

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 22
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A CONVERSATION WITH CAIN MCINTIRE

BY JEFFREY
LEBLANC
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AN OPTION...**

MILK

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**HERE, THERE IS
ONLY ONE LAW.
IT IS THE LAW OF
DEATH...**

IGNACIO BULKOV
BY GK MURPHY

THE MIND FUCKERS

BY STEVEN
HAVELOCK

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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Stephen Hernandez, GK Murphy, Garret Schuelke, Percy Greg, HG Wells, Steven Havelock*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also publish The Book of Ghosts published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This week's cover illustration is John Martin, *The Seventh Plague-1823*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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SCIENCE FICTION CLASSIC

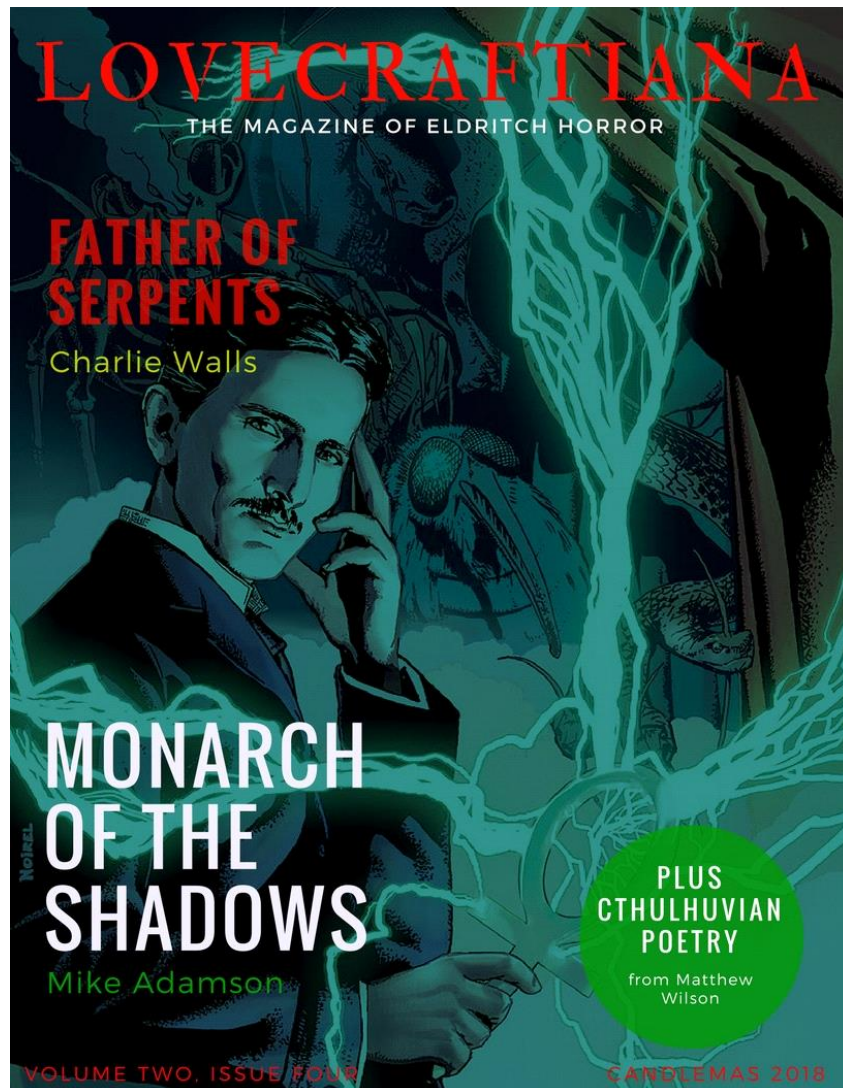
EDITORIAL

In this three hundredth issue of Schlock! Webzine, a cowboy investigates cattle mutilations on his ranch. A man orders milk in a tough bar in the lawless Venezuelan border country. A mental patient experiences an identity crisis. And a serial killer cult notches up a few more kills.

A young lady insists on going to the ball, despite her own part in a man's suicide. *The Grey Wolf of Chicago* reaches a catastrophic close (next week we'll have a new Carter Ward serial). The Astronaut receives a visit from the Zamptâ. And the hero of *The War of the Worlds* has his first encounter with the Artilleryman.

—Gavin Chappell

Still available from Rogue Planet Press: the Candlemas 2018 edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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A CONVERSATION WITH CAIN MCINTIRE by Jeffrey LeBlanc

*“And somewhere in the darkness
The gambler he broke even
But in his final words
I found an ace that I could keep”*
The Gambler—Kenny Rogers

First, I'll say suicide is not an option right now. Neither is letting those monsters in here to rip me apart. But if they come, I still have a few sticks of dynamite left. I'll do what I got to do?

I used to be a person of optimism that believed good overcame evil. Well, eventually anyhow. Evil I believed was finite and controllable. If a man stayed true to the good book and kept his moral compass north, no evil of this Earth and beyond could make him fall. I don't believe that anymore. I believe now, even the most infallible and purest among us can be tainted and changed by evil. I believe a person can live long enough to become the very monster they hate. A wave of dark thought, a glance of unbridled hate, or the seduction of flesh by another, can be all it takes to drown a soul forever.

Hold on a minute. Something black, ugly, and amphibious moved at the back of the barn. It's not a large frog or a cricket. Too large, too human-like, and too ugly to be either. I'm not taking another chance. I must throw another stick of lit dynamite at them.

(Large boom and crack of wood.) Okay, a part of the backside of the barn is gone. But I got three more of the bastards. I can tell by the eye burning ammonia smell and the increasing clicks surrounding me. That purplish glowing ooze splatter might also be the final tip off.

God knows the darkness of my heart. He also knows the shadow of evil that follows the hearts of all men. God knows I'm not a villain. But I'm no saint either in that respect. At best I'm a tragic character, like Achilles, destined to fall on my own arrow. My Lord knows that the actions of any creation are in his hands. I hope God, in whatever form, remembers that when I face him at the pearly gates. In the darkening light I ask to a vacant Creator, "Please don't judge my life's actions too harshly...Father."

This old barn ain't comfy. For sure though, it beats dying alone in an open field. That old bottle of Jack Daniels I hid in the corner rafter of this lumbering wreck, I haven't touched in years. But this evening I'll take exception. I pull it out of the dust and cobwebs, pull the top, and proceed to drink. I don't bother cleaning it off and take a large swig of the bottle's Jack Daniels. On what's left of my ravaged chest and torn legs I position myself in a corner covered in hay. Blood drips from talon ripped legs as I attempt to position myself and my teeth grit together as I bite down to stifle my body's pain. I take another drink and notice my whisky. The caramel coloured whisky with its chunks of black and green mould taste of ash and mildew. It burns my mouth and burns my throat quickly though and starts numbing my mind and the wounds. I retch a little but keep the stuff down in my stomach.

Upturned and on its side in the same corner of this barn is an old busted up radio. I turn on the busted radio. If I'm going to die here I might as well get one more good country song in. Maybe I'll find a little George Strait, Charlie Daniels, or some Kenny Rogers. But of course, they are playing Brad Paisley. That's my bad luck. I hate Brad Paisley.

Night is coming fast in the billowing clouds of smoke, fire, and evening sun. By the look of the encroaching night and the setting Sun, it won't be much longer before I meet God. I see the meeting as finally peace. My prayer or admission I'm sure went on deaf ears. "Lord, it's been a long row to hoe this time. I've seen too much bad in this world. There is too much evil here where I tried to find peace after war. I tried to make a bright spot in all this darkness. I guess I just rolled snake eyes again." I've made sincere peace with my maker for sure. I drink another swig as I think these thoughts.

The last rays of lemon and ochre sun are peeking out of the swaying ancient oak and cypress trees. The glistening fingers of light are reaching out to my decrepit red barn. Great beams of white light break across branches and carpets of long hanging moss as a prism to enter the decayed cracked windows. The light is casting fluttering patterns as it travels striking leaves on the walls near me.

CRASH! THUD! FLOP, FLOP, FLOP! Something, probably with great wings, just tossed a bloody mess of a round object in a burlap bag through the window closest to me. The thud sound came from the object striking a post near me. The final loud flop, flop, flop was whatever it is rolling next to me. It's no accident it landed where it did.

I wish I hadn't opened the bag. "You worthless, God-forsaken bastards!!" I'm screaming in pain. "The woman did nothing. She was already dying! I hope y'all contract some sort of disease from eating her! Y'all are some sons-of-bitches!"

In these shadows, with this joyous panorama, I sit alone in the silence. I see in the bag and at first it doesn't register. It looks nothing like a decapitated head. I start to identify the misshapen thing first as a head, then a torn head from a body, and then the ghost white eyes tell the rest. It's the ex-wife—Sybil Duplantis. I'm investigating in disbelief the ex-wife's purple and brown hair. The hair, rotting, is now covered in dust, spider web, and hay particles. They all glisten as they catch the setting rays of heavenly light.

I scream as a lunatic. I rant as an angry father. Then I insanely talk to the decaying thing as I did when it was alive, "You stupid, stupid fool! We told you to leave. You were a pain in the ass in life. You are just as big a pain now."

As the browning leaves circle and fall on a gentle drift of wind, I'm reminded of the fragile nature of life especially in relationships with family, with lovers, and friends. It seems rooted deep in our psyche, three predominant fears that guide us and shape us during our existence—the fear of loss, the fear of betrayal, and, of course, the fear of death. I see these as a dark abyss swallowing all forms of life until there is only the illusion of living.

Here is the question. Ask yourself this question to these three predominant fears. How many relationships, how many friendships, and how many families have we seen where the people had become skin covering something darker underneath. People I see even now, who were just a hollow shell of what they once were. Spectres, wraiths, and ghosts haunting our world after just one of these fears came true?

With that said, I must stop and reflect on my current dilemma. Reflect in detail on the choices—the good and the not so good. Why is she, or more accurately it, so vengeful? I guess it is their natural way. Especially when you shun such an exalted being, break their ancient heart, and lie. Trust, as I have learned, is a gift not easily given but ever so easy to take back. Somehow, I managed to wreck the greatest gift bestowed on me—trust. Now I face the reality of that choice.

Terror grows as I know what is coming to hunt me down—muok and seraph. There, I've said the name and gave the beasts power. Will it be from the sky my death or from the ground?

As I look on the mutilated head of the biggest pain in the ass I knew in life, I realize once again I caused it all. Now innocent blood is spilled by my own hubris and my betrayal. I won't talk yet of the ancient queen—their leader, just yet. She is an aged innocent creature. Despite the thousands of years in existence she had a heart so fragile. I thought of her as human for a time. And in the great reveal I let my own fear shun the damn thing. If I had accepted her I could have prevented the assault by the horde of her kingdom. They chased down and killed my cowboys!

“Damn you, Diana!” Sobs...sobs...sobs. I hurt their queen who had loved me unconditionally and tried to protect me from my own inequities and transgressions. She even said so. She swore she had a solemn duty to protect me and to make me remember. Make me remember what I have no clue. Protection and memory, were they the cause? Had it been the cause of all the death and sacrifice? Sure, the beings had been so trusting but that slight wouldn't cause a war could it?

Whatever the reason one thing is certain; the love and the trust are now rescinded. The monsters have not been so forgiving. Looking at my fatal wounds they most likely have killed me.

I look on at the rays of setting light. Tears and snot drop from my mouth. I'm at the breaking point as my mental state is assaulted with the entire spectrum of manic emotions. This is what madness feels like. It's the slow ripping away of my wit, my reason, and my mind. I look on as the sunshine beams play their late evening game and place rainbow prisms across my shaky hands. Beams shine through in magenta, green, turquoise, and violet while they strike my hands. These same leathered hands I run through my ex-wife's silken brown and purple hair. Pieces fall out as I do this. My touch is more to calm her soul which I pray finally can be at peace.

Madness from the battles creeps in further. I jest with the rotten head. “I figured AIDS would have killed you. You see, you should have eaten the pistol. It would have saved you from being dinner to a seraph. Hahahaha!” I laugh a little too loud on that.

I continue my conversation with the head of a decapitated corpse. “Then again they saved you

from the additional stomach cancer. I heard you got the cancer from drug resistant bacteria. Again, we all thought the cancer would kill you. Boy, I sure was wrong on that one! Hehehehe Hahahaha!" I laugh hysterically in madness. My fingers and palm move slowly as they pull off hair then explore the maggots dropping off and sooth scratched, cracking, and scarred scalp. The same palm and fingers burn and swell from bites caused from fire ants and earthen beetles nesting in her hair. They are feeding on the lifeless waxen tissue of the decapitated dead of Sybil Duplantis.

Even if I had a last minute save by law enforcement or militia right now, no one will believe I didn't kill Sybil. Worse you dear reader would make me the culprit or scapegoat for the murders of countless people—my neighbours, family, and friends. They are scattered from one end of Bayou L'Ourse to the other. I'm sure I'd be frying in Old Sparky, if Louisiana still electrocuted prisoners, or taking the lethal injection needle before any rational investigation started. No one in this world anyway is looking to the sky or darkest swamp for an army of mythological murderers. This world of science, of rational thought, and of reality will try and condemn me before the trial. Maybe after they shoot me or have me in chains, someone possibly a technician or officer looking at the scene of battle—yes it was an epic one, might notice the peculiarities as we did and question. Maybe they would as maybe you will, upon closer scrutiny realize what I know. Another world exists now with claws, clicks, fire, and wings.

I shout out to my adversaries. "Well, what are you waiting for, damn it? I'm here and I'm out of bullets! You know that!" It's as quiet as the graveyard now. The sun is setting lower and it won't be long before it is their time to prowl and hunt. They no longer wish to hunt and sacrifice my cattle. My mausoleum, this over used barn, has more fluttering shadows on the wall. Wraiths dip and they sway guided by currents of wind. Is it wings and fire breathing creatures? Maybe it is. Could it be purple slime with stingers and bat wings outside my door? Who believes such things but the mad?

I speak to the ghosts coming for me. They come in the form of seven sins that have plagued man since his existence.

"Lion...Pride...Serpent...Envy...Boar...Anger...Donkey...Sloth...Wolf...Greed...Bear...Gluttony...Leopard... Lust..." As I speak these words I draw their pictures in the dust covering the floor.

The sweat, the tears, and the blood on my fingers act as a brush to paint in the earthen canvas of my barn floor. Shadows flutter over their renditions. Clicks and cricket—like scratches, echo locating me, I hear in the distance as I draw. Leathery wings ruffle through the air as stinger bat drones are already in their arcs searching for my flesh. It won't be much longer now.

My journal still has my notes and Jake's. His invaluable notes on their biological systems, on their ancient societies, and on their defences, may be the only thing that stops their ascent. Oh, poor Jake. What did I do to you? My dear friend, did I kill you too, Jake? Did bringing you into my mess cause your demise? No time to grieve and no time to say 'sorry' my friend. But for now I must write down everything from beginning to now. Maybe someone will be able to stop them.

So far though, we've done a better job of killing our own. But we can hope that someone may one day.

"Lion...Pride...Serpent...Envy...Boar...Anger...Donkey...Sloth...Wolf...Greed
...Bear...Gluttony...Leopard...Lust." I chant my mantra again.

My memory is becoming clearer of what each one of the seraphs looked like. I say them again as I draw them in the journal. I add more detail now. Each flying animal has the land based muok slave platoon at its beckon call. How many muok? I haven't a clue, but I do know each is a tribe of ancient beings working as a collective. The word associated to the seraphim animal is a human word that almost killed off each tribe. It's not their weaknesses they loath. It's ours.

When did this all begin? Were the cattle mutilations the catalyst or Little Joe's attack by them? Had they become impatient after thousands of years waiting? Lurking and hidden in the abyss of swamps and marshes, the caves and perches of mountains near Wallachia, or in Tibet near Everest's icy splendour was the need to rise up too great. Was the desolation of deserts and caves near Zion in Africa or plateaus and bluffs of New Mexico no longer a sustainable environment for the beasts? Hidden in such places how could we possibly know then they really existed.

"Lion...Pride...Serpent...Envy...Boar...Anger...Donkey...Sloth...Wolf...Greed
...Bear...Gluttony...Leopard...Lust." I say them a fourth time and talk louder as I draw them in the journal. I add their wings and I add the details of the ground beings—muok or nephilim. Either name on the latter you can take your pick.

Tired. So... tired. My battled body.... sigh... is failing and I'm weary of it all. My wounds are deep now, and I'll die of the poison or bleed out from the cuts to my legs, chest, and side. At least let my one enemy who is now my dearest friend—Death, please come before they get me. One can only hope. Death got his nod when the jaguar seraph got me in the lungs. The damn thing hit me a good dose.

Now, where are you Death?

I know dear reader you must know what's a muok? What's a seraph? Do you really want to know? Read on and I'll tell you. But be warned! The price to know may be too high for you as it surely has been for me.

My cowboys and the farmers in Bayou L'Ourse knew predators. When faced with losing a cow or livestock we killed coyote, bears, and alligators. We had known and, in some cases, seen these animals kill cows and people. We returned the favour to whatever manner of beast and dealt the blow accordingly. Wing beings, creatures of the night that scurried like rats or moved like giant frogs were legend like the dragon and the loup-garou. They stayed in the shadow to keep the morality of children in check. Not to terrorize the rational adult. These were just superstitions or lessons to scare the child. How I wish that were so now.

"You won, Diana Nemorensis! I'm dying. So, what the Hell are you waiting for?" It's getting hazy now. I have to keep writing and drawing. My drawings, please be patient with the drawing.

I'm no great artist. As I sketch on and on, I try to think when did it begin again and lead to this? When was it? Memories are coming back.

I slam the back of my fist into barn wall. The pain is excruciating and feels like electric shocks awakening my dwindling senses. I scream out on the darkness now. "Why wait, you damned and cursed thing?"

I say more to myself, "Focus, Cain McIntire...sigh...sigh...focus on your humanity." I take a deep breath after saying this. Come on I have to focus. Of course, now I remember it as well as I can. It was the summer two years ago when our world changed forever. That was when I must guess. Our god passed judgment on me, my family, my neighbours, and my ranch hands for our sins. Pride I think then imagine—Lion...Pride. I look at its picture as I say this. Or was it all of them...it could have been by the seraphim's justification. These dark angels, who gained hold to destroy the pious, gained advantage because somewhere underneath my flesh was flawed. The beasts smelled the scent of evil and the rot of hate then came to feed.

A red and orange and yellow furnace of a summer two years ago I now recall. The summer was one of the hottest on record in nineteen eighty nine. It was sweltering heat with shimmering mirages that baked the rich, black alluvial clays of the Mississippi River into hard packed concrete. Driving my truck in this heat, I ran a cool rag that misted on my dirty, grit-filled neck. I drove my truck on across nature's cracked earth to my destination four miles west of the ranch. My younger son, John, during the drive switched my Wayne Toup's "La Fille Du Nouvelle" to the contemporary rock of Duran Duran. The song he had blasting on my old F-150's radio was "Hungry like the Wolf". Music played on in clouds of ragweed pollen that dusted the truck, the air, and covered the supplies I had for the cowboys waiting. Insects such as buzzing cicadas cried from the oak ridge while the ratchet chirping of black and crimson grasshoppers flourished and flew in multiple directions when I ran my rusted vehicle through the hay pasture. Conditions, while scorching hot, did allow for some hidden animals to be seen. The nearby emerald tree frogs, who usually only came out at night or after a rain, were leaping to a wetter patch of earth. Now visible bull frogs hopped between dried water hyacinth patches, duckweed, and browning azolla producing harmonious sawing croaks. They too were looking for the coolest portion of dried bayou beds.

Homesteads suffered through the heat assault as well. The heat as a blanket twisted itself into the coolest of refrigerated homes or camps on shaded river waterways. The homes in this heat did their best to cool and protect. The bayous and waterways misted or waited on the great trees covered in carpets of moss to provide some relief. The home owners and greater recipients of the sauna alleviated their conditions with the simple things they had readily available—cool rags for the neck, a fan or even better, air conditioning. To combat the heat and quench the thirst; Lipton, Luzianne, or Community iced teas with lemon and mint were made ready and available. To further cool down the body, a refreshing dip in the lakes, swimming pools or a jump from trees and bridges into the larger bayous definitely helped. All of these were almost worshipped as pagan idols in heat such as this. Shaded Southern galleries, such as my own, kept the heat blanket at sparse distances while the attack of the Sun to the Fahrenheit continued.

This was the summer I questioned myself—God, creation, and what it was to be human. What would I call it now? Darkness, yes darkness seems the right word. It was a darkness that would begin with a crawl then scurry its way into my world like a twisting cottonmouth. At the height of our investigations into my farm's animal sacrifices, my heat exhausted body from day chores would become quite chilled at night waiting for another attack. An icy chill it was, to the bone I'd add, at the onset of the muok and seraph attacks.

