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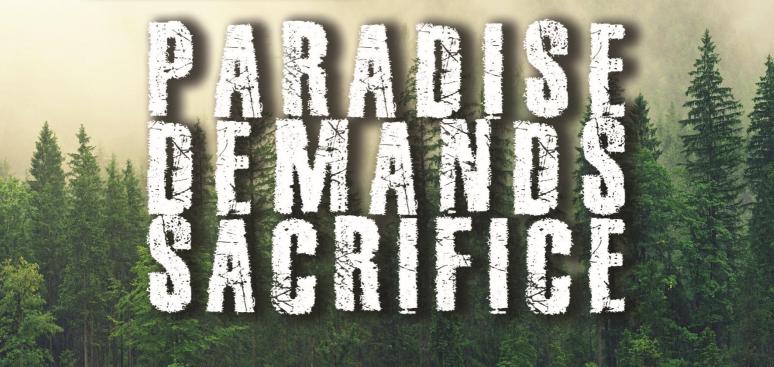
AVAILABLENOW



WITH THEIR MARRIAGE ON THE ROCKS, JAY MORRIS TAKES THE LIBERTY OF EXTENDING THE FAMILY VACATION WITH HOPES OF MENDING WHAT'S BROKEN. KENDRA IS WILLING TO TRY ANYTHING, EVEN IF IT MEANS FEELING LOW IN THE PROCESS, ALL THE WHILE TAKING ON ALL HOUSEHOLD DUTIES WITH THEIR SON, JACK.

What Jay considers a paradise quickly becomes Kendra's nightmare. Camden Island is not all that it seems and the quaint locals are much less friendly than they appear.

Something supernatural is going on and everyone is in on it. In an effort to save her husband and son, Kendra must ward off animal attacks, meddling locals, and a pagan society looking to swallow her family whole.



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Layout, design, editing, and artwork by Eddie Generous

5716KS FROM A LATECOMER WITH CASSONDRA WINDWALKER

I arrived late to the world of horror movies. My mother always had a passport there, and delighted both in being frightened and in being frightening. I, on the other hand, found all aspects of life terrifying in general. Although I loved scary books and ghost stories of all kinds, I avoided horror movies unless I could be absolutely assured that I'd have a place to sleep with my mom when it was over. My poor dad spent a lot of nights on the couch. To this day, my husband and I only schedule a horror movie night when he won't be working away from the house.

So, I missed out on a lot of the horror movie franchises. Watching them as an adult has robbed them of much of their allure, and the Freddies and Jasons and Chuckies strike me as humorous now rather than frightening. The horror that fascinates me possesses a strong psychological element, exploring what is awful and wretched and mysterious about humanity rather than relying as much on man versus monster. Hopefully some of my favorites will be new to you, even if they aren't that new in general.

THE BATTERY (2012)

I was reluctant to try this one. Most zombie stories bore me, and the idea of following professional athletes through the apocalypse did not appeal at all. But this film is a masterwork. Deeply human, tender, and heart-wrenching, it delivers its story with an unfeigned vulnerability and grittiness that brooks no saccharine sentimentality. This movie only cost \$6000 to make, so it's also a fun middle finger to the big studios who insist on churning out one sequel after another instead of investing in original content.



BONES AND ALL

(2022)

Is this is a horror story, or a romance? Hemingway warned us that all true stories, given time, end in death, and no horror movie worth its salt offers a happily-ever-after. That said, this has to be one of the most beautiful love stories you'll find on-screen. Wonderfully disgusting, it plumbs the depths of how humans devour one another in order to survive, and what are the limits of love—if there are any. Perfect for date night—but maybe not first date night!





THE CONFERENCE

(2023)

If you like your humor as black as the inside of Cerberus' belly and your gore inventive, this movie will definitely not disappoint. A Swedish film, The Conference channels all the dread and drudgery of office life into a violent romp that will leave viewers appalled at their own sense of humor while weirdly grateful for the catharsis.

THE BLACKENING

(2022)

This film includes all the classic elements of an ensemble horror movie while subverting them in the most disturbing and delightful of ways. One of the key elements of fear is discomfort, and writers Tracy Oliver and Dewayne Perkins exercise that most expertly. I do love the dark humor, but overwhelmingly this movie is just plain terrifying. You might spill some popcorn—definitely prepare yourself to squirm in your seat!





LOVE AND MONSTERS

(2023)

Not horror, but it IS full of monsters, so I'm including it in the genre. After seeing the trailer, I initially thought it might be a little too childish, but I was happily surprised by the depth and heart in this film. An excellent choice for those times you want a dark little adventure that will singe your eyebrows off but not leave your soul burning in hell.

CHAPTER FOUR

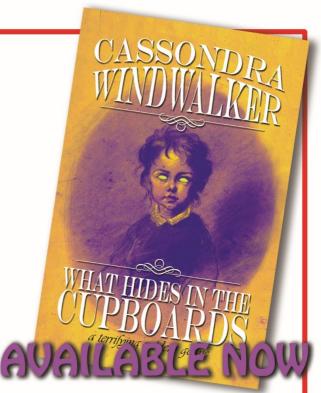
Before she left for the grocery store, Hesper walked around the perimeter of the courtyard. She felt silly, but it was still reassuring to see no footprints in the dust besides her own.

Richard and Ginny were right. She overwrought. She grinned crookedly at herself. How very appropriately melodramatic for an thought artist, she cynically. Waking nightmares and compulsive thinking were symptoms that would surely go away once she could lose herself in the clay. Today would be the last of the moving details that required much of her attention. She still needed to schedule the satellite installation so she could have internet service, but that was simple enough.

Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow she would sit in the sun and listen to the wheel sing and see what stories the clay had to tell. Tomorrow she would start to heal.

She loaded the trash into the back of the Subaru and waved toward Richard's desk before driving away. No trash service out here, unsurprisingly. Maybe this would be the push she needed to seriously reduce her waste impact. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine," she hummed absently to herself as the desert spun away under her tires. Sweeping mesas and stony outcroppings filled her gaze, the fierce blue sky competing



for her attention with casino billboards. An unexpected hopefulness lodged in her chest.

It lasted until she reached the grocery store parking lot. "Mastodon-muncher," she said weakly as the old dread crept back over her.

It took fifteen minutes of watching people mill in and out of the automatic doors, wrestling carts and juggling purchases, before she managed to force herself to retrieve her reusable bags from the back seat and go inside.

"Face your fears," she ordered in her best imitation of Ginny as she forced herself to make eye contact as she passed people, to smile and nod and murmur hello. Reach for the apple, for the box of pasta, for the paper towels.

Long-term reward over short-term gratification, she thought. As much

as she wanted to get out of this place, away from the garish lights and glaring strangers and mishmash of colors and labels and screaming boxes, she needed to get a full load of supplies. The better she did this time, the longer respite before she had to come back. And she needed all the basics—rice and flour and dry goods. Coffee.

In an effort to fool her brain into thinking it was all one stop, she pushed her wheezing grocery cart into the liquor store next door rather than unloading her bags into the car first. A case of ciders, a case of beer, some Fireball and Sailor Jerry's, and she was good to go. She even managed some small talk she promptly forgot with the clerk. Had it been a man or a woman? Maybe neither. She wasn't sure.

Back behind the wheel, Hesper stretched her arms, rolled her neck. She'd done well, hadn't she? What had felt insurmountable this morning was now already accomplished. She'd disposed of the trash on the way in, and now her car was loaded with all the goods she would need for at least two weeks, maybe three or four if she stretched it. She'd been nice to strangers and hadn't cried for no reason even once. She was a mastodon-munching rockstar.

On a whim, she opened the maps app on her phone. She whistled as she pulled out of her parking spot. She wasn't going to call Gloria. She'd drop by the office, like any normal person would be able to do,

no problem. Likely the realtor would be more inclined to share information in person, right? Hesper would be personable. Charming. She'd be irresistible. Gloria would spill all she knew.

Why exactly did all realtors look like they just left a Glamour Shots photoshoot? Hesper wondered fifteen minutes later, as she sat across from Gloria Padilla (Padilla, Padilla, why couldn't she remember that?) in a sidewalk corner office. All Hesper's intended charm evaporated in an inhale of hairspray and gardenia perfume. She was going to suffocate in this place. Choking to death on plastic air.

"It's so wonderful to finally meet you in person," Gloria gushed through red-plastered lips. "Isn't that the most fantastic little enclave out there? It's like it was built specifically for an artist."

"Yes, it's everything I'd hoped for—" Hesper began, but Gloria rattled on.

"Oh!" She rummaged in her desk drawers. "I'm so glad you dropped by. I meant to leave this for you in the kitchen to have when you arrived, but I forgot."

Hesper peered into the gift bag Gloria handed her. A bottle of pink Cupcake wine, a plastic clamshell filled with what Hesper couldn't deny were amazing-looking cupcakes, and a Mariah Carey Christmas CD. Hesper choked back a laugh.

"Thank you. You didn't need to do

this." Really.

"Oh, I want all my clients to feel like family. Just because the sale is over, doesn't mean our relationship is. I'm here to help you settle into your new community any way I can. So, what can I do for you? You must have had some reason to drop by? No trouble, I hope?"

Was that real anxiety darkening Gloria's mascara-draped eyes? Or something darker, something more like fear? Hesper pushed the notion away.

"Nothing wrong," she reassured the other woman with what she hoped was a warm smile, even if it felt like fishing line was drawing back the corners of her lips. "I just find myself more curious than I thought I'd be about the previous owner, and I was hoping you wouldn't mind indulging me a bit."

Yes, Gloria's smile was definitely strained now.

"Someone has pasted up shelf paper over the inside of all the cabinet and closet doors. When I pulled them down, I found some truly fantastic paintings, gallery-class work, but they were all of the same boy. And all hidden, of course. Do you happen to know the significance of that boy to the artist who was there before me? And what was the artist's name, anyway? I should have asked earlier. It might even be someone I'm familiar with."

Gloria's smile clung stubbornly to her powdered face. "I'm sure you haven't heard of him." "I quite like the paintings." That was true, wasn't it? They were certainly very compelling. "I'd like to understand them better. One artist to another, you know."

More often than not, people would excuse any eccentricity once she attached the word "art." Hesper wondered how other people explained away their quirks without such a convenient crutch. It must be very difficult.

"His name was Leon Oberman."

Hesper's eyes widened in surprise even as Gloria's filled with what appeared to be genuine tears. Hesper did know Leon Oberman. Not personally, but by reputation. His work was highly sought after, but he wasn't known as a prolific artist. It was hard to reconcile the dozens of his pieces hiding in her house with his career. And she had heard something a while back about his untimely death, but she couldn't recall any details, if she'd ever known any.

