

# ENCOUNTERS

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REMEMBER THE SUNFLOWERS

K.C. Aegis

THANATOS IV

Max Gray

MEAT FOR THE BEAST

Buck Weiss

THE LEATHER BRACELET

Guy T. Martland

CHRISTMAS EVIL

Darren French

SCIENCE FICTION

FANTASY

HORROR

SHRIEK OF THE HARPY

Sebastian Bendix



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## From the Editor's Desk

As the search for habitable worlds around other stars continues to expand, most estimates place the number at a billion or more in our galaxy alone. Many of those planets are likely more hospitable to life than our current home. A perfect candidate would be a planet slightly larger than earth, circling in the habitable zone of a slightly cooler star. The more stable star would allow life more time to evolve into an intelligent species and the larger planet would hold its atmosphere longer and retain its interior heat an additional few billion years. This would allow a molten core to create a strong and stable magnetic field to shield living organisms from harmful radiation, and sustain active plate tectonics that have proven important to the development of life here on Earth.

It's important to recognize that planetary systems have a shelf-life, and ours may be approaching its expiration date faster than we realize. About 3.5 billion years ago Earth enjoyed a much thicker atmosphere, a higher concentration of oxygen and a biosphere far more dense than today. Most insects were measured in feet, not inches. All this at a time when Earth was squarely in the center of our Sun's habitable zone.

Today we are circling on the inner edge of that zone. The Sun has grown hotter and more luminous as it converts the nuclear fuel in its core to heavier elements and will push the habitable zone beyond our orbit in the next billion years. Long before that, pandemics, changes in the global climate, super volcano eruptions, asteroid and comet strikes or a gamma-ray burst originating within our galaxy could seriously damage or destroy human civilization (perhaps as early as within the next five-hundred to a thousand years).

It's time as a species that we take seriously the need to expand outward into the universe. It's a matter of survival.

Guy Kenyon  
Encounters Magazine  
05/12/2015

# REMEMBER THE SUNFLOWERS

by K.C. Aegis

I tell myself I'm not afraid of death, not really. But I *am* scared of old age. Seems funny, I know—especially since most have considered me ancient for decades. During that time, however, I didn't *feel* old. I had Gina, my wife, to make sure I took care of myself. But since she passed five years ago, I haven't been so motivated. Now, it seems my body's finally had enough. It's closing up shop, locking all the doors and boarding up the windows. Everyday, I wake up with a body that aches a little more, moves a little slower and thinks a little less clearly. It's the agonizing crawl at the end. That's what I'm afraid of.

But I keep going, don't I? Fear doesn't stop me, does it? And even now, I go on living.

The alarm goes off at six a.m. but I'm already awake. I don't sleep much, you see. I reach across a bed that is empty and cold to flick off the noise. When I rise to a sitting position, I pretend the cracks I hear are coming from the bed and not my shifting bones.

I get dressed. It takes longer than it used to. Everything does, but I've adapted. I slip my feet—swollen and deformed stumps of raw hamburger meat—into nylon tights. It's supposed to help with the circulation but it's just duct tape on a damaged car.

After a modest breakfast prepared by Silvia, my chef, she drives me to work—she's also my driver although I

use the term lightly. People don't really *drive* anymore, you know. The onboard intelligence links with the Sense Way and does the real driving while Silvia just helps me get in and out without falling like the old fool I am. In any case, I enjoy her company.

The drive lasts less than twenty minutes in which I gaze out my window at the city. It's changed so much in my lifetime that its labyrinthine flow of streets is now a stranger to me. Actually, the streets I grew up on—black asphalt with potholes and such are gone now. Well, not *gone* I suppose. The old streets still exist below the newer sensor ways. Some say they've become a kind of slum called the Undercity, but I can't imagine a world down there without sunshine, people living in the shadow of progress. The idea could keep you awake at night if you chose to believe it.

And the streets aren't the only changes I've witnessed in my years. Skyscrapers that were once so iconic have been torn down. Newer, flashier edifices were constructed on top of the old foundations. The way of the world, I suppose.

We arrive at our destination—the building that bears my name soars one hundred and sixty floors into the azure sky. Silvia helps me out of the car and holds out my cane. She takes my elbow and guides me through the doors of *Leaf Tower*. The main lobby is impressive in both size and wealth. The walls are lined with steel pillars that twist and curve like liquid metal. The engineers that updated its aesthetics say it uses magnetism and some type of superconductivity, but the fluidity is just an illusion. The pillars are quite secure, so I'm told. I don't

much care for their explanations because at my age everything is near collapse.

The floor beneath the pillars is marble and shines with a reflective gloss. Many a young lady has been embarrassed upon entering the lobby and realizing that wearing a skirt was a mistake. When I look down, an aged man wobbling on a wooden cane stares back at me. It's an image of great contrast with Silvia who is still young and full of precious vitality. She gently urges me along. She doesn't think I notice the impatient frown on her face.

"I'll be back at five," Silvia says and vanishes back the way she came. What she does in the time she's not taking care of me, I can't say. Would be impolite to ask.

I'm less than halfway to the elevators when Tom Bellis, a narrow post of a man, strides across the glossy floor to stand directly in front of me.

"Good morning, Mr. Leaf." He extends his hand, but I don't take it. I'm not interested in hearing his soliciting spiel again and frankly, just walking from the car to my office has become a strain. My mind is set on the soft leather chair behind my desk and not the man who is so insistent on selling me his *Reset Plan*.

I move past Bellis without responding and his hand drops. Behind me, he calls, "When you're ready to talk, Mr. Leaf, you know where to reach me." I think he's given up when he says one more thing. "Say hello to Diana Brandt for me."

I halt at his words. Diana's one of my chief financial officers. She's been with the company for close to thirty years and she's become a dear friend in the meantime. She's the kind of person that would just as soon

compliment you as call you a fascist idiot, but I admire her honesty. And over the years, I've come to depend on it more than she knows. Sadly, she's been on medical leave for over a month and the idea that Bellis would bring her up in his sales pitch is a bit too much to take. I mean to say so, but he's already gone by the time I've turned around. My knuckles crack as I form a fist. I move on.

A quick ride in the executive elevator and I've reached the top floor. When the doors open into the reception area of the executive suites, there's quite a commotion going on.

For one thing, no one is working. Usually by this time, the offices are buzzing with boardroom meetings and video conferences, but instead of this, everyone has emerged from their glass-walled offices and is standing in a semicircle around a woman I've never seen before. At least, that's what I think. Her back is to me so I can only make out a slim, attractive physique with long auburn hair.

Those around her are grinning ear to ear. Others are applauding like they're at some kind of stage show. All I can figure is that this strange woman is telling them something that gets them going. What that is, I can't say.

A few of my staff catch sight of me stepping out of the elevator and hush up pretty quick. The others follow suit as if I'm a teacher who's just walked into a room of misbehaving students.

The woman must notice their shift in attention because she spins around to face me. When her hair flips behind a surprisingly youthful face, I notice two things. First, she's not a woman at all, not by at least three years. She's



pretty, but with features not fully developed. *She's just a child*, I think.

And second, this girl knows me. I'm certain that I've never seen her before, but something about the way she looks at me—the unnatural confidence that burns behind her young, hazel eyes makes me think twice.

"Do I know you, young lady?" I say. The people behind her break into laughter, but I can't imagine why.

"Mr. Leaf," the girl says. "It's me. It's Diana Brandt."

Without warning, the room is closing in on me and the floor falls away. I know I'm going to faint but soft hands catch my arm. It's the girl. Her hands are slim yet powerful. She guides me to my office and helps me into my seat behind the wide wooden desk.

People are speaking frantically, but I don't hear their exact words. They sound as if they're underwater. I look up to see the girl—the one who says she's Diana—shooing people away from my door. When the last of my staff has left, she pulls the blinds closed and shuts the door, leaving me alone with her.

Sitting down helps and after a few minutes, my head clears.

"So, you went ahead and did it," I say. "You got the *Reset Plan*."

"I did." She beams and spins around in a circle. Her blue sundress twirls with her movement. "Can you believe it, Mike? I'm young again!"

Her joy is infectious and I feel it pouring through my discomfort. Still, I manage to voice my concerns. "But you were already young."

She stops her spinning and gives me a look of exaggerated disgust. "Sixty-three years old is not young, Michael Leaf." Then after a pause, she says, "No offense."

"But you weren't dying," I protest. "Your body still had twenty, maybe forty years left."

She folds her arms and says, "Why wait? With all the medical problems I've been having lately, I figured, why not start over sooner rather than later?"

Her words echo in my mind. I've heard them before, but not from her. It's the same pitch that solicitor Bellis used.

"So, how old are you now?" I say.

"Fifteen," she says. Her cheeks flush with color. "It's crazy, Mike. Just last month, I could barely walk across my living room without my bones cracking. Now, I can jump and dance and sing and run and laugh all day without even getting tired. This body..." She runs her hands up from her stomach, over slim shoulders and through silky hair. "I haven't felt this alive in half a century."

"Did it hurt?" I say.

She smiles and I'm taken aback by the playful innocence she displays. "Not even a little. The last thing I remember was lying in the personality transfer ward. The technician put an IV in my arm and the room began to stretch almost immediately. Before I really knew what was going on, it was two weeks later."

"Why so long?"

"It takes time for the data carriers to fully embed themselves into the new body. I mean, we're talking over sixty years of memories to be switched over. The data

carriers enter the blood through the IV and their programming guides them into the brain. They know where to go. They latch onto the hippocampus and feed it with memories—my memories.

"When the process was complete, I opened my eyes and saw the world with vision so clear—it's hard to explain how different it is. I stretched out on the bed with joints that didn't ache with arthritis. And when I called for the nurse, my voice didn't croak with all the years of cigarette smoke I've poisoned it with."

"What about—" I'm not sure how to say my next question without insulting her, but it's not until this moment I realize how seriously I've been considering *Reset* for myself. "What about your old body? What happened to your *original* self?"

"They time the whole thing so right when the process finishes, your old body passes on."

"They killed you?"

Her face contorts into a scowl. It's a look that is out of place on the young body. "Do I look dead?" Diana says. It's true, the person before me certainly isn't deceased, but she looks nothing like the woman I used to know.

"How do you know they transferred all of you? What if part of you was still left uncopied in your old body?"

"It's pretty thorough, Mike. Before the transfer, they send in memory receivers—tiny machines smaller than blood cells. They scour the brain for every trace of your personality. Once they've created a complete copy, the transfer begins."

"Do you know where it came from? Your new body, I mean."

The awkward silence that follows tells me I've offended her.

Finally, Diana says, "*Sheesh*, Mike. What's with all the questions? Are you happy for me or not?"

"I am...I'm just...just curious, you know."

An impish smile spreads across her lips. "Why? You thinking about doing it too?"

I avoid the question and she doesn't push it. Instead, the conversation turns to her plans for the future. She says she'll be taking a great deal of vacation days in the coming months. She'll take her young body on a tour around the world. With a lifetime of accrued wealth and a body full of energy and hope, she wants to take advantage. She says she might even take a shuttle to the moon and do a space dive on the way back.

I urge her not to overdo it. She wouldn't want to get herself killed.

Her carefree laughter reveals that death is the farthest thing from her mind.

After another hour or so of prattle, we say our goodbyes. She wraps her arms around my brittle bones and I'm surprised when tears form in my eyes. She was my friend, but now there are so many years between us. I wonder how much longer she'll even want to talk to me like this.

She knows I'm upset and before she leaves, she whispers in my ear. "I'm still me, Mike." Then, she turns away and flutters so quickly out of my office that I wonder if she was really there in the first place.

I sink back into my chair and stare at the atomic clock on my desk. The hours crawl on until the end of the

workday. I don't take any calls and my secretary reschedules all my meetings. I don't even *think*, not really. Recover is a better word. For the entire day, I sit behind my desk while my mind slowly, painfully makes sense of what Diana told me.

By the time Silvia arrives to take me home, I'm already waiting for her on the curb. Without a word, I slump into the backseat.

"Bad day?" Silvia asks.

In response, I shut my eyes to close out the world. Silvia reads me well and doesn't try to coax me into conversation.

Later that night, I'm sitting on the edge of my bed with a business card in my hand. It's contact information for the Bellis fellow. I turn the card over in my hands—my stiff, aged hands. Blue, bulging veins crisscross the back of my hands like lines on a transit map. My fingers are misshapen with arthritic joints. *But they're my joints*, I think. *My hands. My body.*

"What should I do?" I ask no one in particular, but when I look up my eyes fall on a small, framed picture resting next to a bedside lamp. A fine layer of dust has formed on the picture of my wife, Gina, but I can still make out her sweet smile and sparkling eyes. She had always been so full of laughter, even in death. She had died in her sleep—a wisp of a smile on her face.

*What would she say if I didn't follow her?* Would it be a betrayal to the woman who had always stood by me?

I think of Diana and her new, young body—the body that had belonged to someone else just a few weeks prior. *Can the soul really be separated from the body?* Gina's eyes

are on me from the frame. They are not judgmental eyes—never were, but they burn just the same. Looking away, I make a decision, and with popping knees, I stand.

Bellis' business card folds in my gnarled fist. I take a step towards the waste bin resting in the corner of my room. I mean to toss the card in the trash, but crushing pain grips me where I stand.

A cry escapes me and I crumple to the floor. The pain presses against my lungs and cuts off my air supply. The last thing I see is Silvia's horror stricken face as she turns me onto my back. Trying to escape the pain, I close my eyes while death grips my throat and pulls me under the earth.

Time passes. I can't say how long because I'm in and out of consciousness. At one time, I wake to find myself ensnared in a myriad of tubes and wires. An image of grim faced doctors at my bedside flickers briefly before I'm back under.

Time flows like a river all around me, but I'm not affected by it. I've become a heavy boulder resting in the middle of a stream. Its waters wear away at my edges, smoothing me out, but I don't move. Too large to be pushed downstream.

I might remain this way forever, but the outside world is calling me. Begging me to return. Slowly, the haze fades away and I open my eyes.

At first, the lights in the hospital room are blinding, but after a few moments, I can see clearly. In fact, the colors on the various posters around the room are so crisp that I'm afraid they might jump out at me. One poster in

particular—A warning about cross contamination—has lettering so clear, I feel that it's shouting at me.

The nurse call button is hanging from the side of the bed. I reach for it and—*My hands!* The varicose veins are missing. In their place is skin that is tan and smooth. My fingers are slim and strong. I kick the bedcovers to the floor with legs that are not mine. They are young and powerful. A moment of glee surges through me but is quickly dispatched by a dawning realization. A deep chill creeps up my spine.

A nurse all but hops into the room. She's smiling stupidly while holding a white clipboard in her chubby fingers.

"Mr. Leaf," she says. "So good to see you've come back to us. What do you think of your new body?"

I can only stare. I don't know if I should yell, cry, or laugh.

The nurse ignores my silence and continues going through her routine. She asks me a series of questions to make sure the personality transfusion was a success. She asks me my name, my address, what I do for a living. Then she moves on to more personal questions about when I met my wife, what was her favorite song, what is the name of my second grandchild, and so on and so on. I answer each of these questions with a voice that is horribly foreign in my ears.

When she's finished, she sets down her clipboard and begins detaching several cords and wires. After she removes my catheter, she gives a playful smile and says, "You really lucked out, Mr. Leaf. Your new body is...very

handsome." I feel sick. This nurse is young enough to be my grandchild.

"How old am I?"

The nurse checks the clipboard and says, "Seventeen." Eighty years gone in a blink. *Not gone, stolen.*

I want to walk and the nurse helps me stand because even though I'm now young, I've been asleep for over two weeks and my limbs are all pins and needles.

At first, I feel that my legs are so powerful that I might accidentally jump through the ceiling. It takes me a moment to adjust to the increased energy and before long I've taken to the hallways in long strides. I make at least ten laps around the hospital ward before returning to my room.

Tom Bellis is waiting for me. "Hello, Mr. Leaf," he says. "Looks like the Reset was successful." Several pressing questions come to mind. Bellis must see it in my eyes because he says, "Is something wrong?"

"I didn't agree to this," I say.

Bellis puffs out his cheeks and his eyes widen. *Too bad*, those eyes say.

"I didn't give consent."

"When your caregiver, Silvia, found your *almost*-corpse, you were holding my card. That's all the consent she needed. As your nurse, she holds certain medical rights that allow her to make important decisions in situations when you are unable to do so. She acted fast and saved your life. Saved your life and gave you a new one."

I look down at my new body and say, "And what about him? The kid whose body I've moved into?"



Bellis waves his hand dismissively and says, "All volunteers give up their bodies willingly. And besides, the compensation their families receive is far more than most of them can earn in a lifetime. Most volunteers are honored to know their body will go on to do great things." This is another sales pitch and I don't want to hear it.

I want to scream, *If you think nobody is forced into suicide for the sake of their family, then you don't know a thing about poverty.* But I'm silent. What the hell do I know about it anyway? I've lived the high life for decades. Any empathy I have for the poor is imagined at best.

By the time Bellis starts to explain *Reset's* insurance plan that guarantees a new body in case anything should happen to my current one, my blood is boiling.

I cut him off mid-sentence and demand that he leave. He feigns a hurt look, but exits without further discussion. On his way out, he tacks another one of his business cards to the bulletin board next to the door.

Silvia arrives soon after and takes me home. Our exchanges are a little awkward because she's so used to helping me around, but now I'm younger than she is. I'm sure she's wondering where she stands in my world now that I no longer need a caregiver but she doesn't bring it up. Instead, she silently drives me home and carries my things to my room without a word. After that, she leaves and I'm left alone in someone else's body.

In the privacy of my own bedchambers, I stand in front of a tall three way mirror and stare at my new reflection for hours. The body is slender, but not frail. A muscular physique is adorned with patches of light fuzz—I wouldn't call it hair—on the chest and cheeks. Deep blue eyes stare

back at me from within a face of smooth skin and soft angles. Aside from a small star-shaped scar on the underside of its chin, the face is flawless. And it's handsome, there's no denying it. A boy's face on the cusp of manhood.

Turning away from the mirrors, I catch sight of my wife's picture beside the bed. I open a dresser drawer and set the picture inside. I bury the image of my late wife beneath a pile of socks and close the drawer.

Out of habit, I sleep. When the morning wakes me, I rise. Silvia brings me breakfast, but I don't eat. Instead, I get dressed in a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt—I have to punch extra holes in my belt because the pants are too big. Silvia tries to start up a conversation when I emerge from my room—trying to dispel some of the tension that's sprung up between us—but I don't respond. I just walk out the front door without a word. When I reach the sidewalk, I keep walking.

About three blocks later, I start to jog. Two blocks after that, I'm sprinting. My pulse pounds in my ears, my breathing is unlabored and rhythmic. On some level, I feel like I might run too hard and damage this new body. Blow it out like a new engine pushed too hard. But after a few more minutes, I realize that's impossible. The body is too young and too powerful for that.

I slow to a steady pace and let my feet carry me along the early morning streets. I fear people will stare at me as I pass like I'm some sort of abomination, but they only see a young man on an morning run. They don't see the elderly hijacker hiding within stolen skin.

Sweat is dripping in my eyes when my feet stop moving. This isn't a conscious decision. I wasn't planning on stopping—I just do because something has grabbed my attention. Half a block up the sidewalk on my left is a narrow opening between two buildings. I might have missed it if I hadn't stopped, but now I'm intrigued. Old age has limited my desire to pursue any curiosities. Whether it's cynicism or a weak bladder, I can't say what's caused my lack of adventure. I only know it's been awhile since I've felt comfortable enough to try something new and unexpected.

I figure that I've always wondered about the Undercity. Why not see if it really exists?

A peek inside the opening reveals a narrow alley with a steep descent below street level. I step inside a deep shadow and walk through air thick with humidity. At the end of the alley, someone has tied a torn cardboard box to a rusted chain link fence. I move the board aside to reveal a room full of darkness.

I should feel fear, I know. Doubt should be rushing in and urging me to turn back the way I came. *Go back to what you know*. But there is no fear. No doubt bars my way. I step into the dark and let the cardboard door close behind me.

A faint light from somewhere up ahead reveals some kind of parking structure long abandoned to vagrants and rodents. The edges around me are lined with several forms buried beneath blankets and piles of junk. *People of the Undercity*.

I shuffle through mounds of garbage and occasionally jump back as rats scurry through the darkness. Again, I

know what I should do. I should stop this foolishness and return to the world above. I'm about to do just that when something up ahead catches my eye. At first, I think I'm not seeing clearly or perhaps it's a crack in the concrete above that's letting in a ray of sunshine. But as I grow nearer, I see that I'm not mistaken. Growing from a mound of muck on the floor is a flower that glows bright yellow.

I reach for it and something heavy shifts from within a mound of blankets.

"Ey! Get yer own! Leave mine 'lone!"

The face of the speaking vagrant is shrouded in darkness, but his eyes glow fiercely with the reflection of the illuminated flower. *A demon in the dark.*

It's a wonder I don't bolt for the exit, but I'm still overcome with wonder for this strange place I've stumbled into.

Without arousing the vagrant any further, I step away and move towards even more light coming from below. I follow the parking structure down two ramps and a stairway lined with empty liquor bottles until I step out onto the street—an actual street—the asphalt and potholes of a city long forgotten by progress.

