic weekend ruined, the woman is by now frantic. Definitely my type.

I turn to other-Eric, make an over-to-you gesture. Let the living me explain it to his paramour. At once, a trapped look comes over him. I glimpse him briefly considering a lie, but of course it would

be useless. I could contradict anything he says. After all, I *am* him. He blinks slowly, and in a voice leaden with defeat, tells Stephanie:

'About five years ago, I died.'

'*What?*'

'It was only for four minutes.'

I add, 'Just long enough, apparently, for my spirit to depart. It happened right here in this room.' Grimly, I realise what black comedy this story will be when it gets out: the big pharma exec with no soul.

'Are you kidding me?' Stephanie bawls. She turns to the other-Eric. 'Why the hell would you bring me back to the hideaway where you died?'

She has not so much asked the question of her lover as impaled him on it. Stuck for an answer, he tries honesty. It's not an adulterer's forte.

'I just … have so many pleasant memories of weekends away in this room.'

So my enemies were right after all. I really am the kind of man who would ransack his own grave.

The living Eric's answer floats in mid-air between him and Stephanie, resting momentarily on her cloud of disbelief before shattering on the floor. Savagely, she says:

'I'm leaving.'

'Stephanie. Don't.' A kind of panic suffuses his voice. But she has already heaved her roller case onto the bed and begun repacking it.

'I don't do necrophilia, Eric.'

Ouch. That stung even me. High maintenance, this one.

The denouement is fairly predictable. Ten minutes of other-Eric's rueful protestations go nowhere. Before slamming the front door shut, Stephanie hurls a *Go fuck yourself!* down the corridor, and in the moment of reverberating silence that follows, I look over at my double's miserable face and almost say, *Want to go for it?* When you're dead, quips like this are cost-free. Things, after all, can't get worse.

Or so I thought.

It takes me a few seconds to notice that Eric's breathing has become a thin stridor. His face has drained. He is slightly stooped, as if suddenly standing in a separate gravity field. Most balefully, he now reaches for his chest. I say:

'Oh dear God. Seriously—no!' He turns to me with slow-emptying eyes. I actually yell, 'Eric! If you die again, I will fricking kill you!'

This too happens in Hemingway fashion. Preamble concluded, he collapses on the floor, like a marionette with all the strings snipped.

At this moment, four bleeps emanate from the front door. Stephanie stomps back into the cottage.

'I forgot my car keys. Don't even try to—' She halts at the sight before her. The dead man standing and the living one sprawled on the carpet, not breathing, eyes sightless. 'Oh my God!'

Then it's phone on loudspeaker; her screaming at the emergency services; amateur CPR; paramedics dashing in shortly thereafter; then professional CPR.

What I'm about to say will sound cold, but the truth is that I stand there surveying this panic-stricken scene utterly indifferent to whether or not other-Eric is resuscitated this time. For he has already been dead for that fateful four-minute window. The same one that deincarnated me. My question now is what will happen next.

It is soon answered.

A silhouetted figure, slightly stooped, suddenly materializes at the end of the corridor. My five and a half years of blissful solitude have come crashing to a halt. It seems I really do deserve myself.

Gary Malone

Born and educated in Ireland, I now live in Sydney.

Sovereign

Linda M. Scott

THE SQUALL LASHED PRIMER PETE all at once. The little Honda rocked, nearly into the oncoming lane, its faulty window seals shrieking like slide whistles. Esme fought the wheel while pretending to spit—*ptu ptu ptu*, three against evil—and frantically struggling to keep from voicing the profanities that would have let the malevolence right in.

How had this happened? Cousin Jacky was supposed to be keeping its attention, and there were at least two more heirs apparent before Esme, the black sheep who'd tried to dodge the family curse by fleeing it. She'd piled into the car with sage leaves, palo santo, yerba buena, and her evil-eye amulet to outrun the spirit today, yet here it was, smashing at the windows with wind and hail and spectral palm-prints slapping the car.

Esme coughed in the smoke from the ashtray, where she'd crammed the smoldering wad of incense. She caught herself flapping a hand to disperse the smoke and chid herself: had she forgotten absolutely everything? *Don't dismiss the good*. Her eyes in the rear-view were dark smudges narrowed against the personal storm and the pall of incense and sage; the curse-mark sat indelibly between them, a blood-dark stain like the top half of a cartoon exclamation point.

This is a fine how-do-you-do, she thought angrily. What had Jacky done to buck the family curse off himself and onto her?

Esme fumbled at her phone, awkwardly managing to get the contacts open. Wrangling the wheel with one hand, she stabbed at the scroll button until she managed to open "Jack Sibley," then thumbed the speaker button.

She could barely hear the ringing over the howling windows. Then, a tinny female voice spoke, small in the speakerphone. "Esmeralda?"

"Yeah, Sara. Hey, um, is Jacky there?"

"Didn't you hear?" Sara's voice throbbed sorrowfully. "I'm sorry, sweetie. He—your cousin had an accident."

Poor Jacky. But that explained things. "My God," Esme breathed. "I'm so sorry, Sara."

"Thank you. Honey, I hate to say it, but this is an *ungodly* connection…"

"Exactly," Esme murmured, grimacing at handprints evanescing and vanishing in the sleet piling onto the windshield faster than the wipers could carry it off.

"What? You're breaking up—" Static. Lost call.

Esme gritted her teeth. She *must* be almost there. Where was the turn?

There. Too close.

She almost flipped the little Honda fishtailing onto the long drive, stabilizing at the last instant as it rocked. Her camera bag rocketed around the cabin like a bullet, tumbling somewhere into the back. For a moment, a spectral body tumbled against the windshield, making impressions in the sleet: raging face, bony hip and leg. The windshield spiderwebbed with cracks as the passenger-side wiper twisted, but for a blessed moment, the passenger was gone.

Didn't like that, did you? Esme gloated, licking her lips. They were bitter with sage smoke.

With a bang, the fiend redoubled its efforts. Esme resumed wrestling the wheel.

Home. She was incongruously pleased that even after all these years, despite the darkness and supernaturally wretched downpour, she knew how to find the home she'd tried to renounce.

The old Victorian's turrets loomed ludicrously over the gloaming dark as Pete skidded into the roundabout. Its purple paint and mad ornamentation made it resemble a refugee from *McMansion Hell*. It looked like it'd been built shoddy and faddish in the 90s for an Internet millionaire but dated to a century earlier.

Dilapidated now, it seemed fit to be pulled down with a wrecking ball. Boards covered the windows.

Shit, where were Cousin Alice and Cousin Jay? Why weren't they handling the upkeep?

The fiend slammed itself into Primer Pete again, rocking the suspension, then furiously yanked pieces off the car: driver's-side wiper, misogynistic hood ornament, the ridiculous spoiler from the previous owner.

The house had always been warded, and should still have its witch-

marks, spell-jars, and wall anointments, but the car's hasty wards were clearly failing.

Esme decided to run for it. She seized the smoldering bundle, yanked the amulet off the rear-view—*sorry, Pete*—and flung open the driver's door, running through pummeling hail over the dilapidated brickwork and up the front stairs.

There was one flimsy board nailed across the door, but, with murder nipping at her heels, Esme sprang to rip it down. Palo santo smoldered in her clenched palm; she screamed as she pulled.