"He really was the nicest man. People talk about artists like that as if they're difficult—oh, I'm so sorry, I don't mean that across the board, I just mean other people, you know, other artists." Gloria's hands fluttered. "But he wasn't like that at all. He was kind. I never guessed what would happen."

Hesper struggled to detangle Gloria's threads of thought.

"The boy, of course. That was his son. Leon was a single dad, and his son—well, you can probably tell from the portraits. Down's Syndrome, you know. Poor little babies. He died. Pneumonia, I think. Something like that. Leon never recovered."

Something cold and oddly familiar settled in Hesper's belly. "So, Leon came out to the desert to start over?"

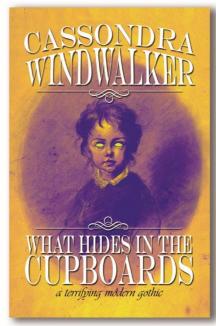
Gloria dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. Hesper had to hand it to her—not a streak of makeup marred her face.

"Yes. And I think he really was happy for a while. I'm sure of it. I used to see him at the bakery sometimes. He always smiled at me. Sometimes people get overwhelmed in a moment, you know? I'm sure he didn't really mean to do it."

Hesper nodded understandingly. Inwardly she considered how bizarre the measurements by which other people's happiness was gauged. Leon Oberman must have been able to find happiness after the death of his young son because he smiled at a realtor when he saw her in the bakery?

People mystified her.

"Tm so sorry to have upset you," she said. "But thank you for sharing his story. That helps me. And I imagine it would have been important to him that people would know and remember his son. Otherwise, he wouldn't have created so many paintings of him."

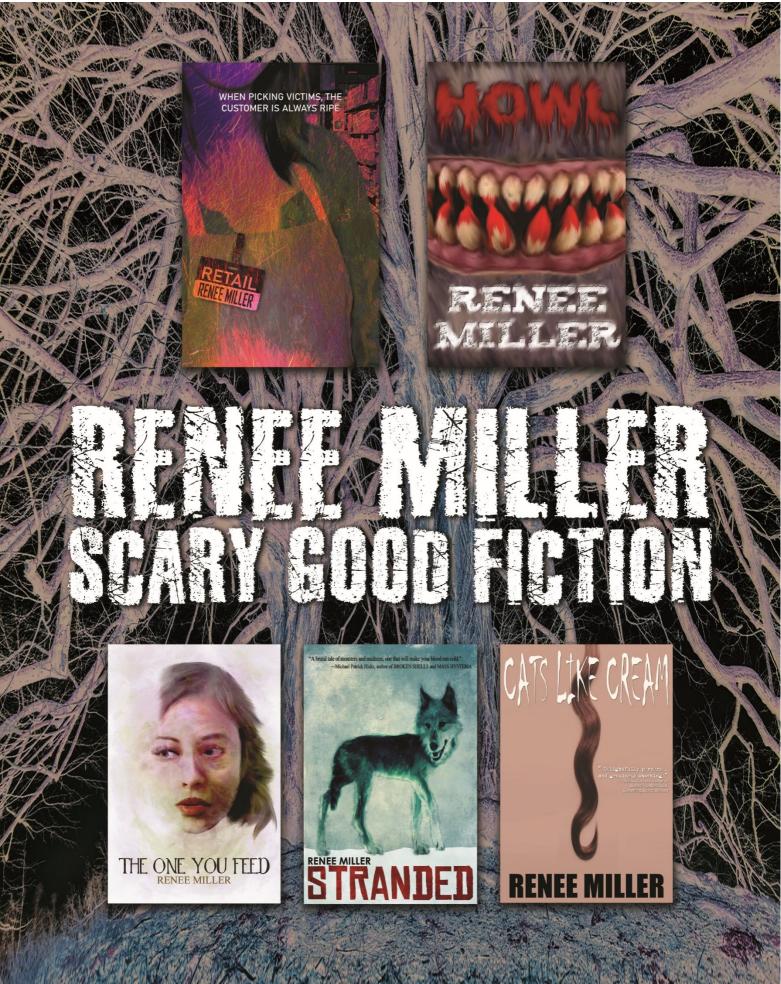


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Although that didn't really mesh with closing them all up in dark cabinets and rooms where no one could see them. Hesper didn't think Gloria would examine her words that deeply, though.

Sure enough, the other woman cheered slightly, like a morning-glory perking up under the sun. She wasn't a bad sort, Hesper decided. It probably wasn't even her fault she was so plastic. Basic qualification for a woman in a face-forward occupation...

Cassondra Windwalker is a poet, essayist, and novelist presently writing full-time beneath the gaze of the Rocky Mountains. She enjoys hearing from readers via Instagram @cassondrawindwalker, Twitter @WindwalkerWrite, Facebook @CassondraWindwalkerWrites, smoke signals, chocolate offerings, and interstellar songs.





A flash of light and the sound of rending metal jolts me from an uneasy half-sleep, and as the plane's tail bucks, I'm tossed sideways past the flight clerk sitting next to me. Something catches me hard in the ribs, knocks the wind out of me, and leaves me senseless on the floor. Feels like an eternity before I can remember where I am.

Transport plane bound for home. Well, the Homestead Army Air Field at least. In the back of the plane, tucked among pallets of dummy cargo, is the thing everyone's hoping will bring Hitler to his knees.

Alarm klaxons fill the air along with a whining howl that makes my skin want to peel off my body to get away. As I push my glasses back up the bridge of my nose and clamber to my feet, I catch sight of the FC, still strapped into his seat. A huge chunk is missing from his torso. Left arm, shoulder, part of his ribcage. All gone. Like something took a big bite out of him.

A memory of the dog back at Dr. Edgewood's lab, the last of her test subjects, comes rushing at me. The almost human way it had howled just before... Oh God.

The howl splitting the air now isn't from any of the doctor's cursed lab animals, though. It's wind, shrieking past the metal edges of a hole in the fuselage. My empty seat harness rattles, its straps snapping and fluttering in the wind. Cold washes over me. Six inches to the left and it would have been the FC staring at

my shredded remains, not the other way around. The plane banks hard and pitches me forward. Things that should be hidden away inside the man squelch between my splayed fingers as I stumble against the body. It's too much. A stream of vomit erupts down my front just before someone grabs me and spins me around.

"Are you hurt?" the flight engineer shouts through the clamor of the alarms and the wind.

Am I? I don't think so, and I shake my head, but he frowns at my slick chin, bile-stained shirt, blood-soaked hands, clearly unconvinced. Then he sees the flight clerk.

"McAlister! Ah, shit!" He muscles past me, presses a couple of fingers to the man's neck even though it's obvious he won't find a pulse.

"What happened?" I holler.

"Anti-aircraft," he barks back.

"But we've got to be nearly stateside by now. Who—?"

"The goddamned Krauts!" the FE yells as he darts to a wall panel. "Parking their subs off the southern coast."

He flips a bunch of switches, pushes some buttons, all the while cursing. The alarms stop blaring, and red emergency lights flood the plane's interior. The pilot's voice comes through an overhead speaker, barely audible above the roaring wind and my own pounding pulse. "[crackle]... evasive maneuvers... [crackle] radioed base for... [crackle]..."

It doesn't make any sense. This

mission is top-secret. I didn't know we were flying out until they dragged me from bed and bustled me onboard a few hours ago. Even then I didn't know where we were going until we were touching down in Gibraltar to refuel. I don't think the pilot even knew our final destination until we were back in the air. How could the Germans know where to look for us?

"Sergeant, I don't understand."

"What's to understand, four-eyes? You're bad-fucking-luck." The FE goes back to the body of the flight clerk—McAlister—and closes the man's sightless eyes. He turns back to me, face grim. "You and your doctor pal, both."

Before I can defend myself, the speaker crackles to life. "What's it looking like back there, Davis?"

The FE shoots me a final glare, then flips a switch and pulls on a set of headphones. "Breach in the aft midsection. Nothing the kite can't handle, but McAlister took it in the chest. He's gone west." There's a long pause. "If the order comes through? We can make it happen." Short pause. "Yes, sir." He looks at me. "Can you swim, civ?"

Can I—? Oh, no. "Yes, I can swim." "How about your lady friend?"

"I—" My throat locks and I have to swallow to get the rest out. "I'm not sure about Dr. Edgewood."

The FE grunts like he's not surprised, then says into his headset, "The gink can swim. The broad might be a walrus, though." Long pause. "Roger, wilco."

With that, he strips the headphones off and shoves past me.

"Sergeant, please. What's happening?"

"We've got Adolf chasing our tail, that's what's happening. Whatever you've got back there better be worth the trouble." The FE squeezes his way up toward the cockpit. "Buckle up!"

I'm left clinging to the back of my chair, staring at shreds of viscera spilling from the flight clerk's torso. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be here. None of us should be here.

The hairs on my neck lift with the sudden certainty that someone is standing behind me, but when I spin around, there's no one. I can feel it, though, a presence like a constant whisper in the back of my mind. My eves drag toward the rear of the plane. Somewhere back there, Dr. Edgewood's crate sits apart from the rest of the cargo, marked with the false label: Chemical Warfare Specialists - N19 Anhydrous Lewisite. Inside, there's a double-lined steel drum containing something far more lethal than anything the doctor and her chemists could have dreamed up by themselves.

The plane banks again, and through the tear in its hull, streaks of gunfire track upward amidst the darkness.

From the cargo bay, an angry voice calls out to me. "What is going on, Mr. Galloway?"

Dr. Edgewood appears from behind a tarp-covered pallet, looking

annoyed.

"Anti-aircraft fire, Doctor! It's the Germans. The pilot's taking evasive actions." An awful thought freezes my insides. "Is—" *Unas*, I nearly say, then correct myself. "Is the package all right?"

"It's fine. Don't worry."

Is she joking? I've been worrying ever since the army first showed up outside the dig site and took over. When we're safely on the ground—no, scratch that—when this damned war is over and that drum and its contents are back underground, buried deep in a bunker somewhere, maybe then I'll stop worrying.

Dr. Edgewood reaches me and glances at McAlister's mangled remains like someone looking at a pencil smudge before turning her attention to the tear in the fuselage still whining at us.

"That won't take us down," she says in a flat, analytical tone that I've come to hate. Then she turns to me, scrutinizing me from head to toe like I'm one of her test subjects. "You look terrible. Are you injured?"

"No, but—"

"Good." Without another word, she turns and heads back into the belly of the plane.

I've been nothing but an irritation to her from the start. As if I wanted to stay involved. It was the higher-ups who insisted I stick around. To keep an eye on me, make sure I didn't go blabbing to anyone about my...discovery.