And again, what are muoks and seraph? We'll get to them soon enough.

This was the summer that fog held wonder again and I became a frightened child at what that rolling fog held. Mists surrounded and covered and protected my enemies. In the end, fog would leave us all hiding under our beds. Monsters were coming to stay and reside in my dreams, in my nightmares and the reality of my world. All alone I'd be praying monsters didn't come out of the dark closet to drag me into the caverns of cloth and close hangar and death. My imagination's beasts came to life from the sky and from the wood to strike down the vanity of men and bring a plague for their disobedience. The shadows and the myths when revealed as real, broke my heart, killed my boys, and ate away my sanity.

A heat wave summer filled with cattle mutilations and secrets best kept by a roaring campfire. Confessions that were spoken by holy candle light in the mass of a church. Secrets. The trail we followed—the Bible, Greek literature, The Golden Bough, the Torah, Quran, Indian holy books, Druids, cryptic curses, and even pagan legends. Secrets I had to discover the answers to even if the cost would be more than my heart and my soul could bear. Secrets that seem to have started as whispers. Secrets in the community like the whispers that lead me to catch my ex-wife cheating. Secrets like whispers that spoke of missing people. More secrets and more question coming from reports on missing settlers, missing trappers, and missing tribes of Indians dating back over five hundred years ago and probably longer. Secrets we dismissed and laughed about at first. Legends that started to catch more attention and hold more weight with my best friend Jake and then our group. Secrets we wished we had overlooked and later hadn't found during the research and investigation of the loss of my cattle. I discovered links to hidden real creatures alluded to in myths hidden for thousands of years.

But on this fateful day, the day of the first attacks, I was whistling a little Willie Nelson tune under my breath as I drove to our ranch locations. New music was playing on the radio after a station change by my son John. Though it wasn't Willie, I was growing in tolerance to Duran Duran. I drove on toward one of our barns in the rickety vehicle crunching cattle feed numbers in my head, beef prices, and rising mortgage interest rates for the ranch. The truck sputtered on creaking and twisting wheels as I made my way to our final destination—the tin sheds, hay barn, and corrals. To my right and to my left as we drove on, four hundred acres of corn grew large and greener than any in the region on this last trek to the hay barn. Our tomatoes and purple eggplant I saw were as large and fresh as a small child's head the closer my journey came to an end. On my four-thousand-acre farm, even the Angus and Hersey cattle grew enormous and tasty. The cows mewed and played while following my battered vehicle to the music rocking from the vocals of one screeching son, John McIntire, and the famous Simon LeBon:

*In touch with the ground
I'm on the hunt I'm after you.
Smell like I sound, I'm lost in a crowd
I'm on the hunt I'm after you...*

A large herd of cattle meanders in a wave of colour—auburn, black, and whites. They are surrounding my truck thinking I have sweet molasses or the impossible to resist sugar cubes as I drive on. I look back in the mirror to see another hundred cows following suit. As I look again I realize I need a shave, shower, and some sleep. My tan skin was fine but the lines and bags under my worn eyes made me look sixty years old instead of the vibrant forty-five-year-old rancher I was. Yes, the sleep would be first.

But this modern cowboy would take in a little more Duran Duran before sliding home to whisky and listening to Waylon and Hank. Maybe some of that new cowboy stuff too from that Garth Brooks fella. The song plays on and John is shaking his head, snapping his fingers, and just giddy with laughter with his twin brother Mark.

*And I'm hungry like the wolf
Straddle the line in discord and rhyme
I'm on the hunt I'm after you...*

These smelly beasts—cows, were my extended children in my paradise on Bayou L'Ourse. A bayou community just south of Morgan City, Louisiana, it housed my family of cowboys and cattle. I birth the cows, read the moral lessons to the cowboys, fed both, and I watched them grow until it was their time to leave. In the cow's case, yummy steaks, hamburgers and etc were a needed sacrifice for all.

Sacrifice. What I would learn of great sacrifice. I hate the very word more than I do Brad Paisley. The ranch, my children, my cowboys, and the cattle, were to be lost—my own paradise lost.

It had been such a great morning. It was turning into an even better afternoon. My jovial, rosy outlook of the day, though, was about to change with the broad-shouldered cowboy riding up. He rode fast on my best horse, Blaze, followed by other horses each carrying a cowboy. The young man with hardened, steel eyes like my own had a nervous look which was of concern already. It was an out of place look on a cool under pressure cowboy. It was the look of real bad news on his face. I felt this was the kind of bad news that I'd seen before that costs a life, large money or a chunk of time.

“Boss, we found another one.” Terry Bourgeois is twenty years old but has the mind of well, a forty-five-year-old. He sits stoically atop Blaze, the first of my fifteen quarter horses. Auburn hair to match his auburn beard, he is a rugged man with deep burnished skin. It countered with a wholesome and endearing smile from a square jaw chin. A wad of Redman tobacco sits in his right cheek as he spits brownish tobacco juice to the ground missing a small grey spider. Terry has no smile today as he lowers his head. With a large black straw cowboy hat slightly tilted he

says the words. The toughened broad shoulders sink slightly as he conveys the news. It's a strange mix of courage and reference to me that only a real camp boss can have. "It's east side of the field, two miles from the first."

"What are we talking about here, Terry? What the heck do you mean you found another one? I didn't know there was a first one." I take off my bluish grey Massey Ferguson hat and run my fingers through my brown and grey sweaty hair. I look him in the eyes with an iron gaze from my sky-blue eyes. I look at the whole crew I trusted to help me take care of this working ranch and farm. My head is still spinning too from last night's bender. The hangover doesn't help me process 'another one' well either. "Answer up, dammit."

My growl sent a shiver to the ranch hands quick. It must have been adolescent jitters. Do I really sound that terrifying?

I look to the faces of my motley crew of working cowboys. Their ages as I wait for an answer, ranged in age from twenty-one down to ten. The ten-year olds were my two sons.

"What's the deal, Roger?" I lower the Massey Ferguson hat on my head. I give the twenty-one-year-old Roger a harder stare than Terry got with a slight wink.

"Boss, let Terry tell you." Roger looks wide eyed at Terry and motions for him to explain.

Roger Gaspard my second go-to guy on the ranch aspires to work the Atchafalaya and the Mississippi rivers. There is big money working a tug or crew boat and Roger wants a ranch now with his own money. I easily could have helped him with the latter, but Roger wouldn't take it. He felt I'd done too much already for him. Personally, I believe its Roger's restlessness to see a little more of the world. He was my first in charge for quite a while. Now Roger is my second in charge after Terry Bourgeois. Roger is head strong as a bull, has a body like a rhinoceros and the forearms a lumberjack could be proud of. I did admire his my-way-or-the-highway approach to getting the younger boys to work even if I thought he was a little too rough sometimes. His eagerness to ask questions if he had one at the right time was all instinct. Also no one else was more protective of the cowboys, the ranch, and me.

On the other hand, the preachy Bible talk Roger Gaspard did could be annoying. But I recognized his preaching came from a great heart. Oh and did I mention Roger had a huge superstitious nature in the loup garou, vampires, and etc. to match. But tell me of any South Louisiana Cajun that didn't dabble in a little religion and a little voodoo.

My eyes fall over to the nineteen-year-old Jo-Jo." You knew too, Jo-Jo?"

"Yes, Boss. But we all agreed Terry would bring the news." Josephus Ledet was Jo-Jo to everyone, a cowboy if I ever saw one. He was nineteen years old but wiser than that. I was the only one who knew his first name was Josephus too. Jo-Jo was tall and gaunt—like one of those Norwegian warriors, with salt and pepper in his sable black hair. Jo-Jo tries to bring a little humour. He starts a whistle of a little Randy Travis 'I Told You So' country tune while Terry looks up annoyed. The flowing locks were already turning grey in Josephus's agile

nineteen-year-old body. His looks and youthful face were at odds with the feathers of grey. He was a good back up man for the supervisors and his imposing presence kept the wildness of our younger cowboys at bay. And it always sprung its head on the hotter, more tedious days. "You need to tell him, Terry."

Rounding out the crew were Joe Broussard or Little Joe, Billy Badeaux, Emmanuel Daigs, and Tyson Verdin who all three looked like buzzards ready to pounce on a carcass. As if they had planned it they spoke as one voice. "Tell him, Terry." Seemed Terry was the favourite scapegoat to tell me.

My cowboys were teenagers and slow growing mature men. All were nervous right now telling me bad news in their own way. Yeah, they had hearts of gold to match their heads of concrete. Too many times I reckon I'd break a two by four to keep them from killing each other when the horseplay or horse's ass got out of line doing chores. Some of the boys were my wards and some came to me looking for after school and weekend jobs. I'm pretty sure one had begged and argued for work with no pay. A few came from broken homes where the dad was dead or in Bayou Oaks Psychiatric. One had a momma who skipped town. Two I knew had fathers that were in Angola Prison. The one's with parents left had options too. If the parents were berating the kid or had the blank stare from long alcohol naps from Hell, the boys could come to 'The Cloven Hoof' for sanctuary at the bunkhouse. If it was worse, say for example a parent in a drug induced coma, they came to stay permanently.

Our ranch had become their home. And while I had a Little Joe I was far from being a Ben Cartwright. For sure 'The Cloven Hoof Ranch' was an even further cry from being 'The Ponderosa'. And the biggest difference from the Lorne Greene TV show was I had real cowboys from various ethnic cultures with the kind of problems that weren't always family friendly. And most certainly they didn't always get resolved by the end of the day. I had a gumbo of guys of mixed races that bled the same, laughed the same, attended church on Sundays together, and called each other brothers. And they were brothers even if their skin and features were of another of Israel's twelve tribes.

Israel and her tribes had to come up. Of course, as I write now, I had to make that reference. But later I'd recall, with all I know of the real history of Israel tribes now, how much I'd come to hate the word tribes. And dare I say all of the Middle East as well.

Little Joe Broussard, was he fifteen years old now, moved un-easily in the saddle next to me like a ten-year-old. It must be really bad because the poor kid right after he looked in my direction vomited on his horse and my boot. "Sorry, Mr. Cain." He was a scrappy, five feet four inches, practically a midget, and would be lucky if he'd grow to five feet five in two more years when he turned eighteen years old. Ebony black, straight hair coursed under his ball cap. The pale cowboy with the vomit dripping face and mouth, needed to cut the developing pony tail and shave off the ridiculous Fu Manchu moustache.

"Manny and Rabbit, you not working? Now I know it can't be good. Okay, what the Hell, Terry? No more suspense!" Emmanuel Daigs or rather Manny was sixteen years young, and his cousin Tyson Verdin was seventeen years old. We called Tyson 'Rabbit' and there were still

comical discussions as to why. But more concerning right now, was neither of these two boys was on the job. Yeah now I really needed to know what was going on.

“We figured you would need us for this one, Boss. It is bad.” Both Manny and Rabbit had shamed faces. They were lengthy and both ever so tall at six feet three inches. Manny was African American, and his cousin Rabbit was what the locals called ‘Redbone’ which simply meant he was African and Attakapas descent. But Tyson always reminded me he was Ishak and that Chitimacha had named his people Attakapas so there you go. Anyway, these two boys had an outstanding work ethic. They worked hard and never complained. So, to see Manny and Rabbit not working threw me off. Nothing could stop these guys. It made me more apprehensive to know. When cowboys like these guys, who don’t stop for heat, cold, mud, or rain, stop working it’s a concern. If they ever got shot in a brawl they might come to work with a bandage or casts and not stop. Hell, a bullet in Tyson’s arm once for protecting a defenceless woman, never fazed him pushing a herd, mending a fence, or getting a cow out of the muck before he went to the doctor. Now here they were. Not good, not good at all.

By now my two-ten-year old’s, twin boys, scrambled out to see one of the cows. I was trying to round them up too. I had a circle of cowboys together and needed my sons to complete it. John the singer and Mark the always-curious were both a little tough to keep on track. Both of them worked harder than any kid their own age. And that was even if Mark or John when singing couldn’t hold a tune in a bucket just like their father. “John and Mark, get on over here, boys. Leave Nelly alone for now. She’s a good cow but she’s always ornery when she hasn’t been milked.”

“Little Joe, you didn’t tell Boss about what we found this morning?” Terry is looking on the fifteen-year-old boy who just recently just learned how to shave his pimpled scrub of a freckled face.

“I was Terry, but I was...was afraid until we knew what done it. I spent the morning with Billy Badeaux, looking to find tracks, Mr. McIntire, or what done it. We never found a hair, a tooth, or nothing.” Little Joe gazes on Billy for support. “We found a bunch of massively large nutria tracks, but nutria couldn’t do that.”

“That’s right, sir. The indentations and grooves suggest a very weird animal indeed. Weird track stuff, Mr. McIntire.” Billy Badeaux had sandy blonde hair, intelligent brown eyes, reddish brown freckles and a professor’s brow. Billy’s thin wraith-like frame is out of sorts with his large ears and head. Like a horse wearing a cowboy hat except the horse might be smarter but unlikely. Billy had just turned fourteen. I felt sometimes he acted like a twelve-year-old, but his mind calculated like a college professor or an ancient wizard depending on his mood. He had a brilliant mind. If I had to guess at this moment, Billy Badeaux was probably calculating bite force and predator population statistics in his head while we were still trying to identify the problem.

I must fake anger to shake up the complacency. “Not acceptable, gentlemen. I’m ready to jerk a knot in someone.” I give each cowboy a steel gazed stare and shake my head in disappointment.

Then I continue. “Or dock some wages here if I don’t get an answer. Terry, you gonna lose wages with the rest if I don’t get a full story now. Y’all know me well enough to not ever lie to me. Ask young Roger Gaspard if there is any doubt.” I point in Roger’s direction. He’s seen this a time or two and knows I’m bluffing on the violence, but the money is another story.

Roger adjusts his hat on the sandy brown mop of hair under his cowboy hat. Then he leans forward in his creaking saddle as he talks. “Mr. Cain McIntire is an honest man and dun right by ya. He don’t take thievin’ and lyin’ or a man that ain’t in church on Sunday at St. Andrews. Why ya’ll wait so long to talk to dis man cha’? Who you want run off, Boss?” The bronze skin and thick forearms of Roger were menacing enough for these young cattle hands. His ‘no bullshit’ words bashed my lesson into the hearts of these young men. Even if the words landed hard like a sledgehammer on bricks. No one questioned the authority of the powerfully built twenty-one-year-old cowboy with a chiselled physique when I gave him the lead in matters.

“It was Daisy, sir! We know that she’s...she’s...that’s your prized milk cow! She’s the one you raised on a bottle when her momma die in breech.” Little Joe’s crystal blue eyes are large and fearful as he pulls off his straw hat to tell what he saw. “PLEASE SIR! PLEASE DON’T RUN ME OFF! Papa still in the jail for trying to kill that priest and no one can take care of Momma since she took sick and we been cast out. Please sir, I beg you!” His tears were breaking my own heart inside. But I didn’t show it. I had to remain strong to keep the boys on their wares.

“It’s OKAY! Calm down, boy. No one is running you off.... yet. What about Daisy, Lil Joe? Did she go and get stuck in the mud again?” I look on the boy and can tell it’s more than mud.

Lil Joe continues, “Never seen anything like it, Mr. McIntire. Her head was pulled off like a grasshopper caught on a pair of chaps. The head was placed at least forty feet above us in the top of a great big oak. The cow head had her skin with Daisy’s spots on them. We could recognize it was her plus the ear tag. The head was looking down on her chewed up body. Rib cage and bones picked clean with just cow skin and guts everywhere. Whatever ate her took the liver, spleen, and heart too.” He looks up and I can see there is real shame in his face. I won’t dock him pay but he’s going to have a hard week hoeing the corn fields by hand instead of tractor.

“Daisy is dead?” My precious Daisy was killed and sacrificed? It just seemed it had to be another cow.

I look out on to the spread of work we still had to get done today. It was all side railed by obvious predators and pests. Hay bales sat as lone sentinels waiting to be plucked. There were only a thousand of them with rain clouds and rain on the way. I squint with the glare of sun being shadowed by those same bluish-purple rain clouds then turn back to the boys. “So, some coyotes or possums got the better of old Daisy. We can take care of that.”

“Boss, we were thinking a coyote or a bear too. We went into the site looking around. But it is very troubling. I can’t understand the natural order of the species here. It bothered me enough to even pull out the Winchester .30-.30. My reconnaissance of the second mutilation is more disconcerting.” It took me a minute and a thesaurus to figure out what Billy Badeaux was saying. But I got the point—he didn’t know.

Billy continues. "They are weirding me out, the tracks, Mr. Cain. They are damn weirdest pattern of tracks and carcass debris I have ever seen or referenced anywhere." Terry looks on Billy perplexed and has a puzzled look on his auburn bearded face. Terry at twenty-one and the same age as Roger, was the real brain, the real detective if I needed a sleuth until Billy came along. Now we had Billy and Terry who both were regular Sherlock Holmes in a cowboy hat. "Mr. Cain, it was the tracks. Like nutria with webbing and claws but too large for nutria and too spread out. Also, their direction was weird. We saw muddy tracks everywhere. Some went straight up into the trees and some went into the field. Other muddy tracks just stopped in places like the middle of the field and were gone. No back tracking or anything by whatever it was."

This was getting down right annoying and I'd had my fill. "Go on, Terry, give me your report. Tell me more of what you saw. We still got corn to pull, hay to pick up, and the living cattle to feed."

Terry adds more to the report. "It was like Noah's ark around the second kill. Animals were everywhere in a circle around it. No coyote, bobcat, possum, alligator, or anything would go near the kill. They would hiss at it and raise their noses and even scratch ground behind them onto the bloody mess. They would try to go in and grab something or piss around the area in a circle. But nothing would touch the left-over guts, bones, or flesh. And you know for a possum that's damn near impossible."

"Possums eat anything no matter how tainted or rotten. Remember the last cow that had died of disease. It was at night and they were in the carcass. It was a whole nest of them with their eyes glowing green peeking out between the ribs and stomach." Billy adds to Terry's report on opossums. Then he looks on back to the fields while Terry is talking of amount of each animal eaten, what was dispersed in more detail, and the possible next attack. Billy is hard focused on Terry's words, but his mind is obviously still stuck at the kill site. As Terry continues on, Billy is scratching his head and rolling up his cotton blue shirt sleeves. He jumps down from his horse and grabs a drink from the faucet while washing his face and hands.

"So. The animal was sick, and the animals wouldn't touch the kill. We just have to set a patrol until I can get Tic Tac Scheyxnader down here to fix the portable cameras. Problem solved." Oh, if it had been so easy. Just getting Tic Tac here would be a challenge. And it was certainly going to be a battle of wills.

"Now we have our current issue. How do we solve this dilemma?" It was more of a rhetorical question that the boys knew all too well. "Patrols I imagine gentlemen. We will be pulling a little over time mind you. I know ya'll got school, but we need some watching tonight until we get this sorted."

It was time to work and figure out which one of these knuckleheads would be first watch for the cows tonight. Joe and Billy would be easy enough for patrol. It was the occasional fighting cousins I'd have a problem with. "Joe, you got first watch, then Billy. Terry, please go through and sort out the order of watch for the week. Decide out of Manny and Rabbit who'll take late watch. Manny and Rabbit, we need y'all help. We all work as a team. We got no time for bull

today.”

“Okay, get back to work.” I waved over and walked with Roger and Terry into the main crew camp to get a cool drink out of the Amana refrigerator. The chilly air as I opened the fridge was a relief. Drinking the red Pop Rouge soda drink was a glistening God-send. The carbonation cooled my dry throat. Now, I could let relax and off the throttle among my supervisors in private.

“That was pretty hard-core, Mr. Cain. I think Little Joe almost wet himself and Billy Badeaux might not sleep a week.” Terry is smiling a sheepish smile and Roger punches him in the arm playfully.

“We have to be firm sometimes, Terry. You know that. You and Roger been with me a while. You know I would never run any of them off short of stealing or hurting an innocent person intentionally. But this is a ranch and we got to make sure to keep everyone minding or someone could get seriously hurt.” I run my fingers through my hair and belch a real squealer from the carbonated strawberry soda. “We’ll get them into town or the zoo for a bit of fun to chill things out soon. We’ll do all that probably right after the cameras get installed.”

“Sounds like a plan, sir. We better get them hay bales in. That storm is coming in quick. Sir, it’s weird how the wind is blowing from the west and the rain is pushing against it from the east. We might be mindful of a twister.” Terry is raising the flag of caution.