The lock hadn't been changed. The old-fashioned iron key she'd kept still worked. She dashed in, slammed the door on her invisible aggressor, and stood gasping.

Everything had been covered in sheets: furniture Halloween. How quaint: the mirrors had even been draped with black crepe.

Obviously, someone had died. *I should have kept up better with my cousins.* But they'd have lured Esme home, and she'd have smothered in the endless woo-woo, the curses and rituals. *Yup, you definitely escaped that. Hah.*

Esme grimaced, dragging the sheet off the cluttered foyer console, then pried the smoking bundle of leaves and wood from her blistered hand into the ashtray: blood-warded, now. She sponged her sopping hair and clothes with the sheet. It was so dusty that she might as well have daubed herself with mud. How long had it been?

The boarded ground-floor windows banged, one at a time, counter-clockwise around the house, spiraling up to the shutters. Esme sagged with relief: all the thresholds must still be painted with saltwater.

Unfortunately, the doorstep gleamed with sleety melt, seeping under the doorway in a wind-driven trickle.

Esme ground her teeth so hard that they crunched. The fresh water would melt the salt; the wards would fail. She needed her elders' advice.

Her elders, who were all dead.

Fuck. She'd have to go to the attic. How she'd hated it, growing up.

The highest shutters now banged ominously. Even from downstairs,

she could hear querulous voices. There was no help for it. Using her phone flashlight, she panted her way up four squealing floors of stairs to the top. There, she seized the pull-down, rope-burning her already blistered palm, steeled herself, and climbed up.

If downstairs was dusty, the attic was dust incarnate. Eerie lights flickered on ranked portraits, some hung up, more stacked several-deep against the baseboards. Oil paintings, foxed and faded ancient photographs, fad-haired school pictures posed before fake forest backdrops. She'd become a photographer hoping to restore them, but, somehow, she'd never returned.

The spirits of her relatives clung like spiders to their portraits. They mumbled and nattered at each other without pausing to listen, nonsensical with death, like dementia patients in a hospice ward.

The family. Odd boffins of the occult, now ironically ghostly themselves.

Esme braced herself as myriad insubstantial fingers pinched her cheeks, patted her head, rudely honked her bosom. Hands descended on her shoulders. A voice cut distinctly through the inchoate babble. "Why, it's little Esmeralda, come to visit. Look, Lou, it's Esmeralda."

"What? My mother?"

"No, darling, your great-grandbaby."

"Baby Alice?" A whiff of rummy pipe tobacco, a face materializing from dust motes. "You've changed your hair."

"It's *not* Alice, Louis." Esmeralda's great-grandmother's glasses hovered themselves officiously up her spectral nose. In their fogged lenses, Esme could see reflected eyes.

"*Ptu ptu ptu*," another voice said with abrupt clarity.

"Don't you try to ward off Alice, now, Mother," Lou said. "Pointless. She's Living."

It was Cousin Alice's sulky voice that replied. "*No*, I'm not, Grandpa."

"Alice, honey!" Esme cried. "What happened?"

"Mr. Whiskers didn't get his nummy-nums," Alice moaned.

Alarming meows arose.

Esme shuddered. The Sibleys were worse than Egyptian royal-

ty, dragging cats along into their haunted afterlife. Poor Whiskers. "What happened to *you*?" she persisted.

"In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue…" Alice recited, voice snapping and fading like a flag.

The shutters banged ferociously, the poltergeist wind crying between them, rising like a scream. The gust was so brutal it knocked down a portrait: a Kodachrome sailor-suited boy in Mickey ears, posed beside an ersatz princess. Cousin Jay.

Great-great-grandmother Esmeralda spat distinctly, "*ptu ptu ptu*."

Then, all of the maddening old voices were all fake-spitting with her: *ptu ptu ptu*, *ptu ptu ptu*.

"It's trying to get in," Esme said desperately to the rum-tobacco-scented cloud of dust motes chanting *ptu* beside her.

"What is, pumpkin?"

"The malevolence."

"Come again, sunshine? I'm a little bit deaf and your cousins are all so *very* loud." Ghostly hands patted her forearm genially.

Esme cried, "The *malevolence*, Grandpa Lou. The—*it*, the fiend, the demon, the curse." She waved her hands for emphasis, accidentally touching invisible fur: one of the ghost cats bonked a silky phantom cheek and whiskers against her fingertips. Esme swallowed hard, wanting to quail right back down the stairs. The cats had always been the worst.

Lou said, "Oh, the *spirit* can't come in. Witch-marks and salt, y'know." His invisible hand ruffled Esme's wet hair.

"The salt…" Alice sighed. "Salty, salty salt."

"It's dissolving," Esme said.

"Salty salt… going, going, gone…" Alice giggled. "Great, green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts!"

"*Ptu ptu ptu!*" Esme's namesake shrieked.

Esme clenched her jaw. "Alice and I think it's breaking through, Grandpa Lou."

"Hmp. Better stop it, then."

Esme reached out and grabbed where she thought his lapels should be. Handfuls of rough invisible tweed, so cold it numbed her knuck-

les, cracked her blistered palm. “That’s what I came here to ask! Help me! Say how. *How* do I settle it down?”

Her mother’s voice, dry and bitchy: “Little Princess Esmeralda was too good for us until the malevolence chose her. Now the prodigal daughter returns to take, take, take.”

“Quit it, Mom.”

Her mother repeated snidely, “*Quit it, Mom.*”

“What’d *I* do?” Grandma Bess complained. “I didn’t even touch you, Virginia.”

Alice murmured, “Duck… duck…”

“Ugh! Everyone hush,” Esme growled. “Grandpa Lou? How do I stop the malevolence?”

Befuddled cloud of tobacco. “The what now?”

“The *spirit*, Grandpa!”

“Duck…”

Lou had materialized partially, just enough that she could see his flashing grin of enlightenment. “Oh! With *silver*, honey. Sovereign silver is too pure for evil. If you touch *anything* unseelie with silver, it’ll be gone ‘til the new moon. Keep at it. They get discouraged eventually.”

“Where will I get silver?” Esme asked urgently.

“Now she’s here to steal the silver!” her mother yelped. “Help, 911!”

Alice poked her with a spectral finger. “*Goose!*”

Cousin Jay’s slow, effortful voice said, “You shoulda stayed, Ez. You’da known *all* our secrets.”

Esme winced. “I know, Jay.”

Grandpa Lou said sadly, “There *was* silver. My grandmother’s tea service and tableware. In the family since the Old World. A true heirloom. It’s not here anymore.”

“*What?!*” Esme cried, dismayed.

“Allie sold it,” Jay confided, a whispered puff of unbreath in Esme’s ear.

“*Tattletale*!”

“You—pawned the family silver?!” Esme asked Alice.

Alice tittered. “*But I did not shoot the deputy*!”

Esme dropped to fling the lid from the nearest crate, scattering portraits from its top. Keepsake clothes: prom dress, wedding dress.

Her mother screamed: "don't you *touch* that jewelry box!"

"*Mom*—" Esme started, then was interrupted by the sound of shutters tearing off the window and smashing to the ground. Esme wheeled about to look, finding herself staring at fully manifested malevolence: nasty, twisted bone, clinging tendon, buzzing nimbus of black-metal wasps, oily sizzling smoke.

The rain and sleet began lashing the yellowed photos Esme had scattered. The uppermost of them curled up from its damaged frame, springing free, while its unremembered ghost wailed in melodramatic protest. Turn of the century gelatin-silver salt prints. Irreplaceable.