The plane's nose dips suddenly, engines growling, and my toes scrabble for purchase in the weightlessness. If I hadn't emptied the contents of my stomach just moments before, I surely would now. The second the floor is again underneath me, I bolt for my seat, start fumbling with the buckles, and try my best to ignore the dead man strapped in beside me, head rolling back and forth on a ragdoll neck. It's fine. Everything is going to be fine. Assuming I can ever get these damned buckles to fasten.

From outside the plane comes a sound like the screamers we used to set off every Fourth of July when I was a kid, followed by the metallic hammer of artillery shells pounding the underside of the plane. The alarm klaxons kick in again, and the aircraft starts shuddering hard enough to rattle my skull.

The buckles of my harness are a lost cause, so I abandon my seat and make for the back of the plane, heart in my throat. I'm a man of science, but I swear to Jesus, if I make it out of this alive, He will see me in church every Sunday. An image of the thing I found in Unas' tomb fills my head. Maybe praying to Jesus isn't my best course of action.

The emergency lights in the cargo bay throw shadows the color of blood stains across rows of wooden boxes. On the far side of the hold, Dr. Edgewood is bent over, checking on Uncle Sam's newest weapon of mass destruction. A skull-and-crossbones stenciled across the front of the crate

leers at me over her shoulder. Like it knows something.

"Dr. Edgewood!" I shout, just as the alarm klaxons cut out.

She startles upright, fumbling with something before turning to face me. "Mr. Galloway. What are you doing back here?"

"Checking on you," I lie as I slip and slide on the exposed rollers that make up the cargo bay floor. The vibrations in the plane are growing more violent and there's a faint odor of gasoline coming up through the grating.

"How chivalrous of you," Dr. Edgewood says dryly. "I appreciate your concern, but it is misplaced. You should go back to your seat and strap in."

So, that bluff's been called. What else can I tell her that will allow me to stay back here without coming off as a complete coward?

"The FE wants to know if you can swim."

Dr. Edgewood's eyes widen, then narrow in thought. "I take it that a water landing is likely. Help me get these straps undone."

She starts working a knot loose on one of the tiedowns holding our crate in place.

"Don't just stand there, Mr. Galloway," she snaps when she realizes I haven't moved. "If we crash now, and this crate isn't free, it will sink with the wreckage and all our efforts will have been wasted."

Still, I don't move. Not because of any willful disobedience or dislike for her, though there's plenty of that after watching her in action for the last three months. I just can't bring myself to get any closer to what I know is packed inside the crate she's buzzing around. If it really were full of a new, more-lethal variant of Lewisite I'd be fine, but it's not.

Echoes of dread shiver through my body.

I should have known. The way my torchlight failed to penetrate the darkness of Unas' burial chamber, as though it were a physical shroud draped across the entrance, hiding something not meant to be seen. The wrongness of what I was about to do had been crawling across my body like a swarm of angry ants. A breach of etiquette, a violation that would never be forgiven. And that whispering in my mind, warning me to turn away, save myself, save all of us. I can still hear the voice, only Unas isn't warning me away anymore. He's calling me forward. We should have left him undisturbed.

I stare at the crate.

The reek of gasoline is so strong now that my eyes are watering. Dr. Edgewood brushes her hands off on her skirt, having freed the last of the tie downs. She sees the tears streaming down my cheeks from the gasoline burning my nasal passages.

"Come, now, Mr. Galloway," she says. "Pull yourself together."

Her tough love fails to elicit the intended effect, however, and she heaves an exasperated sigh I can't quite hear over the vibrations rattling the aircraft. She pulls me over

to an open patch of floor, and we sit down side by side.

"Tell me about him," Dr. Edgewood says.

"What?"

She's practically shouting to be heard above the din. "Your pharaoh, Amun. Tell me about him."

"His name was Unas," I correct her, "and I told you everything I know in my report."

Dr. Edgewood rolls her eyes, then attempts an awkward, sympathetic smile that looks more like a grimace. "Yes, Mr. Galloway, but for the sake of distracting ourselves, let's pretend that I never read your report."

Pretend. Sure. We both know she's never cared about the history of the thing the army retrieved from Unas' tomb. This is the first time she's ever shown a shred of interest, though. For reasons I can't fathom, she's taking pity on the poor sap going to pieces next to her. So, sure, I'll play along.

"Unas was the last pharaoh of Egypt's Fifth Dynasty. Very little was written about him, which is unusual. From what we've been able to find, he was beloved by his people at the outset of his reign, but something changed. We don't know what. By the time he died, he was reviled."

"How long was he Pharaoh?"

"That's what my team and I were trying to figure out. The records we have don't make any sense. Everything points to Unas ruling for somewhere between one hundred-fifty and three hundred years."

She laughs. "Yes, that does seem difficult to believe."

Does it, though? After everything you've seen?

"Unas is still hated to this day," I say. "I couldn't hire a single local to help me excavate his tomb. No one wanted anything to do with the project, no matter what I offered as payment. I had to telegraph my department head, request a team of undergrads from our sister school in Jordan."

"Yes, I know."

I look at her, surprised.

She shrugs. "The army is intercepting every telegraph between the United States and North Africa. With Hitler's forces pressing into new regions throughout Egypt, we can't be too careful. Spies are everywhere, Mr. Galloway. Your missive piqued our curiosity, so we kept an eye on the status of your...project."

I laugh. It feels insane to be talking about this as we sit in an aircraft that's shaking itself apart while German subs try to shoot us out of the sky, but Dr. Edgewood is right. Talking anthropology is distracting me from the current situation.

"How did he die?" she asks. "Unas?" My eyes slip sideways toward the crate hidden in shadows on the far side of the hold.

I don't think he did, I'm tempted to say. Instead, I let her question go unanswered. Maybe she's thinking something similar, because she doesn't press the issue.

"You know," she says a minute later. "What you discovered, what we're able to do with it? It's going to end this little war. When the enemy sees what we have, when they see it in action..."

She lets her sentence trail off unfinished, eyes focused on some distant, imaginary future in which the war is over, and Hitler and his army have rolled over and surrendered. There's an almost excited smile on her face as she's thinking about it. Wish I shared her optimism, but unlike Dr. Edgewood, I'm better at thinking about the past than the future, and the thoughts filling my mind are memories. The crunch of beetle carapaces beneath my shoes. The musty smell of dry stones and stale incense. Dead eyes staring from the sockets of a skeletal face. Movement in the shadows. A sound of shifting, scraping. The weight of something ancient and inescapable wrapping around my body, penetrating my flesh, spreading through my veins, finding my heart, making a new home. My desperate, hopeless scramble backward, like that last poor dog scrabbling in its cage as it tried to get away.

There's no getting away, a voice whispers through my mind.

Around us, the hold starts filling with oily, acrid smoke. Without warning, the vibrations rattling the plane stop. The hold falls eerily quiet. Nothing but the sound of the night whistling past us outside and stillness swallowing us up inside. My blood runs cold. It sounds just like the stillness of Unas' burial chamber right

before I stepped across the threshold.

The emergency lights flicker and die, and in the blackness a scream starts skittering up my throat, but then the lights come back on and instead of screaming I choke on a huge lungful of noxious fumes.

Boots pound toward us from the cockpit. The FE rounds the corner, eyes hard, mouth set. He makes for a control panel on the back wall. A second later, the navigator rounds the corner.

"Suit up, ladies," the navigator barks as he yanks open the door of a nearby locker and pulls out two bulky parachutes. He tosses them in our direction. "We're going for a swim."

Dr. Edgewood leaps to her feet, snatches one up and starts sliding into it. Her eyes are bright with the same strange mix of terror and excitement she had two days ago as she watched an infected swarm of rats chew their way into the guts of a screaming stray.

"Hurry up, pal." The navigator grabs a life jacket and clips it to a brass ring on the front of the second parachute, then starts manhandling me into it. "Goddamned Waldo. You want to get blown up with the rest of the load? Help me out, here."

Dr. Edgewood's head snaps up.

"What?" I ask, confused.

The FE has a binder out and is flipping the pages frantically, glancing back and forth between it and a panel of dials and meters. "Fucking McAlister. He knew all this shit."

"Engines three and four are dead,"

the navigator says as he finishes clipping me into my chute, "and the fuel tank's hit. We're going in the drink."

"Thank you for stating the obvious," Dr. Edgewood says. I recognize the irritated edge in her voice. "What did you mean when you said Mr. Galloway would get blown up?"

The FE punches a button and the loading hatch of the cargo hold whines as the bay door begins to open. The stinging haze of smoke starts to clear as it's sucked out through the widening crack.

"Adolf's in the water, doll. Brass' orders are to blow the consignment and bail."

Dr. Edgewood starts backing away. "Absolutely not. This weapon is far too valuable to just *blow up*. Dump the cargo, Sergeant. The package will survive the drop. Radio your men back at base to send a ship and retrieve it."

"Quit with the chin music, honey. We're blowing this bird so—"

Before the navigator can finish, another explosion rocks us and I'm face down on the floor again. The plane bucks and rolls like it's getting ready to fall out of the sky. Air whips at my face as I belly crawl forward, mouth flooding with the metallic tang of terror.

"Dr. Edgewood!" I shout.

She's rolling onto her belly, pushing herself up to her hands and knees. Still alive. Thank God.

The new hole is huge, metal gaping upward from its edges like sharks'

teeth. Beside it is the crate. Most of the lettering and half the skull-and-crossbones symbol has been blown off. The artillery shell must have breached the inner drum.

My insides soften with terror. Fine black dust is streaming out of the drum, caught in the air gusting into the hold through the new gash in the fuselage.

Unas. He's here.

From the control panel, the FE says, "Got it."

He starts turning a bunch of numbered dials on the control panel.

There's a noise like a kid's toy popgun. The FE staggers forward into the control panel. A flower of red blooms between his shoulders. I turn just in time to see the muzzle of the luger in Dr. Edgewood's hand flash, and the navigator's right eye bursts in a spray of blood and brain matter.

She turns the gun on me. "I am sorry about this, Mr. Galloway, but I, too, have orders."

The bay door yawns wider behind her, revealing a star-dusted square of sky silhouetting the hundred pallets in the cargo hold. My gaze locks onto the only one that matters, still spewing dust.

"We can't dump the cargo!" I point at the broken crate, but she doesn't even glance in its direction.

"We don't have to," she says as she backs toward the open hatch, her gun fixed on me. "As the good Sergeant said, this plane is going down. The drum will survive the crash intact. The Fuehrer's subs will recover it."

"But look!" I scream, my voice cracking, and finally she does. Dust from the ruptured drum mixes with the smoke billowing out into the night behind her. I'm upwind, but she's backed up into its path. She coughs, eyes widening with understanding, but by then it's too late. The gun tumbles from her slack fingers and clatters away.

I'm intimately 'tamiliar with the timing of what comes next. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. She collapses.