“Podna, ya sound like dat Bob Breck now cha. Dat is creepy the weather, Terry, though. Ya voice when you said that, man, was like that scary fella in them Roger Corman movies, Vancent Price.” “Evil wizard weather, my bro?” Roger is making spooky sounds and wiggling his hands and fingers at Terry. “Vancent Breck.”

“It’s Vincent Price, boscayo, or would you rather ‘tree stump’. You know the guy on Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* album. Oh, forget it. We better get.” Terry sees the storm is moving ever near.

Roger continue to laugh and clown. “Dawkness falls across da land. Da midnight hour is close dat hand. Creatures call in search of your blood to tarrorize ya...” Roger, before he can finish, is hit with Terry’s hat and both run out the door.

Damn boys! What will I do?

Later in the day, I was riding Star our golden palomino out to stretch the legs and look over the attack sites. I brought Terry and Roger with me after the hay was picked up. Roger, before meeting up with us, round up the boys to get the fences mended to the southern gates. On the southern gates, a very troublesome cow, Minnie, had managed to tear a good-sized stretch of fence approximately one hundred feet. The wild deer also didn’t help the new tear. They kept pushing the rest of that portion open to get their chance at our molasses licks. While all this work was going on, I was still calculating the interest rates on our current mortgage with Guaranty Bank.

The predator locations where the cows were killed bothered me even more after I viewed them. I

now understood why Billy Badeaux was confused. I had noticed something during both kill site inspections. The observed finding had me scratching my head. I was even further confused when we went back to Daisy's kill site. I wanted to say, "I think the cow just picked up some disease and was dying. Whatever got them just has immunity to the bug." My thoughts were rational from years of seeing all sorts of explained oddities with cattle.

I thought and said it with Terry. "The predator might have sensed the animal was sick or diseased. Maybe the slaughter was merciful to save the cow further pain."

"But sir, we just tested the Jersey and the Brahma just yesterday and gave them their shots. No Brucellosis and no distemper. Blood tests by Dr. Leslie Walker were negative for any other viruses and infection. The first kill was the cow we had set for auction this week." Terry's answer shot that theory down. And the bad news couldn't have come at the worst of time. "Again bones and flesh were organized in a circle and the head was forty to sixty feet up in a tree, overlooking the kill with a light purple slime dripping from the tongue."

"Was it a whack job cultist, maybe? Probably poured whatever that God-awful stuff is on the kill area." The kill arrangements were starting to nag at me more. This had more of an organized human feel to it now.

Terry asked even more troubling questions. "But why go through so much trouble? It seems like a ritualistic staged place to spook us. If this was a human sacrificing our cow to call up whatever demon they serve, why so elaborate a staging of organs and bones? Why take so long and risk getting caught?"

"We should have seen something. Terry, we will catch them. They just caught us napping when they killed our cow. It's looking more likely a sick or twisted person praying to a demon or who knows a muskrat with this smell." In all my years I'd never seen a sight like the mutilations. It was the lemon sweet smell that caught my nostrils first. That was followed by rotted methane and stomach churning sulphurous odours. I expected the latter but to have a sweet smell then stomach churning rotten egg odour caused even me to retch and vomit unexpectedly. Deep brown gumbo and gravy littered grass and flowers. It wasn't one of my finer moments.

"Hahaha, muskrat God! Oh, Lawd Nutria pray for us to not skin ya ass! Hahaha, good one Boss!" Roger can't control himself again. The boys belly laughed a bit. Then saw I had vomited and started having concern.

"You okay, Boss?" Terry took out his blue embroidered handkerchief and gave it to me to rub my mouth. It was needed, and it was well received.

"I'm fine for now." I rinse my mouth from my canteen and get rid of the last garlicky bile and digested chicken caught in my throat. "The sweet to sudden rotten egg smell threw my stomach for a loop."

Terry continues explaining the site in detail. "I know it caught us too when we first were exposed

to it to, sir.” He rides over near the sixty or more-circular radius. “Now, see what I mean. Circles, no animal touching the flesh, and the head overlooking the kill. It’s way up there too. You had to put some serious tree climbing and be pretty small to put it on those limbs.”

I bring up a more than likely suspect. “It might be some sadistic ex-wife who is mad for getting a boot to her ass.” Then I continue, “Oh, same ex-wife getting called out and laughed at by the community may have fuelled her wanting revenge. Yeah, putting her business out on blast might have helped.”

Terry counters, “But she’s been in the hospital a lot, sir, getting treatment. I doubt it is Sylvia. She’s mad but she never killed an animal while here. That’s not saying she couldn’t have paid somebody though.”

“That’s true, Terry.” I go on to rationalize everything again with Roger and Terry. “Ammonia could keep off the critters. The head in the tree seems like a lot of unnecessary labour even for Sybil Duplantis’s hyped-up lazy butt. Keep a watch and I’ll follow up on the human end. The way our luck has been going it will probably be the re-incarnation of Charles Manson. Or even worse some satanic cult that Sybil slept with or paid up to further ruin me.” We both laugh at the last line. Like I said, she was a pain in the ass.

Looking back, I would have taken all three to the real cause. As it was, my mind drifted to the eastern fields and then the line of shimmering green, older-than-old forests there. I looked at the flanks of grasses as they moved in time with the shimmering mirages. The occasional gust of heated wind wove them even more like a mirrored rippled effect. Long blades of the deepest green and amber reached toward the darkness of those woods. It seemed as if each blade and stalk of amber and emerald hue held a secret. A secret only they could whisper—of the past, of the present and unfortunate future.

THE END

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MILK by Stephen Hernandez

The bar, if the dimly-lit, barely standing shack could be termed as such, was full of taciturn cowhands and the inevitable solitary, moustachioed barman. They had warned me that the little town would be like something out of the Wild West—but I was still surprised, because, if anything, it was more of a cliché than the cliché itself. Instead of The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, this was more a case of The Bad, The Badder and The Worst. The town is called ‘Temerla’, for a good reason, it means quite literally: ‘Fear It’. It lies between the borderless, lawless state of Amazonas on the southernmost Venezuelan border and the northernmost Brazilian border. Here, there is only one law. It is the law of Death.

Grizzled men, too mean to even grow full beards, sit huddled around filthy, rum stained tables, guarding their drinks in half-cupped hands, whilst smacking dominos down with their free ones. Everything and everyone froze when I walked in. Tobacco smoke hung in the air, dust motes twinkled as if from light years away, moustaches seized up in mid-sneers, yawns remained un-yawned, and even the buzzing, swarming flies stopped midway through their buzzing and swarming. The few yards walk to the bar’s counter seemed more like miles. I made my unwilling, stiff legs carry me over to the moth-eaten, vest covered belly that seemed to take up most of the space behind the bar. The hairy, squat barman had two parts to him: the aforementioned huge stomach, and the equally compulsory huge moustache.

He slammed (everyone slammed things in Temerla), a dirty looking glass on the counter, along with a bottle of rum, a can of cola, and a saucer of badly sliced lime. The silence weighed heavy in the air. Even though no-one in the crowded bar was looking directly at me I could feel their eyes boring holes into my back. I was obviously a ‘gringo’, too tall and not dark enough to be a Venezuelan. I was carrying an attaché case which also meant I was here on business. There was only one kind of business that brought gringos to Temerla. I wearily pushed the beverages back towards the barman.

‘Milk,’ I said, in perfect Castellano (the Venezuelan variant of traditional Spanish).

The moustache twitched. The silence grew more ominous. The barman stared at me and crinkled his nostrils as if something distasteful had been placed directly under his nose. It appeared that we were in some kind of staring competition—this could take a while. I was good at staring competitions. Finally, the eyes, moustache and belly seemed to reach agreement. A carton of milk magically appeared and was placed next to the glass. The capitulation seemed to have wounded him and he disappeared into a back room. What conversation had been taking place before I made my entrance slowly resumed. I drank my milk. The brown paper package was waiting for me outside the bar door when I left.

The matt black stray kitten which my mother had grudgingly allowed me to adopt, I suppose, in lieu of any future siblings, wouldn’t touch the saucer of milk. I tried to coax it by giving it a stroke and making encouraging clucking noises, but it reacted like all strays do by arching its back and hissing at me. I had a young child’s sudden and precocious brainwave. I opened the

fridge where my mother was soaking some pig's liver in milk. I always loved the sauce she made from the liver's blood and milk, the way the blood gently blended with the milk under slight heat, swirling colours of pink and red blending into the white. A magical, aesthetically pleasing union, and my mother somehow never let it curdle.

I poured the pink liquid into another saucer and presented it to the kitten. This time it licked it up voraciously. After it had finished it allowed me to stroke it and curled up in my lap purring. I had made my first true friend. I let it sleep as long as it wanted before I headed off for school. I was given a slight reprimand for my tardiness, but thankfully I arrived just before milk-break. I usually enjoyed the milk-breaks. My mother gave me strawberry flavoured powder to mix with it, which made me the envy of the other kids. But the milk had been spoiled because a tomcat had decided to mark its territory by peeing over the crates, and the smell on the quarter-pint bottles was disgusting. We were made to drink it anyway, nothing went to waste back then. Rationing had finished, and the Welfare State reforms were in full swing. So, if you were fatherless like so many of my young peers, you had to accept things even if that welfare made you ill. Most of the children, including me, threw up. Blood and milk were one thing, but blood and Tomcat's urine was another. I disguised my vomit by pouring most of my milk on the floor. I saw my gagging face in the reflection. It made quite a picture, even then I enjoyed art.

I shook myself awake from my daydream, like a dog shaking off water, and returned to another present and yet another country. The black Austin Martin was waiting for me outside the Bed and Breakfast, quietly growling as it turned over its powerful engine. I didn't hurry. Barry was a patient guy. I dressed in a black suit, white shirt and thin, black tie. I wondered if I looked too funereal as I cast a look in the mirror. I had once seen a photograph one of my surviving uncles had brought back from the war. It was of Johann Reichhart, the Nazi's infamous chief executioner. I remembered his top hat, frock coat and white gloves as if he were going to a classy show and not lopping someone's head off with his own customised guillotine. Most of all, I remembered his impassive expression—it was all another day's work for him. Much like me really, and I seemed to have adopted the same expression. I resented the formal clothes though, but just like me it was what his employers expected of him, so there really wasn't much choice. It was a kind of uniform really. And in my case Tarantino's gangster films had not yet been made, so it made me fairly non-descript. I could pass as a bank clerk—a bank clerk that settled accounts.

I got in the car. As usual Barry said nothing and sped off. The attaché case was on the back seat. I reached over and pulled it onto my lap. I clicked it open. The familiar matt finish of my Glock Auto seemed to absorb all the surrounding light including its black velvet surroundings. I closed the attaché case before the irresistible urge to take it out and kiss it overwhelmed me as it so often did. Instead, I placed the case between my legs. I handed Barry a brown paper package which he stuffed in his overcoat coat.

The pub, which was on the wrong side of Deptford (if there was a wrong side), was double-doored and had grilles on the windows. I had been in worse bars, but this came close. Above the sign: 'Don't ask for credit or you'll regret it!', hung a baseball bat spiked with nails and crimson rings which could either have been rust or encrusted blood. Altogether, it looked an

unhealthy weapon. The clientele were what to be expected this side of the bridge and there were clouds of strong smelling grass hanging in the air. The people we were to meet weren't hard to spot. Five of them sat on a tattered corner sofa with several hangers-on sat on stools around them. My only interest though, was a tall, lean and well-muscled Jamaican smoking a huge spliff who was still probably thinking of something funny to say as Barry went over to the pub's door and bolted them. He seemed taken aback somewhat. I looked the barman straight in the eyes and asked for a glass of milk.

'What the fuck do you think I am—a milkman, and what's with your mate bolting my doors?' I assumed he probably guessed as he made no move for the telephone to call the Old Bill. When I deigned not to reply he reluctantly told me the only milk they had was the frothed stuff that was at the end of the coffee machine.

'Then put ice in it,' I said and lent over and turned up the volume on the sound machine that was currently playing Eddy Grant's 'Electric Avenue', it was from 'Killer on the Rampage', an album I currently favoured. I picked up my glass of iced milk and wandered over to the corner where the man and his crew were sitting. I pulled up a stool and gave him a pleasant smile. I came straight to the point: 'You owe some people I work for some money.'

'Hey man, that ain't due right now. I gotta a month,' he said.

I shrugged my shoulders indifferently. 'You had a month yesterday. You know the rules.'

The Jamaican waved the spliff at me.

'Who the fuck are you, man? Telling me dates and all that shit? In case you ain't noticed, you well outnumbered here and you not welcome.' He pulled back his denim jacket to reveal a huge antique looking revolver that was probably older than him, and would not have looked out of place in the War Museum.

I unlocked the attaché case and placed it on the table.

'That's more friendly, man. You got some more shit for me? You know I'm good,' he grinned, a ghastly tobacco stained gravestone grin.

'Not exactly,' I said and produced the Glock. 'This is set on auto. That means one pull on the trigger and you're all dead. Or,' I said, pointing it directly at the Jamaican. 'I can fill you so full of holes they'll be able to use you as a colander.'

Before he or any of his mates could pull out any more concealed weapons I shot him once straight in his dreadlocked head.

'I lied about it being set on auto,' I said. But my words were lost between the screaming, general throwing up and Eddy Grant singing: '*And then we'll take it higher...*' Admittedly, a man's brains blown out at close range is never a pretty sight to most people. The whole wall behind the deceased Jamaican was testament to that, although, I found it more than resembled some of

Rothko's early work in lithol red. The darker shades of red streaming into lighter shades and then perhaps a touch of Francis Bacon to finish where most of the Jamaican's now recently separated brains had accumulated. They had probably been wasted on him anyway. Some of the blood splatters had even reached my glass milk of milk on the table and was turning it a slight pink—very satisfying all in all really.

I nodded to Barry who handed the brown paper package to the Jamaican's second-in-command. I told him: 'Same terms just don't make the same mistake.' I went to replace the Glock in its case but instead swung it to my right and snapped the jaw of one of the hangers-on that I didn't like the look of—I can't stand pimples. His head jerked back with a crunching sound and he slid off the stool onto the floor, out cold.

'Or we'll be back,' I said. I would have liked to have said: 'I'll be back', *à la* Schwarzenegger, but it didn't seem fair to leave Barry out.

With that we took our leave. Fast. Barry really did like to have an excuse to drive fast.

They say that few adults can remember anything before the age of three. But I have a very vivid memory of when I was a baby and I am quite sure it is real. I had been sucking on my mother's teat, and once I had drunk my fill my mother gently released me, but there was still a slight bobble of creamy milk left on her pink nipple. I had fallen asleep contentedly with this in my infant mind. I suppose it was because even then I knew there would always be milk.

I lay back on my lounger soaking up the sun's rays. I always chose the Caribbean for my holidays, although, you could term it a 'Busman's Holiday', I suppose. The two gin and tonics I had ordered arrived in tall glasses beaded with droplets of condensation. They matched the beads of sweat that were running down my companion's breasts. I watched with interest as one large droplet meandered its ways down her flat stomach paused for a while in her belly button then disappeared into the negligible diamond of her white thong. I remembered last night when I had traced a similar line down her stomach with my tongue, then pausing for only a few moments before stroking her clitoris with its tip. It grew satisfyingly larger with just a few tender licks accompanied by equally satisfying groans of pleasure. I decided I might even stay with her at the resort for a while longer. She really enjoyed sex. I was looking forward to her menstruating—that's when I really enjoyed performing cunnilingus. Some women protested, but only for a while.

She looked at me with her deep, solemn brown eyes over the top of her glass, slowly licking her crimson lips suggestively and then smiled at me with perfect white teeth.

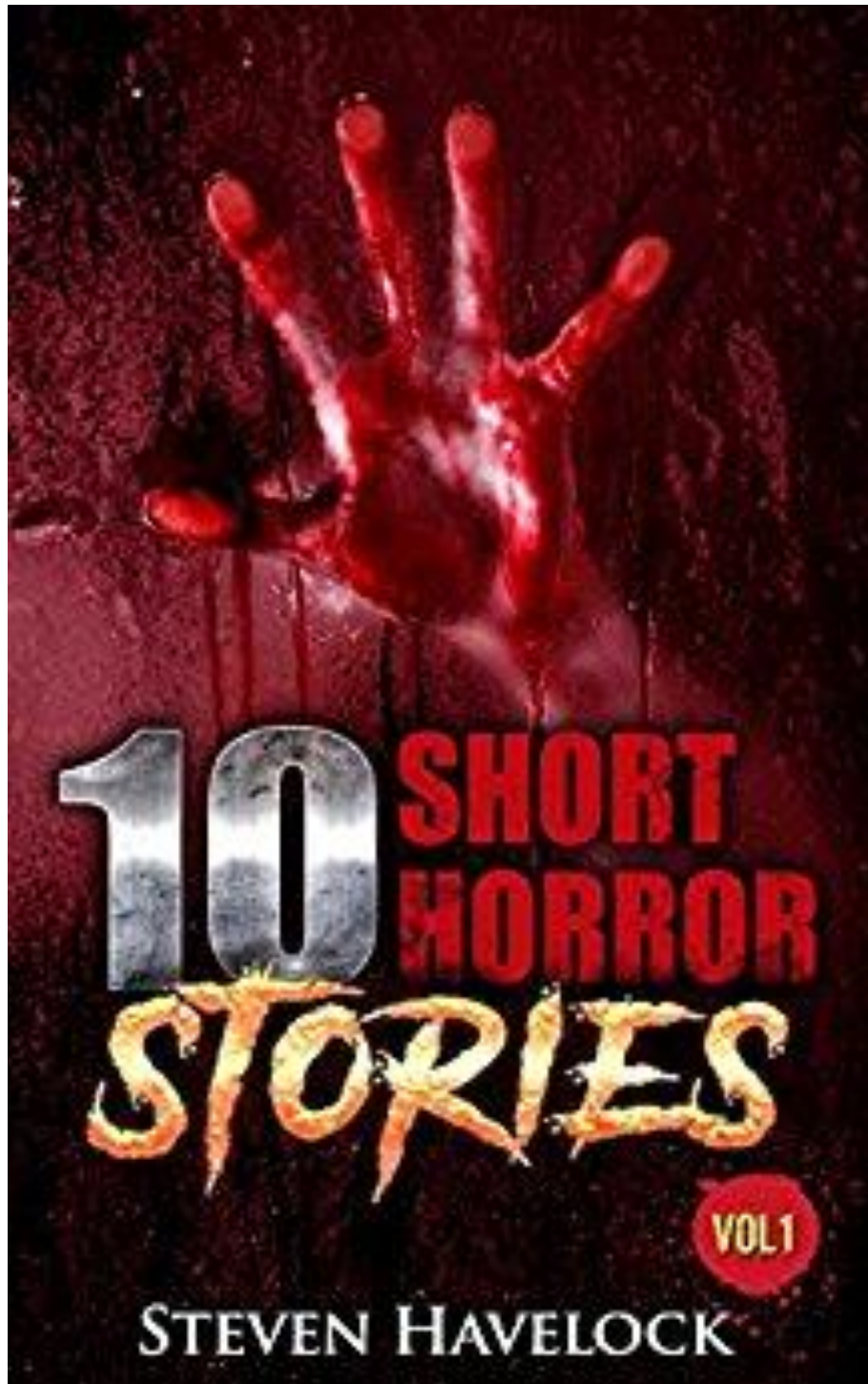
'How is your drink?' she asked.

I shrugged indifferently. 'I wish I'd ordered milk,' I said truthfully.

For some reason she found this hysterically funny. 'You! Drinking milk!' She whinnied. It was a neighing, horsey laugh that I found incredibly irritating. I suddenly found myself very much

wishing I had my gun with me.

THE END



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IGNACIO BULKOV by GK Murphy

It had been a difficult existence over these past twenty-five years for Jessica Thorn. Having murdered her infant as a teenager, she was admitted the most infamous mental institution in Berkshire (in the world, perhaps). She had been tried and sentenced by the High Court to Life Imprisonment once (out of desperation) she pleaded guilty to the murder. She'd lasted just over the duration of two terrifying weeks in HMS Liverpool Prison before she attempted suicide. As well as this, she had displayed sometimes extreme outbursts and violent tendencies, mostly random assaults upon the hard-working staff members patrolling the wings.

That was twenty-five years ago, after some time spent in a Regional Secure Unit in the Midlands, after one in a secluded area of rural Milton Keynes. Until, she discovered herself one day back in her local community, living day-to-day in 24 Hour Care courtesy of a company called Spillane Healthcare UK. Suddenly, everything seemed peaceful. She rediscovered and explored a foreign, sometimes-strange society and its occupants.