A sense of recognition strikes me and the dark corridors around me suddenly transform back into a scene from my youth. A movie marquee flashes with tube lighting while a folk band plays joyously on the corner. An open guitar case at their feet is filled with glittering coins and dollar bills. Beside me, Gina smiles and tosses a coin into the case. She takes my hand and kisses me softly.

The scene from my youth fades back into its new, dark reality. A series of slanting pillars line the street. They must be the support beams for the Sensor Way that lies overhead. It blocks out the sun and has turned the Undercity into a sea of shadows and forgotten memories. Aside from a few sputtering streetlamps in long need of repair, the only other lighting comes from a glowing storefront directly across from where I stand.

With nowhere else to go, I cross the street and push against an iron barred door. A tin bell rings as I step inside what first appears to be a convenience store of some kind. I'm not sure because there seems to be no rhyme or reason to what's stocked on the shelves. They aren't any more organized than the streets just outside, but one thing in particular catches my attention.

An entire row at the back of the store is stocked with at least twenty of the glowing flowers I first saw in the parking structure. Each one is resting in a plastic cup filled with soil. I pick one up to get a better view. It looks like a tulip, but its petals glow with a slow pulsing yellow.

"Ey, mister," says a woman's voice from behind me. "You thinking 'bout buying a Sunflower? They's real specially made, ya. Specially bred with phosph'rous, ya. They keep dat glow for two, three weeks before they darken."

I mean to turn and face the woman, but I can't. An icy chill has plunged into my center and I stand motionless. The woman says something else but I'm not listening. Instead, my attention is latched onto a picture pinned to the wall next to the row of Sunflowers. In the picture, two kids—a boy and a girl—are kneeling next to a box filled

with the glowing flowers. They are covered head to toe with dirt, but they are smiling. They seem unconcerned by the black world they live in. The world where the only sunlight is the kind produced by their bio-engineered garden.

The girl I recognize right away. It's Diana Brandt—at least, not the Diana I knew, but the one I saw yesterday in my office. It takes me a moment longer to recognize the boy.

The woman behind me speaks again, this time more urgently and I spin around with the Sunflower still in my hands. The woman gasps and puts up a black smudged hand to cover a face ridden with wet sores and lined with deep cutting wrinkles. Her eyes show the horror I feel.

"Tim?" she says. Her voice is little more than a whisper. "Is dat you, Tim?"

"I...I'm sorry...I shouldn't be here..."

The woman steps backward, bumps into a shelf and knocks a bottle of vinegar to the ground. It shatters and the acrid stench fills my nostrils.

"No," she says, her horror turning to disgust. "You ain't him. I shoul'da known. First his girl, Lucy, volunteered. He couldn't stand it. His girl alive but gone. I couldn't stop 'im. A few weeks after he left, they sent me da money. A check wid a lotta zeros. I was thinkin' that if I didn't cash it, he'd come back." Her eyes narrowed. "But I see you ain't him. Why're ya here, then? Ya come to rub it in?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"Get out!"

In my haste to exit the store I commit another crime against this woman of the Undercity, and it's not until I'm

back in the sunlight that I realize I'm still holding the flower.

Its radiance is diminished in the mid afternoon sun, but it still pulses with that yellow light. I stare at it for a long time. Whether it's my imagination or not, I can't say, but somewhere within the illuminated petals are memories from another life. A life that ended abruptly before its time was up. As I gaze at the flower, I wonder just *whose* memories guided me to that subterranean store. *Coincidences are a fool's explanation.*

I begin heading home—walking this time—all the while asking myself the same questions over and over. Am I Michael Leaf, an *old* man with a *young* man's body? Or...am I Tim, a *young* man with an *old* man's memories? I don't know the answer, but I suppose I'll have a long life to figure it out.

In the meantime, I think I'll pay Diana another visit. I will show her my new souvenir from the Undercity. I want to know what she thinks about it.

I need to know if she can remember the sunflowers.

K.C. Aegis lives in Southern California with his wife and three kids. When he isn't writing science fiction in the middle of the night, K.C. teaches English in a public school classroom. You can learn more about K.C. Aegis, leave comments, and/or read sample chapters from his novels by visiting [kcaegis.weebly.com](http://kcaegis.weebly.com).

# THANATOS IV

## by Max Gray

The siren wails in his dreams every night. It's always changing. First it's shrill and incessant, like a high wind, and the next time it's a pulsing warble. The fact is, *if* it actually went off, he would have no way of knowing what it would sound like because U.N. Command didn't include that in his training module. All he knows is the siren means the end of everything. Dender's conception of the apocalypse is probably no more accurate than that of the people living down there, on Earth. Forget Heironymus Bosch, forget Durer. Dender knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the end of the world will be far nicer than all that, not to mention instantaneous. This time it isn't a siren at all, but a baby crying.

He sits up in bed. The sheets are limp with sweat. His lips are dry. The heart rate monitor on the ceiling reads 92. He has seen and heard infants before only in the movies. That means his brain recreated the pitch, the frequency of the child's screams by confabulation. Dender shakes his head. This is troubling.

He exits the dark cocoon of D1, the bedroom, and passes, barefoot, into the dim maroon light of D2, the gym and track room, through a portal connecting the exercise sphere to the "numb room," which powers down overnight. The portal hisses open, admitting him to D4, the observation sphere. Dender shields his eyes from the light. The spotless primary window turns with the



imperceptible rotation of the satellite so that it always faces Earth. As expected, the alarm beacons lining the walls are dormant. It's quiet but for the gentle hum of automated gyroscopes and other instruments that Dender isn't required to understand or even to identify.

The Earth looks pensive. Clouds like shredded cotton drift over the surface. The blue skin of the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico show through the holes in the clouds. The rim of the Earth shines emerald with a faint infusion of pink, as though it's blushing. CO2 levels would be through the roof. Conditions on the ground would be worsening by the day. By now it would feel like living inside a vast bowl of pho.

The celestial body that was once considered the center of the universe now occupies the innermost chamber of Dender's heart. He revolves around it 14.42 times a day, 365 days a year, every year, until they, in their infinite wisdom, decide to pick him up.

He's hated this planet for so long that the hate sits in his stomach like an avocado pit. Dender is beginning to doubt that he'll ever get the chance to press the button that will destroy it. Of his 500-day deployment, this is day 611. And to top it all off, he's pretty sure he's going insane.

**Z**ero eight-hundred. Lights on. This week – this Earth-week, that is – the alarm clock is set to a 22<sup>nd</sup> century psycho-pop song by a group called the Auto Erotics. Brush your teeth to a waterfall of crashing cymbals, a machine gun of staccato bass notes. Don't bother headbanging. The

last time you had the motivation to headbang was almost an Earth-year ago. Next week is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, fifth symphony. Good luck getting up before ten.

Zero nine-hundred. Lie on your stomach and place your palms flat on the floor. Arch your back and feel your spine stretching. Breathe in, breathe out. Dial up the controls for the exercise sphere and deactivate the automated track. Today you want to run without any help. It's an easy day. The log says not to stop until you hit ten miles, and you don't. You stop at ten miles, exactly, and not a step farther. You can be as precise as a machine, if you want to be. That's what got you here. That's why they chose you, over all the rest. You were the closest thing to a 'bot that they could find. You remember the white coats watching you through the glass as you ran on the treadmill, electrodes taped all over your chest, and the expression on the faces of the military brass. *Incredible*, you imagine they probably said, *what a specimen*, or some such drivel. You saw a way out, and you ran faster; you ran until they told you to stop.

Twelve-hundred. Lunch time. Unseal the wrapper on a Long-Term Dry-Packed Nutriment Unit, or LT-Ration. The ugly, brown slab inside gasps for air. It's the size of your hand – odorless, cold to the touch, inflexible, utterly unappetizing. You put it in the enriching oven for thirty seconds and out comes an odorless, inflexible brown slab that tastes miraculously like a bacon cheeseburger on a toasted Kaiser roll with melted provolone cheese, tomato, sliced onions and a pickle. Hold the mustard.

Twelve-hundred thirty. Computer, dim the lights. You assume the full lotus position and allow yourself to think

of nothing. Well, first many things, then some things, then a few things, and then... When it's really good, only one thing; the only thing there is. The button on the master dashboard. How it depresses with a satisfying click. Tendrils of fire bloom out from the surface of the planet, like a stop-motion film of orchids opening. Clouds ignite and seas boil. The Earth becomes a molten sphere, a flawless marble, a diamond in a coal mine. It is finally perfect.

Shit. Think of nothing. Breathe in, breathe out...

Thirteen-hundred. Free time. Try the cross-word puzzle again, maybe this is your day. Computer, thesaurus. Look up *erstwhile*. Never mind. Computer, dictionary. And browse. This is the closest thing you have to recreational reading. The books all remind you of Earth. Half the words in the dictionary are useless to you. Arachnid. Middle management. Teamwork. Dragonfly. Freeway.

Close your eyes and walk in a straight line for as long as possible without bumping into anything. Your record to date: twenty-eight paces.

Fourteen-hundred. Set up the easel in front of the primary window on D4. Choose a new spot. Move it up a few inches, then back again, now a bit more to the side. That's it. Break out the brushes and the pencils and the charcoal. Express yourself. Employ whatever colors or methods your heart desires. By now you no longer need to look out the window. If a bad LT-Ration struck you blind, you would still be able to paint it just as well. You close your eyes, and there's Earth, shining in the darkness like a Christmas ornament.

When you're done, you hang it up to dry with the rest. Or crumple it into a ball and eat it.

Sixteen-hundred. Shadow-boxing. The hologram opponents are Mike Tyson, Rocky Marciano, Sugar Ray Leonard. The hologram is Dr. Gregorian, the head of the U.N.-Com research team, one of the last human beings ever to lay eyes on you. The hologram is God, is the Devil, is a composite image of a man based on rough sketches of the hooded individual who donated you to science, whose image was captured on security cameras sprinting across the lawn of the U.N. Climate Reclamation complex in Toronto, having left you on the doorstep in a basinet, swathed in blankets like baby Moses. Little did he know, a ticking time bomb manifested in flesh and blood. You hope your progenitors, the man and woman who conceived of you more than twenty-five years ago, are still alive when you press the button. You were not, are not, will never be what they wanted you to be. You are not Moses, but the angel of death.

Seventeen-hundred. Retire to the numb room, where you congratulate yourself for putting it off for this long. All of human history is distilled onboard the satellite's video library. Every film that's ever been produced, accessible at the touch of a finger. The lights go down. You watch all of John Huston's movies, Steven Spielberg, David Lynch. Nothing released since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century interests you. There was a time when an ancient film called *2001: A Space Odyssey* used to make you laugh. You don't laugh anymore.

Nineteen-hundred. Have a leisurely dinner on D4. Eat with your back to the window.

Round out the night in the numb room, watching documentary footage of the last four known genocides, only three of which were state-sponsored. An entire ethnic tribe at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains decimated by a horde of flying 'bot wasps in *JP Morgan – Inbev* jerseys. The last one in North America, sparked, ostensibly, over water rights, degenerates into an all-out purge of a rural sub-population based on their peculiar blue eyes. You watch it happen in high-resolution video and it's almost like you're standing there with them. You try to feel something, anything, and fail.

You can have almost any woman who's ever lived, via hologram. And you do. Cleopatra, Ann Boleyn, Mona Lisa, even, in a moment of shame that floods you from the inside like ice water, the Madonna. You can't help but notice an eerie resemblance between the mother of God and Catharine the Great.

The computer diagnoses you with insomnia, brought on by an overactive imagination. It prescribes a break from the numb room and increased time for artistic expression. The thought of even more painting makes you want to scream, though nothing else interests you besides clay sculpture, which is "non-conductive" to Low Earth Orbit.

Earth-days, solar-weeks, nuclear time, space-time. Time elongates; it is elastic; subjective; two polished mirrors facing one other. The sight of the calendar on the bedroom wall begins to irritate you. Back when your deployment started you used to count the days religiously. Tallying them comforted you. Now the notion of quantifying time strikes you as unnecessary, as a little crazy. To what end? You might as well count your own

breaths. Count heartbeats. Count thoughts. The urge to measure, you realize, is a terrestrial mutation, suited exclusively to Earth-dwellers. Thanks to your training, you are above such trivialities. They've evaporated like liquid off a stovetop. Only the urge to destroy remains.

Late into the night, you watch history videos on interstellar imperialism. The bio-spheres of the Moon, mining colonies on Mars, the New Caledonia ice caves beneath the crust of Enceladus. This last segment captures your attention, if only because it will be your penultimate resting place. If, God willing, you finally push the button, the satellite is programmed to transport you by magnetic trajectory to Saturn's frigid moon, where you will live out your retirement as a border guard for the frontier colony. There, in the dark, and the cold, thousands of miles away from the remnants of the Earth, you will have earned the purest solitude imaginable.

You begin to doze off during a documentary feature on the development of space-based weaponry in the late 22<sup>nd</sup> century. *It was a time of great innovation and unprecedented state spending on defense*, a deep-voiced narrator intones. *But not every project was meant to go smoothly. Take Ares VI, for instance.* The image of a satellite flashes across the screen. You perk up. By modern standards, the thing looks laughably complex, loaded down with solar panels and arcane sensors. You watch as the satellite reenters Earth's atmosphere, spinning recklessly, its metal appendages heating up and breaking off. The deep voice chimes in. *Due to a malfunction on board the satellite, monitors on the ground weren't alerted to the problem until it was too late. The Ares*

*VI project officially ended when the satellite crashed-landed in the Indian Ocean, two hundred miles off the coast of Seychelles.*

Zero one-hundred. Computer, power down. You stand in the near-darkness of the numb room, not in the least bit sleepy, as an idea begins to form in the back of your mind.

A series of compartments underneath the master dashboard house an array of wiring related to sensors affixed to the exterior of the satellite. The sensors are attuned, like sunflowers, to the slightest change in the heady mix of vapors comprising the Earth's atmosphere. At least, that's what he remembers from training.

To be fair, that was fifteen years ago, and recently Dender has felt a bit... blunted. But he figures it's a good place to investigate. In theory, if the sensors aren't at peak functionality, then the composition of the atmosphere could reach critical levels without tripping the alarm, and if the alarm doesn't go off, then he won't know to push the button, and if he doesn't push the button, then he fails in his duty, and if he fails, then all this is for nothing, and if all this is for nothing... Yes. He will check the sensors.

Calling home base for help is impossible, as specified by Directive Number 13. Permanent radio silence: initiated on the premise that long before atmospheric levels went critical, the boys on the ground would lose all impartiality due to symptoms associated with an ailment the white coats referred to affectionately as "termination sickness." Dender knows the satellite is incapable of transmitting

outgoing messages of any kind besides an emergency S.O.S., and that would surely be unnecessary. That would be the boy crying wolf. Besides, he doubts U.N.-Com would look kindly upon non-essential instrument maintenance. *That sounds like tampering*, they'd say, if they could. *That's not what you're up there for, dammit. You're living in the most sophisticated luxury apartment complex ever conceived by man. Remember your directives? No assembly required.*

Dender knows just what they'd say.

*This is no laughing matter. You're impartial. Emotionless. Reliable! Understood, soldier? Do you read?*

It's surprisingly easy to remove the rivets on the compartments using a multi-tool from the utility cabinet. The wires are color-coded and organized in packets. Dender proceeds to poke around, in search of something amiss. Poking proves vaguely satisfying. He tries tapping, prying, and, ultimately, yanking. It becomes increasingly obvious that he cannot distinguish between good packets and bad. He has to face it. Dender has no business underneath the master dashboard. He isn't a mechanic, or a scientist, or a commando, or even a do-gooder. He's a grunt. He's nothing but a goddamned button pusher.

In a moment of frustration, he strikes the inside of the compartment with the butt end of the multi-tool. The lights flicker, and the sibilant background noise of the D4 instrument bank goes silent, for an instant. Dender lies on his back. That was stupid, he thinks. That was really stupid.

"Testing, one two three... Testing... Hello? Is this the right button?"



Dender's eyes widen. Very slowly, he crawls out from under the master dashboard.

"There we go. That's better. Lah-dee-dah. Greetings Earthlings. This is Thanatos Log Number 482."

A hologram of a woman is playing in the center of the room. She's wearing leggings and a U.N.-Com tunic and looks about twenty-five. Her blonde hair is tied up in a sloppy knot on top of her head. It lolls like a wilting flower. She talks rapidly about her parents and a golden retriever named Pygmalion. Dender kneels and studies the side of her face.

"I can't believe there's only a few months left. At this point, I'm a little scared to go back, of course. But that's natural... I think. I'm going to be honest. If I wasn't going back, who knows what would happen to me. Forget what's natural. I'd worry about my sanity." The woman crosses her eyes. "I'd probably lose it. But wouldn't you, dear viewer? I dare say you would too. It's lonely up here in space. It's a relief to even hear myself say that – it's lonely. It is! Five-hundred days is a long time. It hasn't all been wine and roses, dear viewer, let me tell you."

She speaks like a person who's accustomed to the sound of her own voice. The woman engages in a variety of nervous gestures. She bites her nails, plays with her collar, and corrects a strand of hair that slips out of place as she's talking. A metallic trill rings out in the background.

"Oh, shoot. That's the oven. Wouldn't you know it, I completely forgot. This is Jenny, Operative Seventeen, over and out."

The hologram vanishes, and it's quiet again. Dender blinks. He stands up and puts his hands on his hips. "Well, I'll be..."

The speakers on the observation sphere crackle, and the hologram of the woman reappears. "Hello, Earthlings! It's me, Operative Seventeen. Thanatos Log 483."

Dender finds a chair in the utility cabinet. He gets an LT-Libation and sits by the door, face to face with Jenny's hologram. He barely sips his drink. He watches Logs 483, 84, 85, and 86. The computer sounds a bell at thirteen-hundred, and at fourteen-hundred. Dender ignores it. He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees.

At nineteen-hundred hours, the hologram is still going. Dender is afraid to touch the wires again. The more he sees of the woman, the more he resents her, and the more he begins to wonder. He begins to wonder if he has been compromised by the passage of time. The nagging worry fossilizes into a certainty. He is definitely crazier than this woman.

Two days later, Jenny – Operative Seventeen – is still talking.

Dender retreats from D4 and spends all his time in the other activity spheres. He cooks his meals in the bedroom, burns the hours away with exercise and watches videos in the numb room. Despite his efforts, Jenny's voice penetrates all the way through to D2. She provides a soundtrack for his lifting regimen. It sounds like she's underwater, like she's been gagged with a soft cloth. Her voice is high and excitable. Dender has never met a

teenager before, but the sound of Jenny reminds him of archived video clips from the numb room. The takeaway is that he can no longer bear to watch his favorite sitcom, *'Bot Party Summer*, or 20<sup>th</sup> century classics like *Full House* or *Step By Step*.

This doesn't make sense. Operative Seventeen – Jenny – must be about Dender's age. Teens, if they're lucky enough to be admitted to the weapons project, are restricted by U.N.-Com to full-time training exercises. They don't see the light of day, let alone the inside of an operational satellite. You're drawing illogical connections, Dender thinks. Stop free associating.

He passes through the portal linking D2 and D3, and pauses on the threshold. Something doesn't feel right. Dender takes two steps backward, which feels better. And four steps forward. That's much better. He repeats the steps the next time he passes from D3 to D2, and the next time, and the next time. The pattern, the numbers, are somehow comforting. Eventually he cannot move from one sphere to the other without engaging in the correct steps. The numbers increase from two to four and from four to eight.

Each time he repeats the pattern he moves closer to Earth, and then further away. Closer and then further. Jenny stands between them, chattering incessantly. She is his problem. She is a living barrier between him and the object of his hatred. It is unavoidable that she, too, will become loathsome. Dender begins to wish he had a 'Destroy Jenny' button on hand, but that – haha – that is just silly.

*Wormhole Adventures of Andromeda Nine* is on and Dender is eating zero-calorie sea salt-flavored potato chips and cheese dipping sauce, with the volume turned all the way up. For a short time, the video program drowns Jenny out. Then, during a lull in the action, the volume recedes, and he can hear her yelling.

Dender turns the volume up. For a few minutes, this seems to work. When he lowers the volume again, it's quiet.

He gets up and wanders across the room. For the first time since the wiring mishap, Dender passes through the D4 portal and enters the observation sphere. Jenny is staring at the floor with her arms crossed over her chest. Her shoulders quake, silently. The log number in the corner of the hologram reads 505.

You've got to be kidding me, he thinks.

It is Dender's 615<sup>th</sup> day aboard the satellite, and this woman is crying about 505. Dender remembers 505. What he ate that day for breakfast. Okay, maybe it's a bit disconcerting to pass the deadline without hearing a word from home base. Some uneasiness is understandable. But a more dramatic reaction is unbecoming of a professional weapons specialist. It's nothing to throw a tantrum about.

Try 550, lady. Try 615. Then we'll see what you're made of.

Dender moves closer. Jenny wipes her eyes and puts her face in her hands. A tear travels down from her cornea, leaving a damp trail in the crease of her nose. Her hair is mussed and her lips are chapped. Dender stands a few feet away from the hologram. He mirrors her, crossing his arms and uncrossing them. The Earth is a

mottled orb in the background. Dender's eyes flicker from Jenny's face to the planet. It seems to regard him for a moment.

What are *you* looking at, Dender thinks.