The stench burning electrical insulation stings my throat, but it's the ruptured drum and the 60 kilos of ground Pharaoh streaming out of it that makes me take shallow little sips as I stumble to get away. Not that breathing shallowly will save me if the wind shifts. Doses of less than a gram were enough to kill the snakes, the rats, all the... other test subjects.

Dr. Edgewood's body starts to twitch.

I think about all the trials I wish I'd never watched. In every case, seizures followed the subjects' initial collapse. Snake bodies whiplashed into impossible knots. Rat spines flexed and spasmed, pink tails jittered like overloaded wires. The dogs were even worse. Oh God, the dogs. The way their legs had kicked and hammered against the sides of their cages so hard they tore claws off. Their heads jerked and slammed on the cage floor until their muzzles were pulp.

Dr. Edgewood's body stops seizing. I back away until the control panel wall not far off.

"Shit!" He squats and goes through the motion of checking the other men for a pulse. At the touch of his fingers against my neck, I start babbling.

"Jesus, you're alive. Where are you hit?"

Adrenaline makes coherent speech nearly impossible. I have to warn him, but all I manage to get out is: "Don't breathe it in, don't breathe it in!"

"Calm down, son," the pilot says. He checks my parachute and gives a curt nod. The navigator must have done a fine job securing it before Dr. Edgewood shot him in the face. The pilot plucks my glasses off my nose and tucks them into my jacket pocket, buttons it shut, gives it a pat for good measure. "Time to get off this bird, soldier. You and me. Let's go."

He stands, turns toward the open bay door, and pauses. "Dr. Edgewood, ma'am. Are you all right?"

My heart tries to punch its way out of my chest. A high, gurgling whine leaks out of me, and God help me, I sound just like the fucking dogs did. Dr. Edgewood staggers toward us, one arm dangling from a badly dislocated shoulder. Blood streams down her chin from where she—it—has bitten through its tongue. She had always insisted on calling test subjects "it" after exposure.

Before I can stop him, the pilot steps forward. "Let me help you, ma'am. That last hit we took—"

The thing lunges, catches him off guard and sinks its teeth into his cheek just below his left eye. Blood sprays from the seam where its mouth suctions to his face. The pilot cries out and pushes Dr. Edgewood off of him. Its jaw muscles clench, and there's a wet tearing sound as it peels a strip of the pilot's cheek away. The flesh stretches tight between them before it rips loose, leaving a ragged flap of muscle and connective tissue dangling from his jawline. Through the hole in his face, I watch the pilot's yellowing molars part as he screams in pain.

The creature screams back and throws itself at him, this time burying its face into the man's neck. His screams become a wet gargle. Frothy pink spittle flies from his lips. He shoves with terror-fueled strength, and Dr. Edgewood's body is thrown backward. A stream of blood arcs from his throat and splashes across the tops of cargo boxes. Air whistles from the dangling remains of his trachea. The pilot clutches at his neck, eyes bulging. Skin and muscle and connective tissue pucker around his palm as he presses his hand deeper and deeper into the wound, desperately trying to stop the blood from pulsing out between his slick fingers. Then, his eyes flutter and roll back in their sockets. His hand falls away from his neck. When he collapses, his head slams into the metal grating with a clang. I know he won't stay down, though. Soon he'll start twitching and jittering, flailing and spasming, and then-

Thumping and scraping from

between the crates. Dr. Edgewood's body rises into view. Bits of the pilot's face stick to its lips and chin like bloody curds. Through a rictus grin, it starts to growl again, a sound that carries a deep and ancient, and unrelenting rage. It crawls over the pilot's fallen body and angles for me, milky white pupils fixed on its next victim.

I turn away from the creature shambling toward me and try not to think about the horse back in the lab, its pink intestines writhing and squirming across the dirt floor in wormy undulations. Visions fill my mind of my own entrails dangling in glistening loops from Dr. Edgewood's ravenous, dripping mouth. The horse had screamed and screamed for what seemed an eternity before it finally stilled. How long will I scream, I wonder. The second my torch lit the interior of the burial chamber and I saw Unas waiting in the shadows, I feared it would end like this.

On the control panel a few feet from where I now sit, I catch sight of a red switch with the words cargo dump written on a piece of tape below it. There is no thinking. As from the first moment all this began, there is only the desperate, instinctive desire to not die. I dive for the switch.

The click of a hundred latches letting go is followed by the scrape of wood against metal and the whir of rollers as the cargo starts to slide. The creature staggers and is pinned between two pallets. It leaves red streaks along the rough wood of the box that is cruising its lower half as it claws to free itself, but it's no use.

Its jaw yawns inhumanly wide to reveal gristly bits of the pilot's trachea stuck between its teeth. From beyond the shredded stump of its tongue comes a howl of fury and frustration. It is the cry of Unas chasing me down the limestone tunnel as I ran from his tomb. As I run from him still.

Crates bump and jostle as the pallets roll out of the hold. They take Dr. Edgewood, the two airmen she murdered, and the fallen pilot with them as they tumble from the plane. On hands and knees, I crawl to the open hatch and watch in the dim light as the ruptured drum plummets toward the ocean, Unas' remains billowing out of it into the moonless sky. Just before the first crate hits the water, the pilot's limbs start to spasm and jerk. It looks like he's dancing.

The bodies will never make it to shore. The current will pull them out into deep water and the sea will have its way with them. I clip into a static line dangling from the ceiling and try not to think about that ruptured drum heading toward the bottom of the ocean. Then, after counting to ten, I jump.

The water comes up fast despite the parachute, hits me hard, but I manage to free myself before being dragged under. I don't remember putting on the life jacket or inflating it, but here I am, bobbing like a cry for help stuffed into a bottle and tossed out to sea.

For two days, there's nothing but water and sky. No sign of the Nazi subs that shot us down. My terror stays with me through the first day as I kick and paddle, guessing at which way is east based on the sunrise. No idea if I'm doing anything other than wearing myself out.

By the second day, fatigue turns my limbs to stone, and with it comes a different sort of terror. A certain, creeping dread that pulls at the edges of my mind. There are things under the water. Dark shapes. Cold fingers grabbing at my legs. Waxy faces looming up out of the blue depths beneath me, mouths gaping in silent, accusing screams. Voices whispering constantly, endlessly. No. One voice. My voice. Who am I talking to? My mind is going, playing tricks.

In the middle of the night, something calls my name in a high shriek, and I flail awake to slap uselessly at the water. I listen, time sliding past me until the sound of the ocean slurs into dream noises. Feet dragging across gritty sandstone. The rasp and whistle of wind scraping through a 2,000-year-old throat. Bones being slowly and methodically ground to a fine powder. A weapon to end this war. To end all wars. To end us all. A pharaoh's laughter.

I'm going to die out here.

Maybe it's for the best.

I drift.

Something catches hold of the toe of my boot and tugs, releases. Catches hold again.

Returning to consciousness is like coming to after a night of heavy drinking. The headache pounding my my skull sounds like screaming. My eyelids are sunburned and swollen. It hurts to open them, and when I do, I can't quite understand what I'm looking at. The sky is just beginning to lighten, a dull, colorless gray above the dark ocean, but the horizon is all wrong. It's solid and unmoving, not the shifting rise and fall of wave after endless wave. Something pale stretches between the dark sea and the dark sky. Again, my boot snags. Understanding hits me like a hard slap to the face. Land.

Every movement is agony. My body feels like wet paper tearing apart as I try to claw through the water toward a white, sandy beach stretching up to a line of palm and pine trees. I drag myself up the beach, gasping and vomiting sea water, crying and laughing. The sand is like shards of glass beneath my water-logged hands, but I don't care. With a final effort, I roll onto my back and stare up at the flat, gray sky. A few lingering stars wink down at me. You made it, they seem to say. You survived.

Exhaustion is a heavy blanket pressing me into the sand.

When I wake again, the sky is blushing with the colors of dawn and the tiny bodies of birds. Gulls, maybe? They streak across my field of vision high overhead. Some kind of migration. Their cries must have been what woke me.

I push up to sitting, cringing at the pain stabbing through every part of me and am met with a blurry view of the sunrise. I fish my glasses from my jacket pocket. I try not to think of the man who put them there.

It's the most glorious sunrise in the history of mankind. There will never be another one this spectacular. The horizon burns like fire. Crimson reds and violent oranges reach upward, melting into a fatty yellow that kisses the deep royal blue of the retreating night. Despite my tears, a lightness fills my chest, buoying me to my feet.

An almost manic glee takes hold as I stumble down to the waterline, eyes on the horizon. I inhale deeply, fill my lungs to bursting with the clean, salty air.

"I beat you!" I bellow, my sea-ravaged throat rupturing with the force of my triumph. "I beat you! Do you hear me? I survived, you sonofabitch. I'm alive!"

Far out in the water, a standing wave sits quietly atop a barrier reef, its seafoam catching the glow of the sunrise behind it. Something glints and glitters in the froth. I raise a hand, shade my eyes, and squint. Lots of somethings flash and sparkle in the wave that isn't so much standing still as it is rolling slowly toward the shore. Overhead, gulls scream as they flee inland. A creeping dread slides down my spine. When I retreat from the ocean's edge, my waterlogged boot slips on something slick and I stumble.

A fish the length of my forearm lies in the sand, eyes cracked and drying.



Fat gray scales sluff off to reveal a patch of pale flesh where my boot slid across it. Pearly orange eggs lie in a slime-streaked spray across the beach. Beneath my weight, they must have squirted from its body when I stepped on it. Its gills lift and lower slowly. Milky liquid oozes from the corner of its gaping mouth. Without warning, its body whiplashes against the sand and launches into the air. It snaps its jaws, just missing my thigh as I stagger back. When it hits the ground, I kick at it in disgust. It spins and tumbles away up the beach, scales and eggs flying in directions. I look beyond it and see that other fish are washing up.

All along the beach, as far as my salt-bleared eyes can see, silvery bodies lie in the dark sand. Some big. some small, many missing fins and wormy white intestines tails, dangling from torn abdomens. Crabs crawl slowly and awkwardly over them, picking at their soft tissues with sharp claws but not feeding. They are all dead, but they are all moving. Their bodies glisten wetly in the morning light as they flop up the beach one flailing spasm at a time.

Something breaches the surface of the waves. I shield my eyes from the bright sunrise to see. With slow, uneven jerks a sea turtle drags itself out of the water using only its two front flippers. Both the hind ones are missing. Torn off, I imagine, but by what? I look out over the open sea. What else has the Pharaoh's curse infected? When I fled Unas' burial chamber, I thought I could outrun his wrath. I let the army step in and take control, hoping they could lift it from me and make it their weapon. I'd dumped the cargo hoping the ocean would wash it away. Who can blame a man for wanting to live?