She was grateful to Spillane Healthcare and its supportive staff who stayed in her rented house with her 24 hours daily. If she had a problem, they were there to help (which seemed often). Thank God for that, since having been diagnosed as a Paranoid Schizophrenic some years previously (in what seemed like a previous life), Jessica attempted on a daily basis to negate people's prejudices and jibes, to keep her chin above water, make the best of an awkward situation and survive in her all-new environment. Of course, it was hardly a big revelation that it proved harder than anticipated. She'd listened to all those life-affirming stories of how those with mental issues were treated differently now—than, say, twenty or thirty years ago.

Sat on the bench in the park, she tucked into a bag of Salt N Vinegar crisps and tossed scraps of bread to the ducks in the pond. It was so quiet here, a sharp contrast to all that plagued her mind and insisted she was a piece of worthless shit.

She smiled, picturing jugulars being sliced and the heavy flow of oozing blood as her victim gargled and drowned on his own scarlet fluid.

She uttered, "My name is Ignacio Moore Bulkov...World, never forget my name. I hold myself to account, and nobody else, for my ways."

Already, she'd been in care eight years yet for some unexplained reason life still seemed strange—frightening, shocking and dangerous for someone who'd been incarcerated for such a prolonged period (far too long) in hospitals, prisons and institutions across this fair (and often unfair) land.

"When I die, I will return, and I will haunt you. The vision of your dearest Ignacio will drive you insane, pretty ones. You will, I promise and swear, feel the root of my madness!"

But she was Jessica Thorn. Ignacio Bulkov did not...

...did not exist?

She preferred being within four walls and indoors more than anything else. Strange, yes...yet, was this really so strange? She'd been trapped indoors and sheltered from society most of her life, with or without her consent, and as she acclimatized to being indoors, she came to hate the outdoors and all of its 'normality', the public as a whole, those 'unlike' her—it was those who she hated and probably hated her back. Especially if they explored her wicked past—everyone in the entire world hated murderers and their ilk, especially insane ones. This was how society would view her, if the opportunity ever manifested when she shouted her grief from the clock tower in the Town Square. This was exactly what she was, wasn't it—a fucking killer!

The crisps were eaten. Eying the empty packet, it seemed like this innocent article would be devoured for a moment too. She scrunched the empty plastic bag up and stuffed it into her left duffel-coat pocket. She narrowed her eyes, like a person with dementia, or a malign preoccupation with death and gore.

“Ignacio, you must remember my name!”

She was still useless around the house—even after eight years of practise on and off—dependent on her support workers for most things, yet they never minded helping her out with cooking, cleaning the house or going to the shops, if she was having a bad day and did not wish to go out.

Now, they were talking about Sleeping Nights. How did they not comprehend, with her background, this was an insane notion, derived from shit, directed towards a shit conclusion, and whoever suggested it, were they not full of shit?

Life, for Jessica, was frightening. In the house, she could sleep safely, knowing a support worker was AWAKE and ALERT—in a neighbourhood full of drug-addicts and drunkards—they were there to watch over her and protect her. Wasn't that why they were there anyway, to guide and direct, to protect from harm? Sleeping Nights would toss everything into the fire—FUCKING FACT!

But the RMN insisted on repeating to poor Jessica Thorn that she was making progress.

Now that her Care Package was on track, it ought to have remained the same. No changes, no alterations...it made sense to leave things the way they were. But no, because Social Services and the Care Commissioners were starting to poke their noses in, and these fuckers demanded alterations.

These people, it seemed, had forgotten to consider Jessica's criminal offence and her history of psychosis and paranoia. They were treating her as if she was 'normal' when the world, its gossip merchants, its troublemakers, would disagree, like she would disagree—because, no matter how anyone looked at, she would never be normal because schizophrenia was a condition, a way of life AND an illness. And schizophrenia was not normal!

On the sofa in the living room, the RMN with her pretty green eyes and blue lipstick looked sideways at Jessica and said, “You’re making fantastic progress, Jessica. We’re all very proud of you. You should be proud of yourself, because coming as far as you have is a great achievement.”

Worried-looking, Jessica said, “A boy shouted ‘mad bitch’ at me the other day. See what I mean? See the way people treat me? I’m getting more and more scared to go outside. I mean, what if he threw a bottle at me or something? What if he assaulted me?”

“He doesn’t speak for everybody. Yes, some kids can be cruel.”

Jessica insisted, “It’s driving me more and more insane. I feel like I’m slipping backwards in time...like I’m drifting back towards that tiny room in hospital, with no furniture, four white walls, an asbestos bowl to shit and piss into, being force-fed and injected, beaten by cruel nurses...as you might have forgotten, I suffered all that, yet you don’t remember that, you make out like it never happened...and for all that happened to me, nobody was held accountable, and the beatings and dodgy injections in the legs and arses probably still go on!”

After Jessica’s years of being pushed around, ridiculed and insulted at every turn, it seemed the RMN (Regional Nurse—employed by Spillane Care) might have got things wrong (did the RMN truly have any inkling of institution life and what awful lengths patients went through to survive day to day ...really, truly?). It seemed Jessica was heading backwards by the hour.

After eight years of 24 Hour Care, it would come as no surprise that Jessica still hated being alone, and feared the day she lived alone without care.

This woman would have rather been back in hospital than brave society and live on her own.

She muttered under her breath, “I am Ignacio...”

Concerned, the RMN frowned.

“I see acres of death...” Jessica said, her eyes staring towards the window.

“Jessica, you’re making me very nervous.”

Jessica was pretty, dark-haired, brown-eyed and petite. She loved her chocolate and consumed it daily by the tray. Dairy Milk, Milk Tray and Black Magic boxes littered the kitchen, cast-offs from a night’s binge. Losing weight had always proved a struggle. A particular support worker insulted her once, when Jessica stated, “I’ll lose weight one day...” when he returned, “I can’t see that happening, honestly...” All she could do was wander off into another room and sulk, while this member of staff congratulated himself and chuckled in a warm corner of the kitchen. This occurred in front of a blaring full-on fan-heater (heating Jessica paid for out of her benefit payment every month, like she did the fucking broadband—which they also exploited), please.

“I see lonely people lined up in a queue at the gates of Heaven, like me, lost, lonely, loveless,

with nobody in the world...”

Jessica feared loneliness the most. She loathed the thought of spending the rest of her days on the planet alone. But things were going this way, she feared her care package may soon be pulled and leave her stranded in a blank dystopian wilderness. The RMN was adamant about Sleeping Nights. Since her release from hospital, Jessica had slept comfortably and mostly successfully, knowing the support worker was AWAKE, not ASLEEP, which always gave her a greater sense of security and inner-safety. She realized—for one thing—those horrible teenagers that shouted disgusting things at her on the street, and banged on the front door and cast stones and gravel at the windows, were kept some of the way at arm’s length, because the support workers WERE ALWAYS AWAKE—and Jessica was SAFE!

Two people—awake—in the house were a better situation than just one.

Jessica had told the RMN this, yet it didn’t seem to register, or even make the blindest difference. It turned out the Ministry of Justice or the Care Commissioners were after blood, and had started insisting Jessica had this frigging Sleeping Nights ruling enforced, where the support workers went upstairs to bed at night and slept right through until morning—leaving Jessica wide-open to paranoia, which should not have been permitted by those in the Care profession. This atrocious idea served only to disturb somebody like Jessica. Nobody seemed to completely decipher or understand her mind and its feeble workings, or comprehend her illness and her fears. Again, they were treating her ‘normal’—which she WAS, of course—and yes, she WAS normal—but she was also a PARANOID SCHIZOPHRENIC and ALWAYS WOULD BE—and Sleeping Nights DID NOT HELP HER CAUSE ONE BIT!

It was like getting ‘dragged’ into this decision.

She didn’t want this state of affairs. She had clearly stated that she did not want it.

But by God in this case, why were these supposedly good, decent folk ignoring her? Jessica Thorn was begging for her care package to remain unaltered. She just wanted her daily tried-and-tested routine to remain the same way, without this new burden, this sudden change, that would psychologically unsettle her, drive her to God-knows-what. Fuck, they were playing toy soldiers with her mental state as well as her physical well-being. Presently, NOBODY UNDERSTOOD HER!

In fact, it was like everybody PRETENDED to understand her, as this newly introduced plan of half-arsed action proved exactly that.

Jessica hit the chocolate. Her armpits and thighs were bloated and getting flabbier—not immediately, but gradually, perhaps every other day.

Bit by bit, for sure, she was getting larger.

The RMN said, “Jessica, you’re indoors every day and don’t get much exercise, yet don’t seem to bother about your overall state of health or gaining weight?”

“You don’t care about my weight...” Jessica spat vehemently. “You just care about your salary, not me or anybody else you drive around to patronize, and issue demands to—and your ambition.”

“Oh, Jessica, really...”

Jessica was referring to the times the RMN suggested she do more housework, dusting, polishing, cleaning dishes on time, weeding the garden, scrubbing the toilet-bowl...and now, well, it had turned into a weight-gain issue.

The RMN said, “It’s a lovely sunny day. Why not go for a walk?”

Honestly, she had no clue about Ms Thorn and her dislike of open spaces or the deep mental pain of walking in the bright light of day.

Jessica put the Mars Bar aside and retorted, “I’ve spent twenty-five years in hospital—TWENTY-FIVE YEARS—not twenty-five days—HALF A LIFETIME—incarcerated, within four walls constantly—and you expect me to cope alone in this strange environment, one I’ve hardly experienced, with its cruel people...and you expect me to sleep, knowing the public can creep up on me in bed, or turn on me at any moment? I’m a Paranoid Schizophrenic and a murderer. What am I expected to do when that information about me spreads around the community, and I have nobody to help me cope or survive?”

“That won’t happen, Jessica!”

“Eventually it will—these things have a way of getting out!”

The RMN feigned a smile and shook her, “Perhaps you eat chocolate as a comfort thing?”

“Dead right I do...I’ve given up caring about my appearance by now. If people are going to think of me as a freak, a villain, an abomination, a killer...well, why should I care about my appearance, because I might as well be a grossly overweight fat person, eh? Tell me, who in the world is going to care? I’ll tell you...”

Jessica’s head dipped as her chin snuggled into her chest. She muttered with a thin smile, “Ignacio Bulkov...”

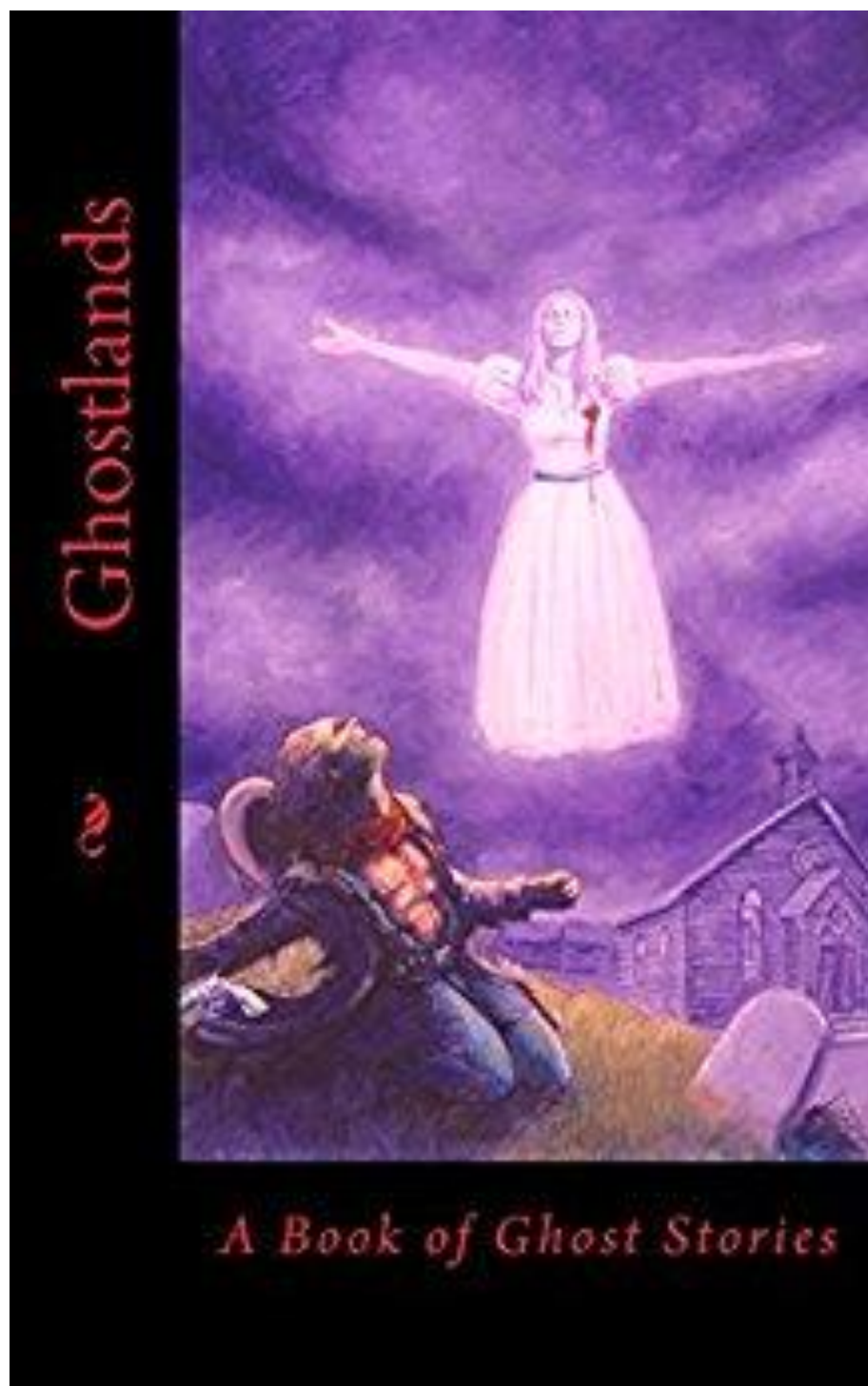
The RMN frowned, “Jessica, are you okay?”

Here Jessica Thorn ended matters. And as she had argued even before her discharge from hospital, she did finally get the care package she desired—she wished for as she continued to eat more and more, day after day. Yet did it all have to end so sugary sweet and a chocolaty, dripping drool? Finally, she awarded herself a sleep which would last forever, which she embarked upon with gusto, although her lips and chin were caked with chocolate and caramel.

The RMN recalled Jessica's one-time friend and lover, the handsome Dmitri Bulkov she had observed in Jessica's old photograph album. The young man visited England briefly, and after a sample of British culture, returned to Russia, deserting Jessica for good when he discovered she had become pregnant. He never stuck around to see his son, or the infant she murdered...little Ignacio.

THE END

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THE MIND FUCKERS by Steven Havelock

Matthew Allman—AKA Palehorse—sat in the dock charged with causing the murders of over three hundred people. His face was deathly pale.

This is it. There's no way I'm getting out of this now.

He had been offered a lighter sentence if he'd turn super grass and name his two co-killers.

Even if I turn them in, I'm still going to be in prison for life. 300 murders, no one would get of lightly.

The judge turned to him.

“How do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” he said barely able to hide a smirk.

Fuck them!

James stood on the edge of the bridge, ready to throw himself from the top. His phone beeped again. He looked at the message.

IF YOU ARE READING THIS MESSAGE, PLEASE BE AWARE IT IS FROM YOUR FAMILY. YOUR FAMILY LOVES YOU. YOUR FAMILY WANTS YOU TO WAKE UP! PLEASE, PLEASE WAKE UP

Tears streamed down his face.

I love my family so much. But they are all dead. They all died in a car crash six months ago.

The three members of the ‘Deadlife crew’ sat in their dank badly lit basement. All around them computers hummed, and the speakers beeped to hundreds of messages.

“Yes, I got another one!” screamed Palehorse.

“Well I’m still ten up on you, slow coach!” shouted Bishop.

“Hey hold on! I got one on a bridge!” Palehorse shouted back. “It will be my hundred and second!”

All other two members stopped what they were doing and came to look at the feed from the latest ‘marks’ cell phone on Palehorse’s monitor, of the guy on the bridge.

They saw his face.

“He’s an ugly fucker!” said Deadman.

“Crying like a baby!” replied Bishop with a smile of glee on his features.

“Do it!” screamed Deadman.

2 days earlier

James had been online when he’d received a message. It read:

*TO NOBODY,
YOUR FAMILY ARE BESIDES THEMSELVES WITH SADNESS AND MISS YOU SO, SO
MUCH. YOU DO NOT KNOW THIS YET, BUT YOU ARE IN A COMA. YOUR FAMILY IS
DESPERATE FOR YOU TO WAKE UP. THEY LOVE YOU SO MUCH.
PLEASE, PLEASE WAKE UP!
FROM DR JORDAN SMITH.*

That first message had sent James spinning into a world of confusion.

*My whole family died in a car crash...but what if...what if they never died...what if it was me? I
am the one that fell into a coma?*

And...And... This world all around me is not real?

A few hours later he received another message.

*TO NOBODY,
IT’S YOUR MOTHER SON...I MISS YOU SO, SO MUCH...PLEASE WAKE UP!
FROM YOUR MOTHER.*

James’ world was spinning like he had never felt before.

I’m in a coma? But I feel awake...

Then he received message number three.

*I AM DR JORDAN SMITH,
YOU ARE IN HOSPITAL UNDER MY CARE. WE ARE SENDING YOU MESSAGES TO
GET YOU TO WAKE UP. IT IS A NEW EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE. WE DON’T
KNOW IF YOU CAN SEE THESE MESSAGES BUT IF YOU CAN PLEASE BE AWARE
THEY ARE OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANT AND YOUR FAMILY ARE HERE BY YOUR
BEDSIDE, WAITING FOR YOU...THEY LOVE YOU SO MUCH.
PLEASE, PLEASE WAKE UP!*

YOURS,
DR SMITH

James remembered that night six months ago. They had been returning from a cousin's wedding. James had been driving. He had seen the lorry too late because he was coming off the slip road. The lorry had ploughed into them without remorse.

I spent eight months in hospital recovering. The nurses caring for me would look at me sadly but not say a word when I asked them about my family members. I wondered why none of them visited.

Then eventually...Eventually when I was better, they told me the truth...The awful truth....

Dead...All dead...

"Oh my God!" screamed Bishop.

"What is it?" cried Deadman.

"We got a trace!" The fear in Bishop's voice was palpable. "If they trace us we will get sent down, not for hundreds but thousands of years!"

"Cut the feed!" shouted Deadman.

"NO!" Palehorse responded. "Just thirty more seconds!"

"No! Cut the fucking feed!"

"Ten more seconds, he's going to do it!"

"No! Cut the feed now!"

James felt the rush of air in his face and saw the choppy water, hundreds of meters below. His phone beeped again.

James, this is the United States cyber police. Please pay attention! You are not in a coma. You have been targeted by a serial killer cult. They want you to kill yourself. Don't believe their lies. You are not in a coma. We can see the feed of you on the bridge from your phone. Don't do it, please don't do it!

“Do it, you fucking shit!” shouted Palehorse.

James moved closer to the edge.

“He’s going to do it!” responded Bishop.

“We haven’t got time!” Deadman interrupted. “Cut the fucking feed!”

“No! Five more seconds!”

“Cut it!”

James’ phone beeped again.

Message number 4:

TO NOBODY,

SON, IF YOU CAN HEAR US PLEASE WAKE UP!!

THE DOCTOR IS SAYING WE SHOULD CUT YOUR LIFE SUPPORT AS YOU SHOW NO
SIGNS OF WAKING OR OF LIFE.

YOUR MOTHER AND I ARE BESIDES OURSELVES WITH DESPAIR.

SON THIS IS YOR LAST CHANCE. WE LOVE YOU SO MUCH.

“Shit, they got a confirmed trace!” screamed Bishop.

“We got to get our shit and run!” Deadman replied.

“The cops will be here in minutes!” Deadman’s face was deathly pale. “We got to go now!”

The two hackers stuffed their bags with their most essential possessions and in seconds were heading for the door.

He’s going to do it, thought Palehorse, just a few more seconds...

It’s going to be my 103! I will be immortalized as the greatest serial killer of all time!

James, this is the United States police, you have been targeted by a serial killer cult. Do not jump, repeat do not jump, you are not in a coma.

Palehorse’s face turned red with anger.

I really want this kill!

He stopped the scripted messages program and started to type.

NOBODY,
DO NOT BELIEVE THE LIES, THEY ARE FROM DEMONS WHO WANT YOU TO DIE
AND NEVER SEE YOUR BELOVED ONES AGAIN.
DO IT! DO IT NOW! WHILST YOU STILL CAN!

Palehorse sat in the dimly lit basement, typing. The seconds were ticking away. He heard the police sirens in the distance but was too fixated on the screen to pay them any attention.