Jenny's skin looks softer in the blue glow of the planet. The usual flush of her cheeks has given way to a sadness that spurns the camera, denying an audience. She is prettier than he first realized. Dender feels, suddenly, like an intruder.

"Something's going on here," Jenny says. Her breath wavers in her throat. "And I'm going to find out what it is."

The numb room has familiarized you with "hearing voices." Sure, those are the voices that exist only in the mind, commonly known as delusions. Illusions, allusions, elisions. Sure. But you aren't delusional. The voice echoing in your brain *is* real; it's Jenny.

Zero eight-hundred. You're lying in bed with your eyes open when the lights come on. You don't blink; pupils dilate. Today is 638 and the alarm clock is playing noise-funk from the Wyoming marshlands. You can't wait until Day 666. There will be so many possibilities.

It takes forty-eight paces to reach the wall separating D3 and D4, ninety-six if you're forced to begin again. You're always starting over. You put your ear to the wall and listen. Layers of metal dampen her voice.

"...of course, I'm up here and you're all down there, waiting to be euthanized, and that's A-OK with me. Just think of me like a doctor, hmm? Like a crazy space-

doctor, pointing a big laser beam at your entire planet. Doctor Jenny is in, folks. Symptoms? Getting a bit hot under the collar, you say? What else? Oh yes, abnormal temperature fluctuations, roving monsoon season, yes. Go on. *Fascinating*. This is more serious than I expected. Oh yes, very bad, very bad indeed. I'm going to have to prescribe self-destruction, or, as we'd say in the academy, time to pull the plug. Haha. I know, what a tasteless idiom. I'll tell you what, folks, I'm going to level with you. Come close. Closer. I'll tell you a secret. I'm not a doctor at all! Shh, keep it down. I'm a metronome. I'm an executive's toy, what do you call those, a Newton's cradle. We can't let this information get out. Ix-nay on elling-tay, okay?"

A long stretch of silence ensues, followed by an abrupt bang and a clattering sound, as though someone has opened a toolbox and dumped the contents onto the floor.

"Surgery time! Let's see here, what does this gadget do? Nope, next. How about this one? Better. Now then, what can we pop open around here?" Another clattering sound. "Oops, that was easy. What do we have here? Hello, my lovelies. You're a pretty set of circuit boards, aren't you? Are you two twins? Yes you are. Yes you are. Oh, you are too cute."

Jenny starts to sing, tunelessly.

"Come to mama. Mah-mah, lah-dee-dahh-dah, mah-mah, mah..."

You remove your ear from the wall, but her song continues. For a moment it feels like someone else is listening in to the hologram next door, someone familiar, and yet, a stranger. You are Dender, aren't you? Yes. But

you're not. You're orbiting him, along with Jenny, like a moon, a space rock, an expensive satellite. You're chained to him, obsessed with him, the sun rises and sets with him. You love Dender so much that it hurts, so much that you hate him. But there's a simple solution: push the button, and spark a chemical reaction so violent that it sends you hurtling outward to disappear like a pinprick in the darkness, an explosion so momentous that it erases the very idea of time.

Soon.

It begins as a smattering of half-choked sobs, and soon escalates. Jenny is wailing, pleadingly, as though she's in pain.

Dender leaps out of bed. He bumps into the wall and fumbles for the switch in the dark. He runs through the exercise sphere and the numb room to D4. Bursting through the door, panting, he finds her hologram doing an exercise video. Jumping jacks. Kicks. Lunges. Her pony tail bounces from side to side.

Dender has not been sleeping well. He isn't himself. He isn't Jenny. He is nothing but anger.

"I hate you!" He screams at the hologram. "I hate you so much! Just go away, would you!"

Jenny continues dancing in time with the music. The beat pulses mindlessly. Suddenly, she slips and falls to the ground. For a moment the hologram is vacant. Dender takes an instinctive step forward. She climbs to her feet. Jenny winces, pressing a hand to the small of her back.

“Ouch.” Her brow furrows and she thrusts out her lower lip. “That’s going to bruise.”

Dender’s mouth hangs open. The fall, he knows, is just a coincidence. She couldn’t possibly have heard him. He backs away, until he’s standing at the doorway. Jenny rubs her back. She looks sad and angry. There’s no way she can hear him. It wouldn’t make sense.

“I’m sorry,” Dender whispers, and lets the portal close behind him.

He’ll be damned if he is going to let a girl sabotage his mission. That’s the bottom line. Case closed.

Dender passes briskly through the portal onto the observation sphere, ignores Jenny, and marches right up to the button. As a rule, he doesn’t let himself get this close to it. The temptation is too great. But desperate times call for desperate measures. The Earth is a ball of fumes, is a giant zit waiting to be popped. It looms in the window, taunting him. The button is bright red and covered in a fine sheen of dust. Dender’s hand hovers over it. This is how it was meant to be, he thinks. He cracks his knuckles and scowls at the planet. It leers back at him.

His hand inches closer. For the first time since entering the observation sphere, Dender becomes aware of the silence.

He turns around, slowly, to regard the back of Jenny’s head. She’s sitting in a chair –the chair from the utility closet, from the looks of it – and doing something with her hands. In spite of himself, Dender circles the hologram. She’s knitting. A ball of yarn rests in her lap, a



placid expression on her face. Long needles click busily against each other.

He's glad she's averted her eyes, so he doesn't have to look into them. Part of him feels as though he's wronged this woman. Most of him, however, is sick and tired of her chatter. Dender makes faces at her. He imitates the pursed lips and the uncomprehending frown, the doe-eyed smile. Jenny doesn't look up from her knitting. Dender sticks his tongue out at her.

Satisfied, he feels the muscles in his neck begin to relax. It isn't so bad in here, he thinks. If it wasn't for the God-forsaken planet squatting out there, D4 might be kind of pleasant.

He sets up the easel on the left side of the window and breaks out his paints and brushes. "It's been a while," he says, out loud. Dender is startled by his own voice. He glances at Jenny, involuntarily. "As if she'd notice," he mutters. He chuckles to himself and begins mixing colors.

It feels good to paint. The computer is right. Creative expression does have its benefits. Once he finishes the first landscape, he decides to try pointillist and abstract versions. The Earth as a bowl of chili, raw and bubbling. The Earth as a grinning face with an arrow through it. The Earth as a medley of blacks and grays and greens and blues, with flecks of white showing through the darkness. Self-portraits: the Earth is Dender; Dender is the Earth.

"Come to mama," he hums softly. "Mah-mah, lah-dee-dahh-dah, mah-mah, mah..." He stops short. A dribble of taupe paint falls from his brush and stains the floor. Jenny's song. He looks sideways at the hologram. Her eyes are trained on the yarn.

Dender has an idea. At first, it strikes him as amateurish, almost maudlin; but it feels like a good time to try something new. What else am I going to do? He thinks. Watch *The Cat Empress of Turkmenistan* again? Dender arranges a new palette of colors, a mixture of warm and cool. He starts with detail work, and switches to thicker brushes when he comes to the background. The sound of his own humming barely registers. “Mah-mah, mah lah-tee-dah... Mah-mah...”

When he’s done, Dender steps back from the easel and frowns approvingly. It’s more of a caricature of Jenny than a realistic portrait. But he’s gotten a few things right: the gentle curve of her neck, the tip of her pony tail, and the soft shading of her eyes. Not too bad, really. Not bad at all. It’s good enough to justify another try.

At nineteen-hundred hours, he wraps up for the night. On his way out, Dender hangs the portraits up to dry on the wall in front of the hologram, where Jenny can see them. When she finishes her knitting. On the threshold to D3, he takes three steps back, three forward, four back, four forward. Dender gets into bed and sleeps soundly for the first time in months.

On Day 695 – Day 660 for Jenny – at eleven-hundred hours, she stands up, yawns, and stretches her arms over her head. She’s done knitting. “Well, that was constructive,” she says. “I feel like dancing. Don’t you?”

“Not really,” Dender says.

“Great. I’ll put something on.”

She leans off camera, and her backside suddenly occupies most of the hologram. Dender's cheeks flush. He looks at the floor. The speakers in the background crackle and snap. Jenny reappears in the hologram and begins dancing to a drumbeat. A bass line and synthesizers come in. She twirls, her arms lifted high over her head.

Dender frowns. It doesn't seem right to just stand there, staring. But the song is terrible. In the window, the Earth judges him. He glares back at it and bites his tongue, seven times.

The heavy drumbeat fades out, transitioning to a single voice and an electric guitar. It's melancholy, but soothing. Jenny sways back and forth, a slight smile on her face. She's enjoying herself, Dender thinks. That's kind of cute. He nods his head, keeping time.

The playlist shifts into classics from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. He recognizes a string of spare melodies: soul music, the original genre preceding soul-dirt, Mongolian soul drumming, and soul-metal-calypso. It's a soft spot of his. Dender can't help it. He starts sliding back and forth in an approximation of a shuffle.

"I've never danced before!" Dender shouts. Jenny shakes her hips.

His fingers play the air like piano keys. The music touches his neck and travels down his spine. He allows himself to close his eyes. Dender shuffles in circles around Jenny. She laughs and claps her hands.

He is relaxed. Dender's feet are floating. The pale glow of the Earth seems to blanket the observation sphere in a warm haze. For once its presence is comforting, even inviting.

“This is a celebration,” Jenny yells. “Let’s celebrate me! Because I hit the S.O.S. Mayday, Earthlings! Mayday! I’m going ho-oome... I’m going ho-oome... Oh yeah, that’s right...”

Dender stops dancing. His heart, for some reason, jumps in his chest.

“I’m done with this tin can. I’ve served my time!” Jenny pirouettes awkwardly, one bare ankle kicking in the air.

Dender gawks at her.

“I’m coming home, Earthlings! Mommie? Can you hear me? I’m coming home!”

Jenny’s face is a fireworks show, is a sculpture of burnished brass; her happiness, an airborne current flowing through the room. She is free.

Dender sinks to the floor. His knees feel weak. The Earth just sits there, in the distance, pitying him. He doesn’t even need to look at it to know.

He sleeps all day and all night. Earth-day, Earth-night. Words, ideas like these are obsolete tools of an alien civilization. Time no longer holds him. Instead, there’s only the computer.

Wearing a bathrobe, he wanders from D1 to D2, to D3. And hesitates. Dender steps out onto the observation sphere.

Jenny is hunched over with a tattered strip of tissue in her hands. She twists the tissue into a coil, slowly, and unwinds it again. Shreds of paper litter the floor around her. In the hologram. The real floor, Dender’s floor, looks clean as it’s always been. Behind the hologram, the Earth

wears a veil of dappled clouds. It gives the planet a surly complexion. Jenny is talking, as usual. Her hoarseness suggests Dender has missed a long speech already. She doesn't appear to notice him, but then again, she never does. He knows Jenny is a hologram, but it doesn't matter anymore. Dender is beginning to think he's a hologram too. Jenny speaks rapidly, with an absent-minded inflection.

"...the S.O.S. signal has been broadcasting for sixteen days, with no word. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. I mean, it is, it is something to worry about, and I have, I have been worrying, a lot. It's fine though. I mean, what's another sixteen days?" Jenny sighs. "Talk, talk, talk. Seems like that's all I do now. That's all I'm good for. Forget that I have the whole world in my hands. Whatever. All I'm saying is, how could everybody forget about me like this? I'll tell you, Earthlings, it doesn't *compute*. This reminds me of that time in second grade when Dad got into that accident on the way to pick me up from school and I thought he'd forgotten about me. I went inside to tell the office lady that I'd been abandoned – that I'd become an orphan – but I was too embarrassed to say anything, so I hid in the bathroom. Do you remember that, Dad? You called the school from the hospital and asked them to look for me, and it took them forty-five minutes to find me in there. I was sitting on my book bag and punching my leg, trying to make bruises." She pauses. "I'm sure you remember. You know, it's funny, in my seven-year-old brain, I got the idea that I'd somehow caused your accident. It doesn't make sense, I know. But you can't blame me, can you? I was just a kid, I thought

everything that happened in the world had to relate somehow to me, and my seven-year-old life. Man, that all seems so long ago. I'm a big girl now. No time for such silliness anymore. There are much weightier matters afoot, and I have a very important job. Wouldn't you agree? Dad, you were so proud when U.N.-Com accepted me. Mom wasn't so excited. She went on a three-hour walk. You were mad, Mom. But you came around in the end, after you saw how much it meant to me. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I said. Talk about seeing the world. I wanted to see it all, and I did. It was so beautiful, back on my first day. I wish words could describe it. It was like a giant pearl. But it's been a long time since I felt that way. Now I just look at the button instead. I look, and think, and look away, and look back. What else is there to do? There's just Earth, and the button. Sometimes I imagine I can see you guys down there. And then I picture you waving at me. Isn't that dumb? I know. A little sad, too. I hate it when I get all sappy and dumb like this. It must be awful to watch. I'm sorry. I'm sorry you have to see this." Jenny examines her nails. "But I can't help wondering why no one's picked me up. I served my time, and then some. No one can say I didn't do that. So what's going on down there? Seriously. What the hell's going on? Two years is long enough to be up here with no one to talk to. To be all alone with that goddamn button. I'm tired of it and I'm lonely, and I'm ready to come home now. Do you hear me? Hello? Did I do something wrong? Why did you forget about me?" Jenny leans forward. "Please bring me home. Mommy? Can you hear me? I'm lonely. Can you

just say something? It doesn't have to be a big speech. Just a sound. Anything at all. Please. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Dender whispers.

"I'm not kidding. I need you to speak up. Because if you don't, I don't know what I'll do. I can't stop looking at that stupid button. Hello? For God's sake. Please! Say something! Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Dender says, louder. "I'm here. I'm right here!"

Jenny's face dips closer to the camera. Her hair is stringy and tousled. She laughs a sad, angry laugh and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "That's what I thought."

He's never seen her like this before. Dread is a shadow on the wall, is a chain of sunspots. Dread is a disease. Dender inches up to the edge of the hologram.

"I know it's there. The button. I can feel it. It's looking at me. It's boring a hole in my forehead. When I'm running, when I'm watching videos, it's sitting there, in the corner of my mind. I've been thinking about how to get away from it. Sometimes I wonder, if I did get away somehow, if I'd start to miss it. The button, I mean. Isn't that crazy?"

"No," Dender says. He is rapt. He can't look away.

"If anyone ever watches these logs, they're going to think I'm one sick puppy. Here's a keeper, they'll say. This one's gone off the deep end, Jerry. Sometimes I even wonder, what if someone's watching me right now? At this very moment? That would be a shocker. There's a plot twist for you. Yeah. There's something nicely deranged about that idea. There's a certain perverted beauty to it. Don't you agree? What if they were watching

me talk right now? They'd probably turn to each other in their white lab coats and grumble." Jenny makes her voice deep and pompous. "Oh, hell, she's figured us out. We better..."

Jenny abruptly disappears, leaving only empty air. Dender starts. He reaches out and fumbles in the blank space.

"Bring her back. Computer? Bring her back! Do you hear me? Hey!"

He whirls. The room is empty.

"Come on. Where did she go? Computer? Where did you put her? Is this a joke?"

The Earth perches in the window and holds its breath. Beneath it, as ever, is the button, mocking him. Dender refuses to look at them. He tries to check the sense of panic flooding his chest.

Of course, it can't happen any other way. The silence, which had seemed a moment ago as loud as a waterfall, is canceled by a sudden explosion of noise and red light. Dender covers his ears, cringing. The observation sphere is submerged in darkness. The red beams of the alarm beacons chase the darkness around the room.

It's the siren. It's what he's been waiting for, all along. Dender is reduced to a jelly, to a tremor in a mound of flesh. It's time.

Don't you remember? You are the executioner. Isn't this what you wanted?

There, in the darkness, is the button.

Gingerly, Dender approaches the window. He crosses the invisible line that he'd never, really, until this moment, believed he would cross. He lifts the glass shield



covering the button. Dender notices, for the first time, that the hologram lens is mounted on the dashboard close by. In order to film a video log, you would have to face the Earth. You would feel, naturally, as though you were addressing the planet, as though it constituted a friendly audience. As though all the eyes in the world were trained on you.

He squats on his haunches in front of the lens, just as Jenny must have done. He feels her standing over his shoulder. He faces the Earth and activates the camera. A tiny sensor blinks at him.

He clears his throat. "This is Dender, Operative Eighteen. As you can see by the lights behind me, it's time. The time has come. As you can see..."

He falls silent. Dender looks at the Earth for a long time, for so long that he forgets the camera is on. The beacons bathe the observation sphere in waves of shadow and red light. All around him, they flash, and flash, and flash...

Max Gray is a graduate of the Rutgers-Newark MFA program. His work has appeared in *Conte*, *The Newer York*, and most recently in *Mount Hope*. He blogs regularly at *The Rumpus*.

# MEAT FOR THE BEAST

## by Buck Weiss

TRANSCRIPT OF A LETTER FOUND APRIL 12, 1985 IN AN ESTATE AUCTION NEAR THE TOWN OF ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI.

January 20, 1863

Dearest Henry,

I sit down to write and address this letter to you in the hope that you will spare our long suffering and angelic mother, who when I last saw her, was frail of body but mighty of spirit.

I believe that the story I will tell herein and the fate of her son, like the three that have passed before me, will not sit well on her overly burdened soul. I fear that this knowledge would fracture her wholly and may steal what is left of her earthly form. I beg you to not share this grim news with her. Burn this letter. I am sorry for the weight of knowledge that the reading will place on your shoulders, but I write only to show that I am lost to the family and must never be found.

You should thank merciful God, Little Brother, that you are too young to be pulled into this cruel and damnable war.

The need for secession felt great at the outset and men who could speak stronger and more convincing words than I dropped tales of injustice and resistance that would

have enticed the staunchest abolitionist to set aside what he thought of the Negroes' plight and pick up his rifle for what we now call the South.

Missouri has never been the South, Henry. I see that now as I wish I would have seen it then. We are slave holders and farmers, not city people like the north east Yankee, yet, we are not to be counted among the rich Virginian or these glory hounds of Tennessee. I may have signed up with the Army of East Tennessee, but I wore Missouri on my clothes and skin, and kept a handful of homeland dirt in my pocket. The men around me knew I answered to Missouri as easily as to Connors and many only knew me by the name of our great state.

Men pointed me out as distinct from the flag-waving multitude around me and I learned quickly that I was not a Southern man.

Steven, may he rest in peace, knew this and said as much. But, he could not convince Jed, Percy, or me to stand aside and let the tide of war wage around us.

Damn the Home Guard and every Lincoln lover in our state for the deaths of our righteous and good brothers.

I trust that they are all in the arms of the heavenly father and that our papa is there with them. Though it was their memories that bid me join under Major General Kirby Smith and follow him into the great Army of Tennessee, I fear that the final resting place of my soul will be a hotter abode as far from heaven as the South is from our beloved home.

By the time you receive this letter, news of the battle near Murfreesboro has reached your door. My last letter, from near Christmas told of the great welcome General

Bragg and all of the troops received when we met there to spend out the month of December. The pleasantries of that letter, the dances and feasts, are gone now, replaced by the cold, bloody reality of this harsh earth and what lies above and below it.

I showed myself well on the battlefield. You can tell your future children that their uncle was a brave and honorable man at Stones River. That he shot many Blues, but never in the back or through treachery.

I was never a treacherous man before the Beast came for me. I had never done anything to damn my soul until I saw its eyes and knew that there was no salvation.

I skip ahead as my mind wanders, brother. Forgive me my fight with time and chaos.

You will have to look to someone else for a full account of the bloody encounter that took place in the woods and fields surrounding the fair city of Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

All I can quickly say is that we lost many and I believe that the Union lost three for every one of ours. Yet, those Blues are like the ants that we would torment as children. You fill one hole and they pour out another.

On the fourth day of the battle, we were less in number, but strong in resolve. General Bragg heard that Union reinforcements were arriving and bid us march south and away. It was an honorable withdraw and I place no blame on him for what happened next.

In the march to Tullahoma I was tasked with the job of rear scout. I and four other non-wounded men took five of the few mounts that were left after the battle and moved off to the west of the main forces.

It is common to worry about the pursuit of an enemy and we were tasked with making sure that Rosecrans and his boys were staying back. I was of the mind that they were properly whipped and the reinforcements that were on the wind would not be quick enough to catch our movements. Yet, and thank God for it, I have never been placed in a position where my thoughts or ideas amounted to a hill of beans.

We spent the first day riding back toward the Stones River and west, more in an effort to forage for food or game than to actually find a following enemy.

That night we camped near a small creek in a vast wooded area that seemed to go on forever to the west.

The men, in case you ever feel the need to contact the army or their families, were:

Boyd Reynolds of Millsburg, Tenn. He was betrothed to an older school mistress in his hometown and read us poetry that she would send him with her letters.

Gregory Franklin of Brentwood, Tenn. A no good scoundrel who was quick with an insult or a curse. Some men of the company swore he was a horse thief, but he had never done time for any crime.

Tom Ashwood of Murfreesboro, who lamented the abandonment of his dear city as if it was his mother or his true love. Ashwood was a dear friend and one to have when stationed in his fair city. We had spent many a night out on the town with him showing us the best places to drink or chase skirts.

And, Rich Fields of parts unknown, though many say he was born on the streets of London. Rich was an actor

with a traveling show before he signed up for the war. You should have heard him sing.