But you knew, Unas whispers. You knew I would come.

Waves shush over the sand as they lap and tug at the shore. In their relentless, endless murmur, his voice calls to me.

I find a cool patch of sand beneath a slanting palm and settle down to watch the sun free itself from an ocean frothing with Unas' rage. The last of the gulls pass overhead, trying in vain to escape what's coming.

A breeze blows in off the water to meet me, carrying the scents of salty brine, a musty tomb, and the faint stink of sweetly rotting flesh.

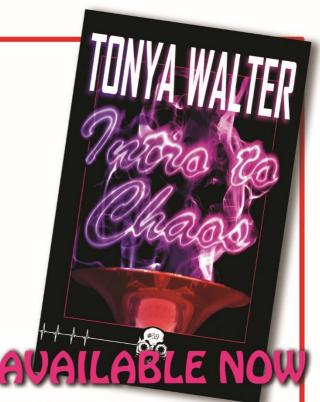
Katherine Karch is a high school science teacher and author living with her family on the North Shore She studied of Massachusetts. biology at the University Massachusetts Amherst and creative writing Lesley at University. Her writing has appeared in magazines such as Uncharted. MetaStellar. Radon Journal, and Metaphorosis. If asked to describe herself, she would say that she's mostly harmless, probably human, and definitely a nerd.



Dinah had been with her since Pierre, Texas. The bus broke down and left Chaos and the other passengers stranded in the pit stop of a town for hours. Chaos took a walk to stretch her legs and found the ghost in the parking lot of a nearby shopping mall. It was weird that the girl followed her, but it wasn't anything that hadn't happened before. Eye contact was the kicker. If she made eve contact with the dead, they were more likely to stick around, but they'd never followed for long, and never onto a bus. Chaos was a little panicked on that trip to New Orleans, with this washed-out trumpeter staring at her all the way. At least Dinah was quiet, though. Not all ghosts are. Dinah never made a sound, until she blew her horn.

And she'd only blown her horn, so far, when trouble was on the way, which made Chaos wonder what the hell she'd stepped into. She didn't worry about Dinah waking Elena. As far as she knew, no one else could hear the trumpet. Elena might hear Chaos saying "give it a fucking rest," though, so she stayed quiet while the teenage ghost cycled through notes in the corner. Chaos crossed the road to examine a bright green running shoe laying a little way behind Elena's pickup truck, and that's when she realized she was dreaming.

"Fuck," she said, no longer worried about waking her host. If she was talking out loud in her sleep, so be it. In fact, she hoped she was. Maybe Elena would wake her up, and she



could avoid whatever was waiting for her in these dream streets. Dinah appeared under the street light, still wailing on her horn.

"You're no help," Chaos said.

At the end of the road another light glowed, and she spotted a woman pacing, long skirt dragging the asphalt. It was a cliche ghost; semitransparent, in Victorian dress. She'd seen the type before and they never caused her trouble, but Dinah was blowing her horn, so watched this waif closely. This was just a dream, but her dreams had a way of showing up in waking life, and she'd learned to pay attention. The ghost didn't do anything but cross the street, back and forth, until another howl echoed through the dark. Dinah's horn stopped abruptly, and the Victorian lady turned and hurried away out of the light.

"What is it?" Chaos asked.

Dinah, in standard Dinah fashion, said nothing.

Another howl rang out, this one closer, and Chaos figured it was time to move. She followed the Hazy Lady (as she decided to call her) to the corner, where the road ended and another began, leading off to the right. The ghost approached a stately brick house with rose bushes around the yard's perimeter, and a neat stone path leading up to the front door. Hazy Lady turned around when she crossed the threshold and, Chaos was pretty sure, looked right at her. Dinah started up on the trumpet again. Another howl joined in her song. The Hazy Lady slammed her door.

That's when shit got weird.

The roses all shriveled fell to the ground, then bloomed again in unison, rapidly cycling through seasons. The Hazy Lady was pacing inside insanely fast, flying past the windows. Chaos thought of a metronome, or a pendulum on a grandfather clock. Bloom, wither, fall. Bloom, wither, fall. Left, right, back and forth, and Dinah on the horn. It was rhythmic, and the howling synced up with it. Bloom, wither, fall. Left, right, back and forth. Dinah on the horn.

"Ah-00000."

Chaos broke out in goosebumps.

"It's a dream," she reminded herself.

Down the road to her right, three whole streetlights away, was the

shadow of a man. He was walking, but his steps were jerky, his arms moving unnaturally, and it took Chaos a moment to realize the man was dancing. Dinah blew her horn. The shadow man straightened up, arched his back, and howled up at the moon.

"What the fuck..." Chaos said.

The bushes rustled. One at a time, they disappeared. Poof. Gone. The hazy lady paced faster. Left, right. Poof. Poof. Back and forth. Dinah, won't you blow.

"Ah-00000."

The dancing man was getting closer, and Chaos wanted no part of any of this.

Liquor bottles sprung up from the front lawn like flowers. A car came screaming up from behind her and plowed into a fence that hadn't been there a moment ago.

"Ah-ooooo."

The man was closer. Chaos saw he was wearing a cowboy hat. She didn't know anything about square dancing, but she imagined that's what he was doing, now only a block and a half away.

The brick house burst into flames.

Chaos felt dizzy. This wasn't right. Her dreams were visions often, and always weird as hell, sometimes downright scary. This, though, felt like something drug induced, like a fever fueled nightmare.

The fire burned away everything but the brick in a flash, then went out. There was no sign of the Hazy Lady. The world went preternaturally still. Dinah let the horn fall from her lips. The cowboy had stopped dancing and stood in the middle of the road. Chaos watched the smoke rise from the blackened shell of the house and then, soft as snow, clothes rained down from the sky. A jacket, a baseball hat, then a boot crashed down, and a heavy backpack, and another bright green running shoe.

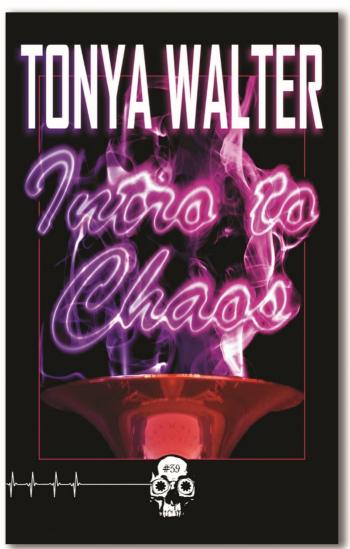
Only then did the dream let Chaos go. She woke up on Elena's couch. The room was still dark, except for the little bit of moonlight falling on Dinah, who still sat on the little table by the door.

I need to get the fuck out of here, Chaos thought, lying awake in the dark.

If she'd seen Carver in the daylight, she would never have stayed in the place...

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Tonya Walter lives with her children and husband in Minnesota, where she writes stories about carnivorous plants and haunted airplanes. Bits of her fiction and weird art can be found at the fictitious tonyawalter.com.

THE STATE ON THE PARTY OF THE P

CRIME #2

THE GLOVE WAS THE ANSWER... UNTIL IT BECAME THE PROBLEM



J.M. TAYLOR

ROBERT R. MCCAMMON

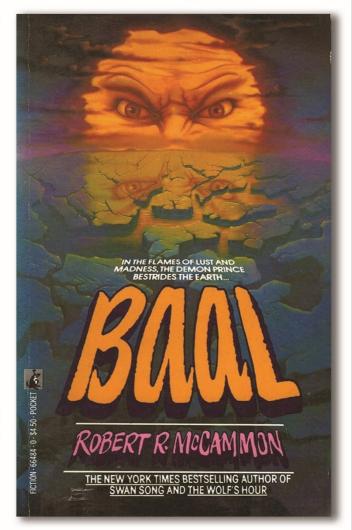
If you're reading Unnerving Magazine, you almost certainly have read something by Robert. R McCammon. He's written close to thirty books, has had three NYT Bestsellers, has had works adapted for the screen, and since the early 2000s has been sculpting the world around Matthew Corbett—including the most recent release, Seven Shades of Evil (2023)

EG: Anything special about your writing process?

RM: I work at night and will be working probably until four in the morning. Night has always been interesting to me and as hard as I try, I can't become a morning person. Also, I never work with an outline, I just trust that the story will progress as it pleases...which it always does...and which is why I never look back at books like Swan Song and Boy's Life because I can't believe I could ever write either one of those without an outline. But I did, I still do, and that's me.

EG: How did writing and selling Baal (1979) differ from writing and selling Seven Shades of Evil (2023)?

RM: I was writing 'in the dark' with Baal not knowing whether it was good enough to be published



or not, so it really was a shot in the dark. With Seven Shades of Evil, I had just about already sold the book before I began writing...so it was quite a difference!!

EG: In general, what's the biggest difference in publishing in 2023 when compared to 1978?

RM: I have to say that in 1978 if you (at least in my experience) got through to mainstream publishing you felt as if you were part of a family. The editors knew books, enjoyed their work, enjoyed communicating with the authors and there was a real feeling of a shared experience. Now...not so much since big corporations have taken over publishing and the editors and execs could be (in my opinion) working at any other kind of business you might name.



EG: Do you look at your past works and wish you could've handled something differently, or was there ever an idea that you failed to pull off that you wish you could have?

RM: When I look back, I think "How the heck could I have ever written that book???" So, to keep from intimidating myself, I don't look back very often. But no, there's nothing I haven't tried that didn't work out. There was one book I decided not to do because it was just too dark, but it was just the one. (A very grim history of Hollywood set around

the inhabitants of a house from the beginning of Hollywood to the present day).

EG: What do you like to read, do you find yourself gravitating to stories written about specific decades, topics, or locations?

RM: I enjoy reading about history and I enjoy mysteries. Also I have a huge collection of science-fiction magazines from the 50s, 60s and 70s that I'm reading through. And I'm reading all the Hardy Boys books I missed (many). Really.





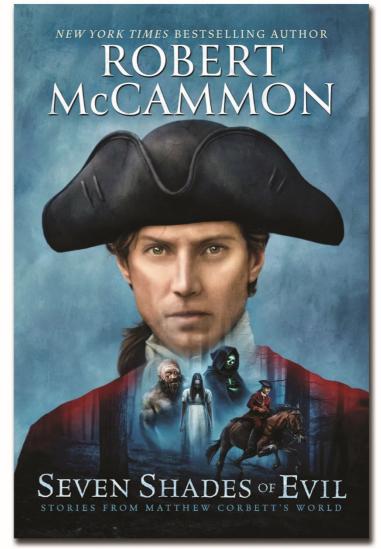
EG: How does the horror of today (books or screen) stack up against the horror of your youth?