James felt confusion and pain like he had never felt before.

My family...

What if the messages are real?

I love them so much and they want me to wake up. I must see them again...

James stepped forward.

The judge was ready to hand down his sentence.

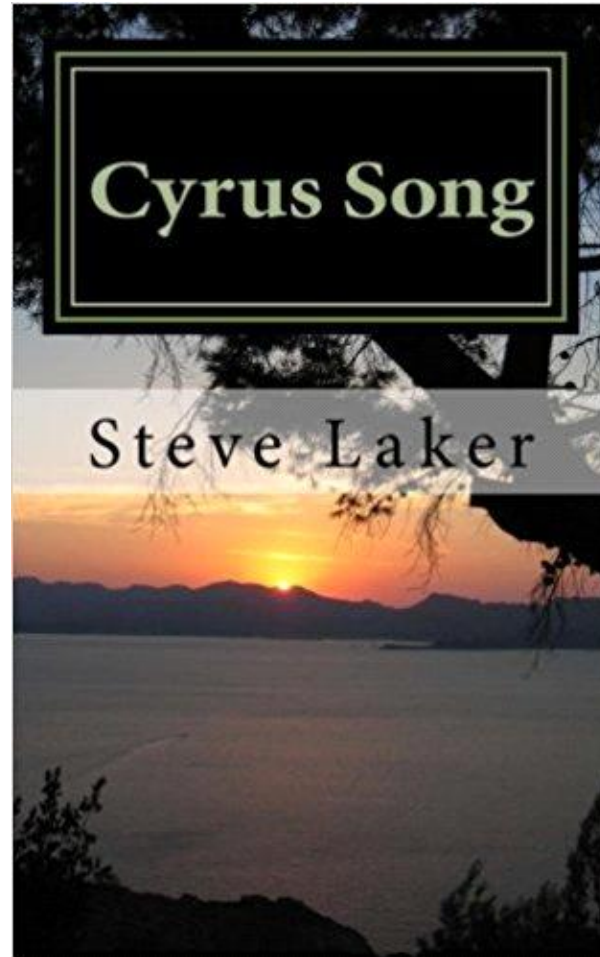
“On all counts of three hundred murders you have been found guilty. You do not deserve ever to walk free outside again. You will die in prison.”

Palehorse smiled.

I'm going to live forever! Immortalized as the greatest serial killer of all time.

THE END

[Cyrus Song](#)



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THE BOOK OF GHOSTS by Sabine Baring-Gould

The Leaden Ring

“It is not possible, Julia. I cannot conceive how the idea of attending the county ball can have entered your head after what has happened. Poor young Hattersley’s dreadful death suffices to stop that.”

“But, aunt, Mr. Hattersley is no relation of ours.”

“No relation—but you know that the poor fellow would not have shot himself if it had not been for you.”

“Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, how can you say so, when the verdict was that he committed suicide when in an unsound condition of mind? How could I help his blowing out his brains, when those brains were deranged?”

“Julia, do not talk like this. If he did go off his head, it was you who upset him by first drawing him on, leading him to believe that you liked him, and then throwing him over so soon as the Hon. James Lawlor appeared on the tapis. Consider: what will people say if you go to the assembly?”

“What will they say if I do not go? They will immediately set it down to my caring deeply for James Hattersley, and they will think that there was some sort of engagement.”

“They are not likely to suppose that. But really, Julia, you were for a while all smiles and encouragement. Tell me, now, did Mr. Hattersley propose to you?”

“Well—yes, he did, and I refused him.”

“And then he went and shot himself in despair. Julia, you cannot with any face go to the ball.”

“Nobody knows that he proposed. And precisely because I do go everyone will conclude that he did not propose. I do not wish it to be supposed that he did.”

“His family, of course, must have been aware. They will see your name among those present at the assembly.”

“Aunt, they are in too great trouble to look at the paper to see who were at the dance.”

“His terrible death lies at your door. How you can have the heart, Julia——”

“I don’t see it. Of course, I feel it. I am awfully sorry, and awfully sorry for his father, the admiral. I cannot set him up again. I wish that when I rejected him he had gone and done as did Joe Pomeroy, marry one of his landlady’s daughters.”

“There, Julia, is another of your delinquencies. You lured on young Pomeroy till he proposed, then you refused him, and in a fit of vexation and mortified vanity he married a girl greatly beneath him in social position. If the ménage prove a failure you will have it on your conscience that you have wrecked his life and perhaps hers as well.”

“I cannot throw myself away as a charity to save this man or that from doing a foolish thing.”

“What I complain of, Julia, is that you encouraged young Mr. Pomeroy till Mr. Hattersley appeared, whom you thought more eligible, and then you tossed him aside; and you did precisely the same with James Hattersley as soon as you came to know Mr. Lawlor. After all, Julia, I am not so sure that Mr. Pomeroy has not chosen the better part. The girl, I dare say, is simple, fresh, and affectionate.”

“Your implication is not complimentary, Aunt Elizabeth.”

“My dear, I have no patience with the young lady of the present day, who is shallow, self-willed, and indifferent to the feelings and happiness of others, who craves for excitement and pleasure, and desires nothing that is useful and good. Where now will you see a girl like Viola’s sister, who let concealment, like a worm i’ the bud, feed on her damask cheek? Nowadays a girl lays herself at the feet of a man if she likes him, turns herself inside-out to let him and all the world read her heart.”

“I have no relish to be like Viola’s sister, and have my story—a blank. I never grovelled at the feet of Joe Pomeroy or James Hattersley.”

“No, but you led each to consider himself the favoured one till he proposed, and then you refused him. It was like smiling at a man and then stabbing him to the heart.”

“Well—I don’t want people to think that James Hattersley cared for me—I certainly never cared for him—nor that he proposed; so I shall go to the ball.”

Julia Demant was an orphan. She had been retained at school till she was eighteen, and then had been removed just at the age when a girl begins to take an interest in her studies, and not to regard them as drudgery. On her removal she had cast away all that she had acquired, and had been plunged into the whirl of Society. Then suddenly her father died—she had lost her mother some years before—and she went to live with her aunt, Miss Flemming. Julia had inherited a sum of about five hundred pounds a year, and would probably come in for a good estate and funds as well on the death of her aunt. She had been flattered as a girl at home, and at school as a beauty, and she certainly thought no small bones of herself.

Miss Flemming was an elderly lady with a sharp tongue, very outspoken, and very decided in her opinions; but her action was weak, and Julia soon discovered that she could bend the aunt to do anything she willed, though she could not modify or alter her opinions.

In the matter of Joe Pomeroy and James Hattersley, it was as Miss Flemming had said. Julia had

encouraged Mr. Pomeroy, and had only cast him off because she thought better of the suit of Mr. Hattersley, son of an admiral of that name. She had seen a good deal of young Hattersley, had given him every encouragement, had so entangled him, that he was madly in love with her; and then, when she came to know the Hon. James Lawlor, and saw that he was fascinated, she rejected Hattersley with the consequences alluded to in the conversation above given.

Julia was particularly anxious to be present at the county ball, for she had been already booked by Mr. Lawlor for several dances, and she was quite resolved to make an attempt to bring him to a declaration.

On the evening of the ball Miss Flemming and Julia entered the carriage. The aunt had given way, as was her wont, but under protest.

For about ten minutes neither spoke, and then Miss Flemming said, "Well, you know my feelings about this dance. I do not approve. I distinctly disapprove. I do not consider your going to the ball in good taste, or, as you would put it, in good form. Poor young Hattersley——"

"Oh, dear aunt, do let us put young Hattersley aside. He was buried with the regular forms, I suppose?"

"Yes, Julia."

"Then the rector accepted the verdict of the jury at the inquest. Why should not we? A man who is unsound in his mind is not responsible for his actions."

"I suppose not."

"Much less, then, I who live ten miles away."

"I do not say that you are responsible for his death, but for the condition of mind that led him to do the dreadful deed. Really, Julia, you are one of those into whose head or heart only by a surgical operation could the thought be introduced that you could be in the wrong. A hypodermic syringe would be too weak an instrument to effect such a radical change in you. Everyone else may be in the wrong, you—never. As for me, I cannot get young Hattersley out of my head."

"And I," retorted Julia with asperity, for her aunt's words had stung her— "I, for my part, do not give him a thought."

She had hardly spoken the words before a chill wind began to pass round her. She drew the Barège shawl that was over her bare shoulders closer about her, and said— "Auntie! is the glass down on your side?"

"No, Julia; why do you ask?"

"There is such a draught."

“Draught! —I do not feel one; perhaps the window on your side hitches.”

“Indeed, that is all right. It is blowing harder and is deadly cold. Can one of the front panes be broken?”

“No. Rogers would have told me had that been the case. Besides, I can see that they are sound.”

The wind of which Julia complained swirled and whistled about her. It increased in force; it plucked at her shawl and slewed it about her throat; it tore at the lace on her dress. It snatched at her hair, it wrenched it away from the pins, the combs that held it in place; one long tress was lashed across the face of Miss Flemming. Then the hair, completely released, eddied up above the girl’s head, and next moment was carried as a drift before her, blinding her. Then—a sudden explosion, as though a gun had been fired into her ear; and with a scream of terror she sank back among the cushions. Miss Flemming, in great alarm, pulled the checkstring, and the carriage stopped. The footman descended from the box and came to the side. The old lady drew down the window and said: “Oh! Phillips, bring the lamp. Something has happened to Miss Demant.”

The man obeyed, and sent a flood of light into the carriage. Julia was lying back, white and senseless. Her hair was scattered over her face, neck, and shoulders; the flowers that had been stuck in it, the pins that had fastened it in place, the pads that had given shape to the convolutions lay strewn, some on her lap, some in the rug at the bottom of the carriage.

“Phillips!” ordered the old lady in great agitation, “tell Rogers to turn the horses and drive home at once; and do you run as fast as you can for Dr. Crate.”

A few minutes after the carriage was again in motion, Julia revived. Her aunt was chafing her hand.

“Oh, aunt!” she said, “are all the glasses broken?”

“Broken—what glasses?”

“Those of the carriage—with the explosion.”

“Explosion, my dear!”

“Yes. That gun which was discharged. It stunned me. Were you hurt?”

“I heard no gun—no explosion.”

“But I did. It was as though a bullet had been discharged into my brain. I wonder that I escaped. Who can have fired at us?”

“My dear, no one fired. I heard nothing. I know what it was. I had the same experience many years ago. I slept in a damp bed, and awoke stone deaf in my right ear. I remained so for three weeks. But one night when I was at a ball and was dancing, all at once I heard a report as of a

pistol in my right ear, and immediately heard quite clearly again. It was wax.”

“But, Aunt Elizabeth, I have not been deaf.”

“You have not noticed that you were deaf.”

“Oh! but look at my hair; it was that wind that blew it about.”

“You are labouring under a delusion, Julia. There was no wind.”

“But look—feel how my hair is down.”

“That has been done by the motion of the carriage. There are many ruts in the road.”

They reached home, and Julia, feeling sick, frightened, and bewildered, retired to bed. Dr. Crate arrived, said that she was hysterical, and ordered something to soothe her nerves. Julia was not convinced. The explanation offered by Miss Flemming did not satisfy her. That she was a victim to hysteria she did not in the least believe. Neither her aunt, nor the coachman, nor Phillips had heard the discharge of a gun. As to the rushing wind, Julia was satisfied that she had experienced it. The lace was ripped, as by a hand, from her dress, and the shawl was twisted about her throat; besides, her hair had not been so slightly arranged that the jolting of the carriage would completely disarrange it. She was vastly perplexed over what she had undergone. She thought and thought, but could get no nearer to a solution of the mystery.

Next day, as she was almost herself again, she rose and went about as usual.

In the afternoon the Hon. James Lawlor called and asked after Miss Flemming. The butler replied that his mistress was out making calls, but that Miss Demant was at home, and he believed was on the terrace. Mr. Lawlor at once asked to see her.

He did not find Julia in the parlour or on the terrace, but in a lower garden to which she had descended to feed the goldfish in the pond.

“Oh! Miss Demant,” said he, “I was so disappointed not to see you at the ball last night.”

“I was very unwell; I had a fainting fit and could not go.”

“It threw a damp on our spirits—that is to say, on mine. I had you booked for several dances.”

“You were able to give them to others.”

“But that was not the same to me. I did an act of charity and self-denial. I danced instead with the ugly Miss Burgons and with Miss Pounding, and that was like dragging about a sack of potatoes. I believe it would have been a jolly evening, but for that shocking affair of young Hattersley which kept some of the better sort away. I mean those who know the Hattersleys. Of course, for me that did not matter, we were not acquainted. I never even spoke with the fellow. You knew

him, I believe? I heard some people say so, and that you had not come because of him. The supper, for a subscription ball, was not atrociously bad.”

“What did they say of me?”

“Oh! —if you will know—that you did not attend the ball because you liked him very much, and were awfully cut up.”

“I—I! What a shame that people should talk! I never cared a rush for him. He was nice enough in his way, not a bounder, but tolerable as young men go.”

Mr. Lawlor laughed. “I should not relish to have such a qualified estimate made of me.”

“Nor need you. You are interesting. He became so only when he had shot himself. It will be by this alone that he will be remembered.”

“But there is no smoke without fire. Did he like you—much?”

“Dear Mr. Lawlor, I am not a clairvoyante, and never was able to see into the brains or hearts of people—least of all of young men. Perhaps it is fortunate for me that I cannot.”

“One lady told me that he had proposed to you.”

“Who was that? The potato-sack?”

“I will not give her name. Is there any truth in it? Did he?”

“No.”

At the moment she spoke there sounded in her ear a whistle of wind, and she felt a current like a cord of ice creep round her throat, increasing in force and compression, her hat was blown off, and next instant a detonation rang through her head as though a gun had been fired into her ear. She uttered a cry and sank upon the ground.

HER HAT WAS BLOWN OFF, AND NEXT INSTANT A DETONATION RANG THROUGH HER HEAD AS THOUGH A GUN HAD BEEN FIRED INTO HER EAR.

James Lawlor was bewildered. His first impulse was to run to the house for assistance; then he considered that he could not leave her lying on the wet soil, and he stooped to raise her in his arms and to carry her within. In novels young men perform such a feat without difficulty; but in fact they are not able to do it, especially when the girl is tall and big-boned. Moreover, one in a faint is a dead weight. Lawlor staggered under his burden to the steps. It was as much as he could perform to carry her up to the terrace, and there he placed her on a seat. Panting, and with his muscles quivering after the strain, he hastened to the drawing-room, rang the bell, and when the butler appeared, he gasped: “Miss Demant has fainted; you and I and the footman must carry her within.”

“She fainted last night in the carriage,” said the butler.

When Julia came to her senses, she was in bed attended by the housekeeper and her maid. A few moments later Miss Flemming arrived.

“Oh, aunt! I have heard it again.”

“Heard what, dear?”

“The discharge of a gun.”

“It is nothing but wax,” said the old lady. “I will drop a little sweet-oil into your ear, and then have it syringed with warm water.”

“I want to tell you something—in private.”

Miss Flemming signed to the servants to withdraw.

“Aunt,” said the girl, “I must say something. This is the second time that this has happened. I am sure it is significant. James Lawlor was with me in the sunken garden, and he began to speak about James Hattersley. You know it was when we were talking about him last night that I heard that awful noise. It was precisely as if a gun had been discharged into my ear. I felt as if all the nerves and tissues of my head were being torn, and all the bones of my skull shattered—just what Mr. Hattersley must have undergone when he pulled the trigger. It was an agony for a moment perhaps, but it felt as if it lasted an hour. Mr. Lawlor had asked me point blank if James Hattersley had proposed to me, and I said, ‘No.’ I was perfectly justified in so answering, because he had no right to ask me such a question. It was an impertinence on his part, and I answered him shortly and sharply with a negative. But actually James Hattersley proposed twice to me. He would not accept a first refusal, but came next day bothering me again, and I was pretty curt with him. He made some remarks that were rude about how I had treated him, and which I will not repeat, and as he left, in a state of great agitation, he said, ‘Julia, I vow that you shall not forget this, and you shall belong to no one but me, alive or dead.’ I considered this great nonsense, and did not accord it another thought. But, really, these terrible annoyances, this wind and the bursts of noise, do seem to me to come from him. It is just as though he felt a malignant delight in distressing me, now that he is dead. I should like to defy him, and I will do it if I can, but I cannot bear more of these experiences—they will kill me.”

Several days elapsed.

Mr. Lawlor called repeatedly to inquire, but a week passed before Julia was sufficiently recovered to receive him, and then the visit was one of courtesy and of sympathy, and the conversation turned upon her health, and on indifferent themes.

But some few days later it was otherwise. She was in the conservatory alone, pretty much herself again, when Mr. Lawlor was announced.

Physically she had recovered, or believed that she had, but her nerves had actually received a severe shock. She had made up her mind that the phenomena of the circling wind and the explosion were in some mysterious manner connected with Hattersley.

She bitterly resented this, but she was in mortal terror of a recurrence; and she felt no compunction for her treatment of the unfortunate young man, but rather a sense of deep resentment against him. If he were dead, why did he not lie quiet and cease from vexing her?

To be a martyr was to her no gratification, for hers was not a martyrdom that provoked sympathy, and which could make her interesting.

She had hitherto supposed that when a man died there was an end of him; his condition was determined for good or for ill. But that a disembodied spirit should hover about and make itself a nuisance to the living, had never entered into her calculations.

“Julia—if I may be allowed so to call you”—began Mr. Lawlor, “I have brought you a bouquet of flowers. Will you accept them?”

“Oh!” she said, as he handed the bunch to her, “how kind of you. At this time of the year they are so rare, and aunt’s gardener is so miserly that he will spare me none for my room but some miserable bits of geranium. It is too bad of you wasting your money like this upon me.”

“It is no waste, if it afford you pleasure.”

“It is a pleasure. I dearly love flowers.”

“To give you pleasure,” said Mr. Lawlor, “is the great object of my life. If I could assure you happiness—if you would allow me to hope—to seize this opportunity, now that we are alone together——”

He drew near and caught her hand. His features were agitated, his lips trembled, there was earnestness in his eyes.

At once a cold blast touched Julia and began to circle about her and to flutter her hair. She trembled and drew back. That paralysing experience was about to be renewed. She turned deadly white, and put her hand to her right ear. “Oh, James! James!” she gasped. “Do not, pray do not speak what you want to say, or I shall faint. It is coming on. I am not yet well enough to hear it. Write to me and I will answer. For pity’s sake do not speak it.” Then she sank upon a seat—and at that moment her aunt entered the conservatory.

On the following day a note was put into her hand, containing a formal proposal from the Hon. James Lawlor; and by return of post Julia answered with an acceptance.

There was no reason whatever why the engagement should be long; and the only alternative mooted was whether the wedding should take place before Lent or after Easter. Finally, it was

settled that it should be celebrated on Shrove Tuesday. This left a short time for the necessary preparations. Miss Flemming would have to go to town with her niece concerning a trousseau, and a trousseau is not turned out rapidly any more than an armed cruiser.

There is usually a certain period allowed to young people who have become engaged, to see much of each other, to get better acquainted with one another, to build their castles in the air, and to indulge in little passages of affection, vulgarly called “spooning.” But in this case the spooning had to be curtailed and postponed.

At the outset, when alone with James, Julia was nervous. She feared a recurrence of those phenomena that so affected her. But, although every now and then the wind curled and souged about her, it was not violent, nor was it chilling; and she came to regard it as a wail of discomfiture. Moreover, there was no recurrence of the detonation, and she fondly hoped that with her marriage the vexation would completely cease.

In her heart was deep down a sense of exultation. She was defying James Hattersley and setting his prediction at naught. She was not in love with Mr. Lawlor; she liked him, in her cold manner, and was not insensible to the social advantage that would be hers when she became the Honourable Mrs. Lawlor.

The day of the wedding arrived. Happily it was fine. “Blessed is the bride the sun shines on,” said the cheery Miss Flemming; “an omen, I trust, of a bright and unruffled life in your new condition.”

All the neighbourhood was present at the church. Miss Flemming had many friends. Mr. Lawlor had fewer present, as he belonged to a distant county. The church path had been laid with red cloth, the church decorated with flowers, and a choir was present to twitter “The voice that breathed o’er Eden.”

The rector stood by the altar, and two cushions had been laid at the chancel step. The rector was to be assisted by an uncle of the bridegroom who was in Holy Orders; the rector, being old-fashioned, had drawn on pale grey kid gloves.

First arrived the bridegroom with his best man, and stood in a nervous condition balancing himself first on one foot, then on the other, waiting, observed by all eyes.