Oh. Oh! Gelatin-*silver* salt prints.

As the horrific spirit reached out, its buzzing maw gaping, Esme wrenched the portrait from its broken frame.

"Sorry," Esme said to the family ghosts, wrapping the painting around her fist, image-out. "Necessity is the mother of invention."

She lunged, throwing a wild roundhouse punch at the oncoming malevolence.

Struck with silver, the demonic thing vanished silently, like a burst soap bubble.

"See, Alice?" Grandpa Lou bragged. "Silver is sovereign."

Linda M. Scott

I'm a Californian anthropologist who's been writing SF, fantasy, and horror since age 14, but have only just gotten serious about editing and publication. When not hunched at the keys, I can be found DIYing everything from art yarn to zombie zoology. I'm probably baking something, right this minute. My partner, my kid, and I are being held hostage in the Central Valley by two cantankerous cats: they're too silly to compose a ransom note, but their demands include chicken and hair ties.

lindascottbooks.com
Facebook
Twitter

A Visit

Marley Bauer

I HADN'T BEEN TO THE DDV in forever, so I guess I'd forgotten what it felt like. Just the sight of the building sent chills going all over my body, and I'd barely laid eyes on it. Hell, a friend of mine worked at their location in Aurora, and she said the feeling never really went away. Every morning she clocked in, worked, and didn't feel quite right again until she clocked out. She worked there for a good five years, though. I guess the pay was too good to turn down.

The building, physically, wasn't the chilling part. Matter of fact, it looked boring. Dull. Windows with half closed blinds, sliding glass doors, a respectably corporate sign facing the road with letters proudly declaring to all who passed by this was the place their life's road would lead them to. I was never able to pin down the feeling around these buildings, the difference in the air when you're close to one. The cloying, cold air around the building seeps into your pores, sun or weather be damned. I'd love to call it 'unnatural,' because between you and me half the people I know feel that way, but the DDV has been around longer than the country, so I suppose it isn't. Not really.

Still feels a bit harrowing to go near one, though.

It's funny, honestly. People swear they'll never go to the DDV, never use a coin, never set foot in the 'unholy' or 'demonic' or 'cursed' buildings, swear that Satan or a cabal or one of the usual culprits was responsible for it.

Then they lose someone.

They always go after that. It might not be the next day, or the next year. Some even go decades without breaking their word. Then the loneliness kicks in, they say a prayer and swallow their pride, and with coin in hand they finally made their visit.

The line to get in was moving at a snail's pace. The cold grew as I shuffled towards the building. Shivering, I put my hands in my pockets, where I found my coin. Everyone has a 'coin story.' They're usually pretty predictable, and mine was no exception: I'd gotten it when my mom died. Never knew my dad, had no siblings, so it came to me, and I'd had it since. For what seemed like the millionth time, I felt the urge to examine it, so I pulled it into the light. It was heavy,

three times thicker than a quarter and about the size of a circle made with your middle finger and thumb. Its silver surface gleamed in the sun, one side completely blank. The other read 'In God We Trust.' I've heard the descriptions depend on where you are; with coins in other countries inscribed with things like 'God Save the Queen.' I couldn't say for sure, though. I've never left the country.

I'd gotten to the DDV early, hoping I could get in quickly, and although I wasn't last in line, I certainly wasn't anywhere near the front. The line had been moving, though, and I'd be going up soon. Thinking back on it, I should've expected the line to be massive. Something about this time of year gets people feeling lonely, reflective. Of course they'd flood in.

People come here for all kinds of reasons. Loss, curiosity about what comes after, you name it. My personal favorite, though, came from a kid who went to my high school. He spent a coin on a school project. Let me tell you, when I heard about it the news felt like a brick to the head. He was doing a report on FDR or JFK or some other president, and thought it would be a slam dunk A+ if he 'got the president's perspective' on some issue. Like he was the first one ever to think of such an idea. Lucky for him, his parents were lawyers, and they could afford to buy the silver coins. Most people can't. Most people are lucky to get one. Hell, some people die alone and there's no one to pick up the coin they leave behind. This kid won the lottery, though. So they buy the kid a coin, they run along to the DDV, and he calls up the old guy, asks a few questions and finishes the report.

Funny thing was, he got a B.

The doors of the DDV slid open with a soft ding, bringing me back to the present. Taking one last breath of outside air, I stepped inside.

For the most part, inside was how I remembered it. Beige. Tile floor. Receptionists behind glass, posters reminding everyone to keep an orderly line and to have their paperwork in order. A perfectly boring building.

Somehow, though, it felt more than boring. Despite all the people in line and the workers running around behind their counters, it didn't

feel alive in there. The air decayed more and more the further in I went. Thinking back on it now, goosebumps go up on my arms just the same as they did when I went for my visit. It's a difficult feeling to describe to someone who hasn't experienced it for themselves, and yet I find myself trying every time I have a conversation with someone about the DDV. Until I find the right words, I've settled on this:

"You've given someone flowers before, haven't you?"

"Yeah."

"Flowers usually get put in a vase, right"

"I suppose so."

"Well, the water in that vase can't keep the flowers alive forever. Eventually, they're going to wither. And once they've withered, they usually sit for a few days, until someone works up the heart to throw them out."

"I think I know what you mean, but what does—"

"That's what I mean. Walking into DDV is like walking into a room full of those flowers, and they'll never be thrown out."

Then they usually express their confusion, and I give up trying to explain.

It was my turn. The receptionist, an elderly woman wearing the same grey polo as every other worker, asked me for my papers. I didn't know how she was managing in just the shirt. I was uncontrollably shivering, and I was wearing a thick coat.

Pulling out the forms, I tried to control my breath. Deep breathing usually helps me in a lot of ways, stopping myself from shaking being one of them, but on that day my body was having none of it. I stood, teeth clattering, as the receptionist looked over my forms, stamping them occasionally. She then placed a paper in front of me, indicating a name with a pen.

"Are you sure this is the individual with whom you wish to exercise your visitation rights?" she asked.

"I am."

She turned away, back to her computer. In fairness, she probably had to ask the question. Some part of the countless rules and procedures in place at any government office. I knew how things went.

Still, in spite of this, I became worried. I knew the process worked, had called ahead to ensure I'd be able to use my coin in this way, and I still was shaken. Maybe I was getting in my own head, or it was something about the building, I don't know. I was afraid she'd turn to me and say my request was "unusual" and it "couldn't be completed at this time," and I'd have to turn around and go home with the silver burning a hole in my pocket. If I didn't use it today, I never would, and it'd be sold off along with my coin when they found me dead in my apartment. Sold to some kid doing a goddamned history report.

She didn't say anything like that, though. Instead, she stood up.

"Follow me, please."

I obeyed.

We went through a door on her left and ended up in what seemed like a forever hallway, with doors on either side about 10-15 feet from each other. Faintly audible were voices, emanating from behind the doors. The sound was never clear enough to make out words, but I could tell there were people in each and every one of those rooms, along with something else. The cold in my body wouldn't let me forget the others who occupied DDV buildings.

"Here we are," the receptionist said, cutting through the not-quite-silence of the hallway. "Room 37. Once you're inside and the door is closed, insert your coin into the slot on the opposite wall. You'll have the standard amount of time, unless you have brought multiple coins, in which case—"

"I just have the one," I interrupted. My shivering hadn't stopped, and I was eager to get started.