He led us as we faced off against those Blues at the beginning of the Murfreesboro mess. I remember hearing his voice as he belted the refrain from “Home Sweet Home,” and thinking of fair Missouri. Many of our number cried at the sounds of two armies, tied together by as much as pushed them apart, squalling about the love of hearth and home.

One commented that he wished all wars could be fought with talent rather than bloodshed and yet another said that his talent was the shedding of blood. Such was the unbridled talk of soldiers on the edge of violence and death.

These are the type of men I sat down to sup with on that cold night. We huddled over the fire with our blankets tight around us and talked of the events of the last few days.

Franklin was in a foul mood and spoke of the end of everything. “I had me a dream,” he ranted as we passed around the beans and meager bits of a rabbit that Reynolds had caught in the brush. “In the dream, death was a looming figure. A creature that stood near me on the battlefield.”

Franklin stood and lifted his hands like a fire and brimstone preacher. “In this nightmare, my courage was more than it would be now. I walked towar’ the Beast, for a beast it was, shrouded in darkness. As I got closer I could see the dark red gore crusting its body.”

He rubbed his hands down his sides as if he was covering himself in the blood he spoke of. I shuddered and pulled my blanket closer around me.

“Shut your lying mouth, horse thief or I’ll gladly shut it for you!” called out Ashwood, and I could hear in his voice that he was as chilled as I.

“I asked it,” Franklin continued without even hesitating at Ashwood’s warning. “I asked it, what was the mean’en a war?”

“Ha!” barked Fields nervously. “You have a question for death and you ask it something that no one...”

“HE ANSWERED!!” Franklin screamed, more like a wild animal than a man. There was fear in his voice and in my spine as well.

“Dammit, Man!” Ashwood shouted back as we all sat frozen by his scream.

Franklin stepped back from the fire and brought his hand across his body to take us all in. “Death raised one large arm covered in thick black hair and swept it across the men gathered. His voice was so deep, I knowed I could never make you understand how it sounded. It vibrated like what an earthquake feels like. Like a loss of control, of falling in a pit with no bottom.”

Franklin paused for a moment and I could feel the tension around the fire.

“What the hell did it say, man?” I asked.

“MEAT!” It said. Franklin held his head proud, like he was a prophet being told the secrets of the dark universe. “YOU ARE ALL MEAT.”

Franklin looked down at all of us. “Then he turned his head toward me and I saw stark white tusks jutting out

from his huge mouth. His eyes had a fire in them, that would consume me, but I could not look away. He looked at me and his mouth opened for speech once more. ‘WAR PROVIDES MEAT FOR THE BEAST!’”

We fell into nervous, but relieved, laughter at Franklin’s ludicrous ravings.

He smiled weakly as he sat back down and took his turn at the food. “That’s when I woke. I woke to a playing of the bands and the feeling of a spook or omen. Something telling me I’d fall in the coming fight, but here I am. The Blues seemed to ignore me. As many that died, and I killed my share, but never even felt as much as a bullet break the air around me.” Franklin shook his head seeming like a man lost, “Never a one.”

“You are just like the rest of us, Franklin.” Fields began to philosophize. “The dream clearly means you fear death and are searching for meaning in what you see as a war without real reasons.”

“I know reasons, Fields!” Franklin fired back. “I don’t doubt the great cause of the South and the place of the slave like many a ya...”

“Watch that mouth, Horse Thief!” Ashwood interrupted, drawing his long hunting knife out for emphasis. “We can always say a ‘skirmish’ with the enemy left one of our number dead.”

“Put the knife away and calm it down, Gentlemen.” I said in as soft a tone as I could muster. “If we keep yelling, we’ll have a real skirmish with Blues. It’s a wonder you weren’t heard clean north at Stones River.”

With that, the camp fell into an uncomfortable silence. We moved quickly to ready ourselves for the morrow.



Watches were decided and I, being chosen for the last watch of the night, went to my bedroll.

I tried my best to pray and place my thoughts on home and family, but I wondered if the spectre of death was going to make an appearance in my dreams as well.

I awoke to the screams of horses in the night. A death knell that was swirling above me. I started to rise just as a huge weight was dropped on my lower body.

The screams erupted again and I saw that one of the horses was right on top of me. Somehow, it had fallen across my legs, pinning me in my bedroll.

I pushed upwards and felt the horse try to rise up off of me. Then, it let out another heart gripping scream. I thought in that moment that I would give anything to stop that horse from throwing another noise into the night.

No sooner did the thought cross my mind, when I felt the brush of something large go past my face in the dark and the horse's screams were cut short as its head was severed from its body.

Blood and gore gushed into me and I had to fight for air, feeling as if I was drowning in a sea of salty, thick liquid.

I could move my arms and quickly wiped at my face to get as much of the grume as I could away from my mouth, nose, and eyes. As quickly as the waterfall of blood began, it trickled down to a slow and steady stream.

In the chaos, I could not see the landscape around me. I was on my back with my head toward the dying fire. The horse pinned me to the ground and I was not able to push upwards.

I paused for a moment to get my bearing and heard a slow crunching and slurping sound coming from the other side of the fire pit. This was not in my line of sight, being past the top of my head.

I maneuvered the best I could to try and glimpse the events that were making such a visceral sucking and crunch. It was as if a man was slurping his soup and eating chicken bones at the same time.

My head cranked around just enough to see a black image silhouetted by the moon. I saw the top part first, which looked like two limbs of a tree blowing recklessly in a violent wind. The two limbs moved quickly and erratically, though I felt not the slightest breeze.

Moving down the image, where the two limbs met the main body, there was a strange connection, as if the limbs did not sprout from a tree, but were falling slowly into a large black shape.

I craned my head more and I fully understood what was happening before my eyes.

A creature. Something black and larger than any bear we had ever hunted with Pa and our dear brothers stood on the other side of the fire pit.

It loomed over the campsite, standing at least 8 feet tall. It had its large face raised to the sky and in its gaping and gnashing maw was what was left of a man. The slurping sound I had heard was the slick blood of one of my companions being sucked down this beast's throat.

The cracking was the breaking of his bones by the creature's humongous teeth. Only the legs stuck out from the mouth and miraculously still kicked into the sky, trying to run in air and going nowhere but slowly down the Beast's gullet.

I thought of the dream and knew it for the omen that it surely was. I started to recite the prayer that our mother taught us to pray before we turned out the lantern each night, "If I die, before I wake..."

Hands grabbing my arms brought me to reality and I tried to punch out at whatever companions ran alongside the Beast.

"Dammit, Missouri!" I heard Ashwood whisper and I silently thanked God as I stopped my fussing and opened my eyes.

"We're gonna pull you out from under there," Fields said as he and Ashwood each grabbed a blood covered arm and tried their best to get a grip.

It seemed like forever, but I slowly slid out from under the Beast's little prison of dead horse flesh and quickly found my feet under me.

I looked back at the Beast, just in time for it to finish its meal and slowly turn its gaze upon the three men who were too stunned to run away or attack.

Illuminated by the fire, I could now see its full form. The thing was black as pitch and the light seemed to hit the barrier of its being and die there. Yet, one could make out the large form of legs that brought the creature's waist up near my shoulder. Its arms were elongated and hung almost to the ground. It was as broad as a man is tall and the head rested on very little

neck. The whole of its body was covered in midnight black fur and blood caked detritus from the wood.

Its head! God, Henry! Its face was the face of a demon. It was unlike any creature I have ever witnessed before. The simian face of a great ape, but altogether more human. There was thought behind the creature's eyes and I remembered Franklin's ranting that it spoke to him. Yet, jutting from the creature's maw were ferocious canines and two large shiny white tusks that jutted up toward the eyes. Each tusk was as big as a man's hunting knife and they looked twice as deadly.

It took a step toward us and I was fully prepared to hear words spill out from the Beast, but only the low growl of a predator that sees cowering prey escaped its lips.

The Beast moved to step around the fire and still we were rooted to the same spot. I feared that I would stand there and let it kill me. I had almost resigned myself to fate, when Franklin came out of the darkness with his rifle.

Franklin let out a war cry and his shot went into the creature's middle just before he drove the bayonet home.

Not even the guttural scream of the Beast brought us to our senses and we stood dumbfounded as the creature backhanded Franklin to the ground and shoved one large clawed hand into the meat of his stomach.

Franklin's flesh tore like cloth and the hand came back out holding gore covered innards and intestine.

To Franklin's credit, he rolled away and stood up screaming, "Move, Soldiers!" to the rest of us, who were wasting his sacrifice by staying immobile.

The Beast grabbed the man from behind and proceeded to tie him to the closest tree with the chords that made up the insides of his own body. The creature kept wrapping them around the man and the trunk over and over again, as if it really feared he would somehow untangle his guts and run away.

Franklin's feet kicked at the Beast the whole time and his anguished screams finally broke the rest of us out of our stunned ineptitude.

Ashwood grabbed my arm and pulled me quickly into the woods and away.

No one spoke as the three of us ran full bore through the dark woods. The high and almost full moon somewhat lit our way as we pushed hard to the north.

We ran for what seemed like hours. Finally, Ashwood paused ahead of me and leaned forward with his hands on his knees. Just as I reached his spot, he vomited up his dinner onto the leaf covered ground.

Thank God we were all trained to sleep with our clothes and boots on or we would be naked to the world. Ashwood was smart enough to grab up his rifle and Fields had his revolver, a weapon highly prized and bought with his own money, but I was empty handed save my hunting knife and gumption.

Of course, we saw what gumption and a rifle got poor Franklin.

"Our Father," I heard Fields whispering a prayer as we all stood for a moment to collect our breath and thoughts.

I silently joined him as we stood trying to hear any movement coming from the woods around us.

A shrieking scream broke the silence from back toward the south. Though the screech was almost human, we moved quickly back into our frantic run, knowing too well that it was the Beast.

The three of us, used to marching most of the day and night, kept a strong pace.

“There... hasn’t...” Ashwood tried to spit out as we moved. “Been ... another howl ... since the first.”

He was asking for a chance to slow our pace without the disgrace of actually saying it. Fields and I obliged.

We slowed to a brisk walk as the night wore on. The moon was high and there were still some hours before dawn.

“What is this thing?” Fields spat out as we stopped for a drink at a slow running stream.

“Hell if I know,” Ashwood replied. “My Granddad always said we should not be pushing westward. That there were creatures that we Europeans pushed out when we settled here.”

“That’s hogwash!” Fields fussed. “Indians were living on this land for hundreds of years before we got here. They would a...”

“The Indians know all about it,” Ashwood countered. “Granddad said there are legends in many of the tribes. Dammit, I should have listened closer to his stories!”

“Well...” Fields continued, but I shut him out. My mind was falling back and remembering the dream I was having just before I opened my eyes to this waking nightmare.

Though I had prayed not to dream of the Beast, the creature was waiting there as soon as I drifted off. I was walking the battlefield of Stones River. Bodies were thrown about everywhere and the ground was muddy with the blood of the dead around me.

I looked up to see the creature from Franklin's ranting. The creature that I knew so well now. It stood in the middle of the death. It towered over the battlefield like a dark scarecrow and I noticed that vultures and scavenger birds perched on its broad black shoulders.

As Franklin before me, I was not scared in the dream. I approached the creature with the need to speak to it. As I got closer, I could see saliva gushing from its maw like a river. As it looked out at the bodies of Blue and Grey boys, its only thought was one of food and fresh meat.

Before I could speak, it raised its head and broke the silence. "Ask your question, Manflesh."

I found in the dream that I knew exactly what to say to this monstrosity. "You told Franklin that we were all meat." I started and the creature shook its great head.

"Meat for the Beast!" It replied harshly and the carrion birds took flight off as if its mere voice could steal their lives.

I stepped back at the recitation of the words that Franklin had screamed into the fire.

"Ask your question," The Beast repeated.

I noticed that the gap between us had lessened as we conversed and I could have reached out my hand and touched the blood matted blackness of the creature's fur.

I spoke in a hushed tone, lowering my eyes to avoid seeing the gallons of liquid falling from its great maw.

“Will you...”

My mind was pushed back to the present by Field’s panicked scream. I saw he was looking up into the trees, and I turned my gaze just as the huge shape of the Beast fell in among us.

Huge black paws closed around Ashwood’s body and lifted him from the ground. Ashwood’s screams filled the night as the creature grabbed his legs with one large hand and his body with the other. Ashwood’s rifle dropped to the ground unfired and his life balanced on the knife’s edge.

The despair of my friend spurred me to action and I pulled the hunting knife from my belt. I ran in quick and shoved the knife deep into the black fur-covered meat of the monster’s leg.

The creature howled and jerked away from me, taking my knife with it. Even through the pain, it kept a hold on Ashwood and suddenly I found myself being knocked backwards as the Beast swung Ashwood’s still live body, like a club, full into me.

Fields quickly pulled me to my feet as the monster turned its attention back to Ashwood. It viciously pulled on both ends and the big man’s legs broke away from his body with an ungodly ripping and a SPOP!

Both legs pulled out of the sockets of his hips and the flesh had torn away, much of it staying with the upper



body so that long pieces of white bone stuck out of the gore at the top of each leg.

Ashwood's cries were cut short when the Beast slammed the top half of his body into the ground and shoved the legs, bones first, into his chest. This pinned Ashwood to the ground and for a moment he tried desperately to pull his own legs from his upper torso. Thank God the bones had been driven deep and Ashwood's agony came to a quick end.

As this unfolded, Fields shoved me hard and told me to run. He then swept Ashwood's rifle up and proceeded to move toward the creature with the gun at the ready.

It was in that moment that the last visage of my earlier dream came crashing into my mind like a wild boar pushing through the rough brush.

I could not face the creature as the question fell cold and fearful from my lips, "Will you spare me... will I be spared?"

The black demon laughed then, showering me with hot saliva and the smell of old blood.

It reached down a hand and cupped my shaking face in its large paw, lifting my eyes past the sword-like tusks until all I could see was the huge ape-like face floating inches from mine.

"All feed the Beast, James Connors." It chuckled darkly, blowing the breath of a thousand digested corpses into my choking lungs.

He then brought his face in until our noses were almost touching and the tusks framed my head, keeping me from turning away.

“Yet, I will promise you this, Brave Meat.” It continued. “You will not die soon. James Connors of Missouri, you will die last.”

That is when I awoke to one of my companions dying. Coming out of the memory, I saw that another one was stepping forward to make me the last.

Fields was quick with the bayonet and caught the creature in the throat with his first jab. Hot blood flowed from the wound and the Beast was pushed back. Fields pulled the trigger and the rifle went off directly into the Beast’s face. The monster riled in pain and a vicious scream broke into the night. Blood and gore flew from the creature’s face as it yanked the rifle away from Fields and seemingly more angered than hurt from the damage it had endured, moved forward. Quick as a cat, Fields jumped back out of reach and pulled his revolver.

“Run,” He screamed as he fired the first shot at the advancing shape. “God blast it! Someone has to bloody survive!” He continued as he fired his second and third.

I was away before the next shot rang out, moving quickly north with the sounds of gunfire and the angry roar of the Beast behind me. I heard a final shot and then dead silence.

I pray that Fields’ final shot was turned on his own chin and he denied the Beast the pleasure of another kill. I like to believe that Fields was the only man to ever hurt the Beast, both physically and by stealing its victory. I want to believe that he left the corpse of Fields where it fell; that the man who fought so hard to save me had escaped becoming meat for the Beast.

I ran on though the woods for what had to be hours, only slowing to a trot when my exhaustion started to make me worry that I would fall dead as the over-taxed horses we saw at the cross country race a few years back.

As soon as I slowed, I could feel the Beast right behind me. It was about to fulfill its omen from my dark dream. My friends and companions were all dead. It promised that I would be last.

I began to feel myself give in, thinking that I was only prolonging the inevitable. Better to face the creature and die like a man. To try my best to deny the monster its little victories as Fields had done.

It was then that I heard a small commotion from the northwest and saw light that could only be from a cook fire.

My rush north had led me back toward the Blues. I must have been moving closer to a scouting camp. One that was sent south from the main forces to patrol and make sure we were not turning back for a renewed attack.

My mind raced as I continued forward. I should turn back to the east and lead the damnable monster away from the camp.

Out of all the moments that had happened to that point and have happened since, it was this one that I know damned my soul. It was this choice that took a righteous young boy from Missouri and turned him into a scoundrel. Many would say that the Beast drove me to it, yet many a good man had stood up to the creature and died for his principles.

I have no doubt that Ashwood and Fields are in the bosom of God at this very moment. I like to think that Franklin and poor Tom Reynolds are there as well.

But, I know that I will never see those pearly gates or walk those streets of gold.

I know because the voices of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost; the voice of my good and kind conscience were all drowned out by the demonic baritone of the Beast's dark prophecy, "You will not die soon. James Connors of Missouri, you will die last."

Hearing this, I turned fully in the direction of the Union camp and was spurred on by a new and grim determination.

I burst into their camp, blood and sweat covered, with my hands up and a smile on my face. The division that greeted me was at least thirty men strong.

A young soldier checked me for weapons, and finding that I had none, bid me to walk toward the center of the encampment. We were almost there when the screaming started. Looking back toward the south, one could see bodies being thrown about by a huge and ominous black shape.

As my guard turned to see the cause of the alarm, I stepped forward and placing my hands on his head, twisted until the neck quickly snapped.

No one noticed me as the men moved forward and fired round after round into the rampaging creature.

I collected the boy's rifle and revolver, stole a horse from the line, and was away before the demon had time to kill everything between us.

That was two weeks ago. I have abandoned war, land, and family in my desperate fight to stay alive.

I am far to the west now, holed up in a small hunting cabin with a French trapper and his African wife. The trapper has lent me paper and pen, in order that I might write my family before I move on. Please, do not try and find me here. I leave on the morrow and will not return this way.

One would think that the sounds of the screams and gunshots, the aroma of death that permeates a place where senseless, bloody violence is occurring would drive a man insane.

However, the game of war long ago stripped me of red dreams of battlefield death or the need to relive even that unholy night in the woods.

No, my dreams are filled with the black Beast. It whispers to me as it cradles me in the darkness. It tells me of our pact of blood and bellows laughter at the ignorance of my plea for mercy from death itself.

It murmurs of the people it has tasted and the ones that it will take next. It lectures me on my new role in the world and promises that it will catch up to me in due time.

I know that my hosts here will soon be consumed by the creature. It has detailed the delights it will take in the devouring of the woman and the child that she does not even know she is caring.

I now fully understand that everyone I come in contact with, everyone that crosses my path, line up in front of me at the Beast's banquet table. It is a power that I am

burdened with and one that I hope my movement to the west will help alleviate.

Yet, I find that I am still too much of a coward to face the creature, and so, others must die in my place.

Now, you see why I cannot come home and no one must come after me. I am as dead as our dear brothers.

Tell mother as much and give her many grandchildren to replace the wayward children that she lost to war and outrage.

I must away, the Beast moves ever closer and it must not catch me idle.

Always and ever your loving brother,  
James G. Connors

Buck's most recent publication is the short story, "The Magician's Study" in The New Pulp Awards 2014 nominated *Carnacki: The New Adventures* from Ulthar Press. He has also had a short story published in *Machina Mortis: Steampunk'd Tales of Terror* from Knightwatch Press and edited the anthology, *Hunting Ghosts* from Black Oak Media.

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# THE LEATHER BRACELET

by Guy T. Martland

It was the summer between the end of school and the start of University. Alastair traveled alone, his friend due to meet him the next day at the hotel bar where he'd agreed to work for the summer. The ferry crossing from Lymington was calm and clear, the hotel growing on the horizon as it approached, flanked by a Tudor blockhouse castle. Gardens stretched down to a messy sand and shingle beach, strewn with seaweed. To the left, a public pier extended into the channel where an old paddle steamer was moored.

It was a grand, ramshackle place, its glamour faded and weather-beaten. Cracked black and white tiles lined the floor of the spacious reception hallway. In the corner of the room a piece of wallpaper was peeling away from the wall, fluttering in the wind that followed him inside. He sniffed at the slightly musty odour which hung in the air. This was Mr. Johnson's renovation project, having been acquired recently. There was an old-fashioned call bell on the counter which he pressed. A shuffling from a corridor preceded the arrival a disheveled elderly woman, holding a sheaf of paper. She scowled at Alastair unwelcomingly until he stammered out an introduction.

"Ah, Mr. Thomas - Tristan's friend. You can call me Mrs. Stadwick."

Alastair took her hand. It felt like parchment.

“We’ve been expecting you. I’m afraid Mr. Johnson isn’t around today to settle you in. But he’ll be here tomorrow, before your first shift. We’ve got you scheduled to start at ten.”

Alastair nodded a thank you. Mrs. Stadwick looked at him quizzically, as if expecting him to say something, but his mind seemed empty, the words which were normally there oddly absent.

“Let me show you to your room.”

He followed her up a series of increasingly smaller and narrower staircases to a collection of rooms beneath the eaves, located at the back of the building. Mrs. Stadwick pulled out a set of keys and slid one off the key ring, before opening a door into a small boxy space, which a bed almost filled. A small desk was also somehow crammed in; a bottle of wine stood on its warped wooden surface, its base securing a note in place. After pointing out the communal bathroom, Mrs. Stadwick gave Alastair the key and took her leave.