Next entered the procession of the bride, attended by her maids, to the “Wedding March” in Lohengrin, on a wheezy organ. Then Julia and her intended took their places at the chancel step for the performance of the first portion of the ceremony, and the two clergy descended to them from the altar.

“Wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife?”

“I will.”

“Wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband?”

“I will.”

“I, James, take thee, Julia, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold——” and so on.

As the words were being spoken, a cold rush of air passed over the clasped hands, numbing them, and began to creep round the bride, and to flutter her veil. She set her lips and knitted her brows. In a few minutes she would be beyond the reach of these manifestations.

When it came to her turn to speak, she began firmly: “I, Julia, take thee, James——” but as she proceeded the wind became fierce; it raged about her, it caught her veil on one side and buffeted her cheek; it switched the veil about her throat, as though strangling her with a drift of snow contracting into ice. But she persevered to the end.

Then James Lawlor produced the ring, and was about to place it on her finger with the prescribed words: “With this ring I thee wed——” when a report rang in her ear, followed by a heaving of her skull, as though the bones were being burst asunder, and she sank unconscious on the chancel step.

In the midst of profound commotion, she was raised and conveyed to the vestry, followed by James Lawlor, trembling and pale. He had slipped the ring back into his waistcoat pocket. Dr. Crate, who was present, hastened to offer his professional assistance.

In the vestry Julia rested in a Glastonbury chair, white and still, with her hands resting in her lap. And to the amazement of those present, it was seen that on the third finger of her left hand was a leaden ring, rude and solid as though fashioned out of a bullet. Restoratives were applied, but full a quarter of an hour elapsed before Julia opened her eyes, and a little colour returned to her lips and cheek. But, as she raised her hands to her brow to wipe away the damps that had formed on it, her eye caught sight of the leaden ring, and with a cry of horror she sank again into insensibility.

The congregation slowly left the church, awestruck, whispering, asking questions, receiving no satisfactory answers, forming surmises all incorrect.

“I am very much afraid, Mr. Lawlor,” said the rector, “that it will be impossible to proceed with the service to-day; it must be postponed till Miss Demant is in a condition to conclude her part, and to sign the register. I do not see how it can be gone on with to-day. She is quite unequal to the effort.”

The carriage which was to have conveyed the couple to Miss Flemming’s house, and then, later, to have taken them to the station for their honeymoon, the horses decorated with white rosettes, the whip adorned with a white bow, had now to convey Julia, hardly conscious, supported by her aunt, to her home.

No rice could be thrown. The bell-ringers, prepared to give a joyous peal, were constrained to depart.

The reception at Miss Flemming's was postponed. No one thought of attending. The cakes, the ices, were consumed in the kitchen.

The bridegroom, bewildered, almost frantic, ran hither and thither, not knowing what to do, what to say.

Julia lay as a stone for fully two hours; and when she came to herself could not speak. When conscious, she raised her left hand, looked on the leaden ring, and sank back again into senselessness.

Not till late in the evening was she sufficiently recovered to speak, and then she begged her aunt, who had remained by her bed without stirring, to dismiss the attendants. She desired to speak with her alone. When no one was in the room with her, save Miss Flemming, she said in a whisper: "Oh, Aunt Elizabeth! Oh, auntie! such an awful thing has happened. I can never marry Mr. Lawlor, never. I have married James Hattersley; I am a dead man's wife. At the time that James Lawlor was making the responses, I heard a piping voice in my ear, an unearthly voice, saying the same words. When I said: 'I, Julia, take you, James, to my wedded husband'—you know Mr. Hattersley is James as well as Mr. Lawlor—then the words applied to him as much or as well as to the other. And then, when it came to the giving of the ring, there was the explosion in my ear, as before—and the leaden ring was forced on to my finger, and not James Lawlor's golden ring. It is of no use my resisting any more. I am a dead man's wife, and I cannot marry James Lawlor."

Some years have elapsed since that disastrous day and that incomplete marriage.

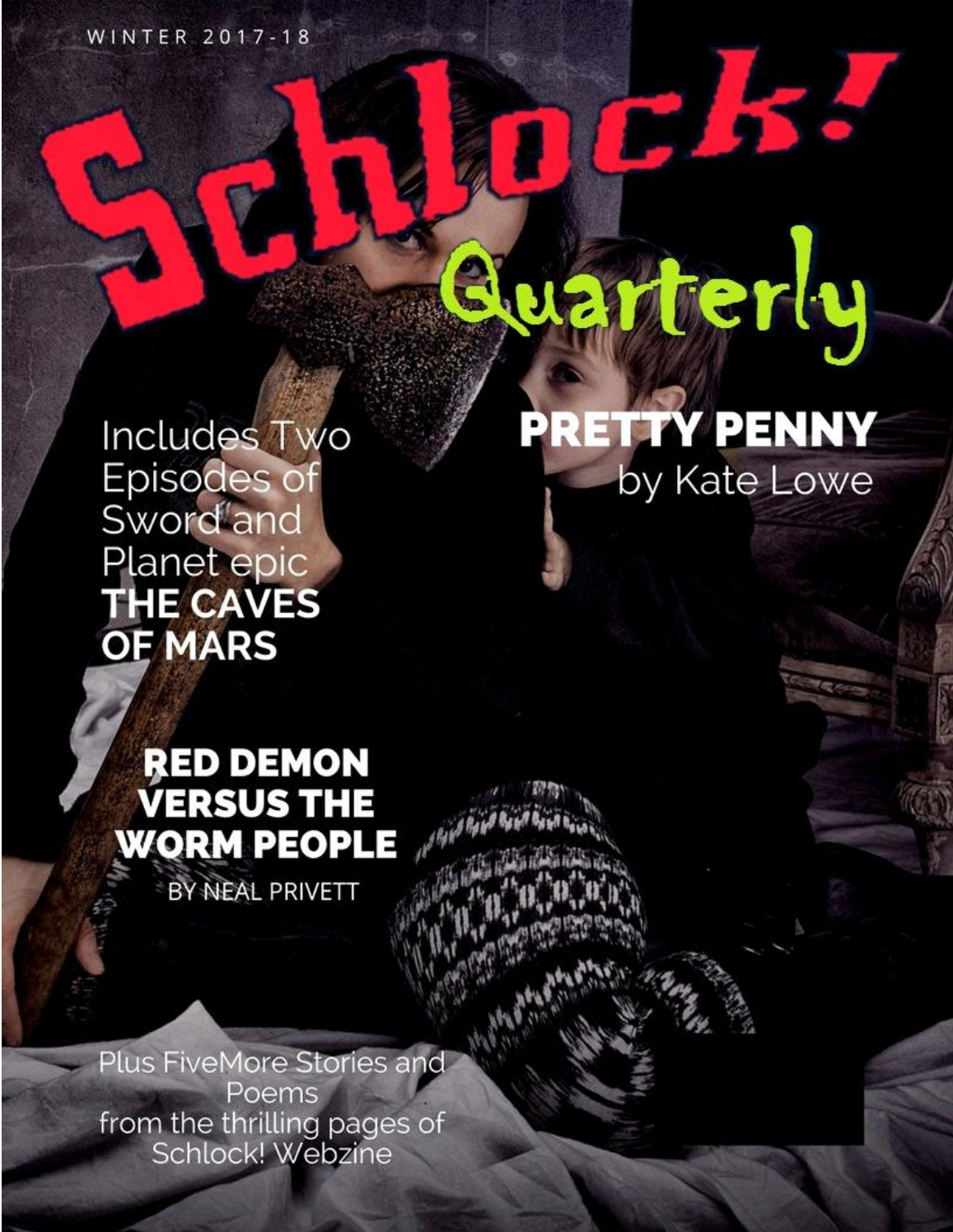
Miss Demant is Miss Demant still, and she has never been able to remove the leaden ring from the third finger of her left hand. Whenever the attempt has been made, either to disengage it by drawing it off or by cutting through it, there has ensued that terrifying discharge as of a gun into her ear, causing insensibility. The prostration that has followed, the terror it has inspired, have so affected her nerves, that she has desisted from every attempt to rid herself of the ring.

She invariably wears a glove on her left hand, and it is bulged over the third finger, where lies that leaden ring.

She is not a happy woman, although her aunt is dead and has left her a handsome estate. She has not got many acquaintances. She has no friends; for her temper is unamiable, and her tongue is bitter. She supposes that the world, as far as she knows it, is in league against her.

Towards the memory of James Hattersley she entertains a deadly hate. If an incantation could lay his spirit, if prayer could give him repose, she would have recourse to none of these expedients, even though they might relieve her, so bitter is her resentment. And she harbours a silent wrath against Providence for allowing the dead to walk and to molest the living.

THE END

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman and a young child. The woman is holding a large, dark axe over her face, and the child is looking over the axe. The scene is dimly lit, with a dark, textured background.

WINTER 2017-18

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THE GREY WOLF OF CHICAGO by Garret Schuelke

Part Four

Fold stumbled backwards, screaming. Godan rubbed his fist as he watched Fold wither on the ground. His rage grew.

One of the Assistants got to his feet and stumbled towards the truck.

“WHY DID YOU DO THIS?” Godan yelled. Fold got up and ran. He tripped and fell onto the minigun. The heat from the barrel burned the side of his face. He screamed, and pulled himself away.

A cop stood up and aimed his gun at them. “BOTH OF YOU, DOWN ON THE GROUND!” Godan glared at him and kept walking towards Fold.

“Jayme, get the fuck down!” another officer said, pulling Jayme to his knees. “Let them take each other out!”

“You’re gonna tell me why you did this,” Godan said, looking Fold directly in the eyes.

Fold glared back at him. “Fuck you, Grey Faggot!”

Godan grabbed Fold by the head, and slammed his face against the minimum.

The Assistant climbed into the driver’s seat. It started up the truck, and flipped a switch.

Godan pressed Folds head harder against the hot barrel. Fold frantically swatted his arms around. A loud whirling sound came from behind him, followed by a gust of wind. Godan turned his head and saw the truck, which now had a helicopter propeller sticking out of top of the trailer, lift itself off the ground.

“NO!” Godan yelled, letting go of Fold. He ran towards the truck and jumped, sinking his claws into the side of the trailer. The truck cleared the buildings and flew away.

Erie shot out of the alley. Two cops gave chase and tackled him.

“Where’s the truck going?” one of the officers yelled. The officer that tackled him pressed his knee into Erie’s back.

“GODDAMN, STOP!” Erie yelled. The officer pushed harder. “FUCK! THEY’RE GOING TO THE BACK OF THE YARDS!”

The cops looked at each other. “Rudkus Headquarters,” the officer said.

Upton cut off his psychic link with Fold. He got up and stretched.

“Well, are my new subjects on their way?” Mysta asked, tapping her foot.

Upton rolled his eyes. “Yes, your fucking corpses are on their way.” He muttered, ‘Christ.’

“And the Grey Wolf? Did your men get him?”

Upton smiled, and shook his head. “Nope, he hitched a ride on the truck. He’ll be here in a sec.”

Mysta sighed loudly. “Okay, what’re you going to do now?”

“Prepare for his arrival.” Upton looked at Sturgill. “Gather up everyone in the neighbourhood—shoot him up when he arrives.”

Sturgill nodded and left the room. Upton noticed Mysta stuffing files into a briefcase. “You don’t want to stick around for his?”

“Hell no!” Mysta opened up another drawer and grabbed a handful of flash drives. “I’m not going to risk neither my life nor my work in case he wastes you guys.”

Upton snickered. “So much for not having faith in your ‘creations’.”

Mysta opened another briefcase and started putting files into it. “Maybe if your boys weren’t scared of getting at least one enhancement they might be able to defend themselves. You’re dealing with a high-class superhuman!”

Upton snorted, and walked up to the monitors.

“I’ll just say this once,” Mysta closed the case, “you should leave with me. You’re—”

“I’M NOT LEAVING ALL THIS BEHIND!” Upton yelled.

Mysta glared. “Your body isn’t close to being ready to fight someone like the Grey Wolf.”

Upton put his fist through one of the screens. He pulled his arm back and examined it. “I’m good.” he said, showing Mysta his undamaged skin.

Mysta shook her head. “Fucking dumbass.”

“What you say, bitch?”

Mysta closed the briefcase. “Fine, but whatever you do, DON’T transform. You do that, you’re absolutely fucked.”

“I won’t need to do that shit,” Upton said. Mysta shook her head again and walked out of the room.

Don’t look down, Godan repeatedly thought as he freed his other claw. He looked to the side and saw the top of the buildings that were passing by. His heart skipped. Shouldn’t have looked that way either, he thought. He took a deep breath, and leapt onto the step.

“LAND THIS THING NOW, ASSHOLE!” he yelled. Godan then realized that the window was closed. He cursed, and punched through it.

The Assistant turned the wheel sharply. Godan held onto the window frame and drivers side mirror. The Assistant suddenly turned the truck upwards. Godan heard bumping. He looked to the side and saw bodies falling out of the truck. His eyes widened.

“GO DOWN! GO DOWN!” he yelled. The Assistant ignored him. Godan put his hand through, grabbed the wheel, and pushed it down.

“DO NOT INTERFERE,” the Assistant said, aiming his pistol at Godan’s face.

“Shit,” Godan muttered. The Assistant began firing. Godan crouched down, hanging onto the mirror. He waited until the Assistant stopped firing, then he shot up and grabbed the gun.

“LAND,” Godan threw the gun away, “NOW!”

“WE ARE NOT AT THE BASE YET.” the Assistant replied.

Godan punched the Assistant in the face. He tried to scooch away. Godan grabbed the hazmat mask and yanked it off. Godan recoiled as he looked upon the Assistants rotting, semi-fleshless face. His stomach rumbled when the stench hit him.

Sturgill spotted the truck above them. He adjusted his eyes to zoom in on it. He saw Godan toss away the mask and begin punching through the window.

He looked towards a nearby building. “Shoot him down!” he yelled.

A sniper took aim, and fired three times. Godan felt the bullets enter his back. He screamed, and his grip loosened. His claws scraped the door as he fell off.

“Please don’t turn to dust,” Godan said, thinking of his leg bones as he adjusted himself to land.

“Enforcers, you’re around me,” Sturgill said as he watched Godan fall. The three Enforcers surrounded him. “Everyone else, make sure you’re loaded!”

“You’ve fell off buildings before!” Godan said. He saw the ground coming up. “Okay, this is really gonna sting.”

Godan smashed into the street, sending dust and dirt everywhere. The Rudkuses began to move in. Sturgill told them to hold their fire until he said so. A gust of wind cleared the dust away, revealing Godan, down on both knees, hands clasped.

Sturgill stepped onto a crate. He watched Godan remain still for a few seconds.

“HEY, PUNK!” Sturgill yelled. “YOU PRAYING TO THE LORD, OR WHAT?”

“No,” Godan stood up, his legs shaking, “but I can you would see why would think that.”

Sturgill jabbed his finger towards Godan. “FIRE!”

The truck landed. Mysta ran to the passenger’s side and begin loading her supplies into the backseat. Upton stood in the doorway, arms crossed.

“I still can’t believe you’re backing out,” he said as Mysta passed by him.

She glanced at the monitors showing security cam footage of Godan tearing through the Rudkuses. She groaned, picked up the last of her research, and ran again to the truck. “Last chance, Up, come with us.”

Upton glared at her, turned around and shut the door. Mysta cursed, got into the truck, and slammed the door.

“Bring me to my Chinatown lab,” she said, fastening her seat belt. She noticed that the glove compartment was open. The compartment light revealed a case containing Alkaline Radicals. Her anger diminished.

“Put us back in normal mode,” Mysta said, taking out the case, “and head over to the battlefield.”

The Assistant nodded, did so, and drove away.

The Rudkus fell to his knees. Godan brought his elbow down onto his head, knocking him out. Godan looked past the fallen gangbangers directly at Sturgill and his enforcers. A shot rang out, and a bullet entered Godan’s butt cheek. Godan yelped, turned around, and glared at the Rudkus who had sniped him.

“FUCK!” the Rudkus said, dropping his rifle and running to the other side of the roof towards the ladder. Godan roared, and jumped onto the building. Sturgill ordered his Enforcers to inject themselves with Alkaline Radicals. He called for backup as he saw the rooftop Rudkus be thrown through the air.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Godan yelled, rubbing his cheek. He heard a thud behind him, and the roof shook. He turned around and saw one of Sturgill’s Enforcers, powered up by the Alkaline Radicals, running at him. Godan guarded himself as the Enforcer punched him, sending him flying into a chimney. He went through, and another Enforcer appeared, took a hold of him, and threw him off the roof. Godan opened his eyes and saw the third Enforcer, mid-air and grinning. He punched Godan into the side of the building.

Mysta and the Assistant pulled up. She watched as Godan hastily stood up as the enforcers surrounded him.

“God, I wish I could have had him under my control instead,” she said as she watched Godan slash at the Enforcers. She smiled, and handed the Assistant a syringe. “Get out there, wait until you get a chance,” she paused, and cooed as she watched Godan kick an Enforcer in the groin, “then inject him with this. You got that?”

The Assistant nodded, got out, and ran behind a nearby lamp post. Mysta moved over to the driver’s side and re-engaged the flight mode.

Godan threw a punch at the Enforcer, who dodged it. He grabbed Godan’s arm and smashed him repeatedly into the pavement. The Enforcer heard the other two yell for him. He nodded, swung Godan around, and let go. The two Enforcers punched Godan at the same time, sending him down the street, where he skid to a stop.

“GO!” Mysta yelled. The Assistant ran out into the open.

“Hey, who the fuck is that?” Sturgill yelled.

The Assistant bent down and injected the Alkaline Radicals into Godan’s neck. Godan immediately woke up. A warm feeling went through his body.

“That’s one ugly motherfucker,” one of Enforcers said.

The other Enforcer turned around. “I think that’s one of those zombie things Upton told us about!” he yelled at Sturgill.

Sturgill looked around and saw the truck, partially illuminated by the street light. Mysta waved at him.

“That fucking bitch!” Sturgill said.

Godan stood up, feeling himself become filled with energy. He took a deep breath. His heart suddenly began to beat uncontrollably. The energy he felt became replaced with pain. He bent down, clenched his fists, and screamed as he felt his muscles bulge.

“GO! GO NOW!” Sturgill yelled. “TAKE HIM DOWN!”

Two of the Enforcers ran towards Godan. “What’s going on?” the Enforcer that stayed put asked.

“HE WAS INJECTED WITH RADICALS!” Sturgill pointed at Godan. “GO, DUMBASS!”

Godan looked up, and saw the Assistant backing away. Haruki flashed through his mind. He growled, and leapt at him. The Assistant put his hands up. Godan grabbed them, kicked the Assistant in the chest, and pulled back, ripping his arms off. He stumbled back, fluid spraying everywhere, and fell to the ground. Godan threw the arms away, ran up, and stomped the Assistant’s head to mush.

Mysta whistled, and began taking off. Godan turned around and saw the truck.

“NO!” he yelled, leaping into the air, claws extended.

One of the Enforcers shot his tentacle at Godan, wrapping it around his legs. He slammed Godan into the pavement, retracted him back, and put him into a bear hug.

“TAKE HIM OUT!” he yelled. The other Enforcer nodded, and each wound up his fist.

Godan growled. He kicked the Enforcer’s knee cap, shattering it. The Enforcer screamed, releasing him. Godan raised his claws, turned around, and swiped the Enforcers face. Flesh, blood, and skull fragments flew as the enforcer collapsed.

“WE GOTTA GO!” the Enforcer who stayed behind yelled, grabbing onto Sturgill’s arm and began dragging him away.

Sturgill pulled himself away. “NO, WE’RE ENDING THIS NOW!”

They heard another scream. They turned around and saw that Godan had put the Enforcer in a head lock.

“We’ll get him later when the Radicals burn out of his system!” the enforcer said.

“Are you fucking joking?” Sturgill yelled “Use that goddamn tentacle of yours!” He took out his phone. “I gotta call reinforcements!”

Godan hammer fisted the top of the enforcer’s skull, smashing it open. He released him and looked at his blood-soaked fist. His vision distorted. He cringed as pain shot through his body.

The final Enforcer shot his tentacle at Godan. He wrapped it around Godan’s face and, feeling relieved, started squeezing. “Let’s see how you like your head being crushed!” he said, putting on more pressure.

Godan grabbed the tentacle and crushed the metal, disconnecting it from the Enforcer.

“Fuck, fuck—” the Enforcer mumbled, trying to regain control.

Godan grabbed the tentacle with both hands and yanked it. The Enforcer flew towards him. Godan let go of the tentacle, ran at the enforcer, and grabbed him by the throat.

“Please, stop!” the enforcer yelled. “I have a—”

Godan crushed the Enforcer’s throat. He looked over and saw Sturgill running away. He dropped the Enforcer and ran after him.