"Alright sir, then unless you have any questions you can step inside and get started. Be sure you have a clear mental picture of the individual in question, and enjoy your visit."

I obliged, and she shut the door behind me.

The room was featureless, with the exception of a few chairs and a table. For convenience's sake, I guess. I walked to the coin slot, palming my coin as I did so. Its surface seemed a duller color in here, under the fluorescent lights, than it did under the sun. After a long look at it, I took a deep, shaky breath, and inserted my coin.

As I did, I felt a swooping sensation in my stomach. In the movies, when they go to the DDV, the lights always flicker on and off, but they didn't when I went. What did change, changed in my body: I felt the cold leave. In its place came an odd sense of warmth, and though the lights didn't change I felt as though I was glowing. The swooping in my stomach grew, enveloping my whole body, completely blindsiding me. Overtaken by the sensations, I sat down heavily in the chair, hands over my eyes.

Almost immediately, the feelings calmed down. I heard a soft, familiar sound. Removing my hands from my face, I saw Margot. There, in the center of the room. It was almost as if she'd never left. Tears filled my eyes. I knew they would, but nothing could prepare me for seeing her again. I fell to my knees, my arms open, whispered something. I don't remember what. With the greeting, Margot's ears perked up, and she padded over to me. I couldn't scoop her up fast enough, and when I did I hugged her to me like I'd never hugged a human being. Margot purred softly, comforting me as I sobbed on the floor of the DDV.

Marley Bauer

Marley Bauer is an author and actor.

The Mark

Jessica L. Hughson

In Tarville, they have a saying:

Every act is a choice.
Every choice has consequences.

The words are found in every home; every school; every grocery store. It's carved into the marble floor at the library and it's painted on stones at the park. Every classroom desk faces it. It's the only true allegiance they have.

On October 31, the veil thins and the dead can be touched on the other side. With arms outstretched and adrenaline pulsing through their veins, they can brush the face of a ghoul, feel inside the hollows of its vacant eyes. The children dress as monsters—vampires and werewolves and zombies—hoping to scare off the Mark. But anyone old enough to love a child knows—the Mark cannot be scared away.

As October 31 draws to a close, the children, with bellies full of chocolate, and with caramel stuck to their teeth, slip, without fail, into sleep. Many parents have tried to prevent what may come—and most are convinced, each year, that their tricks have worked. For the Mark only comes for one child, below the age of 17. A father, keeping watch at the bedside; their child, still wrapped in rags befitting a pharaoh, or with black fur clinging to the backs of their hands, can watch the Mark appear, as if placed by a wisp of air, like the soft blow of a sigh, forming itself on the perfect, smooth skin as if it had always been there.

Can children be marked at the start of life? No one can agree. The cruelty is unfathomable. No… those whose children are not chosen have decided the Mark comes from a fault in the child themselves, borne out over time.

Every act is a choice.
Every choice has consequences.

The Mark itself is a choice—a thumb's silver fingerprint—its whorls and truncated lines. A choice, with consequences. Each year,

the night's crisp silence is splintered by the heartbroken wails. Although every parent yearns for the screams to come from someone else's home, in the bright sunshine which pours itself between the bare branches of their maple trees, they lie to themselves. Of course, no one could wish such ill luck on their neighbours. But can the Mark really be just misfortune?

The child who is marked never re-awakens. The moment the Mark is placed in the pad between the eyes, their life slips away like water down the drain. The Mark arrives with nothing, and leaves with everything. Everyone else will think it was the child's fault, but the parents of the marked can never believe this. They remember an entire life, suffused with goodness. Mischief, maybe; boundaries tested. But pure beauty, just the same. So the parents turn the eye inward—they are to blame. Goodness has left them, long ago. Most families do not survive the Mark.

As the veil thickens again, becoming fibrous, the Mark moves with haste, its jewel in tow, enough to sustain itself for another year as it lurks within the gloom of eternal dusk. It saves and scrimps and hoards until the year is at its end and the veil thins once again.

Tentative fingertips reach through—seeking a thrill in the shadows. The Mark cloaks itself in the visage of the child it last took, dressed as a mummy, say, or a werewolf. It revels in the apple cider and the dry scraping of discarded leaves on the sidewalks. Cracking its face into a macabre grin, with bleeding gums and teeth like a carved pumpkin, it gives thanks for its chocolate gifts.

It shuffles in the darkness until the squeals fade and the moon hits the top of the sky, moving to its own graveyard for marked children—separated, even in death, as if the families knew their fates could be contagious.

Not much time left, the Mark knows. Its skin rots and falls, giving off a stench even the maggots avoid. Its toes break off, then its fingers. Its costume crumbles—burning from the inside out like the paper of a cigarette—and carries itself away on the wind; lost fireflies. Arriving at the grave of the last child it took, the Mark can see the other side, can hear the moaning of souls echoing out under the pale moon,

their greasy desolation seeping into the grass. It can finally hear the whimpering of the child it wears above the roaring of its own wants.

The Mark makes its bargain, as it has every year for centuries. “Go, child, and find another like you. Youthful, and strong. Place upon them my Mark, and I shall release you into the woods, and the river, over the hills which are your home. Go now, and choose.”

A moment passes, and then another. Then follows a scream, rising pure and clear, an arrow through the heart shot from all directions, echoing across the empty, harvested land. The Mark takes what is proffered and slips between the closing velvet curtains, slinking amongst the shadows and hiding its stolen light within its chest.

Every act is a choice.
Every choice has consequences.

No one knows this better than the children lost to the Mark.

Jessica L. Hughson

Jessica finds the most meaning in the stories which show us who we are, who we can be - who we have been.

Tarnish

Kate Michaelson

IT WASN'T THE LONELINESS BUT the dark that took some getting used to. The brevity of the fall days. A thick bucket of pitch poured over everything by six each evening.

Then came the animal sounds. A shrieking fox, the laughing yips of coyotes. After shivering at a trilling scream one night, I made a fool of myself in the light of day mimicking the sound for the farmer next door. With an expression that told me he feared for both my sanity and intelligence, he told me I'd heard a loon. During the day, it was the ravens croaking at me, so much bigger than the crows back home in Atlanta. They glared and squawked as they deliberated when the time would be right to pick my bones.

Then, day and night, there was the nagging. And, really, that's why I wasn't lonely. Between the roar of my tools and Mabel's lectures, I could barely fit a word in edgewise.

"Melanie," Mabel's wavering voice first emerged through the high whine of the belt sander, "is that how you are planning to wear your hair today? Scraped back from your face without a pinch of color on your cheeks?" I recognized the air of concerned disappointment. It was so like my own mother, that at first, I didn't even distinguish it as anything other than that little voice I'd carried with me all my life, the one instructing me on what kind of woman I should be and where I had gone wrong.

I caught my reflection in the dark north-facing windows. Hair scraped back, colorless. I looked away. She wasn't wrong.

Over the weeks, Mabel's admonitions grew bolder. "And those shapeless trousers, Melanie, do you really expect to catch a beau in that ensemble?" Her tone left no doubt as to her view of my prospects. Switching off the tile saw, I glanced down at my grout-smeared jeans.

"A beau is what got me into this mess, Mabel." I addressed the air around my head, the general emptiness of the room.