He opened the small window above the desk, letting the sea breeze flow into the room. The view didn’t offer much, just a sloping gable and a triangle of sky above, but he could hear the sea washing onto the shore below. He picked up the note, which was from his friend’s uncle, Mr. Johnson; it apologised for his absence, explained how he was looking forward to seeing him the following day. The bottle looked half decent with an embossed label; he remembered from his friend that the uncle was a connoisseur of French wines.

Alastair placed his bag on the floor and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Cracks ran along it, one of which



was being traced by a small spider, oblivious to his presence. As he watched, the arachnid seemed to be mending the crack as it traveled across the ceiling; he studied it confused, until he was distracted by some movement outside. He stood up and opened the door a notch, but there was no one there. However, a strong odour filled the corridor, a smell, almost medicinal, which he couldn't quite place. He returned to the room to unpack, hunger eventually driving him back out to explore.

When he closed the door he noticed a young woman in the corridor. She was in her early twenties, with long dark hair and sad chocolate eyes. Her skin was a delicate, fragile white and her hair was wet, as if she'd just taken a shower. She seemed familiar in a way he couldn't explain. As they passed, she looked up at Alastair and seemed about to say something. He stopped and turned but she had already disappeared along the twisting corridor.

Outside, he found the nearest public house, bought a beer and ensconced himself in a dark corner. He plucked a book from a shelf and began to read; it was some modern horror story which featured a strange hotel. The similarities were uncanny, right down to the abrupt receptionist, who shuffled around the place. After a few chapters, the words began to slide off the page. He looked up and something didn't seem quite right. The room had altered slightly: the angles of the beams had shifted and the door seemed to have jumped from one side of the room to the other. He shook his head, stood up and wandered out into the night, taking long deep breaths of the sea air.

As he navigated the corridors back to his room, he found himself lost, the medicinal smell stronger than ever. The walls of the hotel seemed to have shifted, moving around as if having a joke with him. After a few false turns and retreats, he finally found himself at the door to his room. The curtains were billowing in through the still open window, moonlight casting shadows across the bedspread, shadows that didn't quite vanish when he turned on the dim, fizzing electric light.

A few moments later, there was a knock at the door. He opened it, surprised to find the young woman he'd seen before standing outside.

"Er... hello," he stammered.

"Hello," she replied. "I was just wondering if you were settling in OK." Her voice had an accent he recognised as Eastern European.

"I'm fine, yes it's good," he stammered. "I'm Alastair," he continued, holding out his hand somewhat formally.

"I know. I'm Saskia," she replied. Her hand was warm, but damp.

"Um... do you want to come in? I have some wine?" he said, blurting out the first words which came to mind. Saskia nodded and came into the room, looking around at the austere walls. There was nowhere else to sit, so she sat on the bed.

Mr. Johnson had helpfully left a bottle opener, although only one wine glass. He found a half pint glass behind the door on a shelf – it was dusty but seemed clean. He brushed it out with a sleeve and poured the wine, giving the wine glass to his guest.

“So, you work here as well?” he asked, as they sipped the wine, close to one another on the bed. The sense of familiarity crept over him again, as if somehow, somewhere he knew this woman. He noticed that she wore a leather strap on her left wrist, fastened by a small metal clasp.

“Yes. I am a maid here. Summer job.”

“And from your accent, you’re from Eastern Europe?”

“Slovakia. Near Austria.”

“I know where it is,” he replied, almost too sharply. He had an odd sense he had been there, but at the same time, couldn’t see how or when this could have happened.

“So, maybe you don’t want to talk?” she replied, placing the glass of wine on the desk. And then, a moment later, she leaned forward and kissed him. Alastair thought she tasted of the sea.

The next morning he woke up alone. He blinked the day into his eyes, looking around the room, searching for the girl. To the side of the bed, a full wine glass stood on the desk. He remembered the odd feeling he’d had in the pub the night before, wondered if he’d just imagined the girl. Then he realised he was wearing a leather bracelet, the same one he seen on her wrist the night before. To try and clear his head, he took a shower before heading down to breakfast. The staff dining room was a grim black-walled box, sharing one wall with the adjacent blockhouse. There were a few hard-looking youths around the table, but no sign of Saskia.

“You the new boy then?” one of them grunted at Alastair, as he sat down with a plate of bacon and eggs. The man who spoke was the larger of the two, but more fat than muscle.

“Yes, I suppose so. Alastair, pleased to meet you.”

“Luke,” he replied, but didn’t introduce his considerably thinner neighbour. In fact, the man was so skinny, it seemed that skin, hair and eyes were all that separated him from a skeleton.

“One of his mastership’s posh school friends then?” asked Luke. Alastair hadn’t heard his friend referred to in this way before, but nodded and continued eating breakfast in silence.

Just as the two were about to leave, he asked them if they’d seen the maid.

“Which one you talking about?”

“Saskia.”

The men were both silent for a time, exchanging glances Alastair couldn’t fathom, until Luke spoke.

“You got no right, mentioning her. People don’t take too kindly to jokes like that around here.”

He was left to finish his breakfast alone, wondering what Luke had meant. Mr. Johnson appeared shortly afterwards to show Alastair around the main rooms of the hotel. He also took him to the bar, behind which he’d be spending most of his time that summer. The bar manager would show him the ropes, but in the meantime, there were a few odd jobs to sort out. The first was sorting out the small beach at the end of the garden.

“It looks scruffy,” Mr. Johnson said. “All the seaweed, and so on. When the ferry arrives, this is the first thing

they see of the hotel.” He nodded, remembering his arrival the day before.

So he set to work, spending most of the day filling rubbish bags with seaweed and the various bits of jetsam which littered the small crescent of strand. Amongst the litter were bottles, pieces of rubber, fishing tackle and the rotting corpses of a few dead fish. But the view across the Solent made up for it. At one point he thought he saw something flash across the sky, a flicker of metal, but when he blinked it was gone. Oddly, at the same time, there was the same strong smell of medication he’d noticed in the hotel the previous evening. Moments later, it was whisked away by the sea breeze.

At lunch he was again greeted by the laconic faces of Luke and Simon and the kitchen porter, whose name he didn’t catch. But no Saskia. As the sun began to lower in the sky, the beach was looking a lot tidier. He looked up to see the ferry coming in; on the upper deck he could see someone waving.

Alastair was back in the public house across the road, this time accompanied by his friend Tristan. They’d had a few drinks, Tristan raving about a concert he’d been to in Earls Court, some band Alastair hadn’t heard of, but he had their CD and would play it later.

“What do you think of the hotel?” Tristan asked, taking a gulp of his pint.

“It...it feels a bit like stepping back in time.”

“Yeah, it needs some updating.” Tristan nodded. “My uncle’s big project.”

“So who owned it before?”

“I don’t really know.”

“There was a scandal, though, so he managed to get it cheap,” Tristan said a few moments later.

“Really? What happened?” Alastair felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise.

“I’ll tell you outside,” he said, nodding to the corner of the bar. Where Alastair had sat the night before, Luke was sitting, leering over some girl who didn’t look exceptionally happy to be there. The door seemed to be in its right place when they left.

Tristan lit up Alastair’s cigarette first, before tending to his. He took a deep draw before he started. “The previous manager got into a bit of trouble. He was a bit of a lothario - put it about a bit, you know. He’d had a few run-ins with his wife before, I heard later. Anyway, he’d started seeing this member of staff, some chick from Slovenia or somewhere.”

“Slovakia?” Alastair suggested.

“Something like that. Anyway, pretty girl by all accounts. He was up to his usual stuff. Promising her the world and so on. Anyway, his wife found out – another member of staff told her. So his wife turns up at the hotel, starts having this massive argument with her husband in reception, which then moves out into the street. Things get even more heated and she pushes him into the path of a passing car.”

“Shit.”

“It gets better. Or worse, I suppose. The wife then goes on the warpath, looking for this girl. Charging around the hotel, smashing things up and so on. This poor girl is of

course, terrified. She sees the blue lights of the ambulance, thinks the woman has killed her husband and that she's next.

"The girl, Slovakia, runs down the fire escape, this crazed woman running after her. Chases her across the hotel gardens. Slovakia manages to escape but runs onto the pier. Then she's being pursued by the hotel manager's wife and the police. Or at least she thinks she is. But the police were running after the wife, not the girl."

"Anyway, end of the pier, not really anywhere else to go but the sea. She jumps in and starts swimming. It was a stormy night and there are strong currents out there. They called off the search after a few hours."

"Oh my God," Alastair replied, numbly, grasping for a cigarette from Tristan's packet. "When did this happen?" He found himself worrying the leather strap on his wrist.

"Hmm..." Tristan drummed his fingers on the table as he thought. "Funnily enough, it was almost exactly a year ago."

He spent the next few days in a daze. Mist gathered over the village, as if in response to his thoughts; it was sometimes so thick he couldn't even see the tip of his outstretched hand. Tristan seemed to gather there was something the matter, but couldn't fathom what. And Alastair couldn't seem to be able to tell him.

As the days passed, the mist cleared and Alastair began to question himself, whether what he had experienced that night was real or not. It certainly had seemed real, the touch of her skin, the soft gentle way her hair had

brushed on his face as they'd made love, the way she smelt of the sea. But could he have been dreaming?

He searched all the nooks and crannies of the hotel, looking for a sign, although he found nothing. He hung out with Tristan, went for long walks across the island, explored all the public houses he could find. In a way, things seemed to be returning to normal. Except when he was alone – when his shifts didn't coincide with Tristan's: late nights manning the empty bar on his own were the worst; late nights when every sound seemed to represent a drowned girl's footsteps.

He took to searching the local second hand bookshops, of which there were a few, for stories of the paranormal, ghost stories, science fiction stories. He read hundreds in his spare time, looking for an answer. Tristan's uncle ribbed him about being "bookish" as he always had a tome in his hand. There were no answers of course. Occasionally he'd see things in the sky above the sea, odd shapes that seemed to appear from nowhere and would disappear just as quickly as they arrived. Flashes of metal machines; sometimes they seemed to be on fire, plunging downwards into the water. He wondered if it was the stuff he'd been reading, feeding his imagination.

And then the summer, which had previously seemed endless, began to draw to a close. The prospect of University was looming and began to fill Alastair with trepidation. While he should have been excited, there was something which didn't feel right, something about his experiences in the early Summer which nagged at his mind. Tristan was off on a gap year – India, then Thailand, then



wherever took his fancy. As they had done before leaving school, they vowed to stay in touch.

It was a few days before he was due to leave when it happened. It was early evening and he was in the hotel garden, clearing away glasses. It had been a long summer day and the garden had been full to bursting with people in varying states of inebriation. Wasps buzzed over empty tumblers: a trap for the unwary.

Alastair was near the beach, glasses piled into a tray. He looked up toward the pier, as he often did, remembering the story Tristan had told him. The pier was empty bar a single figure, near the end; he could clearly see it was a girl with dark hair, wearing a long unseasonal coat. The figure turned to look in Alastair's direction: it had to be her.

He began to sprint, cutting across the garden to the pier, just as she had done the year before. He dashed across the small car park tucked behind the hotel garden, losing the apparition behind the small pierhead café. And then he was on the pier itself, hammering up the hardwood boards to the end.

The pier was empty, but even so he ran to the end, circling the wooden fisherman's shelter. Then he noticed there was something lying on the floor, near where the girl had stood. As he approached, he realised it was a coat: the same coat he'd seen her wearing. Grasping the white handrail, he found himself searching the dark, cold water beneath. The water swished around the piles, whispering words he couldn't catch.

Then he saw a shape, just beneath the water's surface, a hand waving beneath the foam. Without thinking about

the consequences, he found himself climbing over the metal balustrade. And then he launched himself into the waves.

“I don’t know how much time we have,” Saskia said urgently.

“Where are we?” Alastair asked, looking around at the deep blue walls of the room.

“It’s a construct, like the hotel.”

“A construct?”

“Alastair, there was an accident. You were on a shuttle, heading towards London. There was a terrorist attack.”

“An accident... I don’t understand.”

“Do you remember who I am?”

“You... you were the girl who drowned.”

“No. Think deeper. Think further back.”

“That night in the hotel... I thought I recognised you...”

Something seemed to break in Saskia’s face, tears began to well up in her eyes. “It was much more than that.”

“What do you mean, a construct?”

“It’s a kind of programme. You are stuck in a time from your past. Part of your mind created it for you... But we managed to get me in there too,” she replied, brushing her tears away.

“You mean the hotel isn’t real?”

“No, Alastair. You are currently hooked into a life support machine. In a hospital. They said you were one of the lucky ones.”

More tears began to spill over her cheeks.

“A life support machine?”

“Yes. The doctors don’t know...”

“Don’t know what?”

“Whether you’ll make it. I’m sorry, Al. I love you.”

She leaned forward and kissed him. Alastair thought she tasted of the sea.

When he woke up, he was lying on the beach, his clothes wet. Beside him on the stones was a crumpled up coat. He felt his wrist: the bracelet was still there, intact. It began to get darker, the late summer evening drawing in fast. Mr. Johnson saw him on the terrace as he walked back into the hotel, eyes widening.

“Have you been swimming? Fully clothed?”

“I fell off the pier...”

The laugh that followed sounded real enough. But Alastair found himself wondering if he had created it, in some dark recess of his mind.

The Summer ended, and life seemed to continue as normal. He went to University and began to live out his life, as if nothing had happened, with only the bracelet on his wrist as a reminder. After countless appointments with the University doctor, the man finally ended up almost shouting at him. “There is nothing wrong with you. You are in perfect health.” But he knew he wasn’t.

He began to live his life again, although it wasn’t quite the same. Not being able to remember the first time, it seemed like everything was new. He had a sense that somehow this time though, it was easier, as if the problems he’d had first time around weren’t problems. He found himself taking risks, more risks than he’d taken be-

fore maybe, although he couldn't tell. His fellow students thought he was a bit crazy. Every once in a while he'd see a flicker of something odd in the sky, which seemed to reinforce what his peers told him.

The next Summer he returned to the hotel with Tristan. Presumably as he had done in his previous existence. But he couldn't quite be sure. He'd spend hours on the pier, gazing into the water, willing Saskia to appear once more. But she never did. He wondered if the doctors were still working on him, he wondered if time in this reality was the same.

His hands stroked the bracelet on his wrist, the artefact that linked him to his past and his future. One thing was certain: if he carried on living, he would meet her at some point. He wasn't sure when, but he knew it would happen. Maybe then he could truly start living again.

When Guy Martland is not writing, he works in a hospital as a pathologist and sometimes plays a 19th century German violin (but not at the same time). He is a Milford SF alumnus, having attended the course in 2012 and 2014. At 6'8", he claims to be one of the tallest SF writers in the world.

# CHRISTMAS EVIL

## by Darren French

There had to be at least a dozen of the bastards out there.

Rick watched through the window as a pack of the creatures slid across the blue-white snow and disappeared behind what was left of the McKellen's house, now no more than a wreck of charred timbers. Waiting until he was sure they were gone, Rick snapped the curtains shut and puked on his boots.

He was having a lousy damn day.

He hadn't barricaded the house like he should've, and the freaks had broken down the front door and busted several windows before he'd finally driven them back. And all so he could scrounge up some grub for Matt.

Steam and stink rose from the mess on his feet as he went to the fridge and stuffed food into the old potato sack he'd found in the basement. He didn't pay attention to what he was grabbing, which was a lot of condiments and a package of expired bologna. When he finished, he slung the sack over his shoulder and crossed the kitchen.

As he neared the living room, he grimaced.

Only one of the creatures had managed to get inside, and Rick had killed it by lopping off its head with a large, stainless steel bread knife. Now, less than a half-hour later, the thing was already in the late stages of decomposition: its head was liquefying, and its body sagged on the carpet like a garbage-bag full of leaves.

The only thing Rick could make out in the slop were the thing's eyes, which had lost their cold menace and reverted back to stones.

The snowman had almost completely melted away.

Rick took one last look and then descended into the basement with ketchup and bologna for his fourteen-year-old son.

Whether or not he liked bologna, Matt didn't eat. He sat in shadows and dust in the back corner of the room, staring wide-eyed at the squat windows that crowned the far wall. He was nothing but elbows and knees, not a trace of Rick's hulking mass visible in his rail-thin body, his mother's son from tip to toe.

Rick ate his bologna and sat tugging his scruffy red beard, sizing up the situation. Then he broke apart a set of wooden chairs, laid the resulting pieces across one of the window panes, and hammered them to the sills. When the barrier didn't even keep out the dying sunlight, he stopped and sat in one of the remaining chairs.

Matt was still staring at the windows. Rick figured a good old-fashioned tongue lashing would snap him out of it, but he pointed at the sack instead. "Some bologna left."

Silence. Then, quietly: "They got in, didn't they?"

Rick scowled. Damned kid had warned him about the lack of barricades.

"How many of them were there?"

"Twelve. Fifteen, could've been," Rick said, leaving out that only three had actually attacked. The rest had hung back, watching with their dark, glinting eyes, more of a scouting mission than a raid.

Matt looked down at his feet. “Do you think they could make more...I mean...more of themselves?”

Rick shrugged. He hadn't thought of that. It was possible. Like the snowmen's stone eyes, their stick arms had taken on a surprising amount of humanity. One had even made a pretty convincing fist.

Neither of them said anything for a while, and when the silence seemed thick enough to choke on, Matt said, “Do you think it's the snow?”

“Huh?”

“The snow. Is that what caused this, do you think?”

Rick thought about last night's storm, how the snow had sparkled so strangely, how it seemed blue as it fell. He shouldn't have let Matt play in the stuff that morning. But how was he to know what would happen? Hell, how was he to know the boy still made snowmen? The kid might even be a queer, he thought. Be just like Skyler and June to raise a fairy for a son.

“We should barricade the door...right?” Matt took a longer, harder inspection of his shoes. “Don't you think?”

“Knock yourself out,” Rick said, grabbing more bologna from the sack.

Matt slouched, but eventually rose and began the process of blocking the lone entrance. When Matt was done, Rick had to admit the barricade looked solid. The kid had started with the empty cabinets, which he'd dragged up to the door one step at a time, and then reinforced them with cinderblocks. The final touch were the chairs Rick had started to dismantle.

Panting, Matt took the last of the bologna from the sack and sat back down. He looked around the room as he ate.

“Thanks for the food,” he said, quietly.

Rick leaned back in his chair and eyed the boy, wondering, not for the first time, if he frightened the kid. He’d seen little of Matt over the last five years, and who knew what crap his mother had fed him about his old man. This was to be the first Christmas he’d spent with Matt since the boy was six, and Rick knew nothing about having a family Christmas. He hadn’t even put up a tree. Those Klein bastards down the street had to rub it in, too, with their lit-up eyesore of a house.

Rick finally nodded and stared up at the windows. Matt finished his supper and sat back in the shadows. Father and son, they waited.

Rick had expected the snowmen to return at sunset, but one hour into the moonless night, he still heard and saw no sign of them. He wondered if he should’ve gone back upstairs before Matt built the barricade. They didn’t have nearly enough provisions, and the bread knife poking out from the waistband of his jeans was their only real weapon. He stared at his boots. Puke had hardened like concrete.

Hours passed. Rick fell asleep once or twice, but not for long. He couldn’t take his eyes off the darkness beyond the windows.

At close to midnight, Matt’s voice cut through the blackness: “We’re moving.”

“Huh?”

“Mom, Skyler, and me. We’re moving to Arizona next month...to where Skyler’s from.”

“Skyler. Son of a bitch. Can’t have his own kids, so he takes mine?”



Matt shrugged. "He's alright."

"Alright. Right." Rick grunted. "Arizona, huh? No snow at least."

Matt laughed weakly. "Mom didn't tell you, did she?"

"She supposed to?"

"She said she would."

"You gonna visit?"

Matt said nothing for a long time, and Rick thought the darkness and the silence seemed one in the same. Finally the boy said, "Mom doesn't have money for a plane ticket. Skyler says he'll buy one if I work it off."

Rick scoffed, and when he finally spoke, he said the only thing that came to mind: "Still make snowmen, huh?"

Matt laughed. "No...I mean, not usually. I was bored...I guess."

"Sorry I don't have no Christmas tree for you," Rick said.

"That's alright. I'm allergic."

Rick snorted. Silence gathered.

Then came a soft rustling, like something sliding over the snow. Rick tensed, listening for numbers, but the attack came like it had before: all at once.

The snowmen had soundlessly entered the house and now began throwing their bulk against the cellar door. The cabinets and cinderblocks shook, but held. One chair toppled off the pile and bounced down the stairs.

From the windows, stick arms smashed out three panes of glass, and a head sneered in at them, then another, and another, carrot noses contorted with rage. They breathed plumes of frosty blue air, which sparkled and cast a dim

light into the room.

Rick pulled the knife from his waistband and stumbled in the half-light until he found Matt cowering in the corner. The things at the windows were still struggling to get in, but Rick could see it was pointless. Their abdomen sections were too large, and they were wedged tightly into the window casings, their stick arms flailing helplessly.

The snowmen at the door, however, were making headway, and the wood splintered and flaked under their relentless pounding. They broke free a chunk large enough for Rick to see one of the creatures holding a baseball bat in its twig-fingered hands, gently shaking it like a slugger about to knock one over the fence.

The snowman burst through the hole, pushed the chairs out of its way, and crawled on top of the cabinets.

It laughed, a sound like shattering ice.