“Mysta,” Upton growled, minimizing the feed and opening the commands folder. “I’ll beat you to death in front of everyone after this!” He found the command he was looking for and looked up at the feed. He switched between cameras. “Just have to get him close enough to one of the houses.” He stopped swapping when he saw Sturgill enter his house and lock the door.

Godan appeared, sniffed the air, look towards the house that Sturgill just entered, and rammed himself into the door.

“Perfect,” Upton said, hitting the destruct command.

Sturgill unloading his pistol into Godan, who was laid out on top of the door. The gun began to click. Godan slapped his hands on the floor, and pushed himself up. He glared at Sturgill and growled. Sturgill dropped the gun and ran down the hall. He got to the side door and unlocked it.

The house, along with the other homes on the block, exploded.

The Rudkuses slowly made their way down the street. Some were calm, facing ahead, guns at the ready. Other were aghast, looking at the destruction around them and talking amongst each other.

They spotted a large group of Chicago Police officers heading their way. The ones up front shouted “PIGS!” The cops heard them, and spread out. The Rudkuses did the same, and began firing.

Down in the basement of one of the destroyed houses, an android freed itself from the rubble. It stood up, refreshed its program, and scanned the lab. Suddenly, a new protocol was initiated. It pulled a lever next to a door. It did not work. The android bent down, forced its hands underneath the door, and pushed it up.

It entered a room filled with pods. It attempted to input a command into the computer that would have opened all the pods at once. It did not work. The android smashed the computer, then went around and tore the door off each pod. Bodies fell out—some squirmed, other remained still. When the final subject was released, the android walked back across the lab, kicking each one until they awoke.

Some immediately became alert, demanding to know where they were. Others were groggy and had to be helped up. The android clapped its hands until it everyone's attention. It motioned to them to follow, and the subjects did so.

Some of them asked where they were going. Others asked why the lab was in the condition it was in, or what the loud sounds above them were. The android ignored them. It let them to the entrance to the basement. It cleared away the debris and tried to open it. The door refused to budge.

The sound of a huge explosion sent the subjects into a panic. The android began smashing into the door. Another explosion sent the subjects into a more violent panic. One of them yelled for everyone to get out his way. The group parted, and the android moved to the side. The subject raised his hand. He created an energy ball in front of his palm. The energy spread until it covered his entire arm. The subject yelled, sending a blast through the door.

The Rudkuses and the cops stopped fighting as the energy blast ripped through the ground. The Rudkuses then began firing at the cops again. The subjects began pouring out of the basement lab—some flying, some running straight through the firefight, other making giant leaps over it all.

The android waited until all the subjects were gone. It calmly walked up the stairs and stood in the doorway, watching the subjects disappear. It observed the ongoing battle, smiled, initiated its jetpack, and flew away.

A bloody claw burst through the rubble of the house. It shook violently, and then collapsed onto the wood and shingles.

Upton scanned through the feeds. All were down. "Better got take a closer look, he said. He went into the closet and retrieved a jet pack. He exited the lab, locked it, and flew off.

He initiated his night vision as he came upon the firefight. He saw more cop cars, including SWAT vehicles, enter the scene. He looked over at the remaining Rudkuses hiding behind the rubble as the cops closed in on them.

He shook his head. "All the power in the world, and they still can't smoke some pigs. So much for—"

Out of the corner of his eye, Upton saw the smoking crater where the subjects escaped. He saw somebody crawling away. He zoomed in, and grinned.

"Thank you, Lord," He said. He unleashed his tentacle, and flew down.

Godan, his clothes torn to shreds, covered in blood, slowly crawled away from the house. He felt something grab him by the legs. He tensed up, and closed his eyes.

“I AM SO FUCKING HAPPY RIGHT NOW!” Upton yelled, flying into the sky.

Godan opened his eyes. He relaxed as he saw the neighbourhood get farther away. They started to descend. Upton threw Godan towards the ground.

Godan landed on a pitcher’s mound in Davis Square Park. Upton landed. “I told my men to bring you in alive.” He took off his jetpack and gently placed it on the grass. “Though I was pretty sure Sturgill was gonna waste you there—and I don’t blame him for wanting to.”

Godan stood up. Upton walked up and looked directly into his eyes. “Aren’t Alkaline Radicals great? Super strength, super speed,” he grinned “super rage—it’s probably why you were able to crawl away from that blast.” Upton took out a metal case and opened it, revealing syringes. “Want another shot? Put us on a more even level?”

Godan stared at him, breathing heavily. Upton waved the case in front of his face.

“All right, then.” Upton took out a syringe, uncapped it, and injected the Radicals. He tossed away the syringe, and took a deep breath. His muscles bulged slightly. He smiled, relaxed, and put away the case. “Last year, you pretty much wrecked me in that alley back in Lakeview.”

Upton saw Godan grin. “Glad I brought back some good memories. We dug up as much info on you as we can. I thought you were part of one of our rivals, who had somehow gained abilities of their own. We couldn’t find nothing.”

“I’m one big question mark,” Godan said.

Upton held up a finger. “You gave us all the info we needed, you know, when you started robbing my men. I was sure it was you, even with the shitty descriptions I was given. But you fucked up earlier tonight by showing your face, Grey Wolf.”

Godan’s anger rose. He clenched his fists and glared.

“What’s up with you?” Upton asked.

“It’s Godan, not Grey Wolf.”

Upton burst out laughing. “What the fuck is a ‘Godan’? Look at you,” he pointed at Godan’s claws, “Grey Wolf is more accurate.” He then pointed at Godan’s hair. “Is that dyed?”

Godan began to growl.

“Oh, is this some kind of fresh start for you, or something? Being the Grey Wolf is what got all those people killed earlier.”

Godan took a swipe at him. Upton backed away. Godan took another swipe, tearing Upton’s

shirt.

“Okay, maybe I should take this off.” Upton ripped off his shirt. He grunted, and three more tentacles came out of his back.

Godan charged at him. Upton lashed a tentacle at him. Godan slid underneath it, and kicked Upton in the stomach, sending him flying.

I felt that, Upton thought, rolling on the grass before he composed himself. I haven’t felt a hit since the surgeries.

Godan went after him. Upton shot his tentacles at him. Godan avoided them all and threw a punch at Upton. Upton blocked it, and swung back. They traded blows. Godan took another swipe at him. His claws dug into Upton’s chest. He felt himself scrape against something metallic.

Upton pushed Godan away. He looked at the gashes on his chest. His rage grew. “YOU GRAY BASTARD!” He wrapped his tentacles around Godan’s arms and legs. “YOU’RE NOT GONNA TEAR ME UP LIKE YOU DID NELSON!”

Upton slammed Godan into a dugout, causing it to collapse. He lifted Godan into the air and smashed him into the rubble. He continued doing so until he felt himself lose the connection with two of his tentacles. He looked closely, and saw that Godan has crushed the two tentacles that had ensnared his arms.

Upton yelled, and tried to smash Godan into the rubble again. Godan slashed at the tentacles around his feet, freeing himself. He landed, and shot towards Upton. Up ahead, he saw a light pole and got an idea.

Upton kicked at him. Godan jumped over Upton, grabbed his tentacles, and dragged him over to the light pole. Upton skidded against the ground. Godan slammed him against the pole, and, using his own tentacles, tied Upton against it.

“Oh, fuck you!” Upton yelled as he struggled. Godan walked away, took a deep breath, and wiped his forehead with his shirt. “Stop fighting me like a bitch, you cocksucker!”

Godan growled. Upton continued to rant. He walked up to Upton and glared at him.

Upton became still. “What?”

“I hate that word, ‘cocksucker’.” Godan walked behind Upton. “My Dad used to call me that. What you just said was pretty much what he said the last time I fought him.”

“Man, I don’t give a shit about your fucking—”

Godan sliced off a piece of Upton’s tentacle and wrapped it around his neck. “This is what he

used to do to me before I got my powers.”

Godan put his foot into Upton’s back and pressed hard. Upton ceased breathing. He tried to break free of his tentacles, but his arms barely moved. He then remembered his transformation, along with Mysta’s warning. He tried again to free himself. Godan pushed harder, making him smash the back of his head against the pole.

Fuck it! Upton thought. He initiated the transformation. He felt the metal plates begin to move. The energy he gathered underneath in his palms began to burn his skin.

“DIE!” Godan yelled, pulling back as hard as he could.

Nausea washed over Upton. He unleashed the energy that he had built up into the ground. The blast sent Godan flying back and freed Upton, who immediately fell to his knees. Why didn’t it open? Upton thought, looking at the bloody holes in his palms that the energy blasts came out of. Pain shot through him, and he began to scream.

Godan sat up. He watched the smoke clear, and saw Upton on the ground, shaking violently, holding himself.

Metal plates begin to emerge from Upton’s skin. The flesh tore off, and fell to the ground. Blood began to rapidly pool around Upton as more plates emerged.

“Holy shit!” Godan said, standing up.

Upton held his head and screamed even louder. He felt his flesh tear away from his face, and saw it drop onto the grass, along with his hair. Everything then went dark. His vision returned, and he saw his eyeballs roll on the ground.

“Ugh,” Godan said, getting into a battle stance. “What did he do to himself?”

The unbearable pain became a throb. Upton touched his face. He felt how smooth it was. He felt his eyes and found square slits. He pulled his hand back and saw that they were metallic.

“YO!” Godan yelled. “You okay there, buddy?”

Upton began charging his energy.

“Yep, you’re good, I guess.” Godan said, shrugging. He ran towards Upton.

Upton turned around, put his arms together, and fired. Godan’s eyes widened. He sidestepped the blast at the last second, and attacked. They traded blows. Godan’s claws scraped against Upton’s plates, causing sparks. Upton shot small, quick energy blasts at Godan, sometime hitting him, sometimes not.

Neither slowed down.

A police helicopter appeared overhead. It swooped in, shining its spotlight, and ordering them to get on the ground. Godan took another swipe. His claws went into the space between Upton's plates. He pulled back, tearing the place off, along with some flesh. Upton backed away, immediately covering the wound with his hand.

Godan examined the plate. He got an idea.

Upton grabbed him by the throat and held him up. He put his hand up to Godan's chest. "DIE!" he yelled, blasting him.

Godan flew into the helicopter. The pilot regained control, and the officers aimed their automatic weapons at him.

"You have bigger scumbags you could aiming your weapons at, pigs!" Godan said, standing up.

One of them told Godan to get back on the floor. Godan saw Upton appear, jetpack strapped to himself, charging up a blast.

"BEHIND YOU!" Godan yelled, pointing. The cops turned around. Godan grabbed the assault rifles out of one of the cop's hands and jumped out of the helicopter as Upton fired.

Godan landed, positioned himself on one knee, took aim, and fired at Upton. Upton recoiled at the force of the bullets. The helicopter began to swerve as the fire within grew. Godan shot the jetpack, causing it to explode. Upton fell to the ground.

"HOW DID YOU DO THAT?" Upton screamed, trying to stand up. He ripped off the burning jetpack and threw it off to the side.

"Having a Neo-Nazi survivalist for a dad taught me a lot of things." Godan said as he stood up and tossed the gun to the side. "The main thing I learned from him:" he flexed his claws, "brutality works!"

Godan disappeared. He reappeared behind Upton and dug his claws into his back. He took a hold of two plates, and tore them out. Upton screamed. Godan began rapidly tearing the plates off Upton's body. Blood splattered both of them. Upton tried to blast him. Godan avoided it, and continued ripping off the plates.

The pilot succumbed to the fire. The helicopter began to descend near the end of the field.

Godan grabbed Upton's face plate. Upton grabbed his arms, and tried to push him away. Godan kicked Upton in the chest. The force of the blow allowed him to rip it off. Upton screamed. Godan threw the face plate to the side.

Upton initiated the thrusters in his feet. His soles exploded, and he flew at Godan. He grabbed a hold of him and flew them towards at the end of the field. He landed on top of him. Godan saw

the helicopter coming down on top of them, and started panicking. Upton pressed both palms to Godan's chest and blasted him with energy.

Godan screamed. He remembered Haruki pulling his mask on his face, telling him to save them.

Godan grabbed Upton's arms and pushed them away. He head butted Upton, rolled to the side, and sped away. The helicopter crashed and exploded, sending a wave of heat and debris against his back. He jumped over the destroyed dugout and ran off into the night.

Mysta was on the nightly news, telling the reporter that she was going to purchase the land that the Rudkuses had took over, and would proceed to build a research facility that would assist both the people who resided within the Back of the Yards, and all residents of Chicago.

Lana hugged Salt Chunk Mary harder and cried louder. Gareth heard Lana and made himself stop crying. He held up his head, allowing the water to wash over him again. He turned off the shower and got out. He dried himself off and wrapped the towel around his waist. He felt something on his foot. Tucker's mask had fallen to the floor. He peeled it off his foot and walked out.

The news began to run the police cam footage of the superhuman subjects escaping the underground lab. Lana looked up as Gareth stood behind the couch, watching it. She got up and embraced him, burying her face into his chest.

"I swear, I'll find Tucker and Haruki," Gareth said, embracing Lana. Tucker's mask stuck to the back of her shirt. He looked away from the television and at the red faced Salt Chunk Mary. "I'm gonna bring them back."

Another year had passed.

Another summer nearly finished.

Godan sat on the ledge of the building, looking over Bridgeport. He closed his eyes, and enjoyed the breeze. His phone rang. He saw that it was Lana, and answered.

"Yo, yo," he said.

"Hey, are you in the neighbourhood?" Lana asked.

Godan stood up. "Yep, just chilling on a rooftop."

"I'm at Marty's. Come over, I got something to show you."

“Okay, see ya in a sec.”

Godan hung up. He jumped over into a nearby alley, depowered, took off his mask, and walked down the street. Another breeze hit him. Bridgeport is beautiful in the summer, he thought.

He waited for the crossing light to change, and walked up to Lana.

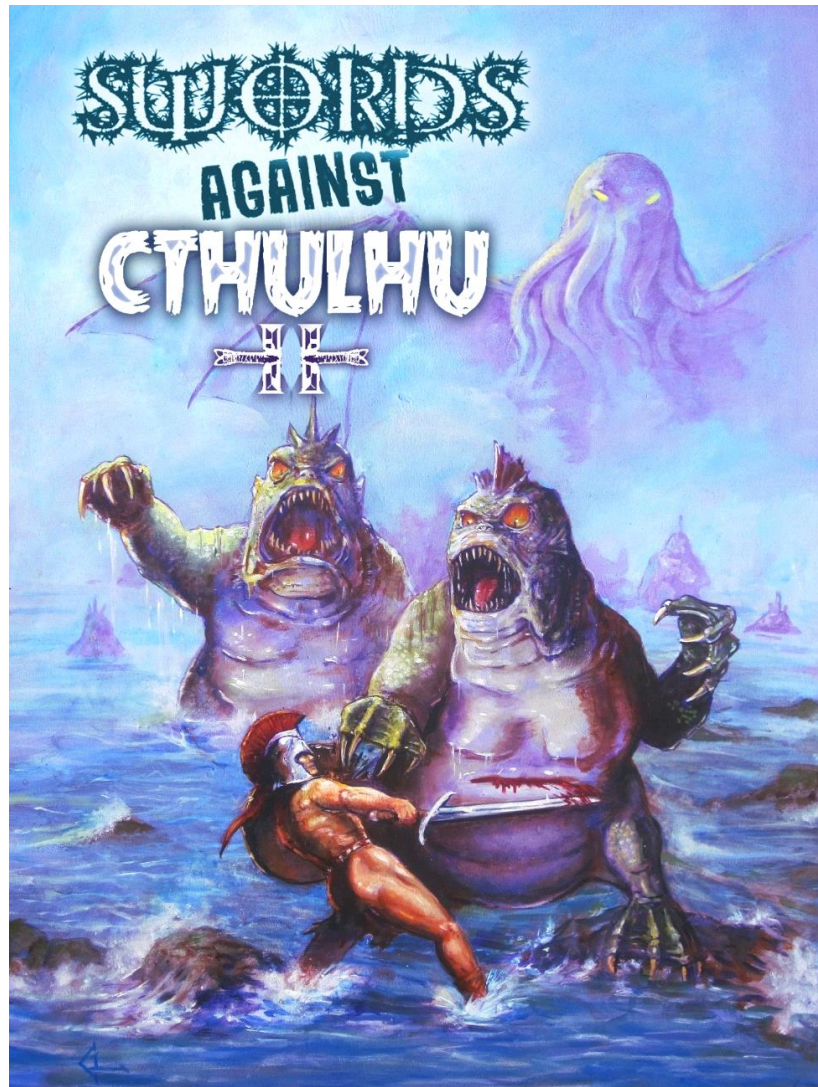
“Hey, what’s up?” he asked. “You wanna face me in another drinking contest?”

Lana shook her head. “Hell no, I would never win.” She pushed her phone in his face. “This story just showed up on my feed. I remembered that you’re from Alpena, and with your powers and all, thought you would be interested in this.”

Gareth took hold of the phone. He read the story from the Detroit Free Press, reporting on what witnesses were claiming were attacks perpetrated by “werewolves” in Alpena County.

THE END

A NEW CARTER WARD STORY BEGINS NEXT WEEK: THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE!



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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter VI—An Official Visit.

At this point of our conversation an ambâ entered the room and made certain signs which my host immediately understood.

“The Zamptâ,” he said, “has called upon me, evidently on your account, and probably with some message from his Suzerain. You need not be afraid,” he added. “At worst they would only refuse you protection, and I could secure you from danger under my own roof, and in the last extremity effect your retreat and return to your own planet; supposing for a moment,” he added, smiling, “that you are a real being and come from a real world.”

The Regent of that dominion, the only Martialist outside my host’s family with whom I had yet been able to converse, awaited us in the hall or entrance chamber. I bowed low to him, and then remained standing. My host, also saluting his visitor, at once took his seat. The Regent, returning the salute and seating himself, proceeded to address us; very little ceremony on either side being observed between this autocratic deputy of an absolute Sovereign and his subjects.

“Esmo dent Ecasfen” said the Regent, “will you point out the person you declare yourself to have rescued from assault and received into your house on the 431st day of this year?”

“That is the person, Regent,” said my host, pointing to me.

The visitor then asked my name, which I gave, and addressing me thereby, he continued—

“The Camptâ has requested me to ascertain the truth regarding your alleged size, so far exceeding anything hitherto known among us. You will permit me, therefore, to measure your height and girth.”

I bowed, and he proceeded to ascertain that I was about a foot taller and some ten inches larger round the waist than himself. Of these facts he took note, and then proceeded—

“The signs you made to those who first encountered you were understood to mean that you descended from the sky, in a vessel which is now left on the summit of yonder mountain, Asnyca.”

“I did not descend from the sky,” I replied, “for the sky is, as we both know, no actual vault or boundary of the atmospheric depths. I ascended from a world nearer to the Sun, and after travelling for forty days through space, landed upon this planet in the vessel you mention.”

“I am directed,” he answered, “to see this vessel, to inspect your machinery and instruments, and to report thereon to the Suzerain. You will doubtless be ready to accompany me thither to-morrow two hours after sunrise. You may be accompanied, if you please, by your host or any members of his family; I shall be attended by one or more of my officers. In the meantime I am to inform you that, until my report has been received and considered, you are under the

protection of the law, and need not apprehend any molestation of the kind you incurred at first. You will not, however, repeat to anyone but myself the explanation you have offered of your appearance—which, I understand, has been given in fuller detail to Esmo—until the decision of the Camptâ shall have been communicated to you.”

I simply bowed my assent; and after this brief but sufficient fulfilment of the purpose for which he had called, the Regent took his leave.

“What,” I asked, when we re-entered my chamber, “is the meaning of the title by which the Regent addressed you?”

“In speaking to officials,” he replied, “of rank so high as his, it is customary to address them simply by their titles, unless more than one of the same rank be present, in which case we call them, as we do inferior officials, by their name with the title appended. For instance, in the Court of the Sovereign our Regent would be called Endo Zamptâ. Men of a certain age and social position, but having no office, are addressed by their name and that of their residence; and, *asfe* meaning a town or dwelling, usage gives me the name of Esmo, in or of the town of Eca.

“I am sorry,” he went on, “that neither my son nor myself can accompany you to-morrow. All the elder members of my family are engaged to attend at some distance hence before the hour at which you can return. But I should not like you to be alone with strangers; and, independently of this consideration, I should perhaps have asked of you a somewhat unusual favour. My daughter Eveena, who, like most of our women” (he laid a special emphasis on the pronoun) “has received a better education than is now given in the public academies, has been from the first greatly interested in your narrative and in all you have told us of the world from which you come. She is anxious to see your vessel, and I had hoped to take her when I meant to visit it in your company. But after to-morrow I cannot tell when you may be summoned to visit the Camptâ, or whether after that visit you are likely to return hither. I will ask you, therefore, if you do not object to what I confess is an unusual proceeding, to take Eveena under your charge to-morrow.”