In my defense, it was only once the sun began setting at five in the evening that I began replying out loud.

"Melanie, my dear, have you polished the silver? Thanksgiving is just around the corner."

I slapped a trowel-full of plaster into a crack in the kitchen wall. "No one's coming for Thanksgiving, Mabel," I snapped. My parents would spend Thanksgiving back in Atlanta pondering why their only daughter had quit a "perfectly fine job" in marketing and run off to rural Maine. My ex-husband would be far too occupied with his new family to think of me, too busy with the fat little baby he and Sarah had popped out like an instant pie.

The truth was I hadn't left Atlanta for the rustic scenery, or even for this old wreck of a house, as drawn to it as I was. I'd left to escape the pitying looks each time my stomach went from round back to flat months too soon, to escape the whispers of my prolific aunts, the reminders of my failed marriage. I'd needed to get away from my sister, who had put her hand on mine and murmured in her gentlest voice that she couldn't imagine anything more tragic than a husband leaving his wife because she couldn't carry a baby. I needed to escape to someplace steeped in a history other than my own.

As usual, Mabel pressed her point as if I hadn't spoken. "Are you listening, Melanie? The boys will be home from school on holiday. It wouldn't do to use tarnished silver." From somewhere in the neighborhood of the butler's pantry, she hummed what sounded like a hymn, relishing the thought of her sons' return.

Boys, I thought. What would that have been like? Two boys chasing a fluffy yellow dog around the yard. Dark like me or fair like Tom? As Mabel hummed, my boys morphed from blondes to brunettes and the season from fall to summer. After a minute, the bright image faded. I was left staring at the bare lathe where my plaster had crumbled from the kitchen wall.

The silver was a sticking point for Mabel. Over and over with the silver. At three in the morning: "Melanie… tarnish will not remove itself."

Eventually, it seemed easier to polish than to argue. To shut her up, at dawn I got the silver down from where I'd seen it tucked away in the butler's pantry between some broken bone china and a wreath made of actual human hair, which apparently didn't repulse the Vic-

torians the way it did me. It was there that I found the portrait, dated 1912. Even before I read the looping script on the back of the mat, I knew it was her, my ethereal nag. ""Mabel Fitzroy.""

She looked about thirty-something in the picture, but it was hard to say with the grim set of her mouth, the high-necked gown, and the mass of dark hair heaved into a bun on top of her head. She could have been as old as fifty. Either way, quick math told me she wasn't the original owner of the 1830s house, just a woman committed to her home, whose identity as a homemaker had somehow outlived her.

It wasn't until I caught myself adopting Mabel's Victorian parlance that I began to think I might have a problem.

"What the blazes?" I fumed as I hung up on a contractor who kept canceling. Studying the disarray of the kitchen, I planted my hands on my hips. "Look at this higgledy-piggledy mess!"

"A higgledy-piggledy mess it is indeed, Melanie." I liked how Mabel agreed with me more and more these days.

But it also wasn't as if I had a lot of other options for companionship. The inspiration to move had hit me during a late-summer, solo trip to Maine. I'd fallen for the picturesque isolation that contrasted so sharply with Atlanta's frantic bustle. Out of idle curiosity, I'd checked home prices and stumbled upon the stately Greek Revival. Something about its three-storied symmetry and the grand decay of it beckoned me, identifying itself as the crumbling wreck that would become my baby. In my rush to coordinate finances and move, I'd thought little about who my neighbors might be. As it turned out, "they" were Gareth, the old farmer next door. And since I'd imitated the loon for him, even he had begun avoiding me. It wasn't until two months in, on a weekend run to the village hardware store, that I encountered a woman my own age. As I gathered up my plumber's tape and a stainless-steel P-trap, I eyed her. Wearing jeans and a flannel, she bounced a baby on her hip as she paged through a book of paint colors.

Glancing up, she caught my eye and smiled. "Do you need this?" Her arms full of baby, she nodded toward the book.

"Oh, no." I shook my head and returned her smile. "I mean, eventu-

ally I'll have to choose colors, but I've got a ways to go before then."

As we fell into conversation, I wondered if I'd stumbled on a kindred spirit in the paint aisle of the hardware store. Her baby cooing and slobbering away, she asked where I lived. She immediately recognized the prominent hilltop house when I described it.

"That's wonderful!" she enthused. The baby spit up something beige to note his agreement. "It will be so nice to see a family there. How old are your kids?"

Looking at her hopeful eyes, something in my chest dropped. I could see her already wondering if our kids would be in the same grades, planning playdates, and speculating if mine would have complicated food allergies to accommodate. Just briefly, I considered lying to extend the moment of camaraderie, but then I confessed. It was just me, Melanie, a middle-aged woman in an overly large, falling-down house. No kids.

"Oh," she looked embarrassed. For me or for herself? I wasn't sure. Her eyes shifted back to the bright book of paint colors and her smile faltered. "I just thought with all that room…"

From there, the conversation petered out.

Christmas brought a different Mabel. When she was near, the air smelled of cloves. She'd become almost giddy in anticipation of the boys' return.

Each time I added a new holiday decoration, she declared, "they'll be mad as hops when they see it," which from the tone of her voice, I imagined was a good thing.

Mornings, I began finding items arranged in sets of three around the farmhouse table. Three plums taken from the bowl and set on plates. Three braided lengths of twine. Three neat blocks of scrap wood with sweet, if rather unsettling, smiling faces drawn on them.

Despite the freezing weather, I vowed to get myself out of the house when it was light. Not only did I need to weatherproof the fieldstone foundation; I needed to escape the nonstop Christmas hymns Mabel had taken to singing throughout the afternoons.

On a rare sunny day the second week of December, I kicked my

way through the brown, ankle-deep leaves that coated the yard. With the newly bare branches, the scrubby woods bordering my property had opened up. What had previously been a green wall surrounding my five acres had thinned to a screen, giving me a glimpse of unexplored lands. Walking along the edge of the woods, I peered through the leafless maples and cottonwoods. It was in a spot particularly dense with brambles that I noticed a headstone sticking a few inches above the frost-furred leaves and twigs.

Briars grabbed at my mittens and coat as I parted them to inspect. Drawing closer, I saw the rounded heads of more stones, just visible. Kneeling in front of the largest stone, I brushed the drift of leaves away. I never for a moment doubted the name I would find. "Mabel Fitzroy, Beloved Wife," I read aloud. "1883–1919. To Life Eternal."

"How apt." The only thing that surprised me were the dates, only thirty-six when she'd died. In my mind, the Mabel that chastised my provocative V-neck had lived into old age, raising her boys and, then, clucking at grandkids.

A half dozen other markers littered the opening. To my right, the heads of three small stones crested the leaves. I cleared the surface of the first. "Walter Fitzroy," it read, but instead of a range of years, the stone listed only one—1902. Had Walter died in infancy? It would explain the small marker.

Shivering in the chill wind, I brushed leaves from the next stone: "John Fitzroy 1904–1905." Another child. I swallowed.

With a heaviness in my chest, I cleared the last stone. "Franklin Fitzroy." Again, the small stone listed only one year—1907. Behind my breastbone, something plunged. I sank back on my heels.

"Oh, Mabel," I whispered. "Your boys."