With the rest of the snowmen still stuck in the windows, the only way out was up. Grabbing Matt by the arm, Rick barreled up the stairs, leaping what was left of the barricade and hitting the bastards like a battering ram. Stick arms tore through Rick's shirt and into his flesh as he swung the bread knife. Snow sprayed into the air in plumes, and he broke through their lines in a matter of seconds. Pushing Matt ahead of him, he ran outside, and they stumbled toward the Klein's house through the blue, shimmering snow.

The roof and walls of the house were covered in multicolored bulbs, icicle lights dripping from the eaves, and several inflatable elves, a plastic Santa, and eight plastic reindeer stood merrily on the front lawn. It was

the only house that remained untouched.

When they reached the front porch, Rick glanced over his shoulder. Darkness. They went inside.

The house seemed abandoned. Though none of the windows or doors had been broken, no one answered his calls as he walked through the first floor rooms, and the phones were dead. Maybe the Kleins had left for the holidays, or maybe the snowmen had gotten them.

After dead-bolting the front and back doors and locking every first floor window, Rick grabbed a blanket from the downstairs bathroom closet and then went into the kitchen and rifled through drawers until he found a bottle of lighter fluid and a box of matches to melt the icy bastards. Finally, he ushered Matt into the study on the far side of the house. The boy was shaking visibly, his face the color of Crisco. Rick placed the matches and lighter fluid on the table next to the door, sat Matt in the leather recliner, and draped the blanket around the kid's shoulders.

When he was sure Matt was okay with only a few scrapes and bruises, Rick peered out the study's window. Nothing but the snow, sparkling like some alien landscape. But within seconds the creatures came into sight, an indistinct mass shifting and sliding toward the house.

Matt had been right. There was at least a hundred of them now.

Seeing the look on his father's face, Matt jumped to his feet. Together they ran to the front door, then the back. The creatures were closing in on the house from all sides, their shattering, barking voices growing louder. Rick

realized he'd left the lighter fluid and the matches back in the study, but there wasn't time to go back for them now. They had only one option left. He led Matt upstairs and into the first room they came to.

He hoped there'd be somewhere they could hide until the creatures moved on, but when he was only a few feet into the room, he stopped in his tracks. Matt slammed into his father's back, and then stepped slowly to his side. The room shone a bright, glittering blue from the four massive blocks of ice that stood beside the bed. Inside each block was a neighbor: Jack and Ruby Blair, and Carl and Melinda Cooper. Gathered in a semi-circle around these poor bastards, like scouts around a campfire, were kids playing with toys.

Rick stammered and Matt blinked. The children gazed at them doe-eyed.

They were all about the same age, eight at the oldest, but Rick recognized only three of them as neighborhood kids. There was something familiar about a few of the others, though, something about their features and their hair.

One of the boys, who was forcing a Ninja Turtle action figure to ride a stuffed Rudolph, stood and stared placidly at Rick. He hair was slicked back, and he wore a red sweater with a picture of a snowman on the front. "Are you here to play with us?" he said, his words tinkling like silver bells.

Wide-eyed, Rick stalked over, grabbed the kid by the arm, and turned to Matt. "We gotta get them the hell out of here." He looked back at the boy in the sweater. "You need to come with us. Now."

The boy wriggled free of Rick's grasp, smiled, and sat down with his reindeer and Ninja Turtle. The other children went back to their toys while the creatures hammered on the front and back doors. The floor shuddered under Rick's feet.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Rick said. "Get up!"

Matt placed his hand on his dad's shoulder and considered the kids for a moment. "Where are your parents?"

In unison, the children sang, "At the doors. They'll be here soon."

Matt stepped back. Then he glanced at the people inside the ice blocks and quickly backed away until he stood in the doorway, clasping his hands to the frame. Rick followed his gaze.

The people inside the ice had changed. When he and Matt had entered, the couples had been their usual middle-aged yuppie selves. Now they seemed much younger, maybe twenty, and their clothing was different, too. Jack Blair's blue polo shirt had grown bulky and had lightened in color. A green blob at the center of the sweater-shirt swirled until it resembled a Christmas tree.

Rick stared at the kids with dawning horror. The frosty breath. Not a single adult in sight.

The child version of Mr. Klein looked up from his Nintendo DS and grinned. His teeth were tiny sharpened icicles. "You'll be playing with us soon," he said, "and Christmas will live forever in your heart!"

Downstairs, wood shattered, and there came a sound like snakes slithering in a pit.

Rick and Matt bolted through the door and down the hall. Each room they passed was similar to the first: filled with doughy children sitting around ice cocoons and playing with toys as if it was Christmas morning. Rick heard scratching behind him as the snow creatures clawed their way up the stairs.

When Rick and Matt came to the end of the hall, Rick looked frantically for a closet or an attic pull chain, but there was nowhere left to run. He put an arm around Matt and drew him close. The boy wasn't whimpering or shaking. Stuffing one hand into the side pocket of his jacket, Matt withdrew the matches and the small bottle of lighter fluid, which he must have grabbed as they fled the study. Rick nodded.

They sprayed lighter fluid into each room and from one end of the hall to the other. When they were done, they went back to the far end of the hall and waited. The creatures scratched, climbing closer. The children sang, *Oh, Holy Night*.

The first snowman in line crested the final step and stood. He had to be at least eight feet tall, with small trees for arms. He belched blue transforming frost breath, narrowed his coal eyes, and roared; it was the sound of an ice-covered lake tearing apart.

Rick and Matt lit separate matches and dropped the tinder to the floor.

Fire erupted, swallowing the hallway, the rooms, the kids, the snowmen. As Rick and Matt were consumed by flame, they listened to the roaring fire and the tinkling bell-like screams of the children, and they watched the snowmen melt.

With their arms around each other, a warmth crept into their hearts.

Darren French believes that Kage Baker's tale "Calamari Curls" is the greatest short story ever written. Using this and other odd tales as an inspiration, he writes the weirdest fiction he can dream up. His short story "Night of the Pygmy Root," a campy horror yarn about class warfare, will appear in an upcoming issue of *The Realm Beyond*. He holds a Masters Degree in American and New England Studies from the University of Southern Maine and resides in a small New England town with his wife Gill and their son Jeremy.



NOV. 8<sup>TH</sup>

OBJECTIVE ACHIEVED!!!

Guys – it finally happened! I GOT THE JOB!! Yes, your intrepid blogger Muriel Sharpe has FINALLY landed her



dream gig as a film archivist. I'M SO EXCITED!!! It took me 4 years of undergrad and 2 post but I am at last ready to make my big screen debut! And by that I mean getting down with some SERIOUS ARCHIVING and film restoration!

But of course, it wouldn't be my life if there wasn't a cloud to the silver lining. As it turns out, I'm not super crazy about my bosses. First of all, their names are Kurt and Kitt? Are you fucking kidding me? KURT and KITT??? Did they like, apply for their positions at the same time wearing matching outfits? At first I thought they HAD to be a couple, but nope, not even dating. They're both annoyingly attractive too, perfect, skinny and blonde. Totally LA... and we know how much I LOVE that. Seriously, if I could live somewhere else, I would be out of here in a heartbeat. I am so OVER this town. But here is where I need to be to do what I love, so Kurt and Kitt are what I have to deal with. At least for the time being.

Oh, and one thing, OF COURSE Kurt is a TOTAL CHAUVINIST. Even after I got the job he kept questioning me about my qualifications and I'm like, hello! EIGHT YEARS OF SCHOOL!! But no, he keeps going on and on about "practical experience" as if I'm some ditzy girl who doesn't know how to handle a film print or something. And I mean, yeah, I haven't done a TON of print handling, but I've spent a lot of time with Gina in the booth of the Crescent and I think that with my EDUCATION the point should be moot. But it's not, because I am a woman. And Kitt, instead of backing up a sister, just stands there nodding to everything Kurt says like some sort of Barbie automaton. WHATEVER. I'll make the best of it, but I got

a misogynist vibe there, BIG TIME.

Anyway, heading into the office to talk about my first real assignment! Later for now!

The Downtown Nickelodeon, known to local cinephiles as “The Old Nick”, was tucked in between a Mexican grocer and a used stereo store on 8<sup>th</sup> street in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. The once garish marquee had been long torn down, but the greasy window of the boarded-up ticket booth was still visible to the keen-eyed observer. Muriel had to use Google maps to find it, a fact that gave her a twinge of shame as she prided herself on knowing the locations of all the old Hollywood movie houses. Even in its heyday the Nick was a lesser frequented theater, mostly a second run venue, so Muriel felt she could afford a little slack. Besides, as exciting as this assignment was, it seemed more janitorial than archive-related, and Muriel was a little offput that this dingy rung on the ladder was where she was expected to start. *I suppose I should be grateful that I landed the job*, Muriel told herself. But thinking it was one thing; believing was another matter entirely.

Standing at the chained and padlocked front doors, she rooted through her fully stuffed backpack for the keys. Past a bag of Skittles and a travel bottle of Aussie hairspray she found them, twisted and stuck in the tines of one of her roller-style hairbrushes. Muriel sighed as she pulled the keys loose, carrying the weight of the world on her mannish shoulders. Adding injury to insult the sky began to drizzle, dampening her hair into a flat frizzy

mop. California rain was a rare and bad omen, thought Muriel glumly. Why did things always have to be so hard?

But Muriel's soggy spirits were lifted as she took in the wonderful, decaying lobby with its grand staircase and tall proscenium archways. The velvet curtains were tattered and moth eaten and the fixtures – no doubt scavenged for scrap – were long gone, but the theater held proudly to its old world glamour even under an apocalyptic layer of dust. A toppled stanchion still clung to a coiled, rotted rope, and the ruin of a concession booth promised popcorn, soda and candy that had long been consumed. Stepping fully into the lobby Muriel's footfalls echoed off of the chipped marble floor, invoking the ghost heels of movie-goers past, and she found herself swept up in a wave of nostalgia for a time she had never lived. To a film preservationist this was not an uncommon sensation, but here, in this once vital house of cinema, the feelings were amplified tenfold, redefined with crystalline clarity.

The focal point of the lobby was a large marble fountain that stood at the apex of the room like a holy altar. It was cracked and crumbling and hadn't held water since the sixties at the latest, but it still had the power to command the viewer's attention. As a centerpiece for a movie theater lobby it was quite unusual, both garish and beautiful, and Muriel approached it with a mixed appreciation. It was a multi-layered construction; a medium size pool hung suspended by a column above a larger, ground-level pool, the sea-shell sculpt of both suggesting an odd, mid-century fusion of nautical and art nouveau. Draped upon the column, in a spiraling,

heavenward pattern, were winged cherubs, or angels upon closer inspection. Even as an agnostically raised girl Muriel had an affinity for angels, viewing them as symbols of feminine power and strength. It gave her some comfort to know they were there, keeping her in sight as she ventured into the darkened recesses of the theater.

It took her a few minutes to find the breaker room, despite the fact that Kurt had explained to her in detail where it was located, to the far left of the dilapidated concession booth. It was dark and cluttered and she needed her phone's flashlight to find her way, but when she flipped on the breakers the theater was rewarded with welcoming light. Some bulbs popped from the strain of being suddenly revived, but the ones that survived gave off a hazily sufficient illumination. Apparently Kitt was good enough at her job to put in the necessary call to the power company and not leave her new employee fumbling in the dark. "Hooray for small miracles," Muriel remarked aloud, giving herself the tiniest of chuckles.

Beyond the lobby were the doors leading to the main auditorium, and stepping through them Muriel was once again transported across time. The three story screen was yellowed and torn in several places, but it put to shame most found in modern megaplexes outside of the ones made to IMAX specifications. One could easily imagine taking in a matinee show of *Lawrence of Arabia* here during its initial run and getting entirely lost in the projected vistas, overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the all-encompassing anamorphic image. The seats, still arranged in their three section pattern, had long gone to seed and the room hung thick with the smell of mildew,

rot and the specter of cigarettes long smoked. But it wouldn't have stopped Muriel from plopping down and digging into a bucket of popcorn had some time-traveling projectionist started running a freshly struck print of *Double Indemnity*, or even better, *Touch of Evil*.

Above and to the back was a grand balcony, the kind you didn't see any more in movie theaters, and Muriel could almost make out the silhouettes of couples necking in the shadowy back rows. Ten feet or so above the balcony was the dusty window of the projection booth, looking out over the auditorium like a giant's cataracted pupil. There lay Muriel's destination, but down here, in the safety of the aisles, it didn't look like a very inviting place. The blackness within had the stillness of a crypt and Muriel could not shake the feeling that whatever slept up there was something that was best left undisturbed.

But it was her job to venture into that crypt, so after lingering a bit in the auditorium's splendor she summoned her courage, slipped the key into the lock of the projection booth door and entered to a stale gust of air. The light from the hall barely cut into the gloom, so Muriel fumbled along the wall for a light switch, at last finding one and flicking it on. She needed a moment to take in what lay there before her. The room was dusty and stale and didn't appear to have been used in many a decade, but this was all to be expected. The cutting table had fallen to termites and years of neglect, leaving one of the legs snapped and the table top tipped over at an angle. The splicing equipment sat rusting on the floor with scraps of old leader littered about it like scattered

petals. But the projectors, twin hulks of iron, glass and steel, looked shockingly intact. Muriel found herself running a hand along their smooth pleasing forms the way someone might do to a thoroughbred pony or a finely restored vintage car. There was sensuality to their construction that was lost in modern equipment, a craftsmanship that had fallen by the wayside for the sake of efficiency and progress. It saddened Muriel to see them so neglected, and even though it had not been suggested or even implied in her duties, she was tempted to fire the twin workhorses up to see if they still ran.

What *was* implicit in her duties was to inventory the moldy boxes that had been stored in the booth for the better part of the century and see if they held any lost prints. Stacks upon stacks of the boxes lined the walls, sagging under the weight of the years and leaning together like old people needing the other's support. They reeked of mildew and rot and their corners were ragged and rat-chewed, but still they held a certain sad air of dignity.

"Might as well get started," Muriel sighed to herself. But in truth she was thrilled as she wandered into the stacks and picked a box from the top layer, careful that it wouldn't upset the others. She set it down on the floor, and tore open the moldy boxtop, an eager child digging into a Christmas present.

Her nose and throat were immediately greeted by a blast of noxious fumes; the reek of photo chemicals that were far past their expiration date. But the unpleasant odor was a small price to pay for the glory that lay within. Stacked neatly in the box were circular tins – the kind

used to house prints in the old days. She felt the same sort of thrill an archaeologist might feel uncovering relics that had been buried for almost a century.

## **NOV. 11<sup>TH</sup>**

### **GOLDEN AGE HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR AT THE OLD NICK**

One word...AMAZING!!! My first day working at the Old Nick was everything I could have dreamed! I mean, at first I was a little skeezed out being by myself in such a huge abandoned building, but after a few minutes I took to the place like a fish to water! Looks like this old gal (not really, I just turned 35...still young!) was born to be a world-class film archivist. As if there was ever any doubt!

So as it turns out, I guess my bosses aren't TOTALLY CLUELESS, though I seriously don't think they know what they have with the prints I found in the projection booth. In truth, I don't know what we have either, but you bet your butt I aim to find out! It's not going to be easy – the masking tape labels are worn and unreadable so I'm going to have to get my hands dirty and look at the prints with my own equipment, something that I'm not really supposed to be doing. But screw that, I'm not going to let those Ken and Barbie robots get the credit for finding some lost classic! I didn't tell either of them about my blog, but I know I can trust you guys. That said, mum's the word, first rule of fight club, don't let the cat out of the bag, etc...

ANYWAY, more will be revealed when I go back there tomorrow. If it wasn't for the fact that I need to shower

and get online to post, I would probably sleep there. I have the feeling that I'll be pulling an all-nighter one of these days, or nights rather! ;)

The following morning Muriel arrived at the Old Nick early, pausing only a moment to admire her fountain angels before heading directly into the booth. Any reservations she had from the previous day were gone; now the theater was an old and trusted friend and she was its loyal caretaker. She loved its peeling walls and threadbare carpets and if she had been a woman of wealth she would have bought the place herself and restored it to its former glory. Alas, all of her trust fund had gone into college, and film archiving, while spiritually rewarding, was not likely to make her rich. It was a sad feeling to know that her time here was brief, that the Nick would soon be gone entirely. But Muriel was no stranger to sad feelings, so she pushed them aside and set about getting to work.

With a little creative – re: jury-rigged – re-construction, Muriel was able to get the old splicing table reasonably stabilized and quickly set up her own equipment. Less than a half an hour later and she was holding her first piece of celluloid under the looking glass and parsing through clues as to its title of origin. She identified it as a print of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and while this was a film Muriel quite enjoyed, it was a well documented title and something most students had seen by their first year of American lit. Putting it aside, she dug into another box, then another, opening tin after tin, her spirits falling with



every unremarkable find. *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Cat People* – all wonderful films but all easily found on DVD, Blu Ray or TCM on any given night. As the morning wore on Muriel began to suspect that she would not uncover any lost relics in this dreary acquisition, and the feeling that her talents were being wasted re-surfaced like a badly digested meal.

After lunch Muriel resolved to remain optimistic and shifted her focus to a stack of boxes that sat in the corner, looking somehow moldier and more pathetic than the ones she had opened already. Opening the first of the boxes she was hit with a gust so foul that she could only assume something had crawled into the packaging and died, likely a mouse or small rat. She shifted the tins around, checking the corners, and was happy to find the box free of rotting animal corpses. But that horrible smell had to be something, and she wondered if it would be wise to invest in a breathing mask, or to stop the work altogether. Cancer was not high on her list of wants, but the fear of it was not enough to keep her from cracking the first of the tins. Looking down at the magic that was coiled within dissipated her apprehension along with the fumes.

Just by eyeballing the way the print had been stored, Muriel was certain that she was looking at something from the 1930's or earlier, significantly increasing the odds that she had unearthed something that had been lost in the annals of time. As with the other reels the masking tape labels were degraded and illegible, so the only way to identify the print was by putting it on to her table and under the glass, which is exactly what she did. There,

magnified in vibrant, full-frame black and white, were images that Muriel had seen only in film history documentaries and reference books. She scrolled the reel towards the leader, heart leaping as she scanned the frames for the title card. When she found it she had to steady herself from fainting.

Looking back up at her in elegant script were the words “Blind Courtesy”.

*Blind Courtesy* was a drama from 1931 that had been directed by British auteur Lyle Abernathy, who would only go on to direct two more Hollywood films before returning to his home country to care for his infirmed and ailing mother. The film’s primary claim to fame was that it starred silent era ingénue Delia Whitmore in her first sound role, and critics responded so unkindly to her deep, manly voice that the tortured actress hung herself a mere month after the picture ended its first and only theatrical run. In a sad twist of irony Whitmore was nominated for a posthumous Oscar, but lost to Helen Hayes’ and *The Sins of Madelon Claudet*. Even in death poor Delia could find no validation – a feeling to which Muriel, seeking validation herself, could relate.

Despite the apologetic nomination the film was a box office flop, and after a fire on the Warner Brothers lot in 1940 it was assumed that all known prints of the film had been destroyed. But here Muriel was looking at one, crisp and clean as it was on the day of its eighty year-old debut. How it had remained here undiscovered was a mystery, but the answer, likely a matter of simple neglect, was irrelevant. Now there was the only the question of what to do next.

Muriel knew what her type-A bosses Kurt and Kitt would want her to do. They would want her to follow protocol, to re-box the print immediately and deliver it straight to the home office. From there it would be shipped back to the studio, shelved indefinitely unless some bean-counting executive deemed it profitable to shit the film out in a half-assed streaming format. And that was if things went well. More likely was that *Blind Courtesy* would remain in the dustbins of obscurity and no one, Muriel included, would ever have the pleasure of seeing it. The thought of this heinous injustice, this crime against cinema, was too much for Muriel to rightfully bear. It went against everything she believed in as an archivist, and as a film lover.

Screw Kurt and Kitt, screw their protocols, and screw the studio. Muriel had to experience this lost treasure as it had been intended; on the silver screen. And she was willing to risk it all – her career, her future, everything – for the privilege.

She looked to the twin projectors, standing tall like iron sentinels. There was something about them, some quiet, ancient wisdom that made Muriel question what she was about to do on a deep, preternatural level. But the lure of *Blind Courtesy* was impossible for her to resist, so she focused back on the table and carefully set about assembling the five reel print. An hour later her trembling hands threaded the lead of reel one into the gate, and the film was ready to be viewed for the first time in many decades.

With the flick of a switch the projectors rattled to life, and for a horrified moment Muriel was sure that they

were going to seize up and mangle the print. But the gate fluttered gently like the soft beating of a moth's wing and the strip ran through unfettered. The twin bulbs lit with a soft glow and down in the darkened auditorium images once lost in time were recalled from the ether like welcome ghosts. Muriel could hear the scuffling of shoes and the rustle of fingers in popcorn boxes echoing through time, and she wanted so desperately to join them.

*To hell with it*, Muriel thought. *If I am going to risk my job by running this, why should I stay up here for the entire screening?* Of course, the responsible thing to do would be to remain in the booth and monitor the projectors, but Muriel had passed responsible a ways back and gone barreling straight on to reckless. To come this far only to be denied the experience of watching the film in a darkened theater, well, that would just be stupid. And if there was one thing that Muriel Sharpe couldn't stand, it was thinking of herself of as stupid.

So it was decided. She checked the gates one last time and satisfied that all was working properly, went downstairs to take in a private, once-in-a-lifetime screening of *Blind Courtesy*. Her only regret was that she didn't have any popcorn to munch on.