RM: Very much...very much...bloodier. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but I will say that one of my favorite films (and books) is the original *Haunting of Hill House*, in which you saw hardly anything at all but the atmosphere was oppressively (and awesomely) scary.

EG: For people new to your work, can you describe the Matthew Corbett stories?

RM: Matthew Corbett is a problem-solver young (detective) in Colonial America. Each of the up until now nine books stand on their own but there's a story arc that connects all the books. I'm writing the tenth and final book in the series now. I think (hope) it's a fun and interesting look at life with all its intrigues, romance, and violence in early America, plus there's creepy supernatural element going on.

For anyone interested in Robert R. McCammon, you can find more



information at: robertmccammon.com, and specifically for the Matthew Corbett series: matthewcorbettsworld.com.

I'd like to thank Robert, and his assistant, Hunter Goatley, for taking the time to hook me up with answers to mate my questions.

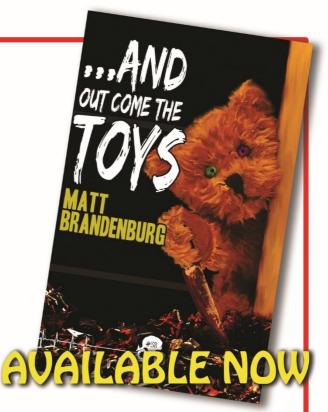


TRACK 2

Darkness cloaked the abandoned toy factory. Before it closed ten years ago, it produced joy for millions of children. Now, the building on the outskirts of town squatted amongst scraggly trees, broken eighteen wheelers, and crooked light poles as lost as the toys it used to produce. Justin stared up at the entrance. He prayed there'd be cool shit in there, anything to make their last time together the best night of their lives.

His friends stood by him, ripples of excitement and awe radiating off them. He didn't know if it was the allure of breaking into the infamous landmark, Vince's silly rumors of a hidden vault in the factory, or that they felt sorry for him, but they agreed to come along.

Stains coated the slate gray walls, broken up with boxy windows near the top. Crooked dead trees blocked the building's lower half. Smokestacks sprouted out of it like a body stuck with daggers. Extensive stone steps, with a red carpet running up the middle like a tongue, led to a landing and a ridiculously sized door that could have been stolen from a gothic cathedral. Columns of twisted and stained marble held up a pitched roof above the entrance. The longer they stood there, the more Justin noticed the garish smiles on molded superheroes, baby dolls with puckered lips, dopey dogs, and boxy robots peering from the wall around the door.



Aaron chuckled as he slipped the hood of his Gangster Fun hoodie off his head. His brown eyes flashed in the slight moonlight. "What the fuck man?"

"This dude was something else." Cam played with the dull stud in her nose.

"I can't even imagine what it would have been like visiting this place," Michelle said while digging a cigarette out of her jacket. One of the chains hanging off her skirt jingled as she moved. "Those five kids that won the contest must have been freaked the fuck out and super stoked at the same time."

A breeze whistled over the barren parking lot behind them and bit at their skin. Dead leaves skittered over broken pavement, whispering legends. Rumors had bounced around Justin's school playground and, later, the bars he snuck into, about what it'd be like to witness the factory's magic. Challis, the whimsical owner, kept the place off limits for visitors, and no one knew anyone that worked there. They all remembered the thrill and jealousy knowing those children were the first people in the world to enter the factory. It all curdled when the winners never came out.

Cam went up the steps first. The back of her hoodie revealed a large patch for Operation Ivy, the skanking man outlined in white. Her Doc Martens barely made a sound as she climbed to the top. Justin's eyes followed her up and knew he was going to miss her the most. They'd been like siblings since the sixth grade when she taught him Agent Orange was a better version of The Offspring. When she reached the top, she flipped them off with a smirk and disappeared into the shadows.

"Oh man, this place is giving me the creeps," Aaron said.

Vince's leather jacket crinkled as he turned, safety pins clicking together. "Dude, it's just an old fucking building, where's the fucking tough guy that beat the shit outta that redneck that called you a nigg—"

Justin coughed, cutting Vince off, and eyed him with a pleading expression to take it down a peg.

Aaron's jaw tightened for a moment before he laughed. "That bastard was all tough until he had my boot up his ass. Anyway—"

A piercing scream from the top of the stairs severed Aaron's sentence. The terror in the yell sent Aaron booking toward the sound. The others were seconds behind. Chasing after Aaron, he prayed a rat had spooked Cam or she was playing a joke. At least Aaron's almost up there; nothing scares him, and if it is a prank, he won't be able to not laugh.

"Motherfucker!" Cam said.

The air around the factory thickened. Scuffling boots, wispy bounced flutters, and clicking amongst the columns. Someone grunted. Justin's skin tightened; energy coursed up his spine. He broke through the shadows with Vince and Michelle.

Aaron stood in front of Cam, one of his fists up while he pointed at the darkness. Cam snarled and squinted as she tried reaching over Aaron's shoulder, her hand a claw ready to grab whatever had upset her.

"Stay the fuck over there, you piece of shit!" Aaron said.

"What's going on?" Justin said.

"I was at the door, testing the handle, when this bastard came creeping out of the shadows like a perv," Cam said as her cheeks flushed.

Heaped against the wall were ripped open stacks of garbage bags with ribbons, tablecloths, and busted toys spilling out. The stench of rotten food and decaying vegetation permeated the landing.

Justin jumped when the pile moved. "What the hell?"

The heap rose. Colorful glitter and sparkly strips of plastic fluttered to the ground. Two green orbs glowed near the top.

"Oh, howdy my children! It's so good to see you!" The voice emerged from the pile in a high falsetto, a faint echo warped and bent the sound into a chorus. A slight ticking and static punctuated the greeting. "I hope you are excited to play in the toy room, it is so much fun!"

"The fuck..." Vince said.

They took a step back as the pile moved into a slice of moonlight. On top of its oblong head sat a floppy fedora. A string of doll heads with ruby eyes hung from its neck. Justin blinked a few times. The face was instantly recognizable from memories, t-shirts, even a poster still hanging on Justin's wall: Challis. He can't be alive, can't be sleeping on the front steps of his own factory. Despite the blue marks zigzagging across his face, the electric orange hair appeared to be made of plastic, the glowing green eyes, it was clearly Challis.

The crunch of breaking plastic and the sizzle of electricity echoed as the owner took a wobbly step forward. His body flopped back and forth like it was made of rubber.

"Now, before you go, I must warn you, do not be afraid of the little ones. It's been forever since they've had any new friends to play with. Any that do come never leave, that's how much fun they have!" It finished by burping out rapid-fire laughter.

Justin's scalp tightened. Are they going to want to keep going now?

He let out a breath, working up the courage to speak, when Vince sucker-punched the person on the side of their head.

"Get the fuck out of here!" Vince said.

The stranger crumpled against the wall. His hat floated down onto the pile of garbage.

"What the fuck are you doing, Vince?" Michelle asked, adding in a whisper, "God, didn't he look like Challis?"

Justin perked up. So, I'm not the only one that thought that.

"I'm not going to let some crackhead bastard mess with us, especially one dressed up like that. Fuck him."

Yeah, but did you have to knock him unconscious? Justin glanced at Vince, wishing he had the nerve to call his friend out. Why is he the one staying?

"Uh, so what the hell do we do now?" Aaron asked.

"Fucking leave him. Who cares?" Vince said.

"But what if you killed him or something? We should probably get him help," Michelle said as she chewed on a fingernail and paced.

Cam tiptoed to the body. "Why the hell would he dress up like Challis, and what's up with his face? Vince couldn't have split his skin that bad."

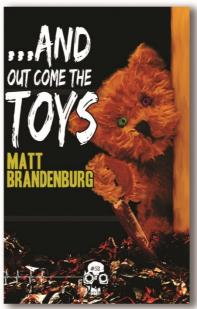
Vince rubbed his knuckles, glared at Cam, then went to the door. "And say what exactly? That we just happened to be up here and found this strange dude hiding in the garbage? Fuck that."

"Yeah, but what if someone finds him? Are they going to come—" Before Michelle could finish, the person leapt into the air. It landed behind

Vince, its arms and legs stretched out. Dark green eyes flashed and rolled in their sockets. A wicked grin grew until it threatened to split the pink face, revealing more of the dark blue beneath. Vince flattened against the door, his mouth hanging open. The group stood transfixed as the man shuddered and bounced.

Its voice crackled and slowed like a warped tape. "Oh yes, they'll love to play with all of you. We are all going to have so much fun!" The bizarre man sprung over them and landed on the stairs. He pranced to the ground before heading to the building's east side. "I can't wait, the gate is almost open!"

Justin's pounding heart drowned out the others' frantic breathing. He didn't want this to be the final note his friends left on. If this soured the night and caused them to leave, would it taint their other memories? Would they want to come back to him next summer...?

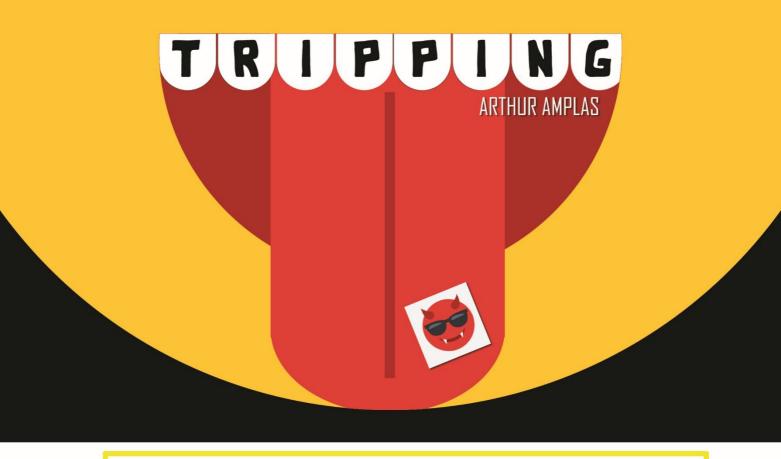


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Marvin scratched his nose as he walked blindly toward the can. The scent of Teresa and Frieda's sex was musky and thick on his sticky fingers. He stood at the toilet, smiling to himself over how well last night had gone.

And he'd been so paranoid about trying acid.

He hadn't been laid in more than three years, and here he was, thirty-four, dropping acid for the first time, and stumbling into the hottest, wettest, most outrageous sexual escapade of his life. A three-way. And damned if Teresa and Frieda weren't a pair of foxy dames.

"Whoops," he said as he looked down to his penis. There was blood in his pubic hair and around the base of his cock. No biggie, that happened sometimes. That opportunities didn't arise often did not mean he wasn't *very* well-equipped for for the job.