The cold had stiffened my legs and the sun was already low by the time I rose. As I made my way back toward the house, I kicked at the dead leaves. Despite the chill, I felt myself delaying my return. How would I act the next time Mabel mentioned her boys? I remembered the pitying looks that had chased me from Atlanta.

The sky to the west was shot through with pink by the time I

climbed the front steps. As I pulled open the door, the warmth of the house hit me, along with the spicy-sweet scent of cloves. A low-hummed hymn drifted from the kitchen. I thought about our coming Christmas, Mabel's offerings of threes, and the long winter ahead. One thing I knew was that Mabel and I would have to stick together.

Tonight, I decided, as the dusk fell like ash and the dark pressed in around us, I would polish the silver until it gleamed. Maybe I would even hum along.

Kate Michaelson

Kate Michaelson lives in Toledo, Ohio. She loves traveling, hiking, and trying (fruitlessly) to tire out her Labrador mix. She is currently working on her first novel, a mystery in which a woman must clear her brother of a murder charge while also searching for answers to her own medical mystery.

Website
Facebook
Instagram

Barnaby

C. J. Spear

Entry #1 – September 12th, 1902

My word! The size of this jungle.

Our guides have led us non-stop, hacking and slashing at the undergrowth, from sunrise to sunset, and yet they tell us we have several days left of our journey.

I will admit to being a tad trepidatious about this trip, what with the stories we were hearing, but as we cut our way through this natural phenomenon I couldn't help but be enthused. The heat and the insects are a small price to pay for the glorious nature all around us.

The others seem in lower spirits, but I suppose they are professionals and they have their work to be concerned with. I will do my utmost to charge them with the same exuberance I am experiencing as we continue our trek.

It has been many years since I have seen my old lab partner, but I am heartily looking forward to our reunion.

Entry #2 – September 15th

Today we arrived at the village. It is a charming place, and while the locals have no concept of class or decorum, they are good company. The children especially, who swarmed me as we arrived, were eager to investigate my tools and instruments. I explained to them what each one did, and while I sincerely doubt they understood a word of it, I could not help but be drawn in by their wide smiles and easy laughter.

The colonel and his men are less jovial. We spoke with the village elder about Jenkins, who claimed the man had gone insane. He'd built a mansion for himself half a day's walk away, and the locals spoke of it in hushed tones. There were rumblings of an accident involving a young boy.

Night has fallen, so we will wait until daybreak before continuing our journey further south. Here's to hoping we can snap poor Jenkins out of it and bring him home.

Entry #3 – September 16th

As another day ends I'm afraid I have been unable to remain in

high spirits. Though we spent a pleasant morning in the village, our rations bolstered by fresh fruit collected by the locals, in the light of the morn they were more forthcoming with details about what had occurred in years past. It would appear Jenkins became friendly with one of the villagers and ended up taking her for a wife. The two had a son, and during this time Jenkins decided to begin work on this mansion of his.

Oh, if only I could describe it. I did not expect it to be a handsome building, out here so far from proper supplies, but it is ugly beyond comparison. Jenkins has burned the trees to make room for it, leaving it squat in the middle of a blackened field, and the structure itself looks like it has been cobbled together with no thought to how it should remain standing.

And the size! Mansion was indeed the right word for it, a staggering construction that must contain hundreds of rooms, but for what, I keep asking? Jenkins had always yearned for a bigger lab, but what possible experiments could he have filled this colossus with?

The colonel is keeping watch tonight before we try entering on the morn. I sense he feels as uneasy as I, but he does not voice his concerns. He is a serious man, and I can tell he wants answers. What has Jenkins been doing with his research money? What does he have to show for it, save this monstrosity on the horizon?

Entry #4 – September 17th

Disaster! What nature of fresh hell have we stumbled into?

Once the sun was well and truly up, we ventured forth into the mansion, the colonel intent on finding Jenkins quickly, dragging the man outside and getting some sense from him. However, we found ourselves striding into a labyrinth, this structure of Jenkins proving incomprehensible. Some hallways lead to nowhere, some rooms have no entrance, and staircases seem to wind up and down through the levels at random.

We know we are not alone. As we progressed through the maze we could make out the noises of a man ranting and raving somewhere in the distance, though every time we tried to make our way toward

him, the hallways led us askew. More than once we discovered some ungodly experiment tucked away in a corner.

Once or twice I am certain I have also heard someone else in these halls. Perhaps his wife or son? At the bottom of the building, we found a passageway that led deep into the earth, but it was engulfed in darkness. From the gloom, I am sure I heard the scurrying of tiny feet. Surely just my imagination.

We ventured far into the building, and now seem unable to find our way out again. The sun has now set, leaving us in darkness save for some candles we discovered. We have established camp in a room where Jenkins cannot be heard, and wait now for dawn to shine some small light through the beams of these accursed walls.

Entry #5 – September 18th

We found the remains of Jenkins' wife. The poor girl.

In ordinary circumstances, I would have taken the body and buried it, perhaps someplace in the sun, but there was no chance of that here. It looks like Jenkins wove her into the very fabric of the walls.

The only mercy is that after several frustrating hours we found a hidden passage that appears to lead deeper into the building. Nightfall has forced us to pause again, but the colonel is intent on finding Jenkins and escaping this nightmare.

Am I imagining it, or does the sun rise and set so much faster now? It must be this wretched place getting to me. I must resolve to be braver.

Entry #6 – September 19th

Out of that horror at last!

We found Jenkins, and my worst fears were affirmed about his state of mind. Gone were the days of witty repartee and nights of drunken philosophy. Here was a man that had stared into the depths of madness. We found him staggering around a laboratory strewn with broken equipment, moldy food, and the viscera of what I prayed were animals.

He paid us no attention as we entered, and while I confirmed to

the colonel this was indeed the man I had once known, fulfilling my role on this hellish trip, he continued to ignore us and our attempts at communication. I tried to interpret his mumblings, but all I could make out was the word 'Barnaby'. Eventually, the colonel snapped and beat him over the head with his rifle. Jenkins' limp body in tow, we fought our way back out of the dreadful structure that had for so many days imprisoned us.

Oh, what a joy it is to see the sky above me, even if the sun has now gone. The silver stars twinkle gently overhead, and I feel the worst is now behind us. Whatever malady Jenkins is suffering from, perhaps there is yet hope we can restore him.

Entry #7 – September 20th

Jenkins is gone.

How he managed to escape his bonds, let alone do so without alerting us while we slept, is anyone's guess, but what is not unknown is where Jenkins has returned. We can hear him once again ranting and raving through the walls.

The colonel insists upon his men returning inside to retrieve him. Were he not such a hard man, I feel the men would have refused, but they daren't say no to him. He has told me I do not have to accompany them, but I see little alternative. I do not have the means or knowledge to traverse the jungle, and I have no desire to remain camped outside this mansion alone for who knows how many days.

We shall enter again, and I fear this time the colonel will bring Jenkins out with a bullet in his head.

Entry #8 – September 20th Continued

The others are dead!

Was it an accident, or malicious intent? Jenkins does not seem to have the sense left in him to set a trap, yet that appears to be exactly what we walked into. It is only sheer luck I survived. Being at the rear of the party, I was knocked back as the men in front staggered into me, forcing me down the stairs behind. I suffered a considerable number of bumps as I fell, but as I returned up the stairs I discovered

the fall had saved my life. The others had walked into some explosion of gas, so toxic it must have caused near-instant death.