## NOV. 12<sup>TH</sup>

### A "COURTESY" TO MY READERS...

Guys...I probably shouldn't be sharing this with you, but...I'm just too excited and I have to tell someone! Today at the Old Nick, well...it seems that sometimes dreams really do come true.

There I was, performing my archivist duties (I still have

some qualms there, but whatever) when I stumbled upon a treasure that has been lost to the world for many, MANY years. What was this forgotten gem you ask? Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that it concerned the blind daughter of a wealthy southern family, who despite her obvious handicap has a better grasp on the lives of her family than they do themselves. This of course leads to both laughter and tears, and the heroine, after several heart-breaking setbacks, ultimately finds love with a handsome and rich friend of the family. Roll credits.

Corny? Maybe by today's cynical standards. But some of us can still get swept up in a simple, elegant story told by people who were more concerned with advancing a magical new art form than making a quick buck. Sadly, they don't make them like this sweet, timeless tale any more.

Not that I would have first-hand knowledge of the forgotten film in question. ;)

Sorry to be so cagey, but those of you who love old film as much as I do have by now figured out what I'm talking about. I wish I could tell you that soon you'll have a chance to experience what I experienced today, but alas, I do not currently wield that kind of influence in my chosen profession. But a girl can dream, right?

Anyway, hope I haven't teased too much. I hope to have an equally exciting day tomorrow, so I'm off to bed...if I can get to sleep. I'll see you lovelies on the silver screen!  
Xoxo

The next morning, as she passed the lobby fountain,

Muriel experienced a dim echo of the dream she had the night before. It had been a rough-reworking of *Blind Courtesy*, with Muriel naturally cast in the Delia Whitmore role, but instead of suffering from blindness like the film's heroine, Muriel could only see the world in the rich, black and white hues of early cinema. The events that transpired were more drawn from her subconscious than from the movie itself, and Muriel had trouble recalling any real details, but she did remember something that happened in the dream's finale. She was rushing through a train station to tell a faceless man not to go, that she loved him but just hadn't been able to find the words, when something swept down at her from out of the sky. Whatever it was it had great wings and long black talons, and before she could scream the horrible thing was shrieking and tearing at her face, waking her with a jolt.

This final, unpleasant detail had been buried until the sight of the winged figures on the fountain dredged it back up. Sadness crept in as she slumped up the stairs to the booth; a feeling that her dreaming mind, and her angels, had betrayed her.

She considered starting with the newer boxes, the ones that held prints of well-known and well-preserved titles, but she couldn't resist the temptation to scour the foul smelling box for more lost gems. And to her delight, her temptation was immediately rewarded. The third tin she opened held an infamous, pre-code gangster picture titled *Knuckles Mahoney*, and if Muriel had her film history correct (and she was certain that she did) it had not seen the light of a projector since 1938. All of the reels were pristine and accounted for, making assemblage easy, and

before she knew it the print was threaded up and ready to roll.

But there was one thing missing. She simply could not endure another showing without some popcorn, so she rushed out to the corner convenience store to see what they had. Settling for a bag of the pre-popped kind, she bought the snack and hurried back to the theater, eager to get her matinee underway. When she arrived at the doors a homeless woman was parked in front, a junk filled shopping cart blocking the entrance. Muriel stood patiently waiting for the woman to move, to get on with her daily routine. But the woman just stared at the theater, at the boarded-up ticket booth, pulling some memory out of her addled, soggy brain.

Muriel cleared her throat, attempting to facilitate some sort of action, and the old crone turned to her, scowling with a pair of eyes that seemed clouded by smoke.

“I saw a picture there once,” the woman said. “When I was a little girl. A horror picture. Dreadful film. Kept me up at night for weeks.”

Muriel had deep sympathy for the homeless, especially the elderly, but the clock was ticking and she was anxious to get to her movie. “That’s nice,” Muriel said condescendingly. “I’m sorry, but I have to get inside.”

“Nice?” The woman bristled. “Nothing nice about it! It was a dreadful film, just dreadful. Some kind of monster....with wings.” The deep creases in her forehead became somehow more pronounced as she rifled through a long-troubled mind for more details. “A harpy! Yes, that’s what it was...a harpy, like in Greek myth.” Another pause. “Dreadful film.”

There had to be something Muriel could do to move the woman along. The obvious finally dawned on her, and she reached into her pack for a single, crumpled bill. No sooner had she offered it when the dollar was snatched greedily from her hand. The poor old crone was not above charity, it would seem.

“You promise me one thing,” she croaked. “If you find that movie in there, you burn it. Burn it to cinder!”

Though she had no intention of ever doing such a thing, Muriel wanted to get the crazy derelict out of her way, so she offered a placating nod. “I will. You have a nice day.”

With a scoff the crone pushed her cart on, rusty wheels squeaking her disapproval of the younger woman’s patronizing. But Muriel was too preoccupied to give it much thought and five minutes later she was seated, center aisle as usual, happily crunching away as Knuckles Mahoney began what was certain to be a thrilling life of cinematic crime.

The film was pretty standard fare for the genre, and the actor who played Knuckles, a long forgotten contract player named Miles Hoover, had nothing on the great screen gangsters portrayed by Jimmy Cagney or Edward G. Robinson. The production was chintzy for a 1930’s studio picture, and Muriel found the story offensively misogynistic even by the lax standards of the day. She was mentally composing a scathing review when the effects of the heavily-greased, factory-packaged popcorn took hold, causing her to doze off.

As often happens to those who fall asleep during movies, Muriel’s dreams fused with the narrative playing



out onscreen, and in a devilish twist of irony her subconscious cast her in the role of Cherry, one of Knuckles' poorly treated molls. Even stranger was that Muriel thrilled at being the gangster's plaything; every cruel word, infidelity, and slap was endured with a rush of dark, forbidden pleasure. When the vicious thug finally saw fit to ravage her, Muriel lost herself entirely, clawing at his pin-striped suit with garish nails, her moans of pleasure rising to a lurid pitch that would never make it past the MPAA censors. Her cries transitioned to the wail of sirens, and she and Knuckles were now on the run, hiding out in some abandoned old warehouse. The gangster promised that the cops would never take them alive, and when they burst through the doors, tommy-guns blazing, Muriel closed her eyes and prepared to die in a hail of bullets.

Instead there was silence. She opened her eyes, finding the dream warehouse vast and empty, no sign of the cops or Knuckles Mahoney anywhere. She looked to the rafters and saw something perched there, hunched in a cluster of grey, filthy feathers. She thought that it must be some sort of strange barn owl, but when it spread its massive wings, wings too big for even a condor, that notion was dismissed. The creature swooped down, descending on her in a frenzy of flapping, and Muriel screamed as hand-sized talons tore at her face.

She awoke to find that the scream was not emitting from her own throat; it was blaring from the auditorium's archaic and rickety speaker system. The image onscreen was a mad flurry of frames, and Muriel's awakening brain figured that there was something going on with the

projector – likely the print’s two-strip audio track had gotten stuck in the gate and was causing the whole thing to jam up. In a daze she stumbled from her seat, adding bad popcorn to the already filthy floor, and raced out of the theater as fast as her feet would allow.

The scene in the booth was even worse than anticipated. The final reel was gummed so badly in the projector that it was shredding and peeling back on itself, like a banana being forced through a pinhole. Why the film didn’t melt was anyone’s guess, but Muriel, not waiting to find out, slammed down the power switch on the side of the lead projector. The machine rattled to a stop, and she did the same to projector two, nearly falling into panic as it violently hitched and seized. But then the monstrous old work horse powered down with a sigh, and Muriel allowed herself to do the same. After a long, slow minute, her breathing caught up with her heart.

She had managed to save the machines, themselves valuable as museum pieces, but the print was another matter entirely. The distressed film strip had popped right off of the reel and was dangling out of the projector on to the unswept floor in a tangled lump. What remained in the projector was giving off an acrid, chemical stench, and it didn’t take an expert to see that it was a total disaster. This was a murder scene, a restoration homicide, and Muriel was the prime and only suspect. The right thing to do would be to gather the salvageable materials, come clean with the matter, and accept the consequences with whatever dignity she could find.

But there was another option. If this was indeed a metaphorical murder, could she not consider the

possibility of covering it up? No one knew of what she had found here and would be therefore none the wiser if she just made it all go away. Did the world really need a restored print of *Knuckles Mahoney*? In truth, where was the crime in destroying a film that an enlightened film scholar such as herself had deemed dangerously regressive in its attitudes toward women? Wouldn't it be preferable to society on the whole that the cheap, nasty little B-picture remain forgotten, that chauvinists and rapists not to be given more fuel for their sick fantasies, that they be denied a new icon to emulate like the mobster hero of *Scarface* or the serial murderers of *Natural Born Killers*? And if keeping this heroic act a secret meant that Muriel was able to keep her job...would that be such a terrible thing?

Yes, she decided. This was the right thing to do. So without further deliberation she gathered the mangled reel off the floor and stuffed it into her backpack. She considered allowing the undamaged reels to remain behind; it wouldn't be hard to claim that the print was found with a reel missing. But the more she thought about it, the more she wanted the whole film gone. So she emptied her backpack of all other items and fit the rest of the print inside. Then she bolted out the door, a criminal fleeing the scene of the crime.

She was past the fountain and almost out the front doors when she ran into, almost quite literally, Kurt and Kitt.

"Muriel!" Kurt greeted as the fleeing girl skidded to a halt right in front of him. "We just came by to check up on your progress."

“Uh, yeah, well,” Muriel stammered. “Not much to report I’m afraid.” She shifted the overstuffed pack on her shoulder, attempting to shield it from their prying eyes.

Kurt and Kitt shared a mild look of bewilderment. “Really?” Kurt questioned. “There was a whole stack of film boxes in the projection booth last time we checked.”

“Well, I haven’t gone through all of it yet. But so far all I’ve found are titles that are readily available.” She tried to maintain a chirpy tone, despite feeling as though she was being, albeit deservedly, interrogated. “But hope springs eternal!”

With their eerily similar eyes, Kurt and Kitt shared a look of skepticism, then re-directed at Muriel, smiling in unison. “If you don’t mind,” Kurt said. “I think we’ll have a look.”

Muriel’s stomach dropped. Up there in the booth, sitting on her editing table were five reels of *Blind Courtesy*, clearly discovered and tampered with. Once her bosses saw that they would know she was lying, and when they looked in her bag they’d find what remained of *Knuckles Mahoney* and assume she intended to steal it. Then, in addition to losing her job, she would likely be brought up on criminal charges. The jig, as Knuckles might say, was up.

She was about to crack, to confess to it all, when something chimed inside Kitt’s designer purse. The wire-framed blonde scrunched her perfect Aryan nose and pulled out her smart phone, answering the call. “Yes?” she barked into the device. “Christ Phil, are you sure?” A weary sigh followed. “Fine, we’ll be right there.”

“What was it?” Kurt asked with concern.

“There was a mix-up at the Egyptian. The new print of *Playtime* is missing a reel.”

And like that, a bullet was dodged. Kurt and Kitt rushed off to deal with the crisis at the Egyptian, leaving Muriel in the lobby, flushed with adrenaline and relief. Somewhere, someone had been watching out for her, and glancing back at the fountain she couldn't help but feel that it must have been her angels. She offered them a solemn, sincere appreciation and promised that she would never, ever do anything like this again. A few blocks from her house she ditched the pack in a lonely dumpster, and that was the last anyone would know of *Knuckles Mahoney*.

After a restless, guilt-fueled sleep, Muriel returned to the Old Nick the following morning and was relieved to find that Kurt and Kitt had not been back to inspect the prints in the booth. The circular tins that housed the now discarded print sat there, empty accusers, reminding Muriel that she would have to dispose of them as well if she hoped to keep her crime a secret. But without her backpack there was no way to sneak them out, and she couldn't risk just walking out the door with them, especially in light of her employer's unannounced visit the day before. An idea struck her, and she went back to the boxes, searching for a print that had been packed without a tin. To her surprise, at the bottom of the rattiest box, she found one.

Collecting it the best she could, she brought the print over to the table to see what sort of movie deserved to be

treated this shabbily. Shockingly, the film was remarkably well preserved, a miracle considering it had been left unprotected for so many years. It was the right number of reels to substitute for *Knuckles Mahoney*, so it would seem that Muriel's promise to the angels had been heard and accepted. All she had to do was pack the mystery print into the tins and no one would ever be the wiser. She would even leave it for Kurt and Kitt to discover, let them have the glory all to themselves. It was the punishment Muriel rightly deserved.

Resolved, she reached for the film, and the end spilled from the table like a snake fleeing the grip of its handler. As she bent over to retrieve the dangling strip, she caught a glimpse of the images repeated in the frames, advancing incrementally like pictures in a flip book. Images that some haunted part of her subconscious demanded were given a closer look.

*Don't do it, Muriel told herself. Just wrap this thing as tight as you can, cram it into those tins and don't forget to tear off the labels. Do not push your luck any further.*

Though it killed her to do so, Muriel was able to stick to her guns and pack the film up without giving it another look. But she decided not to tell her superiors about the find until she had a night to sleep on it, so she busied herself with tidying work and went home later that day with the haunting images still spooling behind her retinas. It wasn't until she was home, sitting in front of her laptop, that she recalled the strange interaction with the homeless woman outside the theater the day before. A few keystrokes later and she was drawn into the mystery, like a hound chasing a rabbit down a deep and fascinating

hole.

## NOV. 14<sup>th</sup>

### NOT TO “HARP” ON ABOUT IT, BUT...

As most of you know, I am not the biggest horror fan, but recently I have taken a...let's call it an *interest* in an obscure film from the 30's that reportedly scared the bejesus out of folks back in the day. The movie in question is *Shriek of the Harpy* and it was released by a fly-by-night production house named Anvil Pictures in a shameless attempt to capitalize on the Universal Monsters craze. The German auteur director, Rudolph Meiner, was so embittered by the course of his Hollywood career that he returned home to the Fatherland and joined up with the Nazi party after Hitler invaded Poland. Though Meiner was never heard of again after the war, some accounts place him at a concentration camp that was stormed by the allies, and it is presumed that he was shot and killed in the battle. Good riddance, I say!

As for *Shriek of the Harpy*, the general consensus seems to be that it was a reasonably effective chiller with a standard script and some notable directorial flourishes from Meiner, who was a protégé, at least in spirit, to F.W. Murnau. The titular Harpy was inspired by the monsters of Greek myth, and the creature design by legendary make-up artist Charlie Spears was said to have been quite shocking by the standards of the time. But the thing that was remembered most by the small number of people who saw *Shriek of the Harpy* was the blood-curdling sound the Harpy made when it attacked its victims, the “shriek”, as it were. It was a sound so awful that it gave

viewers nightmares for weeks afterwards, a claim that at least one viewer I have personally spoken to can support. Sound designers were not credited in films of that era, so we may never know who was responsible for the remarkable noise. But whoever they were, by all accounts they did their job maybe a little too well.

While all of this is fascinating, the thing about *Shriek of the Harpy* that interests me is the well-documented rumors that it was horribly, horribly misogynistic. I mean, hello, the movie is about a monster woman who is literally a harpy! Not too subtle there, Gustav! And Meiner is certainly the one to blame – while the screenplay was credited to writer Eugene Torrance, the story is a creation of Meiner’s fevered brain and Torrance later even apologized for scripting it, calling the finished film “Sick, chauvinistic dreck.” (Sad footnote: Torrance hung himself at the age of 40 in the barn of his country home. His body was found swinging from the rafters, watched over by a pair of hooting barn owls.) Needless to say, my interest is piqued.

Lordy, have I rambled tonight! Well, off to bed sweeties. If anyone has any more info pertaining to this lost “treasure” please let me know. I have a teeny weeny hunch that we have not heard the last of the Harpy’s terrifying shriek. 😊

Powerless against her curiosity, Muriel raced to the theater the following morning, yanked the changeling print out of the *Knuckles Mahoney* tins and slapped it down on her editing table to have another look. Sure



enough, staring back at her in a lurid, dripping font was the title “Shriek of the Harpy”. In this, her third major discovery, Muriel had stumbled upon a Holy Grail film for horror fans. Except that no one would ever know she was the one to discover it. Of course she could take credit and boast about it online, but her claims on the internet would not be taken seriously by the fans who posted in the forums. And in terms of seeing it – well, she would have to wait with all the other chumps, if the day ever came when some distributor released it.

Across the room, the projectors called to her. Muriel fell into a fevered trance, and an hour later she was standing before the twin iron hulks, now fully loaded and ready to roll on the film. A force had possessed her, a facet of her barely cognizant mind that *demand*ed she bear witness to this cinematic atrocity. What was needed, she rationalized, was to face the film’s transgressions head-on, to be incensed and offended by its backwards misogyny so that she might arrive at a keen and thoughtful dissertation, casting a healing light into a dark corner of cinema history. Yes, it was crucial – *important* that Muriel Sharpe view this terrible film, and nothing but a private, immediate screening would suffice.

She stood there, finger trembling over the lead projector’s power switch. Here was the moment of truth. She could back out now, leave *Shriek of the Harpy* to Kurt and Kitt and be done with all of this madness. She could do as she was told, follow orders and be the good girl. The nice, subservient girl who allowed her male superior to swoop in and claim all of the credit that she so richly deserved.

She threw the switch, ran down into the theater and was in her preferred seat right as the melting candle wax title appeared on screen.

The plot unfolded in a manner quite typical of a 1930's horror picture. It concerned a young couple, Adelaide and Calvin, who travel from an unspecified city to visit a friend that has taken up residence in a country manor inherited from his wealthy, recently deceased parents. Once there, the cheerful couple find that their friend, Rupert, is mercilessly henpecked by his shrew (one might even describe her as a harpy) of a wife, Nellie Rae. The constant nagging of his gold-digging spouse drives Rupert into the only place on the estate where he can find solace – the aviary; a magnificent bird sanctuary built by his dead father.

When the brilliantly realized aviary set appeared onscreen, Muriel's heart palpitated. It wasn't the room itself that caused the reaction; though cleverly designed as a dome-like cage, there was nothing unsettling about it save for the fluttering and chirping of the live, on-set birds. The feature that spooked Muriel was the room's centerpiece – an ornate fountain adorned with grim, winged statuary. It was an uncanny cousin to the fountain that sat crumbling in the lobby; so much so that Muriel reasoned that they both must have been carved by the same sculptor. A slow panic gripped her as she tried to reconcile the coincidence, reasoning that the designers of the Old Nick had somehow taken this film as the inspiration for the lobby's focal point. But in her heart Muriel knew that the idea was patently absurd.

In the aviary, Rupert discovers a parchment hidden by

his father that appears to detail some sort of occult spell. Adelaide intrudes, attempting to coax Rupert out of his shell, but the gesture backfires when the married man professes his undying love for her. Flustered by the advance Adelaide flees, not realizing that Nellie Rae has been eavesdropping the whole time. Using her husband's failed indiscretion as leverage, Nellie threatens Rupert with a costly and humiliating divorce, and their heated arguing drives the birds into a state of agitated cheeping. The sound causes Rupert to explode, to toss off the shackles of civility by grabbing Nellie and shaking her violently. She responds by clawing him across the face, and in murderous retaliation he pushes her into the fountain's pool and forces her head under the water. The birds take to the air, swarming in a furious cloud of feathers as Nellie struggles in Rupert's death-grip, drowning to the flapping of their wings.

Though the scene was staged to downplay the violence of the murder, Muriel still found it wholly distasteful. The character of Nellie Rae was written to be so loathsome that the viewer sympathized with Rupert's decision to kill her, and her shrill portrayal by an unappealing and rightly forgotten contract player didn't help matters. But the real blame lay in Meiner's cruel direction – his distaste for women was palpable beyond the words that sprung from the actors' mouths. What strong-handed matron had beaten this attitude into him? Muriel wondered. What emasculating trauma had informed his viewpoint, warped his personality into something so vile that it demanded to be poured into every scene, every shot, every hateful frame? Since the dawn of cinema female leads had

suffered under the attack of monsters, but there was a sadistic quality ingrained in *Shriek of the Harpy* that went beyond simply placing damsels in distress. You could sense Meiner behind the camera, leering as his violent fantasies were trapped in celluloid, and easily imagine the pleasure he would take in the back of a darkened theater, watching women squirm in their seats while the men sat smirking next to them.

Shockingly, Meiner allowed the character of Rupert to feel remorse, but it soon became apparent where all of this was leading. Using his father's witchcraft, Rupert attempts to raise his wife from her watery tomb, his efforts nothing but an act of madness witnessed by the birds. In a moment of restored sanity Rupert tears up the parchment and throws it into the pool, and that's when things take a turn for the supernatural. The birds settle back on their perches, like churchgoers seating themselves at a mass, and as they watch silently something rises from the pool of the fountain. But it is not Nellie – at least not anymore. Great wings crest, shaking off water, and gnarled claws grasp at the fountain's lip, lifting up a terrifying figure. Emerging in Nellie's stead is the Harpy, a distinctly female monster spoken of fearfully in myth, said to occupy a strata of Hell reserved for suicides and those who profit from murder. A head flared with feathers lowers its piercing gaze at the stunned and terrified Rupert, and out of its beak bursts a terrible, soul-wrenching shriek.