After pissing, he began to wash his genitals over the sink with hand soap. It smelled like lavender, a powerful scent, and yet, there was another smell. Earthy. Fishy. Even metallic.

He'd awoken alone in his bedroom after the marathon of debauchery in the living room. He didn't recall leaving the girls, but everything was vague around the edges.

He guessed they'd be hungry—he was mighty hungry himself. Perhaps they'd go to Denny's. If anyone in the history of mankind deserved a Lumberjack Slam, it was him.

"Slam," he said, giggling to himself as he stepped down the hall toward the living room. Images paraded through his head in high speed:

Teresa with her mouth on his cock.

Frieda spreading her pussy lips.

Teresa licking Frieda.

Frieda spreading his cheeks.

Him slamming his stiff cock into every welcoming hole.

The three of them rolling in one another's abundant juices, so thick and wet that the carpet had gotten soggy.

He hoped he wouldn't have to replace the living room rug. That shag was like those blue shop towels, soaking it up and refusing to let go.

"Hey, I was thinking we could..." Marvin began as he rounded a wall, his words trailing as if caught on an arrent nail jutting from the inside of his throat. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He was still high, had to be. He reopened his eyes. Nothing had changed. Teresa and Frieda were gone.

Instead...

"Mom? Dad? Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod!"

Marvin dropped to his knees, laven-der-scented hands over his mouth and nose, eyes stretching to full moons. On the couch was his father, chest slashed open, one arm broken, head decapitated. On the floor next to his lounger was his mother. She was naked with blood smeared up her thighs and ass cheeks.

Teresa...no, Tanya, his mother, screaming as Marvin plunged a knife into her stomach.

Marvin shook away the thought and began crawling. "Please, Mommy, please," he said, reaching her and pulling her backward.

He flipped her over. Her right breast was gone, leaving a dark window, revealing crusty muscles and tendons. Blood covered her chest and abdomen, squirted atop it all were streaks of dried cum.

He jerked backward, falling, landing on his ass, the carpet gushing beneath him, "Ohmygod ohmygod! What do I do?" he wailed, his hand knocking against something soft under the coffee table, he spun and there was his father's head, lips coated in ejaculate residue, "Dad! No!" his attention shifting to his father's headless body, the wounds, the breaks, the...

Frieda...no, Francis, his father, smiling with his eyes closed even as the knife slipped between his ribs into his heart.

Marvin put his hands to his face anew. He couldn't handle this; it had to be a bad trip. The worst trip.

He stopped, hungry, ate that breast.

"No! Fuck! Fuckfuckfuck no!"

Using blood as lubricant, his stiff cock slipping down his father's exposed trachea.

"It can't! Nonono!"

Marvin stumbled to his feet. This was too much. He ran to his bedroom and to his dresser where he left the second tab of acid. The dealer had been persuasive, had even given him a deal for buying two at once. With bloody, lavender-scented fingers, Marvin put the second tab on his tongue—if he was lucky, this tab would mingle with whatever was left in his system and he'd just fucking die. He then ran to the pantry for his bucket, mop, sponges, and jug of Pine-Sol.

"You're cleaning candy," he said, repeating it like a mantra as he sobbed,

working, needing the LSD to kick in and carry-on with an hallucination to match the words. "You're cleaning candy."

After a little more than an hour, he'd completely calmed down. He decided he'd done enough cleaning for the day and hopped in the shower. The water felt like music against his skin, and he somewhat recalled doing this very thing last night.

Dried and dressed in jogging pants and blank white tee, he followed a tweeting bird out of his bedroom, into the kitchen. The bird perched on his cellphone, tweeting, tweeting—

"Oh," Marvin said and scooped up the device. "Hello?" he said, the word having strange edges between his numb gums.

"Hey, Marvy. Your parents aren't answering the phone and your dad promised me he'd come by this afternoon to get all the app-things so I can watch my shows on the new TV. Can you come?"

It took a few moments for Marvin to wade through the small talk, but he caught on. This honey was ready to go.

"Don't think you can keep me away," he said, grinning, his cock already semi-erect.

His grandmother tittered. "Right. I'll call you a cab."

Marvin nodded, thinking about this babe. Josie, she'd said her name was. She'd just graduated. University had been so tough she hadn't spent a moment on pleasure the six years she was there. Now, there was steam to let off. And Marvin was ready to play his part.

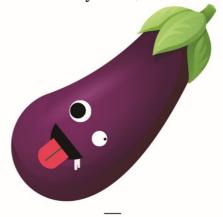
Marvin explained all that he had planned for Josie—moves he'd used on Teresa and Frieda, but Josie wouldn't know that. He kept the phone to his face even as he stepped outside, even as he climbed into the cab, even as he opened his grandmother's door, this despite the call ending fifteen minutes ago.

"Hey there, Marvy."

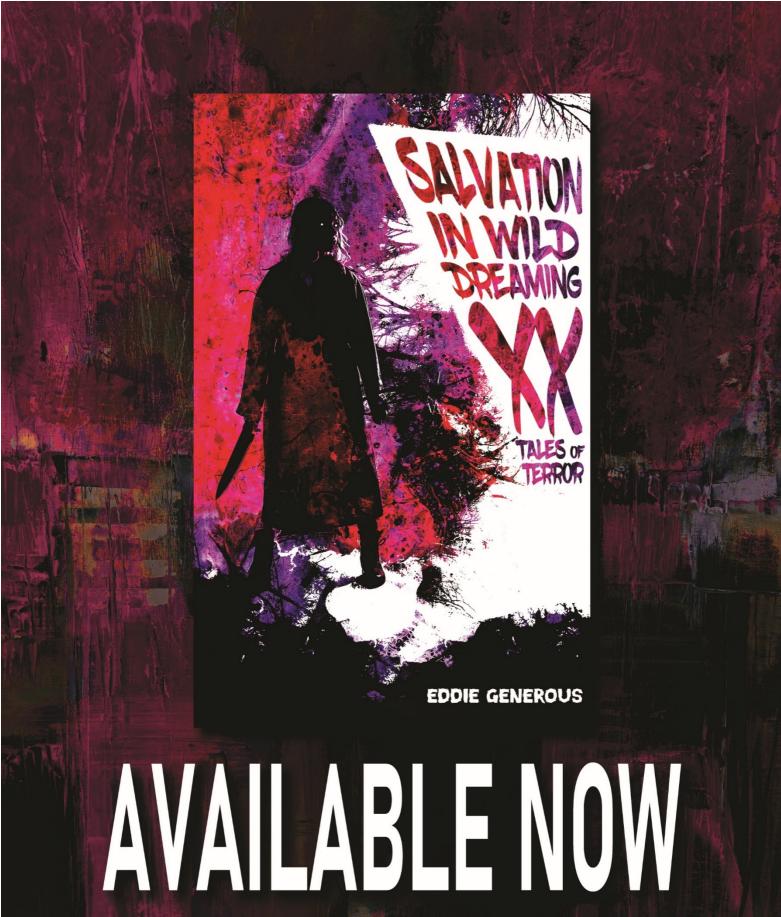
Marvin licked his lips. "Hey there, yourself." He put his phone into his pocket and stepped toward Josie.

"Uh, are you okay?" his grandmother said, eyeing the jutting protrusion barely cloaked by Marvin's track pants.

With a cocky snicker, Marvin said, "You like what you see, huh?"



Arthur Amplas was born in Boston but bounced around most of his childhood and much of his adulthood. He currently resides in Seattle and works as a vet tech in a small, though busy, clinic. He's been writing for six years without much success, hoping that one day he'll cross the finish line on a novel manuscript.





"It's funny; three years ago, someone walks into a bank, a bookies, or an off license wearing a mask, the people behind the counter got pretty nervous. But now, people get nervous when you're not."

Smiling politely at the new guy sat on the bank of desks opposite mine, laughing at his own observation. It's just the two of us working in an open plan office space which seats eighty.

He apologizes for talking so much; it's been mostly him since he started during lockdown. No one else wants to be in the office anymore, but he likes to get out of the house. Away from the kids. I expect him to add his wife, but he stops short.

I'm with everyone else on the planet; if I could work from my bed, I'd rarely be out of it. Though I don't tell him that. A woman doesn't bring up her bed to a man she's alone in a room with, I haven't forgotten that much. I'm only here because my laptop had a hissy fit and died on me this morning. Once IT have fixed it, I'll be back at home in my PJs like everyone else.

"You fancy a cuppa?" he asks, rising from his seat.

I shake my head, clutching a tiny plastic cup of lukewarm water from the cooler next to the kitchenette, not knowing how to keep him at a distance without coming off as weird.

With a smile he shrugs and wanders across the empty office toward the kitchenette where there's no tea or coffee facilities anymore. What's the point when there's never anyone here? Apart

from Gary, one or two blokes in IT and one of the managers rota'd in; though I haven't seen one yet. Though it is only still mid-morning.

While Gary's over by the sink, I consider putting in my AirPods and feigning listening to music but realize that I'm being insane; that it would be totally antisocial. Since lockdown, I've forgotten how to be normal.

Checking the time, I wonder if IT have fixed my laptop. But then it hasn't even been an hour yet since I dropped it off. It's also too early to go for lunch. Glancing down at my lunchbox next to the keyboard. Gary would question why I was heading into town when I already brought in my own food.

And all too soon, he's coming back; I can hear him whistling his way across the office.

Reaching over, I put my headset on and dial in the customer whose file I'm working on.

Gary nods at me as he sits down.

The call goes to voicemail.

Instead of leaving a message, I hang up with a tap of the mouse and start talking as if they picked up. Have a fake one-sided conversation with an imaginary individual just to get out of talking to a real person sitting across from me. What have I become?

From out of nowhere, I start laughing at what I'm doing; Gary looks over at me wanting to share the joke nobody just told me.

Suddenly stuck with no idea what to say next to thin air, I reach for my cup and gulp at the contents, only for the water to go down the wrong way and start me choking.

That's it, Gary's off his chair and across the office to save me. Through teary eyes I pick out the blue first aider reflective vest hanging limp off the back of his seat—perfect—and jump up out of mine, ripping off the headset in the process, still hacking up a lung.

Hands out to ward him off while, at the same time, making out that I'm alright, I back away toward the kitchenette. My foot finds an empty bin which sends me stumbling and sprawling headfirst into a monitor fixed to a bracket hanging over a desk. As I go down, the edge of the desk catches my hip, spinning me away and to the carpet like a sack of spuds.

"You alright?" Gary's kneeling next to me and from sheer embarrassment and a sudden overwhelming rush of self-preservation, rather than thanking the man, I take a swing at him.

My fist misses his face, but my elbow connects. It sends him flailing backwards into the desk I just fell into. Not waiting around, I roll over, getting my feet under me and spring up.