For a moment, I was paralyzed with fear, but now I have redoubled my efforts to keep a level head. I refuse to succumb to the same madness that inflicts Jenkins.

I moved the poor soldiers' bodies into one of the other rooms, and am now sitting across the hall. I have the colonel's gun, in case Jenkins turns on me, but presently he appears oblivious to my existence.

Entry #9

I no longer know what day it is. How many times has the sun appeared and disappeared through the slats in these walls? Two? Three? I have done my best to get some sense out of Jenkins. He rambles constantly, but with some persuasion he focuses on one topic or another. He weeps for his wife, though I am positive it was he who did such terrible things to her, but mostly he mentions the death of his son, the aforementioned Barnaby, and how he must finish his work.

His other mutterings are too disturbing to put to ink, yet I have remained in his company for fear of this staggering mansion. I've had no luck discovering a way out, and the house seems to direct me to the dark passage below time and again, where I am now sure the noises are not imagined.

I have noticed the soldiers' bodies have disappeared, and I fear if I wait much longer I will soon befall the same fate as them. I have built a torch, and I intend to search the passageway and discover the truth of what lies below.

Entry #10

Horror! Such horror I shall never recover!

I bravely ventured into the darkness below this house, but the things I saw half-buried there are beyond my comprehension. Did poor Jenkins stumble across them when he was excavating? Did they drive him insane there and then, or did he construct this house to keep them at bay, away from the eyes of everyone but those foolish enough to venture into the dark?

Barnaby is down there, I am sure of it. How he lives I do not know. At the sound of his footsteps, my courage abandoned me and I fled back upstairs. Did Jenkins succeed in his experiments? Will the boy soon rise from the darkness to attack us? Am I destined to die in these wretched halls?

No! I will not give up hope! I shall find liberation from this nightmare!

Entry #11

Escape!

When all seemed lost, we stumbled across an opening in the walls and managed to crawl to safety.

We wasted no time vacating the area, dashing into the jungle and putting as much distance as possible between us and that wretched place. I had feared we would be inescapably lost in this expansive wilderness, but now as we camp I can hear the sounds of the village in the near distance. One more spin through the darkness until sunlight returns, and we shall be back to safety.

I will rest now, safe in the knowledge that Jenkins and his madness are behind us. His experiments will not succeed.

Barnaby and I are free.

C. J. SPEAR

C. J. Spear lives in Devon with his wife and daughter. He works as a data analyst, which is far more terrifying than anything he could ever conceive.

What's Your Emergency?

Ryn Faust

“THIS IS 911, WHAT’S YOUR emergency?”

My hand wavered over the mouse, barely registering the breathing on the other end. I glanced at one of the three large screens in front of me, and waited for whatever horror was bound to begin. I hoped it was a prank call, an ignorant child who just wanted to see what would happen if they pressed down on the phone’s buttons. As the sound of breathing shuddered through the line, my hopes dwindled.

“Hi,” a voice finally answered, the connection crackling. “Are you close?”

It was a woman. The sound of wind rushed through the speaker, making me wince as I steeled my nerves and readied myself to play detective.

“Hi, can you hear me?” I asked. A low ‘uh-huh’ followed and the sound of crunching somewhere in the background. “Are you having an emergency?”

“Yes, I am,” the woman said, voice light and unbothered. “I’m still waiting at Hugh Park. You’re only a few minutes away, right?”

I clicked open a report log, typing in the location so I could send the nearest police cars over.

“I’m sending someone over to Hugh Parker. Are you with someone?”

“No.”

“Is someone following you?”

“Yes.”

I tapped a few more keys, sending the details over to the nearby officers. The woman was still breathing heavily into the phone. I could hear a few muffled noises in the background, but couldn’t quite decide what they were.

“Someone is on their way,” I said, looking to the screen on my left. A few dots blinked, showing the police cars getting closer to the scene. “Is there a group of people somewhere nearby?” I asked. The woman didn’t answer. “Can you walk to the front of the park?”

“...no,” the woman whispered. I paused, unable to decide if she was speaking to me anymore. “No, no, no—”

“Ma’am?” I cut in and gripped my mouse a little tighter. “Can you

still hear me?" No answer. "Are you still being followed?" Nothing. "Can you tell me who is following you?"

No click. No breathing. No wind. No crunching of leaves. Complete silence.

The call ended.

When the police arrived, they found four sets of people in the park. A family searching for their lost dog. A couple going for a midnight stroll in the park. A woman jogging. And a group of teenagers skateboarding near the bathrooms.

Nobody saw anything. Nobody heard anything. There were no signs of foul play. Nothing.

"It might have been a prank call," Thomas told me the next day. I was off my shift and went to find the responders to last night's call. It wasn't too typical to follow up on calls but I couldn't help myself as I thought back to the woman's voice. Despite the poor connection and static, something about it had drawn me in.

"No," I told Thomas. "I've heard prank calls. This woman sounded scared. She was serious."

"We checked the cameras outside the park." Thomas tapped his pen against his desk. He was in full uniform, his radio still strapped to his shoulder as he leaned back in his chair. "We couldn't see anyone outside the people we interviewed going in and out during that time," he said. I shook my head. "Unless, of course…"

"It wasn't a prank call."

"We'll keep looking into it," Thomas told me. I crossed my arms over my chest. Maybe.

…maybe.

The next night, I got off of work and headed out into the dark. The thing about this job was that you had to try and desensitize yourself to whatever you might hear. Gunshots. Screaming. Begging. I had heard people die. I had heard murder and abuse and crimes so cursed that I never stopped hearing them.

In the grand scheme of things, that woman in the park shouldn't be haunting me as much as it did. I just couldn't get it out of my mind. My feet strayed, taking a sharp turn to the left until I found myself

right outside the entrance of Hugh Park. I stared inside and swallowed. The entrance was a beautiful arch of greenery with flowers weaved in between the leaves. A silver plaque loomed overhead. I shook my head and kept walking, my skin prickling slightly as I left the park behind me to head back home.

When I arrived back at my apartment, I found a package wrapped in newspaper leaning against my door. It was small, a little bigger than my hand, with the paper yellowing and printed words somehow smudged. I tilted my head, ripping it off to find a silver, handheld mirror. I ran my fingers over the front, smudging the reflection of my brows pulling together. Again, there was a chill, but there was no cold in the hallway of my rundown apartment. My thumb paused, tapping over a cracked emerald.

I opened the door, quickly locking myself inside so I could study the gift closer. Lifting the mirror up, I stared. This should go back to the mailman. It wasn't meant for me.

I had seen my reflection over the years plenty. I knew the shape of my eyes and the color of my hair without fault. Still, the mirror felt like a taunt that I couldn't explain. There was a sort of… disassociation with this reflection. Putting it down, I checked my bathroom mirror, relieved to find myself staring back.

Resolved to take the gift back tomorrow, I fell back into my bed, readying myself for another day of work.

Except I couldn't sleep. Not that night. Not the night after that. Not even a week after that.

Sometimes I saw things in the darkness. Not ghosts or demons or strangers lurking in my home. I prepared for that kind of fear. What I couldn't stand was the low thud of a heart in my chest that didn't feel like my own. I would open my eyes and imagine that woman on the phone. Asking for help. Begging for help. Sometimes she wore blue or red. Sometimes her hair was curled or straight. Her eyes could be light or dark. Each night a new image of her was conjured in my mind, mouth barely open as she reached for me.