As had been reported, the sound was unforgettable and deafening. It shook the theater from floor to rafters and for a moment Muriel feared that the sagging old ceiling

was about to cave in from the stress. Thankfully the scene cut away, taking the awful sound and the briefly glimpsed Harpy with it. But those eyes – silvery, piercing and locked in a tight shot – stayed with Muriel long after the frame faded into the next scene. She told herself that they were a trick of make-up, primitive contact lenses, but she could not shake them out of her mind. The scared little girl that still lived in her heart believed that those eyes – and the monster they belonged to – were real.

The next few reels passed like a nightmare as the Harpy unleashed its terror upon the household. Rupert avoids death by fleeing into the night, but a pretty young housemaid who comes to clean the aviary is not so fortunate. The death toll increases with every following scene as one hapless servant after another meets their grisly fate at the talons of the Harpy. Keeping with the censoring parameters of the time the deaths were not graphically depicted, but Muriel found them to be far more visceral and suggestive than similar scenes in either the Universal or Val Lewton horror canon. The lurid method in which Meiner utilized his camera – a subtle hint of motion here or a lingering of a shot there – suggested that the deaths were violent, protracted and painful. It was a total affront to Muriel's sense of good taste, yet as the picture barreled towards its inevitable climax, she found it impossible to pry her eyes from the screen.

The prerequisite, horror movie thunder storm descends on the manor, and when Calvin and Adelaide discover the maid and butler dead they attempt to leave only to find that their car is stuck in the mud dredged up by the

rainwater. Back inside they are greeted by the disheveled and raving Rupert – also driven back indoors by the storm – and naturally the young couple assumes that he must be the killer. But Rupert insists that the deaths are the work of the Harpy, a creature he has summoned from Hell, and when Calvin attempts to call the authorities to take the ranting lunatic into custody, he finds the phone lines have been taken down by the storm. A shadow falls upon the living room skylight, and Rupert cowers by the fireplace, screaming that the Harpy has come for him at last. Calvin and Adelaide are convinced that his mind is completely broken, but when the Harpy shatters through the skylight, Rupert's ravings are proven all too true.

Shown at last in its full glory, the creature design for the Harpy, though exceptional for the time, was no more convincing than the iconic but loveably hokey make-ups for the classic versions of Frankenstein, the Wolf Man or the Mummy. The actress who played Nellie Rae had been transformed into a monstrous angel of death with great black wings and a crown of feathers that crested from her head into twin horns. The woman's fine narrow nose had been re-sculpted into a beak, and those piercing, silvery eyes were framed by thick rings of dark mascara. She wore a Greek tunic-style dress that barely covered her ample breasts, and when she raised her hands they were re-figured into four-fingered, birdlike talons. By today's standards the monster design was quaint and would likely illicit laughter from a jaded, special effects-savvy crowd. But Muriel's suspension of disbelief was strong and well-fortified, and to her the Harpy was as terrifying now as the moment it landed on set.

The Harpy lunged for the camera and Muriel jolted back, as if it was going to fly off the screen and attack her. Calvin stepped in to defend Adelaide, attempting to ward the monster off with a fire poker, but the Harpy swatted the weapon away like an insult. The creature attacked poor Calvin with both talons, raking long swaths of blood down his blandly handsome face. This sort of grisly violence was unheard of in films of this era, and even though the black and white muted what full color would have made plain, the effect was shocking just the same. Adelaide screamed and Muriel looked away, not able to face whatever horror came next. The Harpy shrieked, rumbling the theater, and Muriel was shaken to the core, certain that the sound was coming from somewhere other than the auditorium speakers. There was a great crashing noise from something outside, and suddenly everything went black.

Muriel sat there in stunned silence, thinking for a terrible moment that the world had come to an end. Then there was another teeth-chattering rumble, and she recognized it as the sound of thunder – and not the canned sound effect you heard time and time again in old movies. There was a storm outside, just like in the movie, but this storm was real and was likely the cause of the power outage. Muriel felt a rush of relief, but that gratitude faded quickly to annoyance at the inconvenience of her show being disrupted.

“Godammit,” she cursed. The room was ink black, the row of seats barely visible in front of her, and rummaging through her pockets she realized that her phone with its helpful onboard flashlight was sitting on the editing table

upstairs. Turning to the back of the theater, she stood and began to fumble her way around, hoping to find her way back to the booth without injury. After that she could try for the breaker room, but she highly doubted that this blackout was a simple blown fuse. The power was likely out for the entire city block, and she would be lucky if she could repack the print and get out of here using only the light of her phone.

She was almost under the balcony when the thunder crashed again, freezing her dead in her tracks. When the scare passed she laughed out loud, feeling foolish for allowing herself to get so spooked. “Silly girl,” she scolded herself playfully.

A shattering, shrill sound atomized the air around her, and Muriel’s soul practically jumped out of her skin. It was the shriek of the Harpy, but this time it was not diffused through the safety glass of cinema fantasy – this time it was real and in the room with her. Muriel looked about, wide-eyed, searching for falling plaster, broken glass, twisted metal, something, anything that would rationally explain the noise. But all she could see was the darkness closing in on her, and all she could sense was the certainty that she wasn’t alone.

The shriek came again, louder and closer this time. Glancing upwards she could see it now, a great shadowy shape perched on the lip of the balcony, silver eyes gleaming in the dark. The Harpy had come for her, demanding that she answer for her crimes, and despite knowing the fullness of terror Muriel couldn’t help but be awed by the spread of its magnificent wings.

The monster swooped from the balcony and Muriel



dived into the nearest row, her knees landing hard on the cement. She yelped as air rushed past her head, blowing her hair back in the gust of a rustling wing. The shriek blasted again furiously, and a steady flapping indicated that the Harpy was circling for another dive. Stooped in a painful crouch Muriel scuttled down the row, careful to keep her head lower than the seats. She was almost out into the aisle when talons tore at her back.

Muriel screamed and thrashed her arms around as if attacked by an angry swarm of bees, but after a few seconds it became apparent that she was swatting at empty air. Breathing heavy, she scanned quickly around, and touching her shoulder she found no wounds, just the unmarred fabric of her T-shirt. The Harpy, if still in the auditorium, had gone silently to ground, leaving Muriel standing alone with just the seats and the white vastness of the movie screen. If the Harpy had ever been there at all, that is.

Tears began to well up in her eyes, but instead of crying she broke into hysterical laughter. Madness. This was all madness. There was no flying monster loose in the theater. The stress of the job, the guilt over trashing a print, the crushing loneliness and self-doubt with which she was in constant denial – one or a combination of these things had pushed Muriel Sharpe over the edge. The right thing to do would be to call her parents and tell them that she had cracked up, suffered some sort of nervous breakdown. Lord knows it wouldn't come as a surprise. Yes, that's what she would do – she would walk calmly out of this theater, go get some help and leave the world of film preservation, and this godforsaken place,

behind.

Feeling the fool, Muriel limped out of the auditorium, stumbling into the lobby to the startling crash of more thunder and the disorienting strobe of lightning flashes. The rain was coming down so hard that the domed ceiling had sprung fist-sized leaks, showering water into the fountain's pool, filling it to a frothing brim. From their perches Muriel's beloved cherubs glared down, their once kindly faces full of scorn, their cheeks streaming with bitter, rainwater tears. There was no comfort to be taken from them anymore; now they were harbingers of doom.

As she neared the fountain, Muriel slipped on a wet tile and was driven down to her already agonized knees. She cursed and spat and blamed the cherubs, reaching for the lip of the large pool to haul herself up. But before her fingers could find purchase, a hand that was not hers slapped down on the lip. A clawed, four-fingered talon.

"Oh god," Muriel stammered as the Harpy rose from the fountain's pool, exactly as it had in the movie. Lightning flashed again, illuminating the creature, and Muriel could see that unlike its cinematic counterpart, this Harpy was realistic and entirely convincing. Greasy black feathers sprouted from grey mottled flesh, and its beak, no mere make-up job, was tapered into a razor-keen point. It extended its wings to their full glory, shaking off water in an icy spray, spattering Muriel's terrified face. The eyes – those terrible eyes – narrowed as it opened its beak, and when it shrieked a slimy tongue probed forth like a worm seeking decay.

Muriel didn't even realize that she had gotten to her feet until she stumbled back and crashed through the

auditorium doors. Her mind was waging a war between shock and hysteria with sanity caught in the crossfire, still hoping that this was all some vividly realized nightmare. Thankfully adrenaline flooded in to the rescue, clearing the fog of terror, allowing her to snap into crisis mode. She scanned the area for something, *anything* that could be used as a defense, and her eyes fell upon a velvet stanchion rope that had rolled under the seats five decades past. Picking it up, she ran for the doors, reaching them just as the flapping, screeching horror was closing the distance. She pulled the doors shut and wrapped the thick moldy rope through the brass handles, tying it off into a makeshift barricade. The Harpy slammed into the other side, shrieking in vengeful protest.

The obstruction was not going to hold the monster at bay for long, so Muriel quickly set about finding an escape route. She ran to the front of the theater, to the exits on either side of the screen, but both had been bricked up to keep out vandals and squatters. The only clear way out was back through the auditorium doors and past the Harpy, an option Muriel was not about to consider.

There was the possibility of trying to escape through the balcony, but she couldn't remember if the upstairs exits were boarded up or not. The question was moot as there was no way to access the balcony from the auditorium, unless she could convince the Harpy to give her a lift. Whatever amusement Muriel took from that thought was obliterated by the splintering of the barricaded doors, and she furiously looked for someplace to hide. The only place that could even warrant consideration was the crawlspace that separated the

movie screen from the theater wall, a space that measured no more than a foot across. Cursing her inability to commit to a diet, Muriel squeezed into the crawlspace and hoped for the best.

She fit, but just barely. The last of her body was pulled into the space when she heard the auditorium doors smash open with a mad flurry of wings.

The Harpy made guttural chirping noises as it swooped around the auditorium, seeking out its prey. It was only a matter of time before it sussed out where Muriel had hidden, so if she intended to mount some form of defense, she had better do it fast. As if in answer to her prayers, her eyes caught the dull gleam of metal lying on the crawlspace floor, not more than three feet away. Looking closer she recognized it as the head of a hammer, and as the hideous, unnatural being flapped and chattered just beyond the barrier of the screen, Muriel squeezed further into the crawlspace in an effort to reach the weapon-ready tool.

With incredible effort she strained, reaching down and hooking a finger under the cloven head. She lifted her hand, balancing the hammer from her fingertips until it was close enough for her other hand to grab it by the handle. But her awkward positioning caused her hand to jostle, and the hammer fell loose and clattered back to the floor.

The sound of feet landing was heard outside the screen, and a winged silhouette stood there, listening. Muriel held every muscle in her body still, hoping that the creature would be thrown off by her silence and lack of movement. In her terror, Muriel tried to reason what sort

of mind – animal, human or otherwise – the Harpy possessed. Did it think? Could it be bargained with? It did possess feminine attributes – was there a possibility, however small, that she could appeal to it on that level, one woman to another?

“Hello?” Muriel asked the silhouette. “Can we talk?”

Silence. Not so much as a chirp. “Look...you don’t have to do this. Just let me go and you’ll never see me again. We can keep this between us girls. I won’t even tell anyone I ever saw you. Girl Scout’s honor.”

The silhouette cocked its flared head and for a moment Muriel actually believed that the creature had heard her. *I did it!* she convinced herself. *I got through to it. To her.*

But then the Harpy gave its answer, an inhuman shriek, letting it be known once and for all that there was no soft, feminine side here to be reached. It lunged forth with murderous intent, talons raking at the screen, tearing away hunks in long, jagged rivers. In a final desperate move Muriel reached again for the hammer, managing to grasp the handle in her cramped and sweaty palm. There was a loud ripping sound as the Harpy tore into the crawlspace, and Muriel swung upwards with all her strength, striking the monster hard on the beak.

The Harpy stumbled back, talons clawing at air. *How you like me now, bitch?* was Muriel’s not-spoken aloud retort. The creature shook off the pain with a rustle of feathers, and Muriel swung again, this time hitting it on the scowling crest of its head. The fiend screamed and spat and took to the air, and Muriel ran for the auditorium exit, which had been left wide open in the Harpy’s destructive wake.

Muriel charged into the lobby, and forgetting about the slick tile, went sliding across the floor, smashing her body into the basin of the fountain's pool. The Old Nick's ceiling was now a giant colander, showering down rainwater and soaking Muriel to her already shivering bones. As she pulled herself up to make a final dash for the doors, the Harpy flew in from the auditorium, screeching in hateful triumph. It landed in a crouch right in front of the doors, and when it rose to its full height the spread of its wings blotted out all routes, and all hope, of escape.

To the right were the marble stairs that led to the projection booth, and without fully understanding what she was doing, Muriel ran for them. She took the slippery stairs two steps at a time, expecting the Harpy to descend on her at any moment and tear her to shreds. But the monster never came at her, and she reached the booth winded and shaking but otherwise intact. She slammed the door shut then grabbed an old chair to wedge under the door knob, knowing full well that it wouldn't hold the creature back for long. But it gave her a moment to catch her breath and allowed her frantic mind to formulate some sort of plan.

The room was dark, but after some fumbling she was able to locate her bag and in a nice bit of luck came upon a penlight, which meant she wouldn't have to use up what little was left of her phone's battery. She dug her phone out of the bottom, and was about to call 9-11 when she realized how insane her story was going to sound. Instead she called Kurt, and getting his voice mail, left a message that there was an emergency and he needed to come to

the theater right away. As soon as she hung up, the battery died.

She turned her light to the projectors where *Shriek of the Harpy* sat threaded, waiting to play out its grand finale. It dawned on Muriel that perhaps, as crazy as it all sounded, the manner in which the Harpy was destroyed in the film would be the key to destroying it here in the real world. Old horror movies always had happy endings, and unlike the slasher films of the 80's, when the monsters died in the classics they stayed dead, at least until the cheaply made sequel. And *Shriek of the Harpy* had earned no sequel.

Muriel ran to the projector, tore out the final reel and dragged the last few feet of film over to her editing table, not even bothering to detach the print from the machine. Grabbing the looking glass, she held the penlight in her teeth and furiously scrolled through the final reel, doing her damndest to suss out the plot.

The climax predictably took place in the aviary with the three principles and the Harpy present. There were shots that seemed to indicate Adelaide attempting to reason with the monster (as Muriel had done) but ultimately it turns on the true guilty party, Rupert. Muriel hurried through the frames of Rupert being mauled by the vengeful creature, but the killing seemed to go on and on for several feet of film. Finally the scene cut to Calvin recovering the parchment, and in a desperate move he throws it into the fountain, which calls up some sort of dimensional vortex from the depths. The Harpy follows the parchment into the vortex and as lightning strikes the manor and sets it aflame, the young heroes escape. The

last shot was of the couple standing arm in arm, watching the manor burn to the ground as the final title card announced that in no uncertain terms this was “THE END”.

So that was it. She had to destroy the parchment – throw it into the fountain, creating a dimensional vortex that would summon the Harpy back to Hell. Only there was no parchment. There was no magical document of any kind. All Muriel had was the fountain in the lobby...

...and the film itself. Perhaps the print of *Shriek of the Harpy* was the parchment, the magical Macguffin around which this entire nightmare revolved. Yes, that had to be it! It was the only thing in this insane situation that made any kind of sense.

Something crashed through the projection window and a tornado of dust and feathers exploded into the room. Muriel instinctively grabbed her scissors from the table as the Harpy picked itself up off the floor, once again rising to its full terrifying height. Its wings were folded around its body like a protective cloak, but when Muriel flinched at it, wielding the scissors like a dagger, the wings spread to their furthest breadth. Then it shrieked at her with such force that her eardrums erupted into spasms.

Acting on blind instinct, Muriel lunged with the scissors, stabbing them right above the monster’s ample, womanly breasts. The creature’s silvery eyes widened into glistening pools of shock and it withdrew, clawing at the handle of the scissors, attempting to pull them out. Muriel wasn’t going to wait to see if it succeeded. She scooped up what she could of the print and fled the room, trailing film in her panicked wake.



Out in the lobby, the storm had built to a crescendo, the crashing sound of thunder nearly drowned by a thousand tiny waterfalls pouring through the ceiling. Muriel stumbled down the stairs until a dangling loop of film tripped her up and sent her sprawling the rest of the way. But there wasn't any time for pain. She struggled to her feet, wrapped the tangle of film around her in a death shroud, and launched herself towards the fountain.

But *Shriek of the Harpy* did not want to let her go. It tightened around her like a constricting snake; sharp, sprocket-holed edges slicing into her, a death by a million paper cuts. It tripped her up again at the fountain, causing her to smash into it with her shins, sending white flashes through her body like electric jolts. Screaming in both pain and frustration, she ripped and tore at the print until her hands were bloody, but the celluloid was seemingly forged of steel.

Finally, she gathered a handful and shoved it into the pool like a homicidal mother drowning an unwanted child. Then she waited for the portal to appear.

At first nothing happened – no change in the surface of the water – and Muriel nearly burst into tears. But then there were ripples, and then a churning, and soon a small whirlpool had formed, opening a fissure into some terrible world beyond. Despite the nightmarish implications of such a world, Muriel was so happy to see it, so happy that it was real, that she broke into hysterical gales of laughter.

A shriek of torment carried over Muriel's cackling and she froze, staring blankly into the rushing vortex of the pool. The air came alive behind her, charged with the

flapping of great wings, and Muriel knew that the Harpy was diving in to attack. She could not bear to face that horrible thing again, could not stomach the thought of those terrible eyes being the last thing she saw, so she tensed and waited for the talons to rip her apart like human taffy. But there came no pain, only a splash and a spray of water, and Muriel opened her eyes to see the Harpy torpedoing into the vortex after the rapidly sinking print. Then, both the monster and the film from which it was spawned were gone.

“Muriel?” a voice asked behind her. Muriel whipped around to find Kurt standing there, flustered and confused. “What in heaven’s name is going on around here?”

That was a really good question. Muriel would have loved to explain it, to tell him the story of how she had saved herself and defeated a monster by drowning a rare film print in a fountain pool, but all evidence of the nightmare – the vortex, the Harpy...even the storm – were gone as if they had never happened. No one would ever believe her, and at this point, Muriel wasn’t sure that she could believe it herself. All she could do was throw her head back and laugh.

And she kept on laughing for a very long time.

**NOV. 26<sup>th</sup>**

**I’M BACK!**

SO...gentle reader, your favorite (former, maybe one day again...whatever) film archivist has returned with another update. Right now I’m blogging from my parents

as I have been released into their custody for the Thanksgiving holiday. “Custody?” you ask? Yes, well, that’s a story, isn’t it? Suffice it to say, Muriel Sharpe has suffered a mild breakdown, at least that’s the official version. I’ve spent the last few weeks in the beautiful and palatial Angel Memorial clinic where I’ve been treated for what the doctors are calling a “brief psychotic episode”. Sounds crazy (pun intended), right? Yeah, well, what can I say? Girl’s got an active imagination...I guess. Jury’s still out on that one as far as I’m concerned. Regardless, I’m on some serious medication, and not the fun kind. My doctors (all male of course...hello “female hysteria” diagnosis! ) say I may need to be on it for the rest of my life. As if “my life” couldn’t get any better!

(That last part was sarcasm BTW)

Since the cat (or bird more accurately) is now out of the bag, let’s just say that my unauthorized movie screenings did not have a healthy effect on my pretty little brain. Somehow I got the idea that the monster from *Shriek of the Harpy* was attacking me and I ended up stabbing one of my bosses (Kitt, the fembot) in the shoulder with some scissors when she surprised me in the projection booth. (She’s alive, thank goddess, and not pressing charges as long as I stay in therapy). Then my other boss found me in the lobby, trying to drown the horror movie print in the creepy old fountain that some lunatic decided to build there. Yeah, quite a scene, I know. Needless to say I lost my job, got sent to the booby hatch and here we are, back at mom and dad’s. What an awesome start to my career! Yay me!

(Again, sarcasm people, look it up)

So that pretty much brings us up to speed. But before I go...and not sure when I'll be back...it depends how I respond to "treatment"...I do want to issue a mild warning: That stupid, misogynistic (and Holy Hell is it misogynistic...but more on that someday) movie was rescued from my drowning attempt and has been fully restored. There is already a major home video release planned, and no, I won't be credited for finding it, thanks for asking. Now I won't claim that *Shriek of the Harpy* will have the same effect on you as it did on your intrepid blogger, but I do urge you NOT to give this EVIL film your time, attention, or money. For horror fans I know that the temptation might prove too great, especially with the film's sordid reputation, but I'm begging you, PLEASE just let this hateful piece of celluloid fade back into obscurity where it belongs. If you hear the Harpy's shriek calling you, I'm begging, BEGGING you to ignore it.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand someone in a film forum I frequent just posted that the studio who owns the rights has already announced a remake. PERFECT. ?

Sebastian Bendix is a Los Angeles based writer and musician, as well as host of a popular midnight horror film series, *Friday Night Frights* at the Cinefamily. He attended school at Emerson College for writing and has had pieces published both in print (*Mean* magazine) and online (CHUD.com). He has written several screenplays in the fantasy/horror genre, one of which, *The Black Cradle*, is in development as an independent feature. *The Patchwork Girl*, a self-published YA horror novel, was his first foray into the world of prose fiction. His second novel, *The Stronghold*, is nearing completion and will be out to publishers in 2015.