"What're..." But before he can finish his question, I've snatched up a keyboard and rain down blows over his cowering head until the plastic casing splinters apart and the keys start popping out, spraying the floor with pellets. Gloops of blood join them, splashing the plain grey office carpeting with poppies of color every time the keyboard is whipped back. Between each blow, Gary's face cracks in snatches

like stop-motion decay setting in. Ridges and bumps appear, his nose changes shape, gaps pop in his teeth. Grit and gunk slither off his chin to stain his pressed white work shirt. His knuckles ping every time he reaches out for me to stop. But I can't.

Wheeling around, the nearest office chair is upturned and I heft it down on his shoulders—spinning wheels first—which knocks the remaining air from his lungs. The chair, it crashes into the bank of desks behind him, taking another seat with it to the floor. As he starts to awkwardly get up, looking dazed and questioning, I immediately follow it up with several clumsy kicks to his exposed upper body; all the time, he's screaming for me to stop, spitting out bloodied broken teeth and snot.

Too far gone to stop now, I continue lashing out as he rolls away until he's balled up and bloodied under the desk next to mine. Swinging back my leg, this time I aim for his destroyed face which is just visible between his broken interlocked fingers, booting him so hard that you can hear the snap of something give.

Pain radiates up through my ankle and I stagger sideways into another desk, breathing fast, heartbeat pounding too loud in my ears. Feeling dizzy, hot and not at all myself.

And I used to be so bubbly and friendly.

Gary stays down, his balled up body slowly unravelling like a dead flower. Relief turns to dread as I realize this is this is not good. The office floor looks like someone upended a flask of tomato soup...with croutons. The nearest desks give off preschooler, art-deco. Flesh and hair trail off my high heels, splotched burgundy. Instinctively, I twist around, and standing there, stunned and open-mouthed, is Ahmed from IT; my laptop loosely gripped at the end of one arm dangling inches from the floor.

How long's he been standing there? How much has he seen? Fuck! A dry swallow of air. Our eyes lock for the briefest but longest of seconds. Without a word, I decide to rush him.

My laptop, clutched in his hand, swings up and catches me full on across the right side of my face. A flare of pain flashes through my cheek and jaw bones. Off balance, the momentum wheels me against the radiators bolted beneath the windows overlooking rows and rows of empty parking spaces. The outside world. As still as it has been all through the pandemic. Like there's no-one left alive, anymore.

Winded and aching, I roar in a breath as Ahmed takes off back across the office to his desk behind the kitchenette, taking my now bowed and warped laptop with him. For a second, I wonder if it's fixed.

With no movement from Gary, I chase after the IT guy before he can reach the relative safety of his desk and grab his mobile or headset to call someone. Ahead, I catch sight of the men's room door slam against the back wall before swinging shut. I chase

clumsily, slowly gaining on him, passing the kitchenette. Rebounding off the water cooler, which catches my shoulder, I send it wobbling on its axis—bubbles rising to the top—as I make it to the men's room after him. Crashing through the outer door, there's another slam ahead, this time from a toilet cubicle door. Shortly followed by the slick metallic lock sliding into place. Not slowing down, keeping pace, I plough on, giving it everything I've got at the plywood separating us. With a scream from the other side, the door jars as I knock the small metal lock loose—hearing it skitter across the tile floor—and fall through onto him with an audible oomph. In the same instant, the upper hinge connecting the door to the metal frame snaps off and I drop forward with it, feeling and hearing the door crack over Ahmed's skull as it slams into the toilet cistern fixed to the rear wall.

I slide down the door to the cool tile floor. A slow rivulet of red stems along the tile cracks toward me, drip-dripping from what's left of Ahmed's head. One of his eyes bulge out like it's trying to pop free of the pressure. The lid around it tries to blink but just spasms, leaking milky red fluid onto his face before that, too drips onto the tiles below. Seeping from a crack in the bowl, a brown sludge oozes free, mingling un-flushed shit in with the IT guy's blood. The slime trail reaches me.

After a blink, I ricochet back, bouncing into a waist high plastic bin, knocking its contents of balled up damp paper towels

across to the urinals on the other side of the room. Finally, still, panting, splayed out on the tile floor; every inch of me thrums in pain, pulsing with the last ounces of adrenaline coursing through me.

Everything stops at the sound of a toilet flushing in the neighboring stall.

Wide eyes wrench from the mess of a half-disintegrated cubicle and man to the latch snatching back on the next one, door swinging inwards to reveal a pair of pinstriped trousers and shiny black shoes. Framed in the doorway, stepping out, is the director of operations, Tony Lane.

There is a manager in today, then.

"Everything alright, Amanda?" he asks me, slumped there on the floor of the men's toilets, soaked in sweat and surrounded by debris.

My options are limited, I know this. Not just my job, but my livelihood is in the balance. Hating myself, I reach for the only way out that appears in my periphery. Breathing too fast to properly answer, I stagger out words: "...attacked...me..."

Closing my eyes once I've done it, not wanting to meet his gaze, knowing it's all lies. Sensing his shadow hovering over me, thinking of the best way to comfort someone in my situation and all I'm thinking is don't touch me, you haven't even washed your hands yet!

Eyes open, Tony's got his mobile in his dirty hands tapping in numbers. "I'm calling the police, okay? We'll get this all sorted out, Amanda, don't you worry."

The police? But of course I'm worried. I

go to get up, Tony thinking he's helping by reaching down for my elbow. Those hands of his that he hasn't washed yet.

Reaching up, I grip his forearm and pogo upward—a move neither of us expected—which knocks him off balance and back against the row of porcelain sinks lining one wall. He shrinks away from the look on my face—a wild and savage grimace of sheer, absolute madness—I catch as I see it in the mirrors fixed above the row of sinks as we tumble through the air. The man shrieks, backpedaling. But any noise from his larynx is cut short as the back of his balding head sideswipes the end basin. A comical twang, skull vibrating off porcelain, makes me release his forearm and roll away as the director of operations drops to the floor—a geyser of blood spewing from the back of his head. It sprays the mirrors, sinks in an arc. The dull thunk at it hits tile, his head lolls as more blood bubbles up. His arms and legs jerk or a second or two, then stop.

After a still moment, I consider Ahmed, just as his body slumps from the toilet down onto the floor; the loose cubicle door sliding across and cracking him, again, for good measure. He doesn't make a sound. That trickle of blood and bodily waste pooling and running between the grout surrounding the floor tiles.

Tony remains motionless.

My eyes bore into his chest, waiting for it to rise or fall; not sure which I'd prefer? In the stillness, I realize it's time to go home.

There's no-one in the corridor.

At a jog, eyes everywhere, I go back to my desk.

Gary hasn't moved. Stepping over and around the mess, righting the overturned chairs in the gangway, everything within reach on my desk is hastily packed up.

Except my laptop.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Turning around, I can picture it on the bathroom floor, inches away from feces and gore.

On the opposite desk sits Gary's.

A smile. It's not like he needs it anymore. It goes in the bag.

Clearing the desk, I pick up the empty plastic cup and take it with me; filling it up at the water cooler twice to quench a thirst I didn't realize I had. Sending bubbles gurgling to the top each time. The lukewarm water cools my grated, raw throat. Swiping out and taking the stairs down, a small man passes carrying a refill bottle for the water cooler.

"Everyone back in the office, now?"

When I don't answer, he hefts the bottle onto the opposite shoulder, waiting for me to swipe him in.

"Hope no one's drunk any?" He's smiling as I open the door for him. "Last bottle's not been changed in two years."

"What would happen if someone did?" I ask, a little too eagerly.

He stops, easing the refill to the floor between his feet. Smile gone. Then looks at me, standing on the stairwell, still holding the door open for him. Expecting an answer, the man just shrugs. I take my cue and leave, body suddenly chilled as the water I've been drinking today should be. Right before I went ape in there.

Outside in the carpark, I spot other dazed office workers exiting neighboring buildings. One is drenched in blood, standing there staring at their hands. Another exits and drops to the pavement, moaning and sobbing.



Movement catches my attention, off to the left. Outside the entrance to the nearest building, the same small squat man is hefting a water cooler refill from the back of his van. It's devil red in color. There's another van parked askew in the disabled bay a few feet away. In fact, there's one outside each building with the same man either rummaging around in the back or carrying a refill bottle through the lingering office workers. Emblazoned along the side, Hot Springs.

Smoke rises from a building just visible along the neighboring rooftops. I stare at it for a second before a loud crack which sends shudders through the ground, distracts me. A series of screams then the distant wail of sirens echo out.

Smoke rises from a building just

visible along the neighboring rooftops. I stare at it for a second before a loud crack which sends shudders through the ground, distracts me. A series of screams then the distant wail of sirens echo out.

Stumbling to my car, rummaging in my pocket for the key fob. Once inside, I gaze dazed through the windscreen with no memory of why I'm sat here. Police sirens break through, and I fumble to start the engine, a newscast blaring out from the speakers. Something about office workers across the city going nuts and attacking colleagues. My eyes catch on movement from the top floor window of the building opposite, the one I just left, right where my office is. It's the squat man carrying the water cooler refill I swiped in. He's standing there, hungrily gulping from the bottle. The way the light catches him, it looks like he has horns jutting from the top of his scalp.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I shake my head and take a second look. He's not drinking from the huge bottle anymore but guzzling from Gary's throat. Blood spraying across his face, the windows, his clothes.

Blinking again, and he's gone. Instead, the man's standing in the doorway, a hundred meters away; his skin and clothes as blood red as the van he's standing next to, sunlight glinting off his horns. A tail lazily swinging behind him.

Slamming the shifter into gear, I peel out of the car park, engine roaring as it dodges other dazed figures aimlessly standing around me. The security

barrier is down but I drive straight for it, taking it out with a hollow thunk, bounce down onto the road and squeal around the bend and away.

More people are milling about on street corners outside office buildings; a bus has stopped across two lanes. It rocks as the passengers on board fight amongst themselves.

Sirens, they're getting louder and closer.

Ramping the curb, I aim away from the chaos and into the quiet streets leading out of the city center limits. The news bulletin telling me nothing I don't already know.

Stay home. Stay safe. Soon all this will be over.

Hailing from the UK, Mark Robinson writes crime, horror and spec thrillers. His short stories have appeared in over thirty publications, online and in print, over the last twenty-five years. These include Unlikely Stories; A Thousand Faces; Beat to a Pulp; Thrillers, Killers and Chillers; and in anthologies Demonic Vacations V through 4Horsemen Publications Inc., and Dark Decades: through Lurk Unsettling Reads / Disturb Ink. His debut novella, Dead Close, published in July 2022 together with the follow up, Always Read the Label in September 2022, both through Raven Tale Publishing. When not writing, Mark can be found in the #writingcommunity **Twittering** @the_mark_rob.

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