"Lock it up," I said, thrusting the mirror at Thomas. He jumped, having been going through a report when I stormed in with mused

hair and shadows under my eyes. “It… the mailman won’t take it back. He said he never delivered it. I can’t look at it. I can’t. It looks like her,” I said venomously, breath rising rapidly. Thomas quickly put down his pen, staring at the mirror, puzzled.

“Her?” he repeated but paused when I put a hand over my mouth, trying to keep an onslaught of tears from spilling. I wasn’t sure where they came from. All I knew was there was a burning rushing through me like a wind that swirled with fire, turning my very being into ash. I wondered idly if this was how phoenixes felt through every rebirth they’ve endured… and if each rebirth was a gift or a curse. I felt like I was praying to live with sins. “Do you mean the woman at the park? That was a month ago—”

“She gave it to me,” I insisted, although I knew it wasn’t true. But the shadows moved. They followed me. The eyes in that mirror weren’t my own. Nothing was mine anymore. I couldn’t even remember my own name.

What was my name?

“I tried to help her. I did. I swear—” I began and Thomas stood up, placing the mirror down. “Evidence,” I whispered, backing away. “Put it in the evidence room. I don’t want to see it anymore.”

Thomas hesitated, but I was already gone, walking out of the police station with trembling hands. I let my feet guide me as snow flicked down from the sky in whirls of white.

Soon enough, I was under the archway of the park. A couple walked by me, laughing as their hands intertwined. I stood frozen, mind fogging with some sort of heat building in my stomach before walking inside.

With nightfall rapidly approaching, the park was pretty much empty aside from a few stragglers and a group of teenagers skateboarding near the bathrooms. I walked, a little uncertain of what I was looking for. A clue? An explanation?

The wind blew and a sudden wave of clarity washed over me. What was I doing here? Alone? I turned, baffled to find myself deeper in the labyrinth of pathways than I thought. Sighing, I turned to lengthen my stride back towards the entrance.

A twig snapped. Reassuring myself it was merely an animal, I turned, only to squint at the streetlamp placed behind me on the path. The dim outline of a silhouette stood there.

Fine. It was fine. I kept walking, trying not to look over my shoulder again as I moved quicker, keeping my breathing steady. Another snap followed, and I risked a glance over to see the silhouette had moved, walking in the same direction I was.

My hand moved to my back pocket, grasping my phone. At the forked path, I took a right, the quickest to the front of the park. The shadow followed, and I dialed, deciding enough was enough.

"This is 911, what's your emergency?"

I breathed. Heavily. The words felt stuck in my throat as I kept walking; the wind grew colder as I worked to keep moving. "Hi," I finally answered, trying to keep calm. I didn't want the person near me to know I was calling the police. If they panicked, they might just attack. Taking a deep breath, I continued. "Are you close?"

The woman on the other end clicked something.

"Hi, can you hear me?" she asked. I hummed in response, keeping my eyes on the silhouette. "Are you having an emergency?"

I lifted my chin up. A woman was jogging in all neon a few feet ahead. I thought about running after her, but no. No, the person would know that I knew something was wrong. I needed to keep a level head.

"Yes, I am," I said, forcing myself to continue smiling. "I'm still waiting at Hugh Park. You're only a few minutes away, right?" Please understand, I thought, feeling a little nauseous. Please, please—

"I'm sending someone over to Hugh Parker. Are you with someone?"

Thank God.

"No," I answered, not daring to look over my shoulder. I just needed to get to the front of the park. That was it. In the distance, someone called for their dog, whistling somewhere out of sight.

"Is someone following you?"

"Yes." The word sounded a little numb this time, a vague feeling of discomfort settling in my chest. Something was… was off… I kept

walking, the wind picking up and leaves crunching under my feet.

"Someone is on their way," the operator said, and I paused, noticing that some of the greenery near the entrance of the park had fallen away, revealing the arch underneath. Silver caught my eye, a cracked green gem barely visible under a wayward leaf. "Is there a group of people somewhere nearby?" the woman asked. I didn't answer. "Can you walk to the front of the park?"

"...no," I whispered. I stopped walking. No. This wasn't—it couldn't… "No, no, no—"

"Ma'am?" the woman said, leaving my skin to prickle. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. There was only the sound of blood rushing through my ears and the dim buzz of the woman's voice. Of my voice. "Can you still hear me? Are you still being followed? Can you tell me who is following you?"

I looked up at the arch and moved the phone away from my ear, letting it fall to my side.

The call ended.

Ryn Faust

Ryn is a writer in the PR industry. She holds degrees in journalism and anthropology and often writes creatively in her free time. She lives in New York City.

Twitter: @anon_interest

Judge's Comments

Jim Hull

DEINCARNATION STANDS OUT AS A short story because it manages to weave a meaningful and personal Main Character Throughline throughout the otherwise intriguing plot. Almost all short stories afford audiences a plot, but most stop there: telling a tale rather than hinting at the possibilities of a complete story. And while it may be difficult, if not impossible, to capture an entire story in such a small space, attention paid to the more emotional aspects of the narrative pays off in spades.

Deincarnation is one of those stories.

By exploring the personal issues of someone caught up in the unending aspects of eternal life and tying that to a meaningful evaluation of that character's personal flaws (an unending stream of affairs), the Author offers something more than what is on the page.

Of course, there are the more obvious indications of flair, like suspense and surprise (and a touch of humor!), but these are storytelling devices—not storyforming concerns. The story's form is where the Audience learns a bit more about themselves. And the latter is where the Author captures the Audience and ensures the experience is memorable and worth the time.

Deincarnation's storyforming success lies in the arc of its central character. Compare where the character is at the end of the story with where they are at the beginning, and one notices two things: a reaffirmation of steadfast resolve (he's not going anywhere) and, more importantly—an Author's judgment of that character's personal growth.

Things do not work out well for our Protagonist, and that's because the Author is saying something about those who lock themselves up in an everlasting loop of unending disappointment. The inability to let go and "move on" is why the character finds himself in yet another long line of unfulfilling affairs.

Were he to change, abandon his ways, and stop this lifelong (and after that) sabotage of his personal life, he might afford himself some measure of peace.

But he doesn't.

And that's a good thing for us.

The result, or "point," of *Deincarnation* isn't to tell a scary or en-

tertaining story—but rather, to give us something we can't find in our day-to-day lives: meaning. For that, the Audience responds in kind with an appreciation for the effort. We remember and celebrate this accomplishment because of that effort and intent to grant a better understanding of life.

With our newfound knowledge, we can avoid a similar fate when our lives end.

Jim Hull

Jim Hull is the CEO & founder of Narrative First, the story technology company behind Subtxt: the only writing app that combines a proven and predictive narrative framework with cutting-edge artificial intelligence. As a professional story consultant, Jim helped create the Disney+ animated series *Tangled,* as well as helped develop the narrative for Canada's Oscar entry for Best Foreign Film 2023, *Eternal Spring.*

Jim taught story development at the California Institute of the Arts for seven years, and his students have gone on to write and direct critically acclaimed films like Netflix's *Mitchells vs. The Machines.* In addition to film, Jim has worked with several novelists, including *Avatar: The Last Airbender*'s co-creator Michael DiMartino and swashbuckling-fantasy novelist Sebastien de Castell.

narrativefirst.com

Fin