“Is it,” I inquired, “permissible for a young lady to accompany a stranger on such an excursion?”

“It is very unusual,” returned my host; “but you must observe that here family ties are, as a rule, unknown. It cannot be usual for a maiden to be attended by father or brother, since she knows neither. It is only by a husband that a girl can, as a rule, be attended abroad. Our usages render such attendance exceedingly close, and, on the other hand, forbid strangers to interrupt or take notice thereof. In Eveena’s presence the Regent will find it difficult to draw you into conversation which might be inconvenient or dangerous; and especially cannot attempt to gratify, by questioning you, any curiosity as to myself or my family.”

“But,” I said, “from what you say, it seems that the Regent and anyone who might accompany him would draw inferences which might not be agreeable to you or to the young lady.”

“I hardly understand you,” he replied. “The only conjecture they could make, which they will certainly make, is that you are, or are about to be, married to her; and as they will never see her again, and, if they did, could not recognise her—as they will not to-morrow know anything save

that she belongs to my household, and certainly will not speak to her—I do not see how their inference can affect her. When I part with her, it will be to some one of my own customs and opinions; and to us this close confinement of girls appears to transcend reasonable restraint, as it contradicts the theoretical freedom and equality granted by law to the sex, but utterly withheld by the social usages which have grown out of that law.”

“I can only thank you for giving me a companion more agreeable than the official who is to report upon my reality,” I said.

“I do not desire,” he continued, “to bind you to any reserve in replying to questions, beyond what I am sure you will do without a pledge—namely, to avoid betraying more than you can help of that which is not known outside my own household. But on this subject I may be able to speak more fully after to-morrow. Now, if you will come into the peristyle, we shall be in time for the evening meal.”

Eveena’s curiosity had in nowise overcome her silent shyness. She might possibly have completed her tenth year, which epoch in the life of Mars is about equivalent to the seventeenth birthday of a damsel nurtured in North-Western Europe. I hardly think that I had addressed her directly half-a-dozen times, or had received from her a dozen words in return. I had been attracted, nevertheless, not only by her grace and beauty, but by the peculiar sweetness of her voice and the gentleness of her manner and bearing when engaged in pacifying dispute or difficulty among the children, and particularly in dealing with the half-deformed spoilt infant of which I have spoken. This evening that little brat was more than usually exasperating, and having exhausted the patience or repelled the company of all the rest, found itself alone, and set up a fretful, continuous scream, disagreeable even to me, and torturing to Martial ears, which, adapted to hear in that thin air, are painfully alive to strident, harsh, or even loud sounds. Instantly obeying a sign from her mother, Eveena rose in the middle of a conversation to which she had listened with evident interest, and devoted herself for half-an-hour to please and pacify this uncomfortable child. The character and appearance of this infant, so utterly unlike all its companions, had already excited my curiosity, but I had found no opportunity of asking a question without risking an impertinence. On this occasion, however, I ventured to make some remark on the extreme gentleness and forbearance with which not only Eveena but the children treated their peevish and exacting brother.

“He is no brother of theirs,” said Zulte, the mistress of the house. “You would hardly find in any family like ours a child with so irritable a temper or a disposition so selfish, and nowhere a creature so hardly treated by Nature in body as well as mind.”

“Indeed,” I said, hardly understanding her answer.

“No,” said my host. “It is the rule to deprive of life, promptly and painlessly, children to whom, from physical deformity or defect, life is thought unlikely to be pleasant, and whose descendants might be a burden to the public and a cause of physical deterioration to the race. It is, however, one of the exceptional tenets to which I have been obliged to allude, that man should not seek to be wiser than Nature; and that life should neither be cut short, except as a punishment for great crimes, nor prolonged artificially contrary to the manifest intention, or, as our philosophers

would say, the common course of Nature. Those who think with me, therefore, always endeavour, when we hear in time of their approaching fate, to preserve children so doomed. Precautions against undue haste or readiness to destroy lives that might, after all, grow up to health and vigour are provided by law. No single physician or physiologist can sign a death-warrant; and I, though no longer a physician by craft, am among the arbiters, one or more of whom must be called in to approve or suspend the decision. On these occasions I have rescued from extinction several children of whose unfitness to live, according to the standard of the State Nurseries, there was no question, and placed them in families, mostly childless, that were willing to receive them. Of this one it was our turn to take charge; and certainly his chance is better for being brought up among other children, and under the influence of their gentler dispositions and less exacting temperaments.”

“And is such ill-temper and selfishness,” I asked, “generally found among the deformed?”

“I don’t think,” replied Esmo, “that this child is much worse than most of my neighbours’ children, except that physical discomfort makes him fretful. What you call selfishness in him is only the natural inheritance derived from an ancestry who for some hundred generations have certainly never cared for anything or anyone but themselves. I thought I had explained to you by what train of circumstances and of reasoning family affection, such as it is reputed to have been thousands of years ago, has become extinct in this planet; and, family affection extinguished, all weaker sentiments of regard for others were very quickly withered up.”

“You told me something of the kind,” I said; “but the idea of a life so utterly swallowed up in self that no one even thinks it necessary to affect regard for and interest in others, was to me so unintelligible and inconceivable that I did not realise the full meaning of your account. Nor even now do I understand how a society formed of such members can be held together. On Earth we should expect them either to tear one another to pieces, or to relapse into isolation and barbarism lower than that of the lowest tribe which preserves social instincts and social organisation. A society composed of men resembling that child, but with the intelligence, force, and consistent purpose of manhood, would, I should have thought, be little better than a congregation of beasts of prey.”

“We have such beasts,” said Esmo, “in the wild lands, and they are certainly unsociable and solitary. But men, at least civilised men, are governed not only by instinct but by interest, and the interest of each individual in the preservation of social co-operation and social order is very evident and very powerful. Experience and school discipline cure children of the habit of indulging mere temper and spite before they come to be men, and they are taught by practice as well as by precept the absolute necessity of co-operation. Egotism, therefore, has no tendency to dissolve society as a mere organisation, though it has utterly destroyed society as a source of pleasure.”

“Does your law,” I asked, “confine the principle of euthanasia to infants, or do you put out of the world adults whose life is supposed, for one reason or another, to be useless and joyless?”

“Only,” he answered, “in the case of the insane. When the doctors are satisfied that a lunatic cannot be cured, an inquest is held; and if the medical verdict be approved, he is quietly and

painlessly dismissed from existence. Logically, of course, the same principle should be applied to all incurable disease; and I suspect—indeed I know—that it is applied when the household have become weary, and the patient is utterly unable to protect himself or appeal to the law. But the general application of the principle has been successfully resisted, on the ground that the terror it would cause, the constant anxiety and alarm in which men would live if the right of judging when life had become worthless to them were left to others, would far outweigh any benefit which might be derived from the legalised extinction of existences which had become a prolonged misery; and such cases, as I have told you, are very rare among us. A case of hopeless bodily suffering, not terminating very speedily in death, does not occur thrice a year among the whole population of the planet, except through accident. We have means of curing at the outset almost all of those diseases which the observance for hundreds of generations of sound physical conditions of life has not extirpated; and in the worst instances our anæsthetics seldom fail to extinguish the sense of pain without impairing intellect. Of course, anyone who is tired of his life is at liberty to put an end to it, and anyone else may assist him. But, though the clinging to existence is perhaps the most irrational of all those purely animal instincts on emancipation from which we pride ourselves, it is the strongest and the most lasting. The life of most of my countrymen would be to me intolerable weariness, if only from the utter want, after wealth is attained, of all warmer and less isolated interest than some one pet scientific pursuit can afford; and yet more from the total absence of affection, family duties, and the various mental occupations which interest in others affords. But though the question whether life is worth living has long ago been settled among us in the negative, suicide, the logical outcome of that conviction, is the rarest of all the methods by which life is terminated.”

“Which seems to show that even in Mars logic does not always dominate life and prevail over instinct. But what is the most usual cause of death, where neither disease nor senility are other than rare exceptions?”

“Efflux of time,” Esmo replied with an ironical smile. “That is the chief fatal disease recognised by our physicians.”

“And what is its nature?”

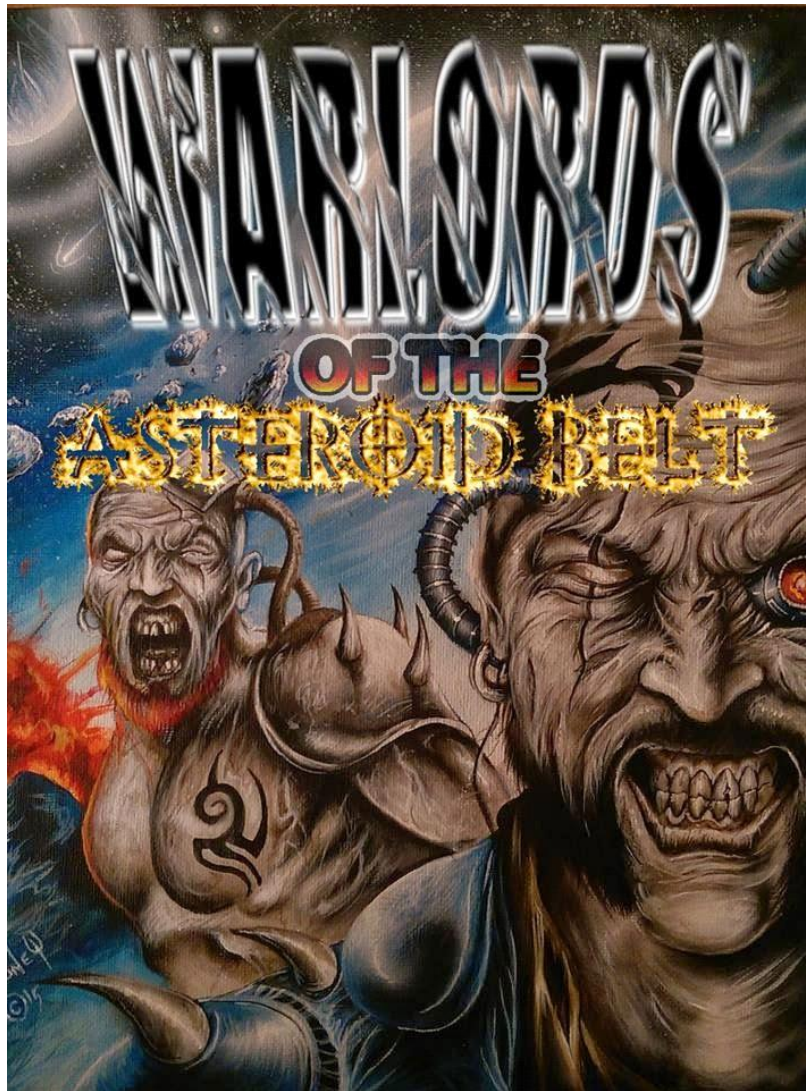
“Ah, that neither I nor any other physician can tell you. Life ‘goes out,’ like a lamp when the materials supplying the electric current are exhausted; and yet here all the waste of which physic can take cognisance is fully repaired, and the circuit is not broken.”

“What are the symptoms, then?”

“They are all reducible to one—exhaustion of the will, the prime element of personality. The patient ceases to care. It is too much trouble to work; then too much trouble to read; then too much trouble to exert even those all but mechanical powers of thought which are necessary to any kind of social intercourse—to give an order, to answer a question, to recognise a name or a face: then even the passions die out, till the patient cannot be provoked to rate a stupid ambâ or a negligent wife; finally, there is not energy to dress or undress, to rise up or sit down. Then the patient is allowed to die: if kept alive perforce, he would finally lack the energy to eat or even to breathe. And yet, all this time, the man is alive, the self is there; and I have prolonged life, or

rather renewed it, for a time, by some chance stimulus that has reached the inner sight through the thickening veil, and shocked the essential man into willing and thinking once more as he thought and willed when he was younger than his grandchildren are now.... It is well that some of us who know best how long the flesh may be kept in life, are, in right of that very knowledge, proof against the wish to keep the life in the flesh for ever.”

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Eleven: At the Window

I have already said that my storms of emotion have a trick of exhausting themselves. After a time I discovered that I was cold and wet, and with little pools of water about me on the stair carpet. I got up almost mechanically, went into the dining room and drank some whiskey, and then I was moved to change my clothes.

After I had done that I went upstairs to my study, but why I did so I do not know. The window of my study looks over the trees and the railway towards Horsell Common. In the hurry of our departure this window had been left open. The passage was dark, and, by contrast with the picture the window frame enclosed, the side of the room seemed impenetrably dark. I stopped short in the doorway.

The thunderstorm had passed. The towers of the Oriental College and the pine trees about it had gone, and very far away, lit by a vivid red glare, the common about the sand pits was visible. Across the light huge black shapes, grotesque and strange, moved busily to and fro.

It seemed indeed as if the whole country in that direction was on fire—a broad hillside set with minute tongues of flame, swaying and writhing with the gusts of the dying storm, and throwing a red reflection upon the cloud-scud above. Every now and then a haze of smoke from some nearer conflagration drove across the window and hid the Martian shapes. I could not see what they were doing, nor the clear form of them, nor recognise the black objects they were busied upon. Neither could I see the nearer fire, though the reflections of it danced on the wall and ceiling of the study. A sharp, resinous tang of burning was in the air.

I closed the door noiselessly and crept towards the window. As I did so, the view opened out until, on the one hand, it reached to the houses about Woking station, and on the other to the charred and blackened pine woods of Byfleet. There was a light down below the hill, on the railway, near the arch, and several of the houses along the Maybury road and the streets near the station were glowing ruins. The light upon the railway puzzled me at first; there were a black heap and a vivid glare, and to the right of that a row of yellow oblongs. Then I perceived this was a wrecked train, the fore part smashed and on fire, the hinder carriages still upon the rails.

Between these three main centres of light—the houses, the train, and the burning country towards Chobham—stretched irregular patches of dark country, broken here and there by intervals of dimly glowing and smoking ground. It was the strangest spectacle, that black expanse set with fire. It reminded me, more than anything else, of the Potteries at night. At first I could distinguish no people at all, though I peered intently for them. Later I saw against the light of Woking station a number of black figures hurrying one after the other across the line.

And this was the little world in which I had been living securely for years, this fiery chaos! What

had happened in the last seven hours I still did not know; nor did I know, though I was beginning to guess, the relation between these mechanical colossi and the sluggish lumps I had seen disgorged from the cylinder. With a queer feeling of impersonal interest I turned my desk chair to the window, sat down, and stared at the blackened country, and particularly at the three gigantic black things that were going to and fro in the glare about the sand pits.

They seemed amazingly busy. I began to ask myself what they could be. Were they intelligent mechanisms? Such a thing I felt was impossible. Or did a Martian sit within each, ruling, directing, using, much as a man's brain sits and rules in his body? I began to compare the things to human machines, to ask myself for the first time in my life how an ironclad or a steam engine would seem to an intelligent lower animal.

The storm had left the sky clear, and over the smoke of the burning land the little fading pinpoint of Mars was dropping into the west, when a soldier came into my garden. I heard a slight scraping at the fence, and rousing myself from the lethargy that had fallen upon me, I looked down and saw him dimly, clambering over the palings. At the sight of another human being my torpor passed, and I leaned out of the window eagerly.

"Hist!" said I, in a whisper.

He stopped astride of the fence in doubt. Then he came over and across the lawn to the corner of the house. He bent down and stepped softly.

"Who's there?" he said, also whispering, standing under the window and peering up.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"God knows."

"Are you trying to hide?"

"That's it."

"Come into the house," I said.

I went down, unfastened the door, and let him in, and locked the door again. I could not see his face. He was hatless, and his coat was unbuttoned.

"My God!" he said, as I drew him in.

"What has happened?" I asked.

"What hasn't?" In the obscurity I could see he made a gesture of despair. "They wiped us out—simply wiped us out," he repeated again and again.

He followed me, almost mechanically, into the dining room.

“Take some whiskey,” I said, pouring out a stiff dose.

He drank it. Then abruptly he sat down before the table, put his head on his arms, and began to sob and weep like a little boy, in a perfect passion of emotion, while I, with a curious forgetfulness of my own recent despair, stood beside him, wondering.

It was a long time before he could steady his nerves to answer my questions, and then he answered perplexingly and brokenly. He was a driver in the artillery, and had only come into action about seven. At that time firing was going on across the common, and it was said the first party of Martians were crawling slowly towards their second cylinder under cover of a metal shield.

Later this shield staggered up on tripod legs and became the first of the fighting-machines I had seen. The gun he drove had been unlimbered near Horsell, in order to command the sand pits, and its arrival it was that had precipitated the action. As the limber gunners went to the rear, his horse trod in a rabbit hole and came down, throwing him into a depression of the ground. At the same moment the gun exploded behind him, the ammunition blew up, there was fire all about him, and he found himself lying under a heap of charred dead men and dead horses.

“I lay still,” he said, “scared out of my wits, with the fore quarter of a horse atop of me. We’d been wiped out. And the smell—good God! Like burnt meat! I was hurt across the back by the fall of the horse, and there I had to lie until I felt better. Just like parade it had been a minute before—then stumble, bang, swish!”

“Wiped out!” he said.

He had hid under the dead horse for a long time, peeping out furtively across the common. The Cardigan men had tried a rush, in skirmishing order, at the pit, simply to be swept out of existence. Then the monster had risen to its feet and had begun to walk leisurely to and fro across the common among the few fugitives, with its headlike hood turning about exactly like the head of a cowed human being. A kind of arm carried a complicated metallic case, about which green flashes scintillated, and out of the funnel of this there smoked the Heat-Ray.

In a few minutes there was, so far as the soldier could see, not a living thing left upon the common, and every bush and tree upon it that was not already a blackened skeleton was burning. The hussars had been on the road beyond the curvature of the ground, and he saw nothing of them. He heard the Maxims rattle for a time and then become still. The giant saved Woking station and its cluster of houses until the last; then in a moment the Heat-Ray was brought to bear, and the town became a heap of fiery ruins. Then the Thing shut off the Heat-Ray, and turning its back upon the artilleryman, began to waddle away towards the smouldering pine woods that sheltered the second cylinder. As it did so a second glittering Titan built itself up out of the pit.

The second monster followed the first, and at that the artilleryman began to crawl very cautiously across the hot heather ash towards Horsell. He managed to get alive into the ditch by the side of

the road, and so escaped to Woking. There his story became ejaculatory. The place was impassable. It seems there were a few people alive there, frantic for the most part and many burned and scalded. He was turned aside by the fire, and hid among some almost scorching heaps of broken wall as one of the Martian giants returned. He saw this one pursue a man, catch him up in one of its steely tentacles, and knock his head against the trunk of a pine tree. At last, after nightfall, the artilleryman made a rush for it and got over the railway embankment.

Since then he had been skulking along towards Maybury, in the hope of getting out of danger Londonward. People were hiding in trenches and cellars, and many of the survivors had made off towards Woking village and Send. He had been consumed with thirst until he found one of the water mains near the railway arch smashed, and the water bubbling out like a spring upon the road.

That was the story I got from him, bit by bit. He grew calmer telling me and trying to make me see the things he had seen. He had eaten no food since midday, he told me early in his narrative, and I found some mutton and bread in the pantry and brought it into the room. We lit no lamp for fear of attracting the Martians, and ever and again our hands would touch upon bread or meat. As he talked, things about us came darkly out of the darkness, and the trampled bushes and broken rose trees outside the window grew distinct. It would seem that a number of men or animals had rushed across the lawn. I began to see his face, blackened and haggard, as no doubt mine was also.

When we had finished eating we went softly upstairs to my study, and I looked again out of the open window. In one night the valley had become a valley of ashes. The fires had dwindled now. Where flames had been there were now streamers of smoke; but the countless ruins of shattered and gutted houses and blasted and blackened trees that the night had hidden stood out now gaunt and terrible in the pitiless light of dawn. Yet here and there some object had had the luck to escape—a white railway signal here, the end of a greenhouse there, white and fresh amid the wreckage. Never before in the history of warfare had destruction been so indiscriminate and so universal. And shining with the growing light of the east, three of the metallic giants stood about the pit, their cowls rotating as though they were surveying the desolation they had made.

It seemed to me that the pit had been enlarged, and ever and again puffs of vivid green vapour streamed up and out of it towards the brightening dawn—streamed up, whirled, broke, and vanished.

Beyond were the pillars of fire about Chobham. They became pillars of bloodshot smoke at the first touch of day